



HOROLOGE

IPSISSIMA VERBA



S. YAHTAHEI

Horologe Ipsissima Verba

Volume II of the Horologe Trilogy

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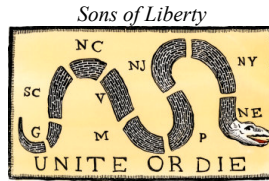
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Thank you, Mr. Franklin

Ipsissima Verba

An ancient Latin phrase meaning "the very words"

In religious terms, it refers to the sacred words spoken by a deity.

In legal terms, it refers to material quoted from an established authority.

In political terms, it refers to the populist claims of demagogues.

In human terms, it refers to your spoken promise.

Acknowledgments

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I would especially like to acknowledge the insightful vision of my Great Grand Uncle Thaddeus J. Fenton III who once wrote:

“Everything in the universe, all actions by the beings within, follow from prior events and ultimately can only be understood in terms of the movement of time. So if you ignore any reality of time, it is at your own risk.”

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- To The Reader

It would be advantageous, although not absolutely necessary, to read the first book of the HOROLOGE Trilogy - HOROLOGE. While I have attempted to keep references to the first volume at a minimum or give a brief explanation, reading the first book might answer any in-depth character details or chronological questions that may arise while reading this volume.

- Introduction

The history of the universe is replete with examples of advanced cultures succumbing to the compelling influence of benevolent rogues who would strip them of their fundamental liberties.

Earth Standard Year 3124:

It's the early morning of day 21 in the month of August. Outside the weather is brisk, brought on by the icy winds streaming off the glacier four hundred fifty-seven miles north. Inside their cabin on Yellowstone Lake's Molly Island, CW and Vienna lay naked, cuddled in each other's arms. The heat of their bodies warmed the king-sized waterbed and kept them cozy. The roaring fire in the fireplace, last stoked the night before, had burned itself down to red-hot coals. The warmth emitting from the coals kept the upstairs bedroom pleasant, but not toasty hot.

"Shall we do it again?" CW asked.

"Are you up for it?" Vienna replied, her crooked smile playfully giving her words more than one meaning.

"Nah, I'm pretty comfortable here on Earth," CW jokingly replied.

"That's not what I mean and you know it. Anyway, we can be comfortable anywhere," Vienna explains.

"Sure, but Earth is our home. I'm tired of saving manic-depressed aliens from other crazed, power-hungry aliens."

"We can't ignore the fact that Sanduval Mule is still out there stirring up his evil. You know his kind of wicked never dies, it only withdraws," Vienna noted.

"Yeah, I know he'll be back, but that's *out there*, not here and not now. I've traveled through space and time, sailed on creaky wooden boats and alien spaceships, and I'm tired. Mainly I'm tired of having to eat strange alien food. Give me a rare hunk of dead cow and some potato root any day," CW quips.

“That’s not exactly a healthy diet,” Vienna caringly instructs. With a sly grin, she says, “You know, at your age, you have to eat right. You’re not getting any younger.”

Discounting Vienna’s amusing remark CW continues, “Maybe not, but it’s better than the tasteless green or purple guano served on other planets.”

“Well then, how should we start the day?” Vienna flirts.

“Hmm, maybe we could start with you finishing the final edit of my K’galmaan tome for the U.O.H., while I keep trying to decipher the ring’s symbols and learn more about the powers of our time jewelry.”

“Work, work, work, is that all you think about?” Vienna asks, looking at CW coyly.

“No,” CW says as he tenderly rolls over on top of her, “This old man can think of other things to do.”

Vienna arches her back and in a voice almost musical she asks, “Then shouldn’t we do them first?”

CW gazed into Vienna’s green eyes. Her natural scent always kindled a fire deep within him. He leans his face close and they tenderly kiss.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, Vienna returns his kiss with aroused emotions. When CW slowly tastes her neck and breasts Vienna reacted with loving moans.

Starting the day off right is important no matter the time you are in or the planet you are on.

Chapter 1 - Born To Be Wild...

Sanduval Mule was born of no real standing in life. His father was unknown. His mother died in childbirth. His upbringing was that of a self-taught vagabond traveling the universe of populated worlds. His name was given to himself, by himself, and signified his immense cerebral psychogenic strength and stubbornness of purpose.

It was midway between dusk and dark. The setting white sun was partially hidden behind a thick cloud of umber-tinged dust. The optimum conditions for a final assault. With the twilight came the ammonia-laden wind blowing across the surface of planet Tuewat like it was alive. In the upper atmosphere, streaks of lightning flashed through the clouds. Closer to the surface the wind ripped through everything in its path. It battered and cut away all vegetation to ground level, then spewed the remains like vomit from the mouth of a mammoth Ehecati wind spirit.

Sand, gravel, and fist-sized plant fragments continuously hammered Sanduval. Even through the armor of his dull gray spacesuit, he could feel the force of every strike from the flying rubble. The constant bombardment on his helmet caused his head to vibrate like it was inside a bass drum. Hoping to get some relief from the pounding noise and bruising impacts he crouched low and slowly moved forward.

Activating his Heads Up Display Sanduval tapped a code into the suit's controller on his left arm. The thick clouds of dust and debris were so dense his suit's scanners were unable to detect where the enemy ground forces had escaped.

After a few more taps on the controller, his HUD overlay identified his first destination directly ahead. The dark blue image signified a large boulder unmoved by the fierce gale.

Crawling on his belly, he muscled his way along until finally reaching the base of the huge rock. Inching his way to the downwind side he finally got a moment of relief just as the command sounded in his ear.

“Arm and attack.” the voice echoed.

Dutifully, Sanduval unfastens the locking mechanism on the sheath holding his cobalt crystal saber. The saber was one of two standard-issue weapons for a Washu warrior. The other weapon was a Kyn rifle. Charged by the Lutetium crystal within, it fired repeated short bursts of three exploding projectiles equipped with adjustable seeking properties.

Even though Sanduval was the smallest of the Washu warriors at six-foot-nine

inches in height and weighing 240 pounds, he was considered a formidable warrior. Being a surviving veteran of three previous battles, he had proven himself a master of the saber in close combat, and an expert marksman.

Earning a leadership position for the Washu always came through combat, and Sanduval's combat proficiency had propelled him to the honorable rank of Merag'don. At the age of one hundred eighteen life cycles, he was the youngest Washu warrior ever to reach such high status.

“Primed,” he spoke into the helmet's communication mic. The HUD scanned the area nearby hoping to get a mark on the other members of his team, Tactical Assault Core 40-20. The display showed a flicker of movement, then nothing, then movement again. The electrical static produced by the wind was interfering with the team’s positioning signals.

“TAC 40-20, on me,” he barked into his comm mic. The hiss of interference was the only response. He had to trust his team to find their way.

A split second later he was fired upon from high within the howling wind. A shower of laser blasts struck the ground around him, ricocheting off the rock where he crouched. One impact caused a sharp bolder fragment to puncture the right shoulder of his spacesuit. Acting quickly, he reached inside his thigh pocket and retrieved a patch. Within seconds he had placed the self-cementing patch on the leaking hole. His suit rapidly regained pressure. Wheeling to his left he scanned skyward and spotted one of the enemy shooters soaring a hundred meters high within the blowing dust. The attackers’ menacing green eyes beamed brightly through the clear shield of his dull black helmet. It was a Tuewat Sky Warrior riding atop his wind sled preparing to fire another volley.

Tuewat Sky Warriors were known as fierce opponents with formidable fighting skills. Numerous intelligence reports described them as vengeful fighters who slaughtered every enemy they faced, leaving none alive to retaliate. Typically, their strategy was to fill the sky with hordes of warriors who ruthlessly pummel their enemy with unrelenting attacks until victory was achieved.

Sanduval raised his rifle and fired a burst of three projectiles directly into the flight path of the Sky Warrior, dropping him instantly. Uncontrolled, his wind sled swirled and tumbled away, hurled haphazardly by the blowing wind. Keeping the rifle high, Sanduval scanned the hazy sky looking for his next target.

A moment later he heard multiple laser blasts coming from West of his position. In his ear he heard an unintelligible garbled sound as if someone was drowning, then nothing. Dropping to one knee he took aim and fired two more quick bursts at the enemy overhead. Again, two Sky Warriors were swept away in their deaths.

Confident that nothing could survive their onslaught the Sky Warriors began to

randomly dive toward the surface. Their eerie shouts and flashing laser blasts echoed within the wind-swept fighting.

Sanduval could hear mixed sounds of laser blasts, the howling of the wind, and the piercing yells from the Sky Warriors. The noise from their high-pitch screech sounded like an angry horde of killer insects swarming within the wind. Suddenly another torrent of lasers was being fired at him. Acting quickly he activated his spacesuit's anti-laser jamming frequency. Even though it drained large amounts of battery power, it was the only thing that might keep him from scores of strikes.

For some reason, the attack slowed. They must be regrouping Sanduval thought. Just then three members of the TAC 40-20 team arrived, crawling on their hands and knees like frightened curs.

"Where are the others?" Sanduval shouted.

"All dead," Psaki nervously whimpered.

Crouched behind the boulder and under random laser fire, Sanduval, Psaki, Tasos, and Gival were the only remaining members of the original twelve that made up TAC 40-20. Suddenly out of the sky came another blistering onslaught of laser blasts as hundreds of Sky Warriors furiously bombarded their position.

"Open fire," Sanduval shouted.

The TAC 40-20 team, each an expert marksman, began firing repeated bursts at the throng of attacking fighters. As they fired each warrior hit would topple off his sled, their dead body-snatched up and swept away by the wind.

Gival, the newest member of the TAC 40-20 team, was so tensed up on adrenaline he suddenly rolled from behind the boulder, jumped up, and shouted, "Die sky gunge," then began randomly firing into the dust-filled sky. Immediately a barrage of laser blasts struck the ground around him. One shot ripped through his suit, grazing his right thigh. The pain from the wound caused him to let out a howling grunt, forcing him to squat on one knee. But he kept firing as fast as he could pull the trigger.

Sanduval leaped from behind the boulder and grabbed Gival by his suit's backpack. Roughly spun him around and slung him to the ground, then instantly sprang back behind the large rock.

Tasos, second in command, grabbed Gival by one of his flailing arms and forcibly pulled him back behind the boulder. Placing a patch on the rupture in Gival's spacesuit, Tasos quickly injected him with a painkiller and told him, "Sit tight you mook; here, keep the pressure on."

Sanduval reported their status into his tactical com, "Captain Nailo, the enemy is

in position, fire the EMC. TAC 40-20 deploy shelters.”

The EMC - Effect Metric Corona - is a biological disintegration ray. Typically launched from a hovering spaceship, the device rapidly dove toward the surface until it reached the predetermined altitude. When detonated it projected a circular ray of proton particles that quickly expanded to a range of four kilometers. The ray would annihilate everything organic within its range.

The Washu battleship Aavial was in stationary orbit twelve thousand miles above the battlefield. Onboard, Captain Nailo turned to his weapons officer, “Pin the target on their signal.”

“Confirm Captain,” the weapons officer responded.

“On its way, TAC 40-20,” Captain Nailo broadcasts.

The onslaught of laser blasts continued as TAC 40-20 huddled inside their EMC shelters and waited. The leaser-jamming emitters of their shelters were the only things keeping them alive. Deploying both the shelter and the leaser jammers devoured energy levels at an alarming rate. Moments before their batteries were depleted, Sanduval heard the crackling discharge of the EMC. He felt the jolt of the explosion just before the intense vibration of the passing atmospheric wave.

Instantly the laser blasts from above fell silent. There was a rare moment of semi-stillness as the blowing fury of plant shards became silent. Within seconds the constant pummeling of debris returned. Unmanned sleds flew randomly within the wind, breaking into pieces as they smashed against one another. The deluge of fragmented sled chunks ultimately became part of Ehecati’s projectile vomiting.

With the push of a button on his suit’s controller, his shelter collapsed into his backpack. Sanduval immediately gave the order, “Psaki, Tasos, spot me, Gival, rear guard.”

Psaki told Gival, “Don’t do anything stupid,” as he and Tasos brought their rifles up into the ready position and gave a sign to Sanduval.

Sanduval tapped the scan code into his spacesuit’s control pad and checked his helmet’s display. Shades of violet highlighted a cave entrance on the side of a slight knoll to the north. It was their mission objective. The portal to the Tuewat command post. Crimson digits tracked the distance to the entrance, exactly 45.328 meters from his current location. Slate gray shadows on the display revealed two TaL-5 combat droids standing guard.

The wind was blinding, and visibility at ground level was less than three meters. Fighting the howling gale was going to be difficult but not impossible, Sanduval thought. He ran the TaL-5 droids ID numbers through command database. He had

fought variations of the TaL-5 combat droids before, and our intel shows their security routines hadn't been reprogrammed. His expanded abilities should ensure he could advance undetected as a hostile.

With intense concentration, Sanduval shifted his appearance into a TUEWAT Warrior. He hadn't yet perfected his shape-shifting abilities to their full extent so he could only sustain it for short periods. He estimated it would take him four minutes to get to the entrance, so he had to move quickly. Stooping low, hidden by the dust and flying debris, he used his display to silently work his way toward the access portal. His disguise kept him from being recognized long enough for him to creep within a few steps of the guard droids.

When he got within striking distance, he gently unsheathed his saber. Just as one of the droids began to move toward him, he executed his attack. Moving at a blurringly fast speed his first blow beheaded the droid on the right. Instantly the droid's body squirmed, stiffened for a second then turned limp, its head fell backward, bouncing several times on the ground. Without hesitating he quickly swirled, agilely side-stepped to his left, bent low, and with maximum force thrust his saber waist-high into the second droid. The force of the impact punctured through its armor and completely penetrated its torso. He quickly followed his blow with an upward motion that sliced the droid in half, waist to head. The droid emitted a dull mechanical wail as it ceased to exist.

"Droids down," Sanduval bluntly reported.

With the droid guards immobilized, Sanduval made his way through the debris and collected the severed head of the first droid. Using his saber, he hastily sheared off its left arm just below the elbow.

He made his way to the cave entrance, stepped inside, and approached a thick steel entry door. Holding the droid's head in front of an orange light in the center of the door he heard a momentary hum, then a dull beep. Using the droid's severed hand, he touched a flat panel on the door and heard the sound of the locking mechanism releasing. Forcefully pushing the door open he dropped the droid's hand and retrieved and armed a mobile EMC device from his utility belt. He then threw it, along with the droid's head, into the cave and immediately stepped back. The door automatically slammed shut. Quickly deploying his shelter he felt the sharp jolt of the EMC detonation as the ground violently heaved under his feet.

"Duty complete," he stated flatly into his mic.

"Well done," came the reply, "proceed to the retrieval point."

Sanduval fought his way through the wind until finally making his way back to the team's defensive position at the boulder. Once there, he and Tasos helped

Gival to his feet. “We got-’em didn’t we Merag’don?” Gival asked.

“Yes,” Sanduval replied, “I think we got them all.”

It took another twenty minutes of fighting the crosswinds before the remnants of TAC 40-20 were able to make their way to the extraction point for transport back to the Aavial.

Back at the departure area, the sight was staggering. Row after row of Washu corpses were stacked three high. Cyclone force dust devils haphazardly swirled through the rows of bodies like random coiling serpents. Multiple detachments of worker bots eluded the scrap-filled spirals as they went about their work of wrapping the corpses, preparing them for the voyage. Like diligent worker bees, a group of droids wrestled their freight through the winds as they loaded the packaged bodies of the dead into the cargo holes. Dozens of transport vessels were landing and taking off carrying their ghoulish freight back to the Aavial for processing.

In space, no resource could be wasted. All available material is useful to some degree and the bodies of dead warriors were no exception. Their wearables would be reused or repurposed. Their organic remains would be recycled as biofuel or nutrients for plants grown as foodstuffs in botanic modules. Maintaining such a large fighting force required forward thinking and access to enormous amounts of useable materials.

Onboard the transport Gival received the needed medical attention. When the transport lifted off it violently vibrated and then heaved back and forth as it fought its way through the turbulent atmosphere. After being involved in such heavy combat, the members of TAC 40-20 tried to relax. The fighting had been fierce and the number of Washu dead was massive, but the battle was won.

Arriving on the Aavial the crew was celebrating their victory. When the TAC 40-20 survivors disembarked, Captain Nailo and several members of his staff were waiting. Dressed in their stiff maroon and gray uniforms they proudly stood at attention. Their left arms raised in a salute to the triumphant fighters.

Captain Nailo was normally a pitiful, faded-looking being. His sorrowful face highlighted by a narrow oval head sparsely thatched with kinky gray hair, made him look sadly fierce. His nappy hair ran down his forehead, ending just above his eyes. Presently he wore a beaming smile of jagged yellowed teeth in anticipation of the triumph and glory that will come with defeating the Tuewat.

Outwardly Sanduval was pleased with their success, but subconsciously he felt uneasy. Inside he felt that instinctive gnawing he got when some minuscule detail he couldn't describe didn't seem right. He had been honing his unique extrasensory abilities for some time now and had grown accustomed to listening

to his inner senses. He didn't know why, but he felt it now.

While the crew's celebration continued, Sanduval remained vigilant. He still had a nagging sensation that something was wrong. He tried to ignore it, tried to convince himself it was just anxiety caused by the recent combat, but he couldn't suppress it. Fortunately for him, his suppression efforts failed.

Even as he watched his jubilant team members celebrate the haunting sense persisted. It abruptly grew stronger just as something caught his attention. It was an unexpected image appearing on a nearby surveillance monitor. On the screen was an undetected Tuewat battle cruiser rising out of the dust cloud below.

"Enemy attack," yelled Sanduval, pointing to the monitor.

All eyes swung to the numerous screens located around the room. Just then round after round from the battle cruiser's photon cannons rapidly bombarded the Aavial. Inside the ship alarm buzzers squealed and flashing lights ignited as the crew jumped into action.

Captain Nailo immediately raced to a communication station and shouted, "Navigation, evasive action."

It was too late. The Aavial's defensive screens radiated violet, flickered, and faltered. The next blast devastated the command bridge and produced shockwaves throughout the ship. Then two more photon cannon blasts impacted the Aavial amidships.

The eruptions from the flurry of photon cannon strikes caused the Aavial to reverberate and lurch violently. Multiple explosions were felt as different deck levels cracked and exploded. Two more blasts struck the engine room causing it to flare like a supernova. As the Aavial's power levels fell she rolled to starboard and pitched forward. The sudden attack had caused massive damage. Any protective actions by the crew now were useless, the ship was crippled beyond repair. Without shields or power, it was doomed.

His voice rising in desperation Captain Nailo shrieked, "Vacate, vacate. Vacate the Aavial."

The ship's crew and combat teams scrambled in all directions frantically trying to make their way to the evacuation hatchways and the escape pods. All the while the devastating onslaught from the Tuewat battle cruiser continued in never-lessening intensity.

Powerless to help, Sanduval watched as Captain Nailo and two crew members were struck by a falling kinetic coil. Blood and intestines gushed in all directions when the rapidly moving coil instantly gutted Captain Nailo. The impact

happened so fast it froze a stunned look on his face. His cold dead eyes stared blankly at Sanduval.

Still wearing his spacesuit, Sanduval could feel the heat coming from the intense violent eruptions. From deep within the ship he heard muffled cries for help and blood-curdling screams from the dying. The acrid stench of burning flesh combined with chemical vapors filled the air. His eyes burned from the leaking noxious gases. Inhaling the fumes scorched his chest causing him to hold his breath.

When another blast hits, the ship loses artificial gravity. The force of the explosion caused Sanduval to stumble, roll forward, and begin to float. Thrown off balance his weightless body twitched and strained against the sudden change in gravitational force.

Over loudspeakers came, “Warning: hull breach! All personnel to airlocks!”

Sanduval struggled to regain his sense of stability while at the same time dodging flaming, flying rubble. Finally able to plant his feet against a bulkhead, he took another deep breath and held it, bent his knees, and pushed. The move quickly propelled him away from the wall, immediately sending him flying across the room. Suspended in midair he began to thrash like a fish.

Twisting and turning he guided himself past buckled wreckage, the floundering injured struggling for life, and the floating dead.

Grabbing anything he could he pulled, heaved, and wiggled his way along a passageway nearly blocked closed with debris. Another blast slammed him into a sidewall. Regaining his stability, he checked his flight against another bulkhead and pushed. Floating away he turned down a corridor until finally making his way to the portal of an escape pod. Forcing more floating rubble aside, he slithered through the pod’s hatch and immediately pulled the toggle to close the access door. Blowing out his breath he gulped new air. Hastily strapping himself into the pilot seat he promptly hit the eject switch.

There was a loud crack when another blast struck the Aavial precisely as the pod’s locking mechanism released. The pod jerked erratically to one side just before its thrusters fired. The propulsion accelerated the pod through the collapsing exit tube as it powered its way into open space, away from the crumbling ship.

Rocketing away Sanduval watched out the pod’s porthole as the Aavial’s oval-shaped fuselage fractured. Nose down, it gradually descended until ferociously exploding into clouds of bright crimson flames as it hit the turbulence of planet Tuewat’s atmosphere.

He had escaped just in time.

Chapter 2 - Dazed And Confused...

Earth Standard year 3178.

My mind snaps aware.

A myriad of thoughts and images clamor for attention. Concentrating as hard as possible I force one eye open, then the other, and stare, waiting for them to become accustomed to the blurry veil of gray shadows. The fluid in my eyes increases and I sense a lone tear slowly creeping from my left eye on its way toward my cheek. A forced blink keeps it from going any further.

My psychic awareness drifts closer to reality, improving with each passing moment. I coerce a deep breath to speed up the process. Air fills my gaunt lungs and moves more oxygen-filled blood to my brain. The surge of life-giving gases caused me to convulse slightly as every nerve ending in my body squealed with fire, which helped sharpen my senses. Each breath drives a cool freshness deep into my core. My first conscious thought is; *“Ah, another day, another time.”*

Little by little my eyes adjust. Through the grayness, I notice a dim glow of white light looming overhead. As my vision clears I recognize the shining light above. It's Earth's moon in three-quarter cycle. Behind this familiar sight lay the deep blackness of space beautifully sprinkled with millions of shimmering points of light. It was the dancing sparkle of Earth's star-scape, the Milky Way.

I lay motionless for several more moments letting my physical awareness grow. Compelling another deep breath, the cool air reminds me how the air on Earth always tasted sweet. The scent of Ponderosa Pine filled the crisp mountain air. When I try to move, a stabbing pain awakens my stiff back muscles. My senescent body quivers from the searing sting of newly awakened nerves. In a fraction of a second, the pain shoots from the base of my spine to the top of my skull. The burning sensation of life gradually grows stronger, moving from inside my head until it completely embraces my entire body. My mind was awakening to the bodily sensations that had been suspended for so long. Instinctively I reach to confirm that my bracelet and ring are still firmly attached. At the same time, I struggle to gather my lone wit.

My bracelet and ring are there. “Good,” I say aloud in a painfully dry raspy voice. Still, I was pleased to hear my own voice.

Widening my vision, I focus on distant snow-peaked mountains and the towering slate-colored storm clouds rolling over them, slowly moving this way.

With my senses improving I hear the splashing symphony of a nearby stream.

Turning my head, squinting slightly, I can just make out the blurry image of flowing water. The rushing water danced against a rocky shoreline causing a bluish mist to rise into the air. A light breeze blew the refreshing cool mist across my face.

Like a spotlight through the mist, a beam of moonlight directed my attention to a nearby rock just a few yards away. The moonbeam revealed my Jyotti spacesuit casually thrown over a flat rock. Bathed in the glowing light of the moon, my spacesuit appeared to be intact and, I hope, still working. Resting next to it was my trusty iJotter emitting its soft hue of activation.

With considerable effort, I painfully force my stiff body into a sitting position, pause to gain equilibrium, and then struggle to roll onto my hands and knees. Hesitating for another moment I unsteadily push myself to a standing position just as another cool breeze wafts across my six-foot-four-inch frame. With each breath of the damp sweet air, familiar smells flow into my nostrils.

Finally upright, I widen my stance, balance myself on the tips of my toes, and stretch both arms straight up as if to touch the sky. When I do every muscle in my body is pulled taut against gravity, opening my old worn joints. The strain on my muscles causes a surge of vitality to course through me, making me feel stronger. With my body needing every fraction of time to recover, I hold that position for several seconds before relaxing.

There was a sharp crack of lightning and the sky roared with angry thunder as the approaching storm clouds arrive. A light drizzle began to fall on my naked body. Little by little the rain turns into larger drops until an ever-increasing cascade of hard pouring rain washes down.

“Ah yes, I need a good shower,” I snigger to myself.

The cascading sheets of rain felt cool and refreshing. The steady downpour washes my body clean - Earth clean. Raising my face to the sky, I open my mouth wide and let it fill with fresh rainwater, swallowing several gulps of the much-needed liquid. Combing my fingers through my wet brown hair, it feels longer than I remember. When I touch my chin, I feel the stubble of several days of beard growth.

Gradually the storm moves on and the last of the deluge again turns to sprinkles. Still unsteady, I force my aching body to stagger through the trickling raindrops to the large rock and plop down on the hard damp surface. Reaching out with my right hand I pick up the iJotter.

At that exact moment, an eruption of data abruptly flashes into my mind. The sudden jolt of input causes my facial muscles to tighten and contort into a grimace. With intense concentration, I force my mind to push back the mounting feeling of sensory overload.

Subconsciously my familiarity with the data source becomes obvious. It was originating from my Craft floating silently eighteen thousand miles straight up.

The surging data from the Craft continues to flood my mind, growing ever stronger, forcing its way into my memories. The increasing intensity of the data stream feels like a railroad spike being plunged deep into my skull, making my entire body jerk and spasm.

“That’s enough,” I yell hoarsely, my mouth as barren of moisture as a summer in the Mohave Desert. Instantly the data surge stops.

Focusing my thoughts, I mentally gain control and moderate the tempo of the incoming data stream. “There,” I growl as the information begins to stream smoothly.

While the Craft continues feeding me more and more details, inside I feel a twinge of regret. My conscious intellect was compelled to accept that my mind's sanctuary had ended.

The blissful void of unconsciousness ceased, while the veil of memory loss was lifting. My memories were returning more rapidly now, pushing their way to the forefront. Yes, it was all coming back. It seems like it was only yesterday when this trip began.

Chapter 3 - Thanks for The Memories...

Earth Standard Year 3124

Seven months ago, Vienna and I returned to Earth. We were living a quiet, uneventful life in our log cabin on Molly Island located on the southern tip of the southeastern arm of Yellowstone Lake.

The retreat was a welcomed change following our most recent spacetime journey to the planet Kr'galmaan in Earth Standard year 2746. Spacetime travel could be stimulating, but so can being together in quiet solitude.

That trip had taken several months of analyzing metadata alterations of the Kr'galmaan's archived history. We had poured over data records from the implanted memory chips in every individual Kr'galmaan being, as well as millions of recorded tomes and media transcripts. The results of our findings from this massive endeavor forced us into battling for our lives in a merciless war.

Long before Vienna and I knew each other I had used the spacetime traveling abilities of the bracelet to personally experience various planetary societies. While on those trips I acquired knowledge of the structural influences of recorded history on culture and the socio-psychological perspectives that drove societal behaviors.

Using that knowledge, along with Vienna's excellent data programming skills, she designed an AI that enabled us to untangle the chronological murkiness of the historical records of Kr'galmaan devilishly fabricated by Sanduval Mule. Once the facts were made public it caused major societal unrest and ultimately a cultural rebellion. This led the Kr'galmaan beings, and us, into mortal combat against the tyranny of Sanduval Mule's puppet O'czardaa and his well-armed minions.

Partnered with TicTic R'gneraq and his brave warriors from the planet Otos, a longtime ally of Pu-illeo, and her Kr'galmaan army, we had taken the battle directly to O'czardaa's forces. Side-by-side we fought many battles and killed many beings. We mercilessly eliminated them with the vengeance that comes from the necessity of continued existence. This meant the death or capture of most of O'czardaa's ignorant pawns.

Not only did we defeat O'czardaa, but we also terminated Sanduval Mule's scheme of manipulating their historic past to control their future and restore order to the matrices of their society. Our victory ensured the Kr'galmaan beings a hopeful destiny with the freedom and individual liberty they craved and rightfully deserved.

After our excursion, Vienna and I swiftly returned to Earth. Deciding to take a

sabbatical from spacetime travel, we spent most of our days at the cabin. We treasured our time together with only an occasional visit to civilization to break up this quiet, pleasant existence.

Once a month we boarded my Craft and, using its crypsis abilities, we floated southeast like an invisible feather on a gentle wind. We smoothly glided along enjoying the alternating fragrance of the jasmine and honeysuckle blossoms. During this leisurely two-hour trip, we followed the rugged slopes of the winding Yellowstone River, along the twisting path of the raging waters of Trappers Creek, finally ending our junket near the small cloister of humanity called Colter City.

I would land my Craft in a secluded grassy clearing just beyond the city. After commanding it to stay veiled until our return, we unhurriedly left the meadow and descended the sloping ground the remaining two miles. Strolling hand in hand we followed the winding trappers' path through the dense woods with its thick canopy of colored leaves. On our way, we enjoyed passing through a small clearing filled with freshly bloomed wildflowers and buzzing insects. The activity and smells were a refreshing reminder of the diverse life on Earth.

After arriving at Colter City, we mingled with other human inhabitants and purchased needed supplies. Typically, we stocked up on freshly grown vegetables, newly caught fish, and the meat of small animals. After our shopping spree, we returned to the Craft, stored our goods, and made the relaxing trip back to the cabin.

As I remember, it was four-fifteen in the afternoon on a typical August day. Earth's ongoing glacial period was in full effect and the weather outside was cool but pleasant. Out the large windows, the gray sky was beginning its ritual change to dusk. The towering trees swayed rhythmically as the crisp breeze blew through the sparse leaves of their branches. I had just placed a few logs on the fire to keep the room warm. The crackling sound when the logs flamed into action was pleasantly soothing.

Vienna lay comfortably stretched out on the leather couch, a wool Dakota Sioux blanket thrown across her legs. She was engrossed in the editing of my most recent tome for the U.O.H. She calmly rotated between taking a sip from a cup of hot chocolate to thoughtfully chewing on the back end of her dreaded red stylus.

Seated at my antique Oak roll-top desk, I continued my quest of deciphering the intricate markings of the bracelet's accompanying ring. Over the last few days, I had used the spacetime traveling ability of the bracelet and taken a few brief trips that I thought were clues... they weren't.

Unexpectedly, I vanished.

When I reappeared, I was standing in the middle of the now-familiar breathing chamber with those intense bright lights shining down.

"Welcome C.W. Comstock", came the sharp telepathic communication from oojavan.

"I was hoping not to hear from you guys for a while," I replied aloud.

"We are pleased to view you again as well," oojavan sent.

Oojavan was the only being on the board of the U.O.H. I'd ever communicated with. If you can call the feeling of being repeatedly hit in the head with a hammer a form of communication. He, or she, I'm not sure which, once told me he was whispering during our communication. I'm just glad I'd never felt him shout. Had he screamed my head would most certainly have exploded.

"That's not exactly what I meant. What do you want?" I asked harshly, as the brain pain grew.

"To the point as usual. You wish to know the inspiration for this visit. We require your chronicle."

"You'll have it soon," I said. This is strange. They've never pushed me for my story before. I wonder what these weasels are really up to?

"Excellent. It is with pleasure we further require your valued assistance."

I knew it. "For what purpose?" I say with disdain.

"There is potential for severe verity disruption of the quantal ora' which must be rectified," Oojavan sent plainly.

"I've told you before," I replied in a defiant tone. "I will not be at your beck and call to fix **your** problems. I will submit my chronicles as required, but that's all."

"The potential disruption is verified as instigated by Sanduval Mule. Naturally, we theorized, given your acknowledged expertise in such matters, you would be interested in protecting a society in danger by assisting us toward the solution."

"Sanduval Mule huh? That devil is at it again? What and where is it this time?" I asked.

"If we have satisfactory concurrence, the U.O.H. will deliver all that you require."

"Yeah, right. I've heard that before," the brain pain becoming almost unbearable.

"Rest assured it is a certainty."

"Right... Hey, can you tone down the pain a notch or two?"

“Please forgive me. I neglect consideration of your cerebral infancy. Is this more pleasant for you?”

“That’s a little better, yes” I replied, as the brain pain eased slightly.

“Then you agree to assist us?”

“No... I do not. I need information. I need details. Either tell me the whole story or send me back and solve the problem yourself.”

“We can inform you that within the parameters of this chronozone innocent beings are in the medial construct of societal manipulation. Their civilization is in peril. If this linear baseline continues, cultural disruption will surely be inevitable and the beings will suffer for many generations.”

Experience has taught me that the U.O.H. does nothing without an objective. Their strict rules for shielding the compositions of the past and their complex nexus for the future were not something I wanted to be involved with, again.

Yeah, they had given me the bracelet and ring time devices to help me write my stories. Their only requirement was that I chronicle my travels. The bracelet and ring have become invaluable tools for both my writing and my life. By turning the dials on the bracelet to the desired time, then touching the green gemstone, I could travel to any time in the past or future. Touching the red gemstone instantly brought me back to the time when I had started. Touching the blue gemstone on the ornately inscribed ring stopped time for a little over a minute. I’m fairly sure there was one fact they did not know. I had deciphered some of the inscriptions on the ring and gained additional abilities.

Anyway, my latest story for them was complete. Vienna was editing it now. The next documented chronicle would be much less dangerous for us both. Even though they had supplied the bracelet and ring time devices, they did not own me. My word was given. I travel and write for my pleasure, not theirs.

“I’m sure you can make the necessary changes yourself. You have both informed me and shown me your powers. Why do you need me?”

“This occasion requires a personal form of participation by someone dependable. Someone who will not take undue advantage of the circumstances.”

“I’m sure you know others who have the time devices that you could coerce into helping you. Why not them?”

“You have proven yourself a most reliable asset for such conditions.”

“Do you think I will just solve your problem and go away? Are you offering me a choice?”

“As always it is your choice to assist us. Unlike Sanduval Mule, we believe you will do everything in your power to oblige those threatened and return to your life on Earth. You have proven both your abilities and your trustworthiness.”

Do these scoundrels think I will fall for their compliments? That just shows how senseless they think I am. Although, if I took out this Mule character once and for all these guys would quit bothering me. The least I can do is hear what they have to say.

“Okay, I’ll listen, but I will not commit to anything until I hear the whole story, all the details. If you are not going to tell me everything, forget it.”

I could hear, or rather feel a mixture of murmuring conversations with other U.O.H. members, although none of it made any sense. It was just unintelligible prattle bouncing around in my head.

Finally, oojavan sent, *“It is customary for this body to eternally express reality. Accordingly, on this issue, you have a modest advantage. As you wish, we will be candid.”*

For the sake of the sequential chronology of acquired knowledge and to preserve and sustain the chronostream of the quantal ora’, we must correct this potential for disruption as quickly as possible. Nevertheless, we must equally maintain the secure operation of chronal continuity exclusive to preordained galactic beings such as yourself.

In keeping with the regulations accompanying the acceptance of the traversing instruments, specifically directive 14b.8.j.9c... if you do not respect our request for your assistance, the instruments and their possessor, as well as all those with knowledge of their existence, will be terminated.”

“Let me get this straight, if I don’t help you, you will kill me. Is that it?”

“You are indeed highly perceptive. A trait not commonly found in all beings. If you desire absolute bluntness, yes! You and Vienna Pitts as well, as she too has ownership and knowledge of the existence of the traversing instruments.”

I had become fiercely protective of that feisty beauty I’d saved so long ago. Vienna had filled my meager existence with a passion more precious than my own life. I couldn’t let these alien bastards harm her.

I knew these arrogant weasels would do anything to get what they want. “Well then,” I say, loathe dripping from my words, “if that is my only *choice*, tell me

what you want me to do.”

“Then we are in agreement, you will willingly assist us.”

“Willingly? I guess I have to if I want to live.”

“Your answer is affirmative?”

I hesitated. These slimy scumbags will do whatever it takes to get their way. Sarcastically I answered, “Yes, I will help you.”

“Excellent decision,” oojavan sent, sounding almost euphoric, “The first phase will be your cognitive preparation.”

“What kind of preparation? I thought you said I had all the experience and expertise that was needed.”

“Your known abilities are numerous and welcome, yet the requirements for this solution are untypical for your many strengths. Additional preparation is a necessity to ensure your chance of success and survival,” oojavan explained.

“Oh, my chance of survival, eh?” You deceitful scoundrels, I thought. If I don’t do what they want they’ll kill me *and* Vienna. If I do as they ask, I’ll probably get killed anyway. Some choice these degenerate scumbags have given me.

“Okay, what kind of *preparation*, and where do I have to go to get it?”

You must be thoroughly prepared to resist cerebral harmonic resonance vibrations. This preparation will not be trouble-free for your limited psyche; although we are optimistic you possess adequate inner cerebral strength. You will travel to the planet Q’nine in the Earth year 3178. Once there, Noiiz Ringwattanajiinga will contact you for the preparation process. When you complete the training sequence further instructions will be available.”

“Cerebral what? You mean I have to suffer more brain pain while some alien creature probes around in my head?” I complained. Maybe I shouldn’t have agreed to this. Death may have been a better choice. But Vienna would also be dead. I can’t let that happen. I think I’m going to need a larger bottle of painkillers for this trip.

“The instruction is essential for your success. Here are the coordinates for Q’nine.”

With that, I felt a sharp-pointed sting deep in my head. “Ouch,” I yelp. I’ll never get used to that.

Allowing some alien creature to play psychological Ping-Pong inside my head isn't something I looked forward to. My mental capacity and thought processes are fine the way they are. But if it keeps Vienna safe, I'll have to go through with it. I knew these wretched vermin wouldn't leave us alone.

"I have to return and inform Vienna of the situation," I explained.

"Do as you must. You are required to begin your journey to Q'nine within 24 of your hours in the pre-stated Earth year. Noiiz Ringwattanajiinga must not be kept waiting," oojavan demanded.

"Got it," I agreed.

Damn those contemptible bastards...

Chapter 4 - Can I Get A Witness...

When I reappeared in the cabin, Vienna was still snugly sprawled on the leather couch engrossed in her editing, never noticing I'd been gone. Of course, for her, it was merely a fraction of a second.

Turning to face her I abruptly interrupted the silence, "Guess what," I said in an irritated tone of voice.

Vienna paused and looked up from her work. "What?" she asked somewhat surprised by my sudden attitude.

"I've just had a visit with the U.O.H.," continuing my irritated tone.

"Just now? I didn't even notice," she grumbled.

"Yeah, they sent me back just a second ago," I growled.

"What did they want?" she asked, narrowing her eyes in a curious expression.

"They asked for my help and I have reluctantly agreed."

"I thought we were taking some time off. Why you? Aren't there others they could get to help them?"

"To be totally honest, they gave me no choice. Rather, they gave me a clear ultimatum. Do what they want or we both die."

"Die? Both of us, why?" Vienna blurted out, raising both eyebrows in shock.

"Yes, both of us. Because we both have our bracelets and rings and, as oojavan put it, 'have knowledge of their existence'."

"Should I talk to them?" Vienna queried. "They've always been nice to me."

"If you think you can change their minds, be my guest. Just remember, oojavan has the personality of a used coffin and we've been deceived by him before."

She paused for a second recalling their last encounter with the U.O.H, and asked, "Wait a minute, exactly what do they want you to do?"

"They think Sanduval Mule is tinkering with the society of some planet again or waging another war, or something even worse. I don't know for sure."

"I hoped we had taken care of him for good the last time," Vienna said sounding

irritated.

“Apparently not,” I respond.

“What exactly are you supposed to do? Where do they want us to go? Did they say how long it would take? I hope it’s not as long as it took on Kr’galmaan. That took us months and we almost got killed several times.”

“So many questions, so few answers,” I muttered in disgust.

“What do you mean? They must have told you something. Didn’t they explain *anything*?”

“Unfortunately, not a drop of factual information. Just that I have to go or else. Believe me, I tried to convince them of other options. But there’s no way I could refuse.”

“Well, when do we go?” Vienna added excitedly.

“Ah... I have to go alone. They said I have to go through some kind of mental preparation first, then wait for further instructions. And if I didn’t go through with this training, I could be mentally harmed.”

“I don’t like it. It’s all very mysterious even for them. And why can’t I go? Remember my training with Pu-illeo, I’m much stronger mentally. The Mule’s mental attacks did not affect me.”

“As I recall, we both fired at Mr. Mule. Wait a minute, are you saying I have a weak mind?” I said smirking.

“I didn’t mean that at all, your mind is as strong as ever,” she teased. Her voice was playful, but her eyes held a malicious sparkle as she smiled that crooked smile of hers. “I simply have some... insight that could be helpful,” she explained in her special cozy tone.

“Believe me, I wish you could come. I don’t like leaving you alone.”

“Hey, I’m a big girl and I can take care of myself,” she said proudly.

“I know you can. I just like being with you.”

Vienna tilted her head to one side, smiled, stepped close, opened her arms, and gave me a long hug. Burying her head on my shoulder she lovingly stroked the muscles of my back. Understandably, she was bothered about me leaving without her. I’m sure she hadn’t planned on being secluded in the cabin for any length of time. But, as usual, she was very understanding.

She was tougher than her appearance would have you believe. Life's lessons had taught her to keep her iron-fisted ambience well hidden inside a velvet glove of beauty and logic. If necessary, she could convey a facade of hardness towards life, but it was always tempered by a deep pool of softness in her heart.

Anyway, if she really wanted or needed to, she could use her bracelet to travel.

Vienna bit her lip and pouted, "Well, I guess that's it then." Her face looked momentarily hurt. "Just be careful, and make sure you come back to me in one piece," she pleaded, her eyes turning moist, "and don't forget, that Mule guy is an expert deceptionist."

"Don't worry, I'll be careful," I said with a smile.

We made small talk about supplies, the weather, and nothing important as I slipped into my Jyotti suit and gathered a few things for the trip, including a large bottle of painkillers. We became quiet. No words were necessary because we each knew what the other was thinking. The air between us was clear and loving. Finally, we walked out towards the landing pad and my Craft, letting our hands softly touch as we walked.

The Craft shimmered in the sunlight like an 180-foot long floating teardrop of quicksilver. When we said our goodbyes, I caressed her gently, hugging and kissing her several times before turning and stepping into the spaceship. Stopping at the entrance I turned and said, "Don't worry, I'll be back in no time."

Vienna composed herself. A wide smile spread across her face as she gave an affirming wave. For her, CW's promise was like another loving caress.

Once inside I turned left, walked down the hall into the control area, and sat down in the command seat located just off-center. The seat was made of the same material as the rest of the Craft. When I sat down the soothing warmth was relaxing as it gently molded itself to the curves of my body. Placing both arms on the armrests, my hands disappear from view, sinking wrists deep into the flowing silverish material. The familiar feeling surrounding my hands was like a pair of warm gloves.

Dr. Jyotti Rabbet, with assistance from Kr'galmaan scientists, had designed and constructed my Craft in Earth year 2746. As he explained to me, the Craft's core structure was a genetic variation of my DNA. Somehow my DNA had been integrated into a nucleoplasm made of multi-walled graphene carbon nanotubes interwoven with some rare Kr'galmaan nano-fiber material. Amazingly, the material was super strong. It had withstood attacks from various advanced weapons from particle beams and lasers to ion plasma cannons. The Craft also had light-absorbing and shape-altering capabilities. My connection to the Craft was my hands immersed in the armrests of the seat. My mind had total control.

Whatever I thought, the neurons from my brain pulsed into the Craft, instantly converting brainwaves into commands. This electrical interaction was the same pathway the Craft's sensors and subsystems integrated with my mind. Jyotti called it the Conscious Cortex Looping system. On my last trip, I had taken a small piece of the Craft's material and placed it inside my iJotter. This allowed me, with a simple touch to the iJotter, to have immediate cerebral communication with the Craft from almost any distance.

Jyotti had also designed the Craft's propulsion system. He told me it was an electromagnetic converging plasmic drive that reoriented the Interplanetary Magnetic Field on demand. I have no idea what all that meant, but according to Jyotti the Craft was capable of equalizing and regulating the frequency oscillations of magnetic fields. He called it the MagNIP drive. Basically, Jyotti had been able to harness and allow my Craft, and me, to control the interplanetary magnetic energy of quantum gravity known as Birkeland Currents. Amazingly, it was capable of traveling at over thirty-five thousand light-years per second.

The Craft was mine and mine alone. Without my DNA no one else could control it, and its speed and precision were incredible. It would do anything I could dream up -- hover at any altitude from inches above the ground to billions of miles in outer space. It could dive underwater, change its shape, and even become virtually invisible by duplicating and reflecting its surroundings. Its sensors were programmed to detect and monitor the wavelength of every known energy spectra and radio frequency. And the Craft could travel at superluminal velocity. It was a fantastic machine. I loved it.

Dr. Jyotti Rabbet was not merely a brilliant scientist he was also a friend. He had not only designed the Craft and its propulsion system, but he had also designed my spacesuit, which I had affectionately dubbed the Jyotti suit. The hooded suit clung to my body head to toe like a second skin. It was made of self-molding state-of-the-art thermal shielding material that hid my body heat. Deploying the hood immediately transformed it into an all-encompassing helmet, including a face-covering visor with a heads-up display. At the same time, the suit was completely sealed and pressurized. The suit had a rebreathing system and I had never run out of air, even after several days. It had proven to be impervious to most weapons, saving my life many times.

After getting comfortable, I gave a quick thought and the Craft immediately shot twenty-four thousand miles straight up and stopped. I sat for a long moment using the Craft's visual wavelength sensors to observe the Earth. In this time-space, its northern glaciers extended down to the border between the U.S. and Canada. To the south, glaciers were covering the southern tip of the South American continent. Even in this global glacial period, Earth was a beautiful planet. Without a second thought, I dial my bracelet to the year 3178, took a deep breath, and touched the green stone.

Instantly Earth looked different. The spacetime change was obvious. The slow-moving northern and southern glaciers had begun to recede from their push toward the equator. With the coordinates oojavan had painfully stamped into my memory, I set the Craft's course for planet Q'nine. I was in a hurry to get started and finished.

According to the Craft's stats, the fastest I had ever traveled was ninety percent of light speed. That was during my last trip with Vienna. But Jyotti had told me that because the Craft uses the gravitational energy of even distant objects in space, he didn't know the limit of its speed. Although he had told me that according to his quantum photon experiments, he estimated the Craft, traveling in the vacuum of space, could cruise at superluminal speeds.

When I ask the Craft to calculate the total travel time to Q'nine using my last speed, it indicated exactly 2.26 parsecs. That was unacceptable, much too long to be away from Vienna. I directed the Craft to recalculate using its fastest possible velocity through every magnitude of gravitational field attraction and propulsion it could. This reduced the travel time to just 51.465 hours.

"Now that's Star Speed," I said with a smile. "Yes, much better."

Commanding the Craft onward toward Q'nine I snarled, "I mustn't keep this Nozie Ringajinga being waiting."

Chapter 5 - Who's That Lady...

Earth Standard Year 3124

Vienna lay sprawled across the king-sized waterbed in the master bedroom on the second floor of the cabin. Her emerald green eyes softly blinked open as she awoke to the crackling sound of the fire in the fireplace.

Outside the tall east-facing windows the morning sun was slowly rising. The beaming radiance caused the tint of the windows to darken against the sun's golden glare. It was 6:24 in the morning of another long day alone.

Gently turning her head, she snuggled deeper into the soft pillow and gazed out the windows. For a long while, she lay looking at the radiant blue sky while listening to the chirping birds. The clean gray sheets felt smooth and warm against her nude body. Occasionally the birds would flit past the windows as they busied themselves with the morning ritual of searching for food for themselves and their young. Their fleeting shadows sporadically danced across her face. Her short auburn hair was mussed from sleeping. With a lazy gesture, she brushed a stray strand of hair back from her forehead. Rolling onto her back the bed shifted, making a slow-motion wave. Raising her arms over her head she arched her back and stretched, letting out a deep sigh in the process.

Her body lay still but her mind was active. It was obvious she was getting restless. At first, she had enjoyed the solitude, only taking one quick trip to town. But now she was tired of being alone, especially in bed. She misses laying in bed with her head on CW's chest listening to the soothing rhythmical beat of his heart. She pushed that thought to the back of her consciousness. Using her left hand she threw the bed coverings to one side. Swinging her legs off the bed, she stood, rubbed the sleep from her eyes, and slowly strolled into the bathroom.

After relieving herself of nature's call she started the water and moments later stepped into the stonewalled shower stall. In no hurry to start the day she took her time, enjoying the hot cascading water. The growing steam rolling from the shower filled the room and fogged the clear glass shower enclosure. Emerging from her bath she casually dried herself with a large soft towel. After vigorously towel-drying her hair she shook her head from side to side so her hair flew freely. She would let nature do the final drying process.

Casually walking into the cedar-lined closet she scanned the hanging clothes trying to decide what to wear. Finally making her choice, she threw on a pair of faded denim jeans and an old gray t-shirt with the face of a Ba'cho wolf stenciled on the front. Taking her time she strolled down the wooden staircase turned left and entered the kitchen. She filled a teapot and placed it on the stove, cut two

slices of raw grain bread from a full loaf, and placed them into a toaster.

Moments later the bread popped up just as the teapot sang its whistling song of readiness. Mechanically she spread homemade cinnamon flavored cream cheese on the toasted bread. Showing no evidence of emotion, she ate the toast while nibbling on slices of a Red Delicious apple. Then washed it down with a fragrant mouthful of warm ginger green tea.

In a pensive mood, she stared out the window at the tapestry created by the distant mountains crowned with glistening ice and snow and the tall evergreen trees crowding the space from the lowlands to the top of the mountain. Gently rolling puffy clouds decorated the sky. Occasionally her eyes would roam across the living area to CW's most recent tome for the U.O.H.. I should be editing, she thought to herself. No, that would be her third editing process. No part of her wanted to do it again. There was no need, the story was accurate, excellently written, and needed no revisions. She thought to herself, the tale was no longer so very remarkable. She had lived it.

When she finished her last mouthful, she got up tossed the trash into a waste bin, and placed her used cup in the sink. She stared out the window above the sink for a few moments watching the trees move in the breeze, the scurrying squirrels, and busy birds. I should be doing something more productive, she brooded. She had certain capabilities she knew would be needed wherever CW had gone. Unsuccessfully she tried to push the thought of CW away, which was difficult.

She cared for him. He wasn't a handsome man by thespian standards, with his scruffy whiskers and disheveled hair. His piercing deep-blue eyes seemed to look through you when he stared. He was tall and well built for his age with broad shoulders and slim waist. He walked with a slight limp that, according to him, was due to an injury he received during his travel to 463 BC Rome. He had a sharp, dry yet droll wit and his writings of history were vivid, realistic, and well-detailed, with a flair for the zany and unexpected. They went together like peanut butter and chocolate, she chuckled to herself.

Moving to the kitchen island she sat on one of the stools. For ten long minutes, she sat looking around the inside of the cabin, wondering what to do next. Her life had made many sharp turns since meeting CW. She now suffers from an increasingly dangerous case of curiosity and impetuosity. Those traits had always been within her but it had taken CW to bring them to the surface. Her life now has a renewed purpose filled with infinite possibilities.

"Exercise" she almost shouted. Exercise, be it yoga, aerobics, or gatka, was her form of stress relief and escape from the mundane. Most of the time she practiced her own mixture of yoga and gatka.

When she began her exercise routine her thoughts roamed from one thing to

another until anchoring themselves on her experience during her visit to Colter City two days before. The memory had teased the back of her mind ever since. She again reviewed what had happened. Was what she saw and felt an illusion? Positioning herself in Sarugu Dhyana Mudra, she closed her eyes tightly as her mind traveled through her memories, examining the tiniest details of the moment.

While sitting at one of the outdoor restaurants enjoying a cup of black tea, a nearby pattern of unusual disturbance caught her eye. The distraction she noticed was the haphazardness of time stopping and restarting. Because she wore her bracelet and ring the time stoppage had not affected her. Even so, she stayed motionless when it occurred so as not to draw attention to herself. She had also felt an unusual murmur of thought so strong it made the hair on her arms stand tall. She felt it, lost her connection for a split second, regained it almost immediately, then lost it again. Frustrated, she had looked around the area at the people close by, then widened her search to survey the surrounding locale. But there was no trace of where the thought could have come from.

That incident continued to haunt her. Maybe she should go back to the market today. Yes, she should, she thought, suddenly determined to solve this new mystery. Anyway, she needed something to do.

She transformed into the meditative Jalandhara Bandha position holding it for several moments as her mind continued to wonder. Altering her position to the plank pose she held it for several moments then began her daily fifty push-ups. Continuing her routine with the Bakasana, slowly converting into Balasana, she rested in that pose for several minutes.

That's enough, she thought to herself. Stop wasting time!

Taking long purposeful strides, she went back upstairs, again stripped to bare skin, and slipped into her Jyotti suit. Over her suit, she put back on the faded pair of jeans, a warm shirt with a hoodie attached, and her favorite western boots, grabbed her overcoat, and went downstairs. Standing in the center of the room, Vienna turned the dials of her bracelet to the exact latitude and longitude of the clearing where she and CW usually landed the Craft and three minutes into the future. She touched the blue stone on the ring to the green stone of the bracelet and stepped into the floating blue nothingness between time zones.

Stepping out she began the two-mile walk to town. As she strolled through the wooded grove, she again thought of CW. During their combat on Kr'galmaan, he had always reminded her that she must keep her situational awareness at a high-level no matter the time or place. To always stay ready to confront the unknown with authority even if she didn't feel threatened with imminent physical or mental danger. What was surprising for her is she felt relaxed in this time-space. No sweaty palms and no suffocating fears. For the first time in centuries, there was no fighting or wars anywhere on the planet. The people of Earth were in mutual

survival mode due to the continued glacial period. Sadly, billions of unprepared Earthlings had died of starvation or frozen to death during the change.

Now they helped each other more than at any time in history. Species' survival was more important than territorial and tribal disputes.

After her short walk through the forest, she arrived in town, strolled around for a while then sat down at an empty table in the outside seating area of one of the cafés. Customers of various classes, easily determined by their clothing, occupied several tables. A few waitresses, bundled warmly against the cold, sliced their way around the tables and chairs delivering their orders to and from the kitchen. The cool air was thick with the smell of baking bread and grilled meats. She watched with interest as the human traffic moved along the village street. The main street was somewhat busier today than on her previous visits, she thought. She watched those moving along the walkway, couples strolling hand in hand, as well as single men and women. In a grassy yard down the street children laughed and chattered as they played. Her eyes continued to survey her surroundings, down the aisles of tables and chairs sitting outside the various eating establishments, and along the spacious rows of buildings. She tried to convince herself that whatever she had seen and felt before was only an illusion, that it was nothing she should concern herself with.

She waited for a while enjoying being among others until a waitress came by and asked if she wanted anything.

“Yes, I’ll have a hot cup of green quince tea please.”

“Is that all?” asked the waitress.

“Yes.”

Moments later the waitress returned with a warm mug of tea. Vienna paid her in silver coins and continued her observations. After two cups of tea, she tired of sitting and started her stroll around the town, stopping on occasion to window shop. She leisurely walked first down one side of the long street then crossed over and did the same up the other side.

She repeated this trip several times during the day. Occasionally she would get a slight murmur of thought but was never able to pinpoint the source. By the end of the day she had discovered nothing that would help her unravel the mysterious feeling of mind-to-mind communication.

Returning to the clearing, she dialed her bracelet to the cabin’s location and three minutes into the future and again touched the blue stone of her ring to the green stone on her bracelet.

All that evening her mind raced as she pondered those strange thought occurrences. Something was going on and she knew it.

Chapter 6 - Working 9 To 5...

For the next three days, Vienna returned to the small town in search of the source of her mysterious thought event, but to no avail. No noticeable clues, no patterns, no time stoppage, nothing.

On this day, she followed her normal routine. This time on one of her walks she stopped outside a supply store, observed for a moment, then decided to enter. Inside was an older man, probably in his 70's, serving another female customer. Covering his old yet husky body he wore threadbare brown bib overalls over a dirty rust-colored long-sleeved shirt. You could tell by his looks he had lived a hard life. His wrinkled and leathery face bore a constant expression as if his broad nose always smelled something stinky. His ruddy complexion magnified the scar running from outside his right eye, down his cheek, and into his full gray beard. His long gray mustache matched the color of his thick lengthy hair. Both looked like they'd been tightly braided for decades. His wide shoulders couldn't keep him from standing slightly bent forward. And he walked with a noticeable limp, favoring his right leg.

The old man packed the woman's order into several well-used cardboard boxes and then stacked the boxes on a trolley. The wheels of the trolley gave off a loud squeak as it moved toward the door. He pushed, with some effort, the heavy load of goods outside to the woman's waiting transport vehicle. Her vehicle was an ancient off-road pickup truck covered with mud that had been converted for both ground and hover driving. Even though the truck hovered a few inches off the ground, the cushion of air between the vehicle and the ground did little to smooth the ride.

With the truck sitting on the ground, the large poly-rubber tires increased its height, making it difficult for the old man to load. It was obvious his stiff bones and tired muscles from his advanced years made the task painful. He would grunt and strain as he lifted each box.

Over the last few days, she'd watched this old man suffer through his tasks many times. That's when an idea suddenly came to her. After the man returned, he asked in a raspy voice, "May I help you, ma'am?"

"Yes," Vienna said politely, "I'm looking for work and thought you may be in need of some help."

The old man's eyebrows rose and pinched together, "Just how can you help me?" He asked suspiciously.

"I could help pack and load the wares for your customers, stock your shelves,

sweep the floor, whatever you might need. I'm healthy and will work for minimal wages," she suggested.

"What makes you think I need any help?" his gravelly voice growled.

"Not to be insulting sir, but I noticed you were having a hard time loading that woman's things and thought you could use some help. If I've insulted you, I apologize."

"Humph, I may be old and a bit slow but I get the job done," he said defensively.

"I'm sure you do sir, I just thought we could help each other. I need a job and you looked like you could use some help, that's all."

"Hmm, I do get tired easily these days, maybe you're right. Maybe I could use some help, but I can't pay you much," he said crankily

"I'll work for whatever you can pay. I'll work for goods if that would be easier for you."

"Goods huh?" He thought for a moment. "Yeah, we can make that work. They call me Wilurby, what's your name?" Extending his hand out to shake.

Pleased, Vienna took his hand, "Vienna, Vienna Pitts, glad to meet you Wilurby."

"You have a sturdy handshake... for a female," Wilurby grinned.

"I work out," Vienna explains, "when would you like me to start?"

"Today's almost gone, so come back tomorrow at six in the morning."

Vienna smiled and agreed, "Very well sir, I'll see you then. Thank you."

Chapter 7 - Tak'n The Time...

Earth Standard Year 3178

Two days passed while I continued trying to further decipher the ring's intricate markings. My original findings, the power of wearing the ring and bracelet on the same hand and arm, had proven right. But getting a grasp on the remaining script was turning out to be much more difficult. So far, there was no clear significance connecting the markings to the full powers of the bracelet and ring.

I was closing in on my destination so I prompt the Craft to make the front of its body transparent. I wanted to use my own eyes not just its sensors. The view was breathtaking. The Craft was traveling through space at a velocity so fast that light seemed almost stationary. It seemed like the reflecting light of distant stars would blink on and off as we instantly passed. With the assistance of the Craft's sensors, I could distinguish the various gaseous space clouds in assorted shades of red, blue, orange, and green of the nebula where Q'nine was located. Within seconds the Craft entered the star cluster, automatically slowed, and made several course adjustments to dodge the errant asteroid roaming in an unpredictable orbit.

Gradually the Craft slowed further as it approached the star that Q'nine orbited. The star giving life to its planets was a deep blue color and appeared massive compared to Earth's sun; probably four times its size. Oojavan's directions indicated Q'nine was the seventh of twelve planets orbiting this strange-looking star. As I got closer the planet gave off an odd reflective yellowish-colored glow.

"What a curious planet. I hope the inhabitants are friendly," I drolly thought to myself.

As I approached, the Craft's sensors indicated the yellowish glowing aura surrounding Q'nine was exactly 4,253.124 miles from its surface. It was obvious the glow wasn't a natural occurrence, an energy field no doubt. At the distance of 4,500 miles, I slowed the Craft's approach. Just outside the energy field's range, I came to a complete stop to evaluate this new development. The Craft's sensors indicated it was a very powerful electromagnetic phase-disrupting force field. There were only two things it could be, either an alarm system or a defensive shield capable of destroying anything that strayed into its path. Never having come across anything like this I was being intentionally cautious. Oojavan wouldn't have sent me across the galaxy just to be taken out by a force field. Or would he? I'll never trust those U.O.H. scalawags. But killing me now made no sense. Anyway, they could kill me at any time by terminating the bracelet and ring.

"Okay, what are you going to do?" I asked myself aloud.

Finally, it dawned on me; I directed the Craft to calculate and map the field's magnetic energy waves and mirror its signal frequency.

“Yeah, that should work... I hope,” I say aloud, not overly confident of my plan. But what were my choices?

I gave the thought command and the Craft slowly moved closer. It carefully inched forward until its pointed nose barely came in contact with the field. Nothing happened.

“Good. Okay, let's keep going.”

Continuing to move slowly forward the Craft gradually passes through the field safely, apparently without being noticed or sounding an alarm.

“Phew,” I said, relieved that I was still alive.

Immediately diving toward the planet's surface, I passed through a murky cloud cover at five thousand miles, leveled off, and began an orbital flight path. As I circled the planet the Craft's sensors scanned for a place to land. The planet appeared to be completely covered with a mossy greenish-brown fluid, void of solid surfaces. Moments later the Craft identified one tiny location south of Q'nine's equator and opposite my original path through the force field. There, in the middle of an ocean of brown was a lone charcoal-colored island tapering up to a plateaued top. According to the Craft's calculations, the base of the island was half a mile wide and grandly protruded 924 feet above the muddy liquid. The plateaued surface was 163.6 feet square. The Craft's sensors indicated there was breathable air covering the top of the island.

This can't be the only place to land, I thought to myself as we hovered over the rocky island. Moments later I touched down and waited for someone or something to appear or to receive some form of communication.

Hours passed as the planet's rotation steadily turned the island away from the vibrant blue sun and gloomy darkness spread. Suddenly the island rock began to tremble. At the same time, a distorted reflection of light suddenly popped out of the ocean of murky liquid. The circle of light soared upward until it formed a thin filmy bubble-like canopy the color of skim milk that enveloped the entire island.

The quakes steadily grew stronger until the island itself shifted hard and began to fall, gradually sinking below the surface. The bubbly orb kept my Craft and me safely encapsulated as we submerged into the ocean of brown fluid. There was an uncomfortable falling feeling as the rock rapidly increased in speed, plunging lower and lower. As I descended deeper the dark mucky fluid outside the bubble became lighter, turning a honey-brown. After plunging another mile, the fluid again changed color. This time into a translucent fluid. The Craft's sensors

revealed we were now in liquid water and submerging faster and faster. At three miles down the Craft's sensors identified a large energy source centered another five miles directly below.

A few moments later I could see bright lights. Gradually, I could make out a sprawling metropolis encapsulated in a larger dome-shaped spherical bubble. According to the Craft's sensors, the area was an enormous 160 miles long and 222 miles wide.

My enclosure continued its downward journey until it seamlessly collapsed, absorbed by the larger orb covering this immense megacity. The Craft's sensors also told me the population of the city was 234,003 living beings.

Now well within the larger sphere, I could make out a teeming metropolitan area. It had a perfect geometric layout with wide avenues, sidewalks, and hundreds of tall structures reaching thousands of stories high and bathed in bright lights. Between the towering structures were several complexes of smaller, mid-sized buildings. Sleek airborne vehicles glided across the interior sky at varying heights. They maneuvered along invisible lanes passing through the valley of soaring skyscrapers. The reflection of their gleaming shells glinted off the random fish-eyed-shaped window integrated into the walls of the buildings.

The closer I got the clearer things became. Clear enough to make out distinct features on the ground below. Some of the buildings looked like businesses lining an urban center while others varied in size and shape depending on their purpose. A vast cacophony of radiant foliage filled the spaces between the buildings. The plants appeared to be various types of trees and bushes with bluish-hued leaves and multi-colored flora.

Curious-looking beings moved along the ground below, calmly strolling from place to place, stopping momentarily to watch holographic displays.

What a sight, I thought to myself. I was seeing for the first time a busy city, including flying machines, inside a bubble more than eight miles below the planet's liquid surface. It made me wonder just how long it would take and what advanced technology was necessary to build something of this magnitude.

Continuing to sink another half a mile, my stone elevator finally descends into an opening at the top of one of the larger buildings. Once inside, my rock elevator began to slow. Ultimately it disappeared into the floor as my Craft and I gently came to rest.

Chapter 8 - Mind Over Matters...

Out of nowhere, I hear a low mellow hum. It gradually increased until an unfamiliar melody sprang forth. The melody floats in my head and then finally forms into the utterance of word-like sounds.

“Ça c’est bon celui qui raconte fais do-do gris-gris se bat pauvre ti bête c’est tout.”

I could not answer what I did not understand. After the Craft’s atmospheric analytics were completed I stood and walked toward the middle of the Craft. As I approached the side of the Craft opened like a flowing mercury hole, enlarging as I got closer. Stopping at the threshold I saw what must be this Nose-Ringa-whatever creature standing about fifty feet away.

I stepped out of the Craft and onto planet Q’nine for the first time. The gravity felt somewhat stronger than Earth’s, so movement was going to take a little more effort.

Taking long strides with a slight waddle to his step, the creature walked toward me. His long seven-fingered hand reached out and clipped a small device onto the helix of my left ear.

“This will help us communicate,” I heard.

“What is it?” I asked, touching it.

In his croak-ish voice, Noiiz explained, “It is a virtual neural linguistic cipher. The U.O.H. informed us of your undeveloped cerebral capacity. The device will achieve real-time translation of cerebral communications and allow you the use of your verbal communication ability. It will relieve your mind of any irritating distractions.”

“Much better,” I said, as the brain pain slowly winded down.

“I repeat, the companions of Q’nine accept you, C.W. Comstock. I am Noiiz Ringwattanajiinga, we are expecting you.”

“Thank you. Can you pronounce your name again?”

“You may address me as Noiiz if you like,” said the raspy voice.

Noiiz was undeniably not human. He wore minimal clothing: a flimsy turquoise skirt tied around his waist, ending just above his knees like a kilt. The rest of his

body was covered with a chestnut-colored pelt containing patterned splotches of pale yellow that had a phosphorescent glow when viewed at an angle. He stood on two long legs that ended with feet twice the size of a human's, including three toes. He looked as if he was taller than me by about six inches. The pelt on his head was as brown as the rest of him but with a glimmering yellowish-gold stripe on top that ended at a point in the center of his forehead. His groomed furry face was strikingly pleasant with deep-set yet expressive almond-shaped, jade-colored eyes, and no noticeable ears. One very conspicuous difference was his flat stubby nose with gill-like flaps on either side. These flaps started about mid-nose and extended into his cheeks. He also had three of these gill flaps on each side of his neck, just below where his ears would have been.

“Thank you Noiiz,” I said aloud, “Your atmosphere is near, but not the same as my own. I must take precautions. The higher concentrations of one substance will require my body a few moments to adjust.”

“This is our first contact with a Terran, which substance do you refer?”

Terran, huh? That was a first. I've never been called a Terran before. “What we Terrans call CO₂, carbon dioxide,” I explained.

“We are familiar with this trace element; our minimal awareness indicated this vapor should not be deadly for a Terran?”

“It can be in extreme concentrations. If I inhale anything above 20,000 parts per million molecules, it can cause me distress and shortness of breath.”

“Our monitors indicate a concentration of 3,624 by comparison.”

“As do mine,” I agreed. “But my body is accustomed to around 1000.”

“The higher concentration of this component is necessary for our foliage development. Will it cause you distress?”

“That is completely understandable. No, no distress, I just need a moment for my body to adapt to the higher concentration without becoming unsteady.”

“How long will this require?”

“Just a few more moments. The light-headedness is already subsiding. My body is adjusting.”

“Splendid. Please, come with me,” Noiiz asked politely. “We must begin your guidance. We can communicate on our way.”

While we walked, I realized that because of the stronger force of gravity here; my

Craft had informed me it was one-sixth stronger than Earth, and the exertion of simply walking could be tiring. Meanwhile, I thought it a good idea to get better acquainted so I asked, “So tell me Noiiz, how did your species come to live underwater?”

"Why do you ask?" Noiiz asked bluntly.

"I'm inquisitive. It's how I learn, and how I educate myself. I find different beings and their history very interesting."

“Are all Terrans inquisitive?”

“Well, no. Not as much as they should be. But I am a simple scribe and teller of stories, so questions are part of my nature.”

“If that is the case, the answer to your question is, we didn’t always exist on this planet. Twenty-four hundred generations prior to our arrival on Q’nine we resided on the third planet from our star Datu. That planet we had named Euhar.”

“You moved the entire planet's inhabitants to Q’nine? Why?” I inquired.

“Sadly no. We suffered the demise of many of our ancestors as a result of irresponsible misinterpretation of reality. You see, for many generations, our ecological theoreticians were respected and regarded with esteem. Then during generation one-hundred-three, a status ego evolved within that community which distorted their analytical endeavors. Under the cloak of academic authority, they took advantage of their influence and developed it into a form of self-important eliteness. Ultimately, they became the dominant political aristocracy. They feasted on their new authority and lost sight of their commitment to scientific principles. Their predisposed computational projections superseded physical data to the point of deception.

These politically based scientists soon found common values with corrupt despots who believed our technical progress was fueling global climatic destruction. In an effort to avoid their predicted catastrophes, additional protocols were initiated. Over the next four generations, their theories became the basis of quasi-religious mythology rather than scientifically verifiable theorems.

Over time their solutions became incompatible with our thriving socio-economic system. As you may conclude, the outcome was the strangulation of progress and near economic collapse. An objective analysis of their predictions proved them artificial and ultimately the observed changes were determined to be natural. The major cause was planet orbital oscillations of Euhar’s magnetic pole reversal combined with unforeseen variations in Datu.”

“That almost happened on Earth. In fact, throughout Earth’s history policymakers

always used either religion or science to bolster their standing and stay in power. Some tried to meld science and religion but several honest scientists, politicians, and private citizens fought back. So, it was your star that was changing?" I asked.

"Yes. When the transformations intensified the result was planetary climatic alterations. By the time we realized the future of Euhar it was nearly too late. Very few were able to make the accelerated transition to Q'nine. Sadly, before the transition was complete, seventy-five percent of our population had perished. Those billions of deaths were the result of dysfunctional science advancing unrealistic absurdity. That was long ago and cannot be changed. We are here now."

"Earth survived similar situations," I replied. "It suffered through many cycles of self-proclaimed saviors in positions of power demanding obedience to falsehoods. In fact, I have traveled to many periods on Earth and seen empires rise and empires fall. Some have fallen due to invasion while others fell due to social suicide. The ones that fell due to suicide, fell because citizens stood mute as their leaders abandoned them in favor of the tyranny of servitude disguised as equality and justice."

There is another thing I'm curious about. The energy requirements for such a large underwater area must be huge. How do you support the energy needs of this city? Do you use some form of nuclear power?"

"It's quite simple. You might call it kinesis," Noiiz stated quickly.

"Kinetic energy?" I questioned. "You collect energy from movement or motion? How does that work? Is it part of your clothing?"

"Not in the macro since your question suggests. We have constructed an energy-transduction system that collects kinetic energy output from the molecular interactions produced within the cells of organic life. Each Q'nine inhabitant and all organic life is infused with a synthetic bio-molecular electrogenic collecting circuit."

"A what? How? Do you implant this circuit thingy into each plant and being?" I said sarcastically.

"That method failed," Noiiz said bluntly, sounding as if he was closely involved, "it was exceedingly problematic for live organisms. We mastered genetic epigenetic mechanisms eons prior. By using similar adaptive capability, we perfected synthetic electro-biology."

"What the hell is synthetic electro-biology?" I asked somewhat dumbfounded.

"For our use, synthetic electro-biology is the synthesizing and synchronizing of organic molecules with specific dynamic electrogenic functions. One of our

greatest achievements is synchronizing the bio-molecular electrogenic processes specifically designed for diffusion alteration. Our synthetic molecule element is scalable to correspond with various needs of each organism.”

“You invented this while living underwater?” I asked in amazement.

“Not exactly. Before we journeyed to Q’nine we recognized the necessity of producing the required amount of energy to supply our current needs and for continuous growth. To accomplish this, we introduced an extra layer of biochemical instructions, a modular biochemical circuit, into every mitochondria organelle cell structure. This modified molecular pattern influences biological energy collection. The transformation of the cells’ epigenetic code creates a biochemical oscillator circuit. The energy produced by the activity of the cells within all organisms is then sent through the oscillatory circuit and collected in a bio-molecular nanodevice constructed within the miRNA. The device then sends excess energy to a centralized energy core for distribution, the impulse nucleus.

The altered molecular code also determines the rate an organism develops in response to its environment. Because each biological species is an exact duplicate of a singular ancestor, their genetic sequences are essentially identical across multiple generations. When the refined mtDNA is passed on to successive generations, the initial biochemical circuit is also passed on. We finalized this technique once we arrived on Q’nine.”

“That’s incredible.”

“I am pleased you find interest in our technology,” Noiiz said proudly.

“Yes, it really is fascinating,” I said. I wasn’t exactly sure what Noiiz had just described, but it sounded like each organism on Q’nine is an organic energy generator. Basically, a bunch of batteries hooked up in tandem.

“How about that force field I passed through? What’s that?” I asked

“You are referring to the Monde Sheath,” Noiiz replied.

“Yeah the Monde thingy,” I said mockingly.

“The Monde Sheath is constructed of tachyon particles having two major functions. The most important function is object detection. Instability in the continuation of the tachyon field produces an increase in the tachyonic momentum vibrations, which ultimately destroys the intruding object. The sheath is required due to the continued alteration of Datu’s gravitational field, which has triggered irregular orbits of some asteroids. Another purpose is to deflect the increased harmful rays coming from Datu and protect the oceans of Q’nine.”

I was very impressed with the intelligence and industriousness of this civilization. The pinnacle of a civilized society filled with like-minded beings with one common goal, the survival of their species.

Noiiz turned and led the way down a wide glass-walled passageway. We wound our way around several turns, threw a couple of automatic doors then down a long corridor with pale purple-colored walls. In the process, we pass several similar-looking Q'nine beings busily engaged in their tasks. While we walked side-by-side, Noiiz put his wooly arm around my shoulder and asked, "Even though we do not possess an organic auditory apparatus, we thoroughly understand its function. I expect there are many sounds to experience on your planet."

"Yes," I said proudly, trying to sound as intellectual as possible, "most of the creatures on Earth are capable of making sounds. Many of them are very pleasant, though some sounds are siren calls of danger or cries of domination. Our numerous types of bird sounds are a good example. They also communicate their sovereignty through their singing and chirping sounds. Frogs make a croaking sound and most animals make some sort of sound; a growl, a roar, or a squeak. Some swimming mammals such as Whales and Dolphins produce specialized sound pulses while hunting or during timers of excitement. Some of our insects make sounds by rubbing their limbs together. Besides talking as a way of communication, we humans have advanced into producing sounds in unique and expressive ways we call music. It has complex rhythms that are sometimes accompanied by descriptive and expressive verbal phrases. Some of the phrases are fun and fanciful, while others may tell a story."

"Is it always pleasurable this... music?"

"No, not always. While one human may find specific music pleasurable, another may find the rhythms and words unpleasant or irritating. Our music began as tribal celebrations and many humans still hold reverence to the sounds. Over the many following generations, and into modern human society, music has generational as well as ethnic tones and lyrics. The typical young human of our modern societies will create distinctive music that symbolizes their formative cycles. These diverse sounds are meant to express a contrasting image they consider to be unlike previous generations. Many human youths are rebellious in this way as they find their place in society. Music is one of the ways they express their independence. Although, there is one thing I have learned in my many travels. While their music does make the youth feel as if it is unique, and in many cases the rhythms are distinctive, their verbal messages change very little. Over time, their music becomes part of the larger scheme of life as they grow and mature."

"An obvious human deviancy," Noiiz proclaimed. "Clearly humans have been trained from an early age to feel the cheap reaction to gross stimuli, thus making them susceptible to sounds that convey thoughts. However, these sounds can also

obliterate thoughts and terminate logical thinking. It is no wonder the U.O.H. sent you for conversion.”

“Deviancy huh?” Wondering if I should be insulted, but let it pass. “Yes, my *conversion* was a demand from the U.O.H. So tell me, how is this going to be done?”

“Your resonance palette must be cleansed. You must survive a series of psychic probes designed to identify internal contradictions that will test your wits and your mental stability. During the process, your mind will strive for the familiar. The darkness built of your own perversions will not be liberated easily. During your treatment, we will open the correct doors to the darkest corners of your soul. If we are successful, we will clear your mind of the malicious indulgence within the sounds you hear. In essence, we must irrigate your desert of reason and logical thought by eliminating your connection with certain sounds to specific emotions. This will ensure you are no longer swayed into emotional responses stimulated by tonal input. You must be persistent and courageous and endure to the very end. Can you endure such a journey?”

“My mind is strong so yeah, I can. Although I must tell you, I like the music from many human generations. Those sounds mean something to me. They give me pleasure and bring back pleasant memories. Music helps human beings reduce anxiety.”

“Such stochastic resonance is exactly the obstacle that must be eliminated. We must reinforce your mind against timbre-induced sensibility connected to emotions. We must fortify your sensory threshold. You must learn to be impervious to sonic manipulation and not place poignant sentiment on the sounds you hear. It is the only way. If we are unsuccessful, then precise frequency modulations can be used to sway your reasoning.”

“Great,” I say sarcastically. Now the U.O.H. is forcing me to give up my own simple pleasures. I love music. It helps me concentrate and elevates my mood. From Kassia to Du Fay to Bach and Mozart. From Trixie Smith and Eddie Boyd to Benny Goodman. From the Beatles, Nat King Cole, and Martha’s Children, to Matsieng, Cicero Blake, and Lynyrd Skynyrd. From Mose Fan Fan and The Medic Droid to The Hu, Digitus Euphony, 7 Shouting Stones, Butterfly Spit, and the Wailing Whalers. Opera, Orchestra, Jazz, Blues, Rock and Roll, Country, Hip-Hop, Metal, Gagaku, Techno, and Ménage. My list of enjoyable music from centuries of human history is long. And these contemptible bastards in the U.O.H. want to take it away.

We continued down the corridor, turned left through another automatic door, and entered a small room where several Q’nine beings were waiting. They too had novel phosphorescent patterns on their pelts. The room had indigo-colored walls behind several rectangular-shaped holographic displays. Etched into the center of

the floor was a large luminous blue-green circle. Inside the circle was a criss-cross pattern of shining copper that was eerily pulsing.

“This technique is not only complex; it requires several intricate aptitudes. Therefore, the need for my assistants,” Noiiz said. He introduced them as we moved around the room, “This is Ten-Tom Tiddler, she will control the sine wave stream. Ea’choo Walibug will regulate the distortion decibel stream. Samooal Rattnip will monitor the luminance ratio stream, while Rarebit Ladriana verifies the tonic triad and vibration capacity stream. I will manage the overall dynamic sinusoidal ranges.”

They looked like any other Q’nine being I’d seen so far, maybe a little younger than Noiiz. Each one nodded as they were introduced, “Hello everyone,” I said, cheerily waving a hand. No one responded. They simply turned their attention back to their chores.

I was anxious and didn’t really want to continue this, but I had to. “So how are you going to perform my, *conversion*?”

“Each creature with auditory senses has a specific and unique stimulation wave that resonates within their psyche connecting their inner emotions to outer world stimuli. We must first pinpoint that distinctive baseline signal within you. Once we obtain your sense-datum, it will allow us to further eradicate the sensitive psychological correlations,” Noiiz explained.

“Huh, okay, how do you plan to accomplish that?” I asked, not really wanting to know the details because I was spooked by the whole idea.

“We will enter your mind and deactivate the emotional interconnections you retain to certain resonance vibrations. Only then can you progress and truly begin to perceive true sound, isolated and unharmed,” Noiiz explained further.

“What do you mean, enter my mind? Are you going to scramble my thoughts and make me deaf to all music?”

“You may feel a slight emotional irritation but your auditory senses will be preserved.”

“Oh, you mean more brain pain. I see. I’ll be able to hear but not enjoy my music.”

“Fortunately, the procedure will not be physically painful,” Noiiz says unsympathetically.

“That’s easy for you to say.... Okay, let’s get this over with,” I demand.

Noiiz walked to a corner table, opened the lid of a small metal container, and lifted out a slimy-looking thing with offshoots that hung down over his hand.

“The connection to your mind will be accomplished by this Echo Miter positioned on your skull,” he said.

The Echo Miter was a thin membrane-like device semi-circular in shape that looked like a dead flat jellyfish with limp tentacles. The middle of the device was about four inches in diameter.

When he positioned the slimy device on the top and center of my head, I felt a slight suction grasp my head. Its six legs spread out across my skull. Two legs went down each side of my head and wrapped around my ears, two others were positioned down the back of my head to the base of my skull, touching the top of my neck. The last two legs stretched forward down my forehead, their tips ending just above my eyebrows. The whole thing stuck to my head like a skullcap.

“Now, remove your coverings and lay as motionless as possible in the center of the Shenu. Simply close your eyes and try to relax,” Noiiz says, motioning to the glowing spot on the floor.

“That’s what rapists always say,” I sneer. Noiiz just gave me a puzzled look. I'm not a prude but voluntarily getting naked in front of a bunch of furry aliens made me a little self-conscious and apprehensive. Stiffly removing my clothes and Jyotti suit, I situated myself on the floor.

There I lay, completely naked in a room full of strange fur-covered beings wearing a jellyfish on my head. Squinting my eyes, I narrowly peeked out and pondered the possible risks.

Noiiz and his assistants positioned themselves in front of the floating displays and began busily tapping the changing symbols. The symbols looked like continually fluctuating Rorschach inkblots. Systematically the room dimmed. The symbols suddenly came to life and began chasing each other from one floating screen to another.

Nervous about what was to come next, I closed my eyes tight and expected the worst.

Laying on the warm floor I began to feel the sensation of being weightless as my body started to rise from the floor and float. Gradually darkness drifted over my mind. Before long I felt a deep tingling in the center of my skull. The tingling increasingly spread around my whole head, then faded away. From somewhere off in the distance I heard a soft melodious sound followed by a low rich humming noise. Gradually a soothing pitch with a catchy tempo became familiar. This helped me feel somewhat relaxed.

All of a sudden, a fierce heat swept over me and I felt a mixture of complex sounds bludgeoning my eardrums. I thought I was hearing the sounds but they were not actually entering my ears. In reality, they were oscillating signals telling my brain what I was hearing, though not really hearing. The wave of convoluted sounds spun, twirled, and twisted in my head as my emotions began to surface.

Abruptly, there was absolute silence.

Ballooning out of the silence came a familiar jingle which, at first, made me smile. My feeling of pleasure quickly turned into several rounds of uncontrollable giggles. Each bout of giggles morphed into bellowing intense rolling laughter, died suddenly, then restarted. Instantaneously my laughter turned to hilarious sorrow as tears formed in my eyes and I cried out loud. I didn't just cry, I burst into a roaring body-wrenching bawl, boohooing like a hurt child. This abruptly changed, causing my eyes to jerk back and forth as my emotions ran wild, bouncing from one psychological trauma to another. My emotions rambled on from exalted happiness to intense trembling terror. With each combination of sounds, my responses morph from humorous anxiety back to bleak sadness, then into deep chronic depression. With each pulse of sonic vibrations, my very soul was bombarded with a virtuoso of emotional confusion. The reverberations would pounce, recoil, and strike again with even deeper emotional waves rippling through my mind. Physically it felt like my bones were humming and quivering within my flesh.

This went on for what seemed like forever but was actually a tortuous four hours. I was dripping with sweat as the resonance barrage and emotional assault slowed. The deluge of sonic waves progressively faded until it ended when Noiz and his group produced the perfect sound. The pleasant tone flowed through my mind with velvety ease and I became completely relaxed, falling into a deep slumber.

The next thing I know I awoke dazed, still unclothed, and lying on a soft bed in a large chamber with pearl-colored walls. On one wall of the room, two large windows let in the glow of ambient light. My head was throbbing in excruciating pain. Glancing around the room I saw my clothes and Jyotti suit neatly folded on a nearby chair. Throwing my legs over the side of the bed I forced myself to sit upright. Groggily I managed to stand and stumbled my way to the chair.

“What the bloody hell happened to me?” I say aloud.

Still shaky, I flounder around getting into my Jyotti suit, tripping and falling several times in the attempt. With my aging body finally covered, I find the bottle of painkillers in the suit's pocket and down four pills, dry. Retrieving my iJotter from another pocket, its time sequencer indicated I had slept for more than 16 hours. Sitting on the edge of a hard chair I hastily scribe as many notes as possible into the iJotter. It was paramount I capture the many thoughts and emotions

running through my head for my next tome the U.O.H. would undoubtedly demand.

Unexpectedly, three Q'nine females entered the room carrying trays full of the genetically grown organisms Q'nine beings must consume as food. Without saying a word, they placed the trays on a nearby table and left the room.

The local hospitality was very generous. The trays were filled with pieces of foodstuffs that all looked similar. Some pieces must have been a kind of protein because they had the texture and smell of spicy meat, and another piece smelled like sweet fruit. I was so hungry I would have eaten the north end of a southbound jackass. I needed to get my head straight and nutrition was the first step. Once I began to eat, I devoured everything on the three trays. The food tasted quite good even though I had no idea what I was eating. It didn't kill me or make me sick. So I was good.

After eating my fill, I yearned for a smoke. Smoking a cigarette after a meal was an indulgence I could never do away with. I found the pack of self-lighting cigarettes I had stuffed in the pocket of my Jyotti suit. Crossing the room, I slid open one of the large windows overlooking the city, stepped out onto the small balcony, and lit up. Taking a long draw, I inhaled the pleasurable smoke like the addict I was, slowly blowing out the unused vapor. "Ah," I said in complete satisfaction. There is only one thing more gratifying than an occasional Zen cigarette.

The outside terrace was about a quarter-mile from the ground and the sight from this height was almost overwhelming. The glow of the dome was a pale blue yet its appearance gave the impression of a sun-filled sky. Across the landscape below were soaring structures of artful architecture punctuated by enclosed amber lights showing through clear elegant-shaped windows. Even the hurried activity of the floating vehicles and ambling beings below made me feel unbelievably peaceful.

For two more agonizing days, me, Noiiz, and his crew of brain manipulators, assembled in what I had dubbed the torment chamber. During each session, they would send continuous harmonic reverberations percolating inside my skull. The merging resonances crushed any emotion that would arise or be associated with the timbre they produced. Each time I endured a volley of emotions, going through excruciating traumatic assaults. The cleansing forced my mind's eye to give way to fractured abstract images encouraged by faint voices of old friends, forgotten family, true loves, and lost loves. Of hateful conflicts, exquisite happiness, hideously deep sadness, and absolute despair. At times it felt as if deep inside my soul there were demons breathing spears of fire into my mind. As usual, my so-called conversion therapy was followed by hours of bottomless sleep, pounding headaches, and more pain pills.

On the fourth day, Noiiz came to my room. "Today will complete your

conversion,” he explained. “You have done well. This element will last somewhat longer but will guarantee absolute resistance to sonic manipulation. The knell of your soul will be decisive. Expect to rest for a longer period than following your previous treatments. This final session can be very emotionally draining.”

“More than I’ve already been through?” I questioned.

“It is quite possible. At the end of this session, we would like to place your physical self in your ship. I suggest you inform your Craft to allow us to place you on board. We will relocate your ship to the surface so you may return to your home planet.”

“Good idea, I’ll probably sleep through most of the trip that way,” I said. Placing my hand on my iJotter I concentrated and instructed my Craft to allow Noiiz and his associates to place me inside. Once the Craft was again on the surface it was to return to Earth at maximum speed.

After arriving at the treatment room for my final treatment I again disrobed and took my normal position on the Shenu. When Noiiz placed the Echo Miter on my head he said, “When we have concluded this phase I will inform the U.O.H. of your fulfillment.”

“Thanks, I think,” I replied. Not wanting to seem insincere, “You’ve been very hospitable. I appreciate your help.”

“Though your gratitude is welcome, the only appreciation necessary is for you to always be equally ready to serve other beings who may need your assistance. Kindness from one being should always be returned to a fellow being.”

“I’ll try,” I said as I lay back and closed my eyes.

That was the last thing I remember before waking up back on Earth.

Chapter 9 - Sonata Number 17...

Six hundred twenty-two life-cycles after narrowly escaping the destruction of the Aavial, Sanduval sat at his desk anxiously tapping his three pointed fingers on the arm of his overstuffed Targur leather chair.

During those many cycles, his mind-expanding self-education had continued unhindered by conscience or remorse. He now possessed a complete knowledge of the sciences of physics, mathematics, economics, religion, psychology, societal evolution, and psychohistory. This enlightenment had occurred from the day-to-day experiences on both technically advanced worlds and the astronomical backwash alleys of various galaxies.

Those many life cycles had also permitted him time to perfect his genetic aptitude for shape-shifting. The combination of his acquired intellect and physical abilities made him a formidable and dangerous foe for those who would make the mistake of challenging him. His capabilities were further enhanced when, at the age of five hundred twenty-four life cycles, he received his bracelet and ring set from the U.O.H.. Fifty-eight life cycles later he secured a membership in the Administrative Order of the U.O.H.. After thirty-two more life-cycles, he had assimilated enough understanding of their galactic-societal architecture to convince him their philosophy and methods were less than optimal.

Reasoning with cold analytical precision he casually leaned back and gazed at the holographic image above his desk. Routinely he slides his hand over the plasma layer covering the surface. With a quick move of his second finger, he touches the command directing the holographic image to focus on his next objective. His destination was the imposing light of the double stars of the Riim Strand galaxy a mere two light-years ahead.

Slowly taking a deep breath to clear his mind and control his natural tensions, Sanduval focused his train of thought on the task ahead and the next phase of his plan. With precision his fingers controlled the movement of the projected image, rotating and zooming in on his destination. With another move of a finger and Sanduval's new space cruiser immediately changes course, continuing undetected through the vastness of space.

After the destruction of his last ship on Kr'galmaan, he spent many cycles on the planet Moolala personally supervising the building of a new, more advanced starship. He named his new ship Milvago after his initial conquest of the planet Rav-p30 at the age of three hundred forty-eight life cycles. It was there that Sanduval commanded his first army. A ragtag group of maverick Ravians who dismembered and put to death the Bluvium Shadow Pugilists. They had occupied Rav-p30 and taken control of the Yttrium resources. Aeons later he discovered the

truth, the Bluvium Shadow Pugilist was directed by the U.O.H.

The Milvago was crewed by a devoted band of 24 Moolala engineers and 62 warriors. The Moolala were a race of highly intelligent and faithfully obedient beings. Their entire existence centered on pleasing their supreme deity Jal'al. Only a Rector of Jal'al could properly interpret Jal'al's teaching and guide the true believers. His teachings dictated the Moolala must battle against and destroy any and all non-believers. Their death while battling non-believers was the ultimate means of achieving the serenity of empyrean. Once they reached empyrean, they would exist forever with Jal'al.

Using the bracelet Sanduval had traveled back in time several aeons and visited the planet Moolala. In that time-space, he planted the seeds that created the Jal'al religion. He then returned to this time-space and convinced the inhabitants he was the one and only Rector of Jal'al. For this reason, the loyal Moolala warriors slavishly obeyed his every command without question.

As far as Sanduval was concerned the Milvago and its crew were without equal in the known galaxy. At two hundred feet at the center diameter and a full quarter of a mile long, the Milvago wasn't small by any means. Yet it was the perfect size for his needs. Encircling the ship's scalene ellipsoid shape was a blurry ash-gray protective membrane of light-diffusing chromo-eluding sol-gel nanoparticles. This made it almost impossible to see against the galactic sky. The shield was capable of deflecting an attack from any known weapon.

The Milvago was powered by a personalized version of an Alcubierre drive designed to manipulate dark energy by expanding spacetime behind the spaceship while shrinking spacetime in front. Naturally, this required an enormous amount of energy. Using the meta-stable isotope Element 240n in its core reactor, the ship was quite capable of interstellar travel. The Element 240n power source also supported the massive weapons arsenal of four wide-band lasers, six photon beams, two antimatter cannons, and an experimental weapon of his own design he had dubbed the Void-ray. Even though close maneuvering was somewhat sluggish, because it rotated on its median axis, the Milvago was still a formidable opponent when fighting from a distance.

Sanduval smiles widely showing his jagged gray teeth as he reflects. Since leaving the board of the U.O.H., with their delusional philosophic theory of psychohistory and societal self-determination, he had perfected his concept of galactic psychohistory. Using unique and precise mathematic computations in the physics of psycho-sociology, he identified the fundamental fallacies in the objectives of the U.O.H.. His aeons of experience noted in previously recorded tomes, and personally observed predictability of sociological psychohistory was unparalleled. Combined with his flawless instincts and ingenuously reasoned algorithmic ciphering; his psycho-sociology modules had passed every test and achieved every complex objective except one. Even the test events on Kr'galmaan

were not unexpected.

But that one occasion where an arbitrary event by the impulsive actions of a single human had caused a yoctosecond time wobble was a minor irritation. Typically, those small unpredictable anomalies had only minuscule effects, while larger alternations had more momentum and thus more predictability. Excluding that one random incident, the preponderance of evidence has proven that no matter what an individual being does, the events of larger groups of beings have an explicit scientific psychosocial predestination.

Instinctively he knew his design for the future was perfection. Yet he was not one to underestimate an enemy. That small human-generated episode was instructive and valuable, causing a necessary modification of perspective. He knew humans did not have the mental caliber to pose a serious threat. However, that event provoked an adjustment to the trajectory of his objective. If he is to succeed in his task he must transform the philosophy of society in the system of Riim Strand. He must plant the seeds of social change and allow them to take root and develop.

Using his psycho-sociological insights, astute cleverness, and unique shape-shifting ability, he had already made the necessary transformations on several worlds. Even so, there is a practical limit to all theoretical calculations. To assure the next phase of alterations occurs in a timely fashion it has become obvious that this parameter of societal transformation requires a calculated, real-time nudge toward the proper orientation.

The correct sequential direction at this stage will be launched on one of the planets in Riim Strand colonized by the beings from the planet Naah.

He had used his superior intellect to invent the Factum-terminal, a brilliantly designed tool to modify or restore any unwarranted changes of recorded history coded in any format. But the forces of the U.O.H. were at work to stop him. They had fraudulently stolen his invention and with help from that single human had used it against him. He vowed to himself that that would never happen again. But even the inevitable doesn't always happen on its own, so the development of a new mechanism was required.

An apparatus that, when used with his collective knowledge of psycho-sociology and intuitive guile, will combat any uncertainty of outcome. An apparatus the U.O.H.'s detecting equipment for societal changes will be incapable of discerning. The data would make them believe the changes were the natural progression of this particular society at this particular time. Yes, an instrument with the singular purpose of manipulating a being's neurological comprehension. One that would relieve them of the irrational baggage of unique independent thought.

Of course, detection is always within the realm of possibility, but the arithmetical probability is infinitesimal. Using such a device along with imaginative literature

modifications, accompanied by persistent use of his promotional skills, the combination will undoubtedly guarantee a successful alteration to the course of events. Even so, he must leave nothing to even the slightest chance. He must be prepared to make minor revisions if it became necessary.

Sanduval felt energized at the prospect of merging psycho-sociology with a mechanism. Such a technical accomplishment has never before been seen in the annals of galactic chronicles. The pieces were falling into place, and the collective changes to the past were leading to a point in the future of galactic societal equilibrium dreamed of by the U.O.H. but soon to be achieved by Sanduval Mule himself.

Chapter 10 - Whisper Shifting...

Stopping his cruiser at twenty-two thousand miles from the surface of the planet Naah, Sanduval concentrated and shifted his shape into the Naah being Kriibo Nez of the ancient Nez Clan of Naah.

The average Naah being stood around five and a half feet tall weighed around 170 pounds and had crimson-colored skin. Their heads were proportional to that of a human with a smallish nose, large hairy ears, mustard-colored buggy eyes, and thin lips. Their heads were typically topped with tan-colored hair that grew down their neck and back. They were very proud of their velvety-furred mane, letting their well-groomed fleece show by wearing clothing designed to show their pride and self-admiration.

Kriibo turns the dial on his bracelet to three hundred forty-seven cycles in the past and to the specific location on the surface. He touched the blue stone of his ring to the green stone of his bracelet and stepped into the flowing blue nothingness between time zones. A moment later he stepped out of the zone, appearing just outside the building known as the Compendium of Instruction.

Calmly making his way up the steps leading to the entrance, Kriibo walks through the towering double doors into the education repository building. He went directly to the area containing the historical annals of Naah's educational tomes. Searching the sacred writings, he finds exactly what he is seeking. Stealthily, he expands his newly encoded Factum Terminal and gingerly covers the primary tome named "Essential Enlightenment". With a few quick finger strokes, he activates the mechanism and makes the necessary changes to the historiography of Naah. The modifications will systematically alter their tutorial history. Altering the curriculum criteria for educating young Naah into a singular concept; the unquestioned compliance to their superiors. The modification will incrementally indoctrinate their young from this point forward, generation by generation, to favor the obedience required of a collectivist ideology.

With a few additional strokes and he reconciles the personal and historical journals of every record involving the Naah being Tyrik Guebr. The modifications took only a nano-second to conclude.

Removing the Factum Terminal, Kriibo touches the red stone of his bracelet. Instantly returning him from the three hundred-cycle time jump back to his space cruiser.

Chapter 11 - Medium Monopoly...

Kriibo summoned three of his Moolala guards as armed escorts. He was dressed in obviously expensive Naah attire. He wore superbly made clothing covered with intricately woven designs and a pair of exquisite tanned leather boots. Braided within his mane were brilliant-colored rare stones entwined with twisted links of delicately engraved leather.

He and his guards boarded an obviously expensive and embellished shuttle bound for the surface of Naah. His next stop was the landing pad located just outside the Grand Kerila Rotunda in the Naah capital of Gulway.

Jetting out of the Milvago the Moolala pilot flew the shuttle toward Naah's defense shield, slowed, and coasted to a stop. Two Naah security patrol ships approached the shuttle and floated nearby in an offensive position. When the security patrol contacted the shuttle they inquired, "State your business on Naah."

Responding personally, "I am Kriibo Nez requesting to attend a council at the Cybernetic Information Conference."

"Access to your navigation system and valid certifying documents are required."

Complying with the instructions the Moolala pilot transmitted the required information to the awaiting security patrol.

Several minutes passed before there was a response, "Your documents are verified. Your instructions and tractor beam frequency are being input into your navigation system. Do not attempt to deviate from the ascribed course."

There was a sudden jerk followed by a thrusting sensation as the tractor beam took control of the shuttle. Sanduval and the crew relaxed and waited as they were automatically guided toward the spaceport. When they were within a few meters the tractor beam alarm signaled release and they regained control of the shuttle to complete the docking maneuver manually.

The Cybernetic Information Conference event was an assembly of those employed by the four major communication agencies of the Naah Realm. Privately the leaders of these organizations were called the "Barons of Broadcasting." The agenda for this once-per-cycle gathering is to discuss several issues; the performance of the reporting profession, innovation in information gathering and dissemination technology, and the future of reporting accurate information within the realm. Kriibo had requested and was granted, a meeting with the principals of these influencers of opinion.

He had sent invitations to meet the four barons, Grau Waak, Jakoz Vossik, Phut

Lulling, and Rain Osfire, and each had accepted. Kriibo's use of a reputable moniker such as that of the Nez Clan ensured the hearing. His deception was enhanced by the elaborate shuttle which promoted a noticeable entrance that further established the impression of status and affluence.

His objective was clear. He must persuade these communication moguls to refashion themselves into a coalition of concerned citizens with the single-minded objective of advancing a new Prime. He needed to convince these giants of information dissemination to the masses that their narratives had the power to determine who would or would not govern the Naah Realm.

The Grand Kerila Rotunda was a massive structure. There were twenty-four levels under this elegant pod-like complex. Fifteen levels housed conference rooms, there were also five immense levels of exhibit auditoriums. In addition, occupying the upper four levels were numerous nourishment centers with their specific cuisine, many containing private meeting suites. The surest way to guarantee the attendance of these affluent beings was to offer complimentary food and drink in private surroundings. Their insatiable disposition was not strictly limited to the accumulation of property and wealth. Getting something for nothing was irresistible, even if they could afford to purchase it themselves. Arrangements were made to meet in a private suite at the exclusive eatery The Mnemon, on level twenty-four.

As each communication mogul entered the suite Kriibo welcomed him with the typical Naah gesture of respect touching his open left hand to his right shoulder. He had arranged for an eye-catching and handsomely paid female attendant to escort them to the table and cater to their every need.

The Mnemon suite was well known for its stable of Master Chefs. They prepared a refined cuisine of exotic dishes made of roasted Klavaatu meat and steamed Ramufta. Their famed delicacy of beebyu blood pudding was a desirable dish served as dessert. This fine meal was washed down with an expensive rare pypoo wine. During most of the meal, there was friendly noncommittal small talk. After several bottles of wine Kriibo excused the attendants and began his proposition with a toast to Gaan-lea.

“Please raise your steins; everything in our lives is the result of our love of Gaan-lea and his love of us. Let us heed the breadth of his words of grace and encouragement. May his words continue to fill our spirit and our lives. Let the strength of his words continue to give our existence meaning. He alone is sacred, blessed be his name, Gaan-lea.”

Everyone raised their steins in praise of Gaan-lea. Kriibo then continued, “with great respect, I wish to thank you for taking time in your busy schedules to attend this gathering. You may not know of me personally, but that is unimportant. What is important is that you be informed of my recent quest and the results. I have

been on a long search for a Naah being who will return the ideals of Gaan-lea to the souls of the Naah populous. You see, it is my belief that a darkness has struck the center of our realm. A darkness that was planted and nurtured by the impure hands of Prime JuJu Garr. If Naah is to survive this devilry a more principled Naah Prime must be found.”

No one spoke. They were silently enjoying a full stomach and the fine wine.

“My criteria during this search were clear. First and foremost this new leader must honor the blessed words and teachings of Gaan-lea. In doing so he must be a strict defender of Gaan-lea’s purpose of mutual fairness, not a worshiper of the deviant obsessions of the individual. As Gaan-lea has counseled, he must be opposed, as a matter of policy, to the gross extravagance of private funds and must detest any taxing of the people beyond the actual requirements of our government. He must favor an immediate reduction of the harsh tariffs on the media. Just as Gaan-lea has directed us, he must be a hater in equal measure of any separation from the common good and inequality. He must set his actions like stone against excessive private ownership of property, large financial institutions, and other notions of disparity. He must demand obedience from all corporations and the recognition of the superior rights of his enlightened leadership. But, like Gaan-lea, he must also observe the obligations to protect his creations in all legitimate and authorized undertakings. He must favor the singling out and rigorous punishment of doubters and wrongdoers. He must be a radical conserver of equal justice, not a destroyer. He must unceasingly insist upon rigid application of the principles of Gaan-lea’s teachings of governing through the authorized representatives he initiates. Such a being would be the savior of Naah.”

Rain Osfire spoke up, “Sounds like an ambitious undertaking. Such a Naah as you describe would definitely be a savior in these troubling times. But what does that have to do with us?”

“I believe I have found the Naah who can, through the teaching of Gaan-lea, lead the return of our realm to its proper glory,” Kriibo said proudly.

“An admirable quest with a questionable conclusion, but that is not our concern,” said Phut Lulling.

“Opinions are influenced and directed by what this distinguished group communicates and what issues or Naah beings you advocate through the attention you provide,” Kriibo replies.

“We merely communicate to the Naah populace that which is echoed as favorable to them. We do not direct the landscape of leadership,” Phut Lulling explains.

“At present that is the assumption,” Kriibo asserts.

“We do not advocate any particular leadership. Public opinion will not tolerate such authority. We have their trust. To champion a specific leader or doctrine

would be narrative journalism which is a miscarriage of our responsibility,” Jakoz Vossik stated bluntly.

Grau Waak broke in, “To do so would change the position of our profession from impartially informing to governing.”

“Then I perceive your responsibility as more extensive than you. I see your influence not as governing, but skillfully focusing the attention of the populace on what is best for them. It is not governing when you voice potent counsel guiding the dominance of fact as the state of public opinion. You have a social contract to bind our society together. You do this by deciding what the readers and viewers shall know, or what they shall not know. You mold and form their opinion and thus give consent to those in power,” Kriibo explained.

“What you propose is dangerous and I am exceedingly uncomfortable with the thought. Our communications to the population must remain detached from the agenda of a particular leader or ideology,” Phut Lulling declares.

Kriibo projected an amused look, leans back in his chair, takes a gulp of wine, and swilled it around in his mouth. The pause allows the uneasiness of the group a moment to relax. “One of the reasons for asking you here is because I see the future of Naah as dependent entirely upon the mutual direction of this group. You have a unique and fundamental advantage far superior to and more indispensable than that of any institution or profession in the history of Naah. Your profession offers a vehicle to influence the awareness and importance of this new leader’s message. I hoped you would recognize this opportunity.”

“Then your efforts have been in vain, for you have offered nothing that we do not already possess,” Rain Osfire proclaims.

“An excellent observation Grandè Osfire,” Kriibo declares.

“If I may speak for the others here,” Rain Osfire says, looking around the room for objections but finding none, “we report only facts and communicate them to the populous, as we have always done. Without advocacy or prejudice.”

With a stern expression, Kriibo says, “I know what you believe but I can not accept that outcome. To do so would insure tragedy would follow. You see, there is a movement of change in the wind. Civil war, insurrection, rebellion, revolt, uprising, call it what you will, utter chaos will soon be acted out and anyone in its path will suffer the destructive consequences. I’m afraid you or your places of business, indeed perhaps your families, may very well be initial targets for such hostilities.”

In an indignant tone, “Are you threatening us?” Questions Phut Lulling.

“Not at all, I am simply offering you a warning of probable hazards that should not be ignored,” Kriibo states bluntly.

The silence in the room was dense. These were intelligent industrialists not inexperienced in the world of politics and public affairs. They knew an intended threat when they heard one. Moments passed as each contemplated this threat of violence and its consequences on their lives as well as their livelihoods.

Finally, Rain Osfire asks, “How do you know this violence will occur?”

Almost arrogantly Kriibo states, “I have many sources in many locations throughout the realm. I can confirm, without the slightest doubt, that radicals are planning violent protests and complete disruption of services even as we speak.”

Grau Waak speaks up, “I too have heard from a few informants whom I respect, some in official authority, that disorder is on the horizon.”

“Obviously, I am not alone with my unease,” Kriibo gladly agrees.

In an unmistakably submissive tone, Grau Waak states, “I find what you suggest quite interesting. Your description of our operations had never occurred to me exactly in that light. I have to confess, the undertaking of such a project would be fascinating.”

Kriibo felt a psychological opening with Grau Waak. Instantly he sends a thought. Penetrating the deep fissures of Grau Waak's mind he plants the notion; *‘the power to change our world is here.’*

Almost immediately Grau Waak concedes, “I for one would be willing to experiment with an article or two, simply as a way to measure the public response of course. If the response is favorable I would be willing to continue.”

With a roguish grin on his face, Kriibo agreed, “I will make sure you have what you requested Grandè Waak. There will be two articles for publishing in your hands by tomorrow. I’m sure you will find them exemplary as will the public’s response to them.”

The others sat quietly as Kriibo surveyed them searching for any cognitive trace of agreement. With one firmly with him, he could sense the wills of the others weakening. Continuing the discussion he states, “Grandè Naahs, you can strive not to think about the power you possess, but you would be fooling yourself. You must ask yourself, do I want to be an integral part of advancing the realm forward, or will I fall for the folly and oppression of the current political schemes? Will your life’s work inevitably be pointless or destroyed? As natural Naah beings, isn’t it our duty to make the correct decision to stop digging the graves of our offsprings and advance the realm as Gaan-lea would expect?”

“Would it truly be moving our realm forward?” Phut Lulling asked. “I would caution us not to panic or respond with hysteria. Naah has had self-manifested supreme leaders before with disastrous results. How will this be any different,”

“It is obvious you are all devout apostles of Gaan-lea.” Kriibo praised. “That fact is plain to see in your lives and now in your reluctance. Believe me when I say I have not come to my decision lightly. I am absolutely convinced this Naah being is the disciple of Gaan-lea and truly speaks his noble words. This will become evident when you hear his sane voice of optimism in this world of hopelessness.”

“Specifically how do you expect us to advocate for this being?” Jakoz Vossik asks.

“I know that within your professional infrastructure, your journoes can regiment themselves around certain ideas. I would expect you to instruct them, being authoritative interpreters of public affairs, to present a convincing voice and preference within their communications concerning this leader’s ideas. You should exercise the power you and they hold to convey interest and urgency for the change he brings. And two emphasize the needed changes will come from the principles this new leader expresses.”

Rain Osfire says reluctantly, “Before I pledge my loyalty I must know the identity of this being. I must also have his sacred word that his promises of social and equal justice will be accomplished. If I give my support my organization must be permanently influential in establishing public policies.”

“Yes, who is this righteous being you have found? Where has he been?” Jakoz Vossik asks.

“He exists on Ovik. He is living the virtuous and humble life of a true Gaan-lea disciple. He has been reluctant to acquire the prominence that will be bestowed upon him so I am hesitant to expose him at this time. But you will soon know of him. His words in the articles I furnish will give evidence of his worthiness.”

“I will expect replicas of the articles and will have them published. Further commitment will be forthcoming if resulting public opinion is positive.” Rain Osfire states.

“As will I,” agreed Jakoz Vossik.

Phut Lulling hesitated to commit as he mulled over the suggestion. He found the idea of using his profession and the talents of his journoes to advocate for a particular candidate extremely distasteful. After much consideration he determined it fair for an opposing viewpoint to be made public, so ultimately he consented to at least publishing the articles.

“Superb, I salute your insightful decision to grant this opportunity and your desire

to commit further. Your discovery of the breadth in thought and reason steeped in the doctrines of Gaan-lea will be glorious, as will your loyalty to his authority. From this time forward you must give your best efforts to the advancement of his candidacy. To advertise and elevate him in every conceivable way - it is to that work I wish you to give your chief attention. Fate has directed us on this path of confirming the traditions of Gaan-lea and the future of the Naah Realm.”

Moments later the members of this new alliance left the room and returned to their busy schedules at the conference. Satisfied with this coalition of sponsors and their commitments, Kriibo also left the suite. He moved with renewed vigor as he made his way through the Grand Kerila Rotunda and back to his shuttle.

Once he returned to the Milvago he commanded his cruiser to proceed to the planet Ovik.

Chapter 12 - Under My Thumb...

Colonized by Naah hundreds of cycles prior, Ovik was the third planet orbiting the dual suns of the Riim Strand system. A highly industrialized mining and equipment-manufacturing planet, Ovik was populated by 86,214 beings of various Naah ancestries. 13,523 of those beings could trace their unbroken lineage back to the twelve original Naah Clans, while the remainder were freeborn Ovikians. The planet is under the jurisdiction of the E'gaht Clan, one of the more authoritative clans comprising the Liberty League. Under their leadership, they demanded strict adherence to the laws of the realm and all inhabitants must follow the compassionate and fair words of Gaan-lea. They paid the laborers a fair wage and championed policies that cared for those who, by no fault of their own, become destitute. After the end of the Merchant War, Ovik grew into a thriving society where the majority of the populous flourished. And yet, as is true in most societies, it was not uncommon to find those who were disgruntled and disagreed with the politics of their leaders.

Kriibo again turns the dials on his bracelet to his intended location on the surface of Ovik. He touched the blue stone on his ring to the green stone of his bracelet and calmly stepped into the flowing blue nothingness between time zones. Stepping out of the blue haze he was in a comfort station inside the Belama space terminal. Strolling outside the station he commandeered a local for-hire hover-cab. As the hover-cab came to a stop, he stepped into the back seat and gave the driver his destination, the Rapture Room.

The Rapture Room is a well-known meeting place for non-clan extremists heavily patronized by known political resistance leaders. Kriibo watched out the window as his route took him from the space terminal through a community of bustling businesses filled with life. Lights adorned the exterior of structures alongside holographic billboards shining through a light haze of ground fog.

The hover-cab steadily left the hustle and bustle of the business sector behind and entered the industrial district. As he watched out the window he wondered how a thinking being could spend their entire lives working on machines doing the same thing over and over, day after day. But without these workers doing their mundane jobs there would no longer be a society. The passing scene progressively changed into the cramped streets of a ghetto filled with piles of waste and run-down buildings.

Twenty minutes later the hover-cab pulled up to the curb, he stepped out, and calmly walked to the ornate sculptured doorway of the vintage building. Just above the doorway was a hastily illustrated symbol of the resistance, a flaming arrow piercing through the center of the planet Naah. Next to the symbol was an unconcealed security camera scanning the entrance.

Looking directly into the camera, he says, “Kriibo Nez to see Saalva Lanski.”

It took several moments before the slow-moving door began to slide sideways and open. Once inside, he was escorted through the sparsely occupied room by three stout and well-armed Naah, into private quarters at the rear of the building. Inside the shadow-filled room was a long metal table with five Naah beings seated around it. Scattered around the table were drinking glasses, personal communication devices, weapons, and covered papers. Not unexpectedly, the five Naah had suspicious expressions on their faces. Four of them looked at each other and then turned their gaze to a wingback chair at the head of the table where Saalva Lanski was seated.

Saalva Lanski was a thin, almost emaciated Naah with hunched shoulders. He had a gray, gauzy mane and was dressed in the cloth of a laborer that looked to be two sizes too large. Kriibo was well aware of his history. He is the only son of mineworkers Mersaal and Hoon Lanski and is a native-born Ovikian with no known clan lineage. He is well known in the ranks of the Ovik underground as the major inhabitant coordinator widely known to disapprove of individual free will. He fully embraced the concept of ‘the ordained-know-what-is-best’ principles of collectivism. At this point in time, he has not yet written his narration journal revealing his axioms for militants. His writings will, as the history of the times are composed, further establish his credibility in the sphere of progressive ideology. It will also make him famous among the committed political extremists and diehard fanatics. So far, he has only taken one personal action against the Liberty League, the bombing of a government facility. That deed resulted in him spending several cycles in a penal center for the effort. Naturally, this gave him enormous respect in the eyes of like-minded zealots.

Just inside the doorway, Kriibo stood motionless, legs apart, hands grasping wrists behind his back. When offered, with a hand motion from Saalva, he slowly made his way to the only open chair at the far end of the table, opposite Saalva Lanski, and sat down.

Putting down his drink on the metal table with a thud, Saalva’s bristly eyebrows drew together, “What is your business,” he demanded.

Kriibo was calm. His arms rested limply in his lap. “One of peace and support. I request that you simply hear me out.”

“Support?” Saalva coarsely sneered, “How can you contribute to our cause? No one here has ever heard of you and there are no records of you to be found.”

Kriibo said with a slight chuckle, “Do not worry I am not a spy or secret agent. There is a reason you cannot find any information on me, it is by design.”

“Interesting. Do you have access to the data records of Naah?” asked Saalva.

“I do,” Kriibo replied confidently.

“That’s very intriguing, so tell us Nez, what support can you offer, your access to these records?”

“A more consequential offer than simple access to records. I have a proposition and the connections that could assist you and your friends in this room in achieving your objectives.”

“What do you know of our objectives?”

“I know you are proud and ambitious. Both are admirable traits. I know you are against the monetarist concepts of the Liberty League, as am I. I know the elites of the Liberty League are interested only in their greed, their power, and their profits. I know you are frustrated with the inequality the Liberty League’s policies have wrought on Naah beings. I know you have tried but failed to alter their entrenched power. I know you require a method to attain the necessary changes you desire. I know you do not have a workable strategy that will bring success for those changes.”

Without emotion, Saalva says: “Much of what you say may be true. Unfortunately, an uninformed populace, confuses the magical dreams of prosperity and equality through religious faith and liberty, with the reality that the direction of society by benevolent leaders, would give them the security and equity they deserve.”

“My plan can change that populace dream into your reality,” Kriibo explains. "In fact, together with a charismatic Naah leader, we can assist each other in reaching our shared vision. But I must ask, are you or anyone in this room that charismatic leader?”

No one spoke. All eyes moved to Saalva. “No, not I, it is not in my nature. I prefer the supporting role of mentor, away from the public stage. Are you that leader?”

“No, although I believe I have found the precise Naah for the position.”

“Who would that be?”

“I will inform you when we reach an understanding,” Kriibo promises.

“Your words are of interest, yet you have not offered a clear path. The Liberty League is soft and Juju Ghar is an idiot. The time is suitable for our movement to thrive. Unlike what you stated, our efforts are on the move. And we know nothing of you. We have no reason to trust what you say?”

“Like all of you here I was born of modest beginnings. During my youth and because of my elder clan name, I was an outcast among the native-born Ovikians. I had to make my way alone. I succeeded through a focus on purpose and determination. I agree with your calculation that now is the time to take positive action. Yet, you have not been successful in gaining the support of the populous. Your goals have been limited to punishment, not power,” Kriibo states bluntly.

“That is your assessment. It is wrong. We have a viable plan. And you have not revealed a reasonable proposal. You are wasting our time. Tell us your proposition or leave,” Saalva demands.

“I have particulars to assist you in making your decision. Achieving success will require an efficient inhabitant activist like yourself to introduce civil upheaval in every region of the realm, demanding equal justice.”

“That is already in progress,” Saalva states.

“Agreed, to a minimal extent,” Kriibo continues. “You must persist with those operations, but they must be better organized if they are to produce the necessary outcome. You and your associates must also organize rallies designed to test the authority of the Liberty League. So far, your attempts have had short-term triumphs with negligible long-term effectiveness.

To succeed you must attract, either through pressure or cajoling other groups of similar thinking Naah, from all inhabited regions. They must be mobilized to further insight unrest. Our objective must be to divide the populous of the entire realm. This can only be accomplished through a coordinated campaign where all involved speak with one voice and one purpose. That purpose is to portray the Liberty League as unprincipled Clan elites and their supporters as greedy capitalists. This will separate them from the working nativist. These coordinated actions will swell the turmoil, hostility will grow, and it will implant the needed disorganization.

This will bait the Liberty League into their typical negative overreaction. Their predictable violence against your minority factions will win more support for your cause. For it is a natural inclination for Naah to sympathize with the victims of such actions.

You must also direct a select number of groups to characterize the large institutions and financial supporters of the Liberty League as uncaring and greedy. This must be done throughout all communication media. This will convince Naah beings to have no sympathy for large institutions.

Cutting off their support network and isolating them will increase their insecurity, anxiety, and uncertainty, and keep their narrative off balance. This will fracture any further alignments with their investors and supporters.

While you are following these paths, I will be using the unrest to promote a new torchbearer. Using speaking events and public rallies, his words will take note of the unrest and promise a much-needed reshaping of society. Positive slogans will call for fairness and equal justice. Because there are many Naah that have an ingrained spirituality, his words will include the reverence of Gaan-lea as the major influence in his vision for the future.

His speeches will remind the populous that the cause of injustice and unequal living standards are directly the responsibility of the inequality encouraged by the policies of the Liberty League. Using strategically placed proclamations his comments will be the daily focus in newscasts around the realm. He will be promoted as the face of renewal, the remedy for the unfairness in our society. Influential journos, narrators, and academia will be supportive in creating his image as the only viable leader. Reporting on his speeches will have an approving tone. They will also report that your movement is the voice of oppressed Naah beings. This will attract more interest and gain more public support.

Next, at the right moment, your brotherhood, as well as the other like-minded groups, will confirm your advocacy for the new leader and his policies. Vowing to work with him for the revival of society and supporting him in the upcoming selection.

Remember this, these are the days when those who are most rebellious will determine success. Now you have a choice. We can join forces or you can continue to fail,” Kriibo explained.

Saalva landed back and furrowed his brow, “On its surface your plan has merit. Yet it means we are the ones running the risk of death or imprisonment while you are isolated from it. Our actions will undoubtedly draw a militarized response from the Liberty League.”

“Executing my portion of the plan will not be without danger. Even stealth has a way of being discovered,” explained Kriibo.

“What you have described will require large amounts of tender if we are to succeed,” Saalva affirmed.

“Of course, if an agreement can be made I am fully capable of funding you, your associates here, as well as the groups you assemble for this endeavor,” Kriibo vowed.

Saalva looked around the room. The other members were beginning to nervously fidget in their seats; their eyes sparkled in anticipation.

“Do you also have the necessary connections that can accomplish your part in this plan?” Saalva questions.

“Undoubtedly yes, that and more,” Kriibo promises.

“Even with the journos and academia?” Saalva questioned with sarcasm.

“Without doubt. Journos are more interested in befriending lecherous academia and championing their narrative than providing the populous with facts and truth. Academia’s idealism and desire to maintain their lavish lifestyle will, without fail, trump reality.”

“What is the timetable for this strategy of yours?” Saalva asks.

“It will begin as soon as we finalize an agreement. I will supply the first installment of funds immediately.”

“Is it your belief that all this can be accomplished within the timeframe of the next selection cycle?”

“I can declare with certainty that if we reach an agreement, the next selection cycle will reap the rewards we both seek,” Kriibo responds in an absolute tone.

The room became uncomfortably quiet. Kriibo could almost touch the thoughts of Saalva and the others as they considered cause and effect, probabilities, and possibilities. Finally, Saalva asks, “Exactly what is your motivation? If we are successful, what do you expect to receive for your efforts and providing assets?”

“I have all I require so there is nothing of monetary importance for me to receive. My sole reward will be personal satisfaction that the beings of Naah will be on the path to social justice.”

Saalva mumbled, “Hum,” and looked at the faces of those around the table for approval. “Your proposition is compelling with logical implications. Step out while we discuss it further.”

With that, Kriibo stood, looked around the room, and nodded his head in appreciation. “Thank you for your time,” turned and left the room. After a short period, much less than he had expected, he was asked to return.

“We have decided to accept your proposal with stipulations.”

“I’m sure accommodations can be made for your concerns. What are your stipulations?” Kriibo inquires.

“First and foremost, we must know who you plan to promote as the new overseer. If we have a consensus with this being, there will be solidarity between us.”

Kriibo did not speak for several moments. He had not yet contacted Tyrik Guebr

but doubted there would be any problems convincing him. “I must first be assured his name will not leave this room on condition of death. Can everyone here make such a commitment?”

A thick veil of apprehension filled the room. Kriibo could sense the tense thoughts of the group. The manes down the backs of those at the table seemed to stand on end, but he detected no disagreement. Finally, Saalva asked everyone present to verbally make such a promise, calling on each one individually. None of them hesitated to dutifully agree.

“His name is Tyrik Guebr. I can guarantee he will perform exactly as I have described,” Kriibo announced.

One of the Saalva’s associates spoke up, “I know of this Tyrik Guebr. He is an accountant, weak and malleable. He flees when confronted with opposition. He has no spine. Yes, he may be compelled to do as you say for now, but how can you guarantee he will not retreat if times become difficult?”

Another member spoke up, “I too know of Tyrik Guebr and have doubts of him being as charismatic as you described.”

“Your concerns are understandable, but I would not make such a guarantee if I did not know for a fact that I can make it happen.”

“How can you be so sure? Or do you wish that we simply take your word?”
Questioned Saalva.

“I would not expect you to take my word alone. To ease your concerns I can tell you this, I have full and absolute control over him. I have his life and the flesh of his offspring and kinsfolk under my charge.”

Saalva leaned far back in his cushioned chair, thought for a moment, and said, “Our final stipulation is, if successful, each member in this room will be given a prominent position within the new Congress of Guidance governing body as well as the Court Supreme. And their actions will not be questioned.”

“That is an expected request and will not be a hindrance. You have my assurance you will have whatever positions you request, and your actions as representatives in the new government will be fully supported.”

Saalva scans the room looking for signs of disagreement but found none. “Then we have an agreement,” he said, touching his fist to his right shoulder as a signal of a final compact. Kriibo did the same.

“Thank you, your wise decision proves your commitment to Naah and achieving our common goal.”

Kriibo pulled out a small electronic device and made some quick touches and strokes to the screen. “Twenty-seven million credits have been transferred to your account at Currency Camber #24. That should be enough to begin. I will not contact you again until after we are successful. But I will be observing. If more funds are needed I will know and make sure you have what you need.”

Surprised that this stranger would know his financial information, Saalva checked his account using his own small handheld device. He looked up at Kriibo and nodded in agreement.

After calmly bidding his goodbyes, Kriibo walked out of the building, down the narrow street, and around a corner. There he touched the red stone on his bracelet and was instantly returned to the Milvago, positive this step of his plan would work perfectly.

Chapter 13 - Catch Your Breath...

Vienna had been working at the supply store for several days, stocking shelves, carrying heavy loads of merchandise to customers' waiting transports, and basic cleaning. It was a crisp Wednesday morning, and she was outside enjoying the fresh air while busily sweeping down the sidewalk. Stopping for a moment she surveyed the people as they strolled around the street. She had done this many times lately waiting to prove to herself she was not wrong. She knew what she had felt.

Suddenly, time stood still...

Vienna stood completely unmoving until time started again. When it did she unhurriedly looked around for the source.

Sitting at a table outside the café next door was a smallish man who sat facing her direction. He appeared to look directly at her but was actually staring past her. He wore lightly tinted glasses against the sunlight and a light brown full-length robe that appeared to deflect the sun's rays. As he looked down, he began touching a small device he carried with him. When he finished, he placed the device inside his robe and looked up. Even through the lenses of his glasses, Vienna could see him blink several times, cock his head to one side like a curious dog, then stand. He stood for a moment looking around then walked towards her. She noticed beads of moisture gleaming on his forehead. She also noticed he was wearing a bracelet and ring resembling the ones she and CW wore. Not wanting to stare she watched him out the corner of her eyes. Her attention was riveted on the strange little man just as he touched the ring on his right hand.

Time stopped...

With another movement, the stranger's hand touched his wrist and he disappeared, reappearing several steps from her. Vienna felt the hiss of thought as he began to unhurriedly move toward her. The stranger first glanced at Vienna's arms then stared at her eyes. Vienna stood motionless, her long sleeve shirt covering her bracelet. Just as the man brushed past her he touched his ring to his bracelet. He then lifted his right foot to step into the blue nothingness between time zones.

Without warning, Vienna sidestepped, twirled, and grabbed him by the back of his collar. With a quick yank, she spun him around. Her move made him stumble and fall outside the flowing time zone. Stunned, he rolled to the ground with a hard thump as the zone disappeared, fading into nothingness. Vienna quickly moved to

the dazed being as he lay on the ground. Immediately she removed the bracelet from his arm and placed it in her pocket. Sticking the broom handle to his throat, she pushed hard enough to make sure he knew it was there and put her right foot on the hand that wore the ring.

“Who are you?” Vienna demanded.

The man’s face was beet red; his eyes open wide with a terrified look of surprise on his face. Unable to speak clearly or breathe correctly he could only make confused mumbling sounds. Vienna eased the pressure on his throat slightly and asked again, “who... are... you?”

“My name is Elys, Seer Elys,” he choked out.

“What are you doing here?”

“I can’t breathe,” he coughed.

Vienna placed her left foot hard on his chest and eased the pressure on his neck. “What are you doing here?” She asked again.

“I am not a menace. Just a meager witness.”

“You’re a what?”

“A witness, an observer,” he babbled.

“What do you *observe*?” Vienna probed.

“Human behavior. Now please let me up,” Elys pleaded, struggling against Vienna’s foot.

“Not yet,” Vienna said, pressing harder on his chest. “I saw you. You were manipulating time. What exactly are you doing? What are you looking for?”

Surprised, Elys asks, “You know of time fusing?”

“Time fusing? I know you are distorting time if that’s what you mean. What are you looking for?”

“I collect data. The data is beyond human understanding in this time horizon. You can not decipher their meaning.”

“I’ll decide what I understand. What data are you collecting?”

“Let me go, I need to use my JAR.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes, release me,” he begged louder.

The next moment time restarted and people again began to move about.

“Do you work for someone?” Vienna said, pressing harder on his chest, and twisting her heel.

"Yee-ow," he bellowed, squirming with pain, “I serve J'nus, the prophesier of the future... please let me go. I must return.”

Glancing around, Vienna noticed people were beginning to pay attention to the commotion. She dropped the broom to the ground and removed her ring from the middle finger of her left hand and onto the middle finger of her right hand. The same arm she wore her bracelet. Grabbing Elys by his coat collar and pant waist she jerked him up, took hold of his left arm, and twisted it behind him. Pushing from behind she forced him through the doorway and into the store. As Wilurby watched in amazement, Vienna shoved him down an aisle and into the back room. Throwing him down into a chair, she quickly bound his arms and legs to the chair using duct tape.

Wilurby entered the back room just as Vienna finished securing Elys asking, “What the hell is going on?”

“This man tried to touch me and I’m going to show him what happens when a man doesn't act like a gentleman,” Vienna replied.

“Okay,” Wilurby grinned, “but be gentle, he looks scared enough already,” then turned and left the room.

Vienna took a moment to take a good look at this Elys fellow. His pearl-colored skin was pink from the excitement, which made his short bronze-colored hair look almost bright red. There was a tinge of gray hair visible around the edges. The contour of his head was typically human. His eyes set a little close together, we're dark brown with a slight shine to them. He had small ears and a narrow nose that was somewhat pointed.

“Give me your ring,” Vienna demanded.

“What... no,” Elys replays.

“Then I’ll cut it off along with your finger.”

“No, no just take it off. It’s not worth much. No one will buy it from you.”

“Now, who is this J'nus and...”

“I'll cooperate, but I must use my JAR. I must. Please,” Elys interrupted.

“What is this ‘jar’ you speak of?”

“It's our data recorder and message tool. It ensures we are connected.”

“We, our?” she asked, “I thought you were alone. How many like you are there?”

“We are many, let me...”

“You lied, where are the rest?” Vienna demanded.

“Different locations around the planet.”

“How many? Exactly how many?”

“Twelve.”

“And what data are you collecting.”

“Human cluster-flux modulations.”

“What? For what reason?”

“I told you, you would not understand. Please, I must use the JAR,” Elys pleaded.

“Not until I get some answers,” Vienna replied.

“All right! We monitor the flux of psycho-social chronology and societal behavior as influenced by human clusters.”

“What is this data used for?”

“I don't know,” Elys said shaking his head. “Only J'nusF can interpret the data we collect.”

“You are not from Earth are you?”

“No... I answered your questions, I must...”

“Where are you from?”

Elys didn't answer. It was several seconds before he blurted out, “Theta, I'm from

the planet Theta. Who are you?"

"I'll ask the questions, how long have you been coming to Earth?"

"Frequently over many of your Earth years."

"What?" Vienna said with surprise. "This J'nus fellow, is he from Theta?"

Apparently, beings from Theta looked enough like humans that they would not be out of place when traveling to Earth. His human-like exterior was not enough to endow him with human reasoning. His psyche remained that of a Theta being.

"We were outcastes when J'nus came to us. He praised us with the gift of his presence. He foresaw our future and gave us purpose. His presence healed and restored the Prana Ki of Theta. Please, my JAR, I must report or I will perish."

"You mean you'll die if you don't use this thing?"

"If my report is not submitted at the proper interval, my existence will end."

"How long do you have?"

"Please, let me use my JAR, now!"

Vienna reached inside his robe and retrieved his device. It was small, about the size of an old dataphone. It had a touch screen covered in peculiar symbols.

"Here," she said, releasing one of his hands she handed him his device.

As Elys tapped the symbols on the screen, Vienna concentrated hard just as Puccio had taught her. She peered into Elys' mind trying to retrieve the exact timeline and galactic location of Theta. Without warning came an abrupt thorn-like sensation piercing deep into her consciousness. Forcing her to cringe and making her back away from Elys.

Suddenly Elys' eyes glassed over and he dropped his device on the floor. He began to sweat profusely. He looked straight at Vienna with a blank stare.

His body abruptly launched into uncontrollable quivers. His skin turned a sickly pale gray and his eyes began jerking from side to side. His eyelids repeatedly blinked as he flailed around in the chair. Just before he died he gasped for breath, his body stiffened and froze for the slightest of moments, turned translucent, then flamed into a pile of smoldering ashes. The pile of ashes fragmented and every molecule scattered into oblivion.

Vienna picked up the JAR device and stood motionless, a thousand questions

were spinning through her mind. Suddenly she felt a pain like she'd been punched in the gut. Her tongue felt as if it were twisting and shortening. An unknown fear was trying to rule her mind. She could feel a presence like the touch of cold fingers on the back of her neck. A moment later, she became completely numb.

In the distance, she heard the shrill chanting of creaky voices until the obvious sound of remote laughter grew louder. Then there was silence.

Chapter 14 - Born Again, Again...

Born into the Jurrugu Clan one hundred sixty-eight cycles prior to the Merchant Wars, Tyrik Guebr was the Finance Counselor during the reign of the Wisdom Keepers. He had full responsibility for transforming the capitalistic financial system into their favored structure of centralized authority. Using restrictive regulations and sizable fees on all financial transactions within financial institutions, his progressive manipulation of the monetary system was considered a trophy for the cause of the Wisdom Keepers. The regulatory taxation and fees on financial foundations of the Naah domain increased the government's revenue tenfold. Which in turn funded the Wisdom Keepers' political platform and friends, while giving them absolute control of Naah beings. Controlling wealth controls their economy.

He had fled Naah just as the regime began to crumble. Stealthily making his way to Ovik, he left his mate and six offspring to suffer humiliating disgrace. The lives of his family had always been the second most important thing to him, right behind his own. He spent the following cycles in semi-obscurity, only taking the odd job when necessary due to lack of funds. Today Tyrik Guebr was just another unemployed financial advisor on Ovik.

This was the warm season on Ovik. The weather was sultry and would get worse. Tyrik was hot, his run-down hovercar's cooling mechanism had quit operating many cycles ago. His sweaty hands piloted the beat-up vehicle through the narrow city streets while he scowled to himself at the thought of his current life. He was positive death had caught up with most of the officials of the now-defunct Wisdom Keepers. Even so, he did not feel fortunate. Since fleeing Naah, he had long suffered not only from the depression of lost power but from the ailment of a lost spirit. Unsurprisingly, he didn't suffer from a loss of confidence because he never had any self-confidence.

Out of nowhere, he had been notified that Kriibo Nez wanted to see him. For what purpose, he did not care. He knew of the legendary Nez clan name. The clan's well-acknowledged chronology was enough for him to be interested in the employment opportunity. The mere request for an audience was enough to give him a small amount of momentary comfort. Although he thought the location of the meeting was a little curious. Why would a Nez clansman want to meet in such a less-than-reputable place as the Ecru Nyest? It was in a part of town populated by stone flophouses shackled by rusting fire escapes. The place was a watering hole catering to the lower working class, not a place he would normally frequent, nor a place where an elite clansman would spend time. This caused Tyrik further stress. The wrenching and twisting inside him merely tighten his knot of inner

tension.

He arrived at the rear of the Ecu Nyest, parking his hovercar in the alley next to an overflowing refuse container. Entering through the backdoor so as not to be seen, Tyrik surveyed the room, scanning the crowd of patrons for someone he did not know. At a round table in a far corner sat a Naah being with his back to the wall. His stylish, richly cut clothes made him appear somewhat out of place. That must be Kriibo Nez, he thought.

Kriibo watched a scrawny Naah being wearing shabby plain brown cloth enter from the rear door. He seemed to be trying to maintain a low profile as he wandered around the room. It was obvious by his disheveled appearance and uneasy expression it was Tyrik Guebr, so he motioned him over. The opportunity was now at hand for Kriibo to use his powers of persuasion to convince Tyrik Guebr that he is the next savior of Naah.

“Be seated sir Guebr,” Kriibo said calmly.

Tyrik dutifully followed instructions, slouching into the seat opposite Kriibo. He was nervous and sweaty. The light-colored fur running down his neck and back glistened with moisture.

After a few stressful moments of cheerful pretense, the conversation finally turned to the reason for the meeting. “I’m sure you are wondering why I asked to meet with you.” Kriibo began. “Yes, to the point, I have an interesting, life-changing proposal that only you can take advantage of.”

Tyrik grimaced with suspense but said nothing. Whatever it was this Nez sought from him, if it was dangerous he was sure he wanted nothing to do with it. Though his life was dull and bland, at least he was still alive.

“Let me begin with this,” Kriibo continued, “I hear many Naah voices crying for help. Begging for change from our current direction, and I agree. After witnessing the troubles in our society I decided to devote my fortune, and my life, to those who wish to make sure that proper change occurs. I have searched many cycles for the appropriate being I could support in the future. Someone who has the precise personality, culture, and experience who can grasp the urgency to solve the problems our Naah realm faces. Someone who can assist the Naah populous in their transition to a more perfect society.”

“What does all of that have to do with me? I am but a simple accountant,” Tyrik questions. “If you want me to help monitor and track your financing for this cause? I can do that.”

“I have thoroughly investigated you sir Guebr. I probed the chronicles of your life and your family's lives. Your complete history is well known, as well as your

philosophy of leadership. After completing my investigation I came to realize that statistically you, and you alone, are the one Naah that has the potential to implement these much-needed changes.”

“Me?” Tyrik almost shrieked, “I can not do any of what you describe. You need a shrewd successful businessman or an experienced politician. Not a simple accountant.”

“Perhaps, but as I said, I have studied you. My field of expertise is psyche analysis based on mathematical logic and analytic philosophy. I know you. You *are* the one. Your humbleness now proves you are the right choice. You are not subject to fanaticism.”

As Tyrik listened, his anxiety increased with every word. His brain was in a furious blaze of confusion fueled by doubt. He was not humble, he was scared to death. How could such an intelligent being as Kriibo Nez believe this?

Kriibo continued, “Our fellow Naah are in dire condition. Their lives and families are hurting with no solutions in sight from the current leaders. I have aligned with several groups of concerned Naah that are fully prepared to challenge the status quo. There is a selection cycle on the horizon and you are the one to advance our goals for Naah’s future.”

Tyrik’s starved dullness of a life was such that he did not realize just how out of touch with current events he had become. Nor did he care. Even with the uplifting words Kriibo had spoken, he was not ready to commit his life to a cause that might fail. Tyrik could feel panic setting in. Long and deeply he pondered upon Kriibo’s words. He knew that Naah beings were ill-educated and thus susceptible to proper manipulation. The Wisdom Keepers had recognized this and used it successfully, for a while.

“We are defined by the decisions we make sir Guebr. I offer you a chance for greatness, take it!” Kriibo said

His thoughts hurried him, “I am not a politician,” Tyrik grunted, “and I would be running against Juju Ghar and his very powerful political machine.”

“You do not have to be a politician. In fact, it is better that you are not. You will have my skilled proficiency in the social sciences, citizenry networking, and mastery of message substance to assist you. We will work together. Also, I can ensure the kinsfolk you left on Naah will be well cared for.”

Tyrik sat quietly, wrenching his mind in thought, “You know of my kin?”

“Yes,” Kriibo assured.

Tyrik gazed at Kriibo directly, in a hushed tone he said, “You must also know I was once a Wisdom Keeper. I was nearly killed. Why would any Naah vote for

me?"

"I have solved that minor issue. Your identity has been removed from all records of collaboration with the Wisdom Keepers. Believe this as fact Tyrik, there are always falsities in the memory of beings that cast an unstable haze over their past. Their memories overlook corruption, eliminate the annoyances of life, and magnify the joys. Today the beings of Naah need emotional reassurance. They are seeking salvation from the hardships of life. That is what we will bring them. Don't you see the potential for hordes of Naah embracing you after you promise them the pleasures of comfort, giving them exactly what they desire to transform their lives?"

Kriibo sends a thought deep into Tyrik's psyche: *"Your time is here. You are needed. Chaos conquers worlds. Your legends of followers will create chaos and you will conquer the masses."*

For a long moment, Tyrik stared straight ahead, then cocked his head to one side. His facial expression changed as if his thoughts were a blur. "Yes, I see my truth." Tyrik said suddenly, "Naah beings are impressionable. They are easily led by their pug noses, willing to believe any utopian fantasy no matter how far from reason or reality. They indeed need a compassionate leader to guide them. Someone who can show them the way."

"And you are that Naah. You must believe in your superiority." Kriibo adds, "You were sensible enough to leave when the time was right. You made the right decision to meet with me. You are wiser than you think."

Tyrik's face changed again, and a smirky smile became evident, "You are right of course. Now just might be my time." Tyrik took comfort in knowing that after the rebellion most of the Jurrugu Clan were arrested or put to death. None of the Wisdom Keepers are alive to remember.

"Do we have an understanding?" Kriibo asks.

"Yes. Yes, we do." Tyrik exclaims, that persistent tight feeling in his stomach loosening slightly.

Chapter 15 - Kollin on the River...

A low thump, thump, thump reverberated inside the cabin. The sound gradually became louder and more intense as Vienna increased the volume. She was taking advantage of CW being away to enjoy her favorite music playing throughout the cabin's sound system. They both enjoyed various types of music although, naturally, she preferred her own. Music was important to her; she was human after all.

She especially loved the complex reggae-country-jazz beat of the musical group Jephtha's Chains, now playing their hit song "Defeated Dirt". Their expressive lyrics described events of life's personal trials while finding true romance, always using their well-recognizable rhythm. Without fail the pulsing beat invoked an emotional response in Vienna that somehow put her in a good mood, making her feel a little better about being alone.

While she listened, she tried to unravel the odd symbols on the screen of the JAR device she had taken from the now-dead being, Elys. With each passing moment, the thought of the whole affair became more fantastic and intriguing.

Vienna was able to open the device and, applying her ample skills, she used several wires and clip connectors to port it to her computer. Next, she tried a parallel emulation of the code. No luck. Applying every trick she knew, Vienna couldn't unravel the coded symbols on the device. As a last resort, she micro-beamed the details to the orbital data analysis machine she had humorously named the O'DAM. The O'DAM, a gift from her friend Pu-illeo, was a nano-satellite about the size of a cereal box in geostationary orbit twenty-two thousand miles up. Integrated into it were various sensors, data storage, microprocessors, and sophisticated elliptical code analysis and decrypting programs. It was fast and capable of performing 144-qubit computational tasks in less than .0027 seconds. Able to store over four yobibytes of data, the companion analysis platform could decrypt most Earthly and many alien protocol codes including Turbo-Yorick, Picachoo, Tikanga, Zoot, and cyQL. But even those programs were unable to decipher the alien's unusual code. The code was not simply encrypted; it seemed to be a mutating polymorphic cryptogram requiring a metamorphic cipher key. She had only heard of such a concept built into a source code but up until now, she'd never encountered it. Even after seeing major parts of the raw code when she peaked into Elys' mind, the code was impenetrable... so far.

Having little success with the JAR Vienna changed direction and began examining the bracelet and ring she had taken from Elys. The bracelet was very similar to the ones she and CW had received from the U.O.H. But the ring was different. It had a blue gem that resembled theirs but was much smaller. The ring

itself was thinner with no markings at all around the outside. Looking closely, she found two tiny marks on the inside. One mark looked like an "A" with an upside-down "L" crossing the center and a squiggly line over the top. The other mark was three smaller circles surrounded by an oval shape, much like the American Indian symbol for a bear's paw.

Unsuccessful and frustrated Vienna lay back, stretched out on the couch, and stared at the ceiling. When she closed her eyes to enjoy the energy of the music, she began to reflect.

Since receiving her bracelet and ring she had acted more brazen and unconventional, gaining confidence and strength with each spacetime journey. Having CW's companionship had given her insights she never thought possible. Yet her off-world experiences had not prepared her for this new enemy with different, more advanced technology.

When the music changed, she recognized the new song as Blu Possum's tune, "Lilly Beneath The Falls." It had a more calming rhythm than Defeated Dirt's thumping beat. Vienna relaxed, letting her thoughts wander. In a near meditative state, her mind roamed from the tranquil sounds of her music to computer codes, the U.O.H., CW, and time travel, until she gradually dozed off to sleep.

Waking from her nap the thought of an old saying she'd heard years ago sprang into her mind, "the shallower the stream, the louder the babble." The saying didn't relate to computer code, but it did spark a thought.

"That's it!" she said aloud. The code is babbling. As the program flows it bounces and reverberates off other predictable data points, much like sound waves bouncing off walls. No, that would mean it could be anticipated and decipherable. It was more like a stone skipping across a pond of infinite size leaving ever-expanding ripples at each bounce. The ripples would grow and converge at given points. Of course, the subroutine had to know the exact direction, velocity, number of contacts, and where the next bounce would hit, as well as where the ripples would converge. Hmm, she thought, if this is true, how will she decode the data structure of this alien programming? There must be an oscillating key-set. Maybe the decryption key is a sound or group of sounds, like the staccato gurgling of a babbling brook.

Vienna once dated a musician who was also a computer engineer. She remembered how he boasted about designing a program for musical composition, sound design, and sonic diffusion. From her computer, she did a data archival search using his name, Charles Quick and found the title of his program, Chuck-QD. In another archived file, she found a variation of his sonic diffusion code. Could she detect and unmask the code oscillation and smooth it with this sonic diffusion program?

It's going to be very difficult to interpret the massive parallel processes of this code. Decryption spawning will be virtually impossible because she had no knowledge of the constructor functions. In theory, a wake spore patch using the mutation of Chuck-KD appears possible, but not from this device. She needed to have access to the algorithmic source. She needed to get to Theta.

But how? CW and his Craft are doing the bidding of the U.O.H. Wait, she thought, the U.O.H. should be able to help. Should she ask them? They will naturally want something in return, but she has nothing they would want. As always, she will heed CW's advice. Trust no one.

Standing in the middle of the large room, she turned the outer dial on her bracelet three times to the left, three times to the right, and touched both the red and green gems simultaneously.

Suddenly she was standing in the brightly lit air chamber.

"Welcome, Vienna Pitts," oojavan sent.

"Yes, ah, hello, it's good to be here."

"What is the purpose of your arrival?"

"Well, to be honest, I would like your assistance to explore a mystery I have stumbled upon."

"You would like our assistance in solving a mystery?"

"Yes, if you guys will agree."

"What is this mystery you speak of?"

"You see, I met a being on Earth who, using his bracelet and ring, has been visiting Earth and logging reports to another being named J'nus. This being said he was from the planet Theta. I want your assistance in getting to Theta to investigate."

Puzzled by her request oojavan sent, *"Humans are indeed an inquisitive species, as you are now demonstrating. Naturally, we are aware of planet Theta 636 as well as the civilization that dwells there. It is located in the ancient Vitala Cluster KV8.56 Quadrant 9. No entity there has custody of the time transfer devices."*

"Your lack of knowledge is a little surprising. You see, I have them right here," she said, removing the bracelet and ring from her pocket and holding them out so they could be seen by all.

"Those are not from the U.O.H. They are useless imitations."

"Not as useless as you may think. The being used them to stop time. He did not arrive on Earth by spaceship, he must have used the bracelet to get there."

"Impossible," oojavan said bluntly.

"Then how do you explain all this?"

After a brief pause oojavan sent, *"We can not. However, we will inquire further. Let us retain them so we may probe their origin."*

"Since they are not yours, I think I'll keep them. I may need them," Vienna said, putting them back into her pocket.

"Yes, of course," oojavan sent. Vienna could feel both displeasure and disdain in oojavan's communication.

"Concerning the being you wish to locate, we can assure you there is no being called J'nus on the planet Theta 636. There is no disruption of their social evolution and there is no sign of disturbance in Theta 636's future structure."

"Simply because you aren't aware of a J'nus being doesn't mean he doesn't exist. I don't believe it's possible for you to know of the existence of all quintillion beings in the universe. I personally spoke to the being from Theta and he said J'nus was directing him."

"Who is this being you have spoken to?" oojavan asked impatiently.

"He called himself Elys."

"There is no Theta 636 being named Elys so he cannot possess the transfer devices. As stated, no entity in that system has custody of the devices."

"There is *no longer* a being with that name. He was reduced to nothing. He dissolved right before my eyes. But he did have the bracelet and ring and if you assist me I will find out why he had them and who or what this J'nus is."

Vienna could feel the rumblings of conversational thought coming from the gallery above. It was several minutes before oojavan answered.

"We can accomplish your travel to Theta 636, although we cannot guarantee your return would be accessible."

"If that's the case, I won't go now. I'll wait for CW to return."

Again Vienna felt the rumblings from above. This time the conversational babble was louder, more intense. She could tell there was disagreement. It took an unusual amount of time before oojavan finally communicated.

“The involvement of C.W. Comstock is not a prudent course of action. A more suitable path is for the U.O.H. to assist you. A technique exists which will allow your return with activation of the red gem. It will require faultless compliance to our instructions.”

She was hoping for a spaceship of some kind, but this? “Wait, you mean I can travel from one terrestrial location to another using the bracelet?” Vienna questioned. “That brings up many questions about the Elys bracelet.”

“Customarily device holders do not take such travel. Although there is a linear sequence that can be utilized. Only long-serving U.O.H. members are familiar with the existence of this method. It is typically inaccessible and prohibited from use by preordained transfer device travelers. It necessitates meticulous dial positioning which exposes potential errors by the device operator. The unreliability of the technique prompted the U.O.H. to forbid its knowledge and use. The method can only be employed with complete transfer device operator knowledge, full accountability, and must include authorization PLQ-5.23n9 instigated by the full body of the U.O.H.”

“I’m sure I can be accurate; tell me what to do and we’ll go from there,” Vienna proclaimed.

“The application of the spacetime chronological path will be exclusive to your single event. Upon returning to your now the event authorization will be withdrawn. Any future attempt will initiate the termination sequence of the transfer devices. Do you acknowledge this?”

Vienna was quiet as she thought about what could happen if she agreed. She wondered what CW would do. Is this mystery so important that she would be willing to take the chance? She was confident she could arrange the dials accurately. And of course, she would never use the technique again. Yet just the knowledge was disturbingly captivating. Finally, she agreed, “Yes, I understand the consequences.”

“Do you wish to continue?” oojavan asked, causing a pain in her head she had never experienced.

Grimacing from the unexpected throb of pain, Vienna said, “Yes.”

“There are inalterable specifications that accompany our assistance. You must not alter the now of Theta 636 in any manner. You must conform to their culture. To protect that which is pre-stated, our assistance will include an appropriate

wardrobe as well as a virtual neural language mechanism for proper dialogue. If any of your actions interfere with their customs, traditions, or societal evolution you will be immediately reprimanded."

"What do you mean reprimanded?" Vienna questioned.

"Your awareness of the reprimand will be undeniable. oojavan promised, "You must also submit a tome thoroughly chronicling your observations. Do you still wish to continue?"

This reprimand threat sounded a little ruthless. But that's how the U.O.H. operated. Regardless, she wasn't worried. She didn't plan on changing anything, only observing and of course, now she must produce a record of whatever she discovers about this J'nus fellow.

"Yes, I understood. I will not change anything and I will submit a written account."

"Set your transfer device thusly," oojavan sends the instructions deep into her mind.

"Ouch!" Vienna squeaks. "Now I know why CW hates that."

Immediately she is again standing in the cabin with a stack of clothing laying at her feet. On top of the clothing was a small ear clip.

Theta beings are very close to humans, so looking like a Theta shouldn't be a problem. Disrobing down to her Jyotti suit, Vienna pulled on the pair of baggy lightweight beige-colored pants fasten at the waist with a wide black leather belt. The belt had a large buckle imprinted with a copper-colored emblem of some kind of flying creature. She then pulled on the black ankle-high boots, and tucked the pants into the boots, leaving them baggy at the top. The upper part was a sleeveless vest that was tight at the waist, khaki brown in color, and made of a snakeskin-like material. She had to unzip the top of her Jyotti suit because the cut of the vest was low in the front, showing the top of her breasts. Attached to the bottom of the vest was a maroon skirt about eight inches long made of a tightly meshed material. It was just long enough to reach the top of her hips. She placed Elys' JAR device in her thigh pant pocket and the bracelet and ring in the left front pocket of her vest. Her instructions were to clip the language mechanism on her ear.

Following the instructions oojavan had painfully stamped into her mind, Vienna turned her ring to face the palm of her hand. Using the blue stone of the ring as a stylus, she steadied her hand and turned the large dial twice in a counter-clockwise direction, ending at the exact point between the two designated digits. Still using the ring, she turned the smaller dial four turns clockwise, stopping at

the proper symbol on the bracelet's outer ring. She then turned the dial counter-clockwise halfway around to the next designated symbol. Hesitating for three heartbeats to gather her strength she touched the blue stone of the ring to the green gem on the bracelet and stepped into the flowing blue nothingness between time zones.

Pausing within the nothingness she observed for a moment to make sure there was no danger and stepped out onto Theta.

Chapter 16 - Bad Moon Rising...

Earth Standard Year 3178

With my memories restored, I realize where and when I am. It is Earth year 3178 and I'm at the cabin's landing sight. With the iJotter still in my right hand, I concentrate, summoning my Craft. Hearing a swoosh of air, in a fraction of a light second, it is hovering two feet above the ground directly in front of me. Still somewhat woozy I pull on my Jyotti suit, zipping it up as I walk towards my Craft. As I approached an opening appeared on the outer surface of the Craft's flowing metal structure, growing larger as I got closer. Stepping inside I make my way to the control seat, sat down, and immersed my hands up to the wrists into the armrests. Giving the thought command instantly propelled me forty-five thousand miles from the surface. Floating weightless in space I touch the red gem on the bracelet and I'm immediately transported back in time to when I started this trip, Earth year 3124.

The blue-white orb of Earth was a beautiful contrast to the black canvas of space.

Diving toward Earth's surface, moments later I again land at the cabin's landing sight. Exiting the Craft I briskly trotted up the rock steps to the cabin's rear entrance. Pushing open the tall wooden door I proclaim somewhat loudly, "I'm home." There was no response. After searching the cabin, there was no sign of Vienna. What's she up to, I wondered. Yeah, I'd been gone longer than I expected, but where could she be? It wasn't like her not to at least leave a note.

The thought of her in potential danger gave me pause. But she's a smart and strong woman with qualities that would unnerve most beings. She would neither be distracted by promises from charlatans, nor fall for any dangerous tricks. But I still worried about her.

Anyway, I had to present myself to those reprobates of the U.O.H. Returning upstairs, standing in the middle of the bedroom, I turned the outer dial on my bracelet three times to the left, three times to the right, and touched both the red and green gemstones.

Instantly I was transported to the breathing chamber of the U.O.H.

"Welcome C.W. Comstock," came the mental communication.

"I have completed the required preparation as you insisted. Will you now tell me where I must go and what you expect?" I asked.

“Yes, Noiiz Ringwattanajiinga informed us of your successful conversion. As usual, you surpassed our expectations. You are now ready.”

“I certainly hope so. The torture I had to go through had better be worth it. Now, give me all the details.”

“You must travel to the planet Naah of the Riim Strand galaxy in the Earth year 3249. There you will locate and befriend the being Gwin-o'guin Feht. His circumstances are as follows. He is a being of the land, what you call a farmer, nurtured by his father and uncle. All members of his family, or clan as he will refer to them, are history. They were massacred in a recent conflict. A conflict in which he became an experienced warrior. Do not be misled if he gives the impression of being naive. He will consider himself ill-prepared for what must be done, but his strength is not ordinary. He has an ability that will prove indispensable for the future of Naah.”

"Gwin-o'guin Feht, huh? A being with an Irish first name and a Scottish surname, living on a planet named Naah? A Scot-Irish alien? Nah!" I quipped. I felt no response to my attempt at jest from the U.O.H. members. I doubt if any of these scumbags even had a sense of humor. "Okay," turning serious, "once I make this being my new best friend, what are we supposed to do?"

"*Stop Sanduval Mule,*" oojavan exclaims.

"Yeah, I got that. But, as you said, this Feht being will see himself ill-prepared. For what exactly? And exactly what is this Feht guy's strengths? You aren't telling me much of anything - again."

“Gwin-o'guin Feht is spiritual, as are all Naah beings. Because of their devout faith and the recent upheaval, they are susceptible to societal interference. We have concluded these paradigms of circumstances are the reason Sanduval Mule is there. You will discover Gwin-o'guin Feht's abilities during your friendship.

We are convinced you can achieve the objective. Your task will be to persuade Gwin-o'guin Feht to counter what Sanduval Mule will be attempting.”

I thought about it for a while and wondered what such a place and the beings living there would be like. I always enjoyed the adventure that comes with new planets, new beings, and new experiences. That part of this assignment made me both excited and nervous. Of course, I would never let the U.O.H. know this.

“Let me get this straight, I must discover what Sanduval Mule is planning while convincing this religious Scot-Irish being into working his mysterious magic to stop him? You give me quite a challenge; a secret to discover, a stranger to befriend, and no explanation for why I was tortured by Noiiz. Your candor leaves

a lot to be desired.”

“Our monitoring apparatus indicate Sanduval Mule has created a new device, although we are unsure what function the device is designed to render. Whatever it is, we know he will attempt to use it to change the structural psychometrics of Naah. If our premise is correct, and they are rarely inaccurate, Gwin-o'guin Feht is the only being with the ability to accomplish, with your assistance, what must be done.”

My gut tightens; this assignment is going from bad to worse... these despicable weasels. “What must be done? Exactly what is Sanduval Mule trying to do?” I ask.

“As yet, that information has not been fully acquired. We have detected no variance in social congruity. But we know he is there.”

“So, you know where he is but you don’t know what he’s up to. All you know is he may or may not have an evil plan and I must befriend a being I do not know. Is that about it?”

“Your blunt perspective is refreshing. Whatever he is doing the integrity of Naah’s future must be preserved.”

“Holy Jesus, you guys are a piece of work. Okay, maybe I’ll learn something on this little journey, but never tell me again that I will have ‘all that I require’. That would be a lie, and I don’t like liars.”

“We have provided you with the knowledge you require of this matter. It is not untruthful if we are unaware of the sum of specifics. Because Gwin-o'guin Feht is a farmer and keeper of beasts he will not be readily obliged to assist a stranger, much less an off-worlder. Factually he has never encountered an off-worlder and may assault you if he feels threatened.

To appear less menacing you will go as the beast trader Muxk Eutal of the humanoid trading planet Desaur Minor. You will be given the proper documentation, attire, and knowledge. We have modified the virtual neural language mechanism given to you by Noiiz Ringwattanajiinga to assist you in communicating in the Naah language.”

Not only are these butt-heads sending me to meet some weird alien with strange powers who may kill me on sight, but I also can’t be myself. “With all your power you have no indication of what is happening on this Naah planet? Maybe Sanduval Mule is there on vacation.”

“That is unlikely. He is there, therefore the probability of instability is elevated. That fact is neither misunderstood nor questioned. Where is the chronicle of your

visit with Noiiz Ringwattanajinga?"

"It isn't complete yet. Why?"

"You are obliged to submit your chronicle upon traverse completion."

"Normally you allow me a little time to reference my notes and write my tome. What's your hurry now."

"We are unable to prophesy your safe return from Naah. Consequently, you are obligated to present the chronicle of your most recent traverse as soon as possible."

"Well, that's not very comforting."

"Yes, it is unfortunate. Nonetheless, we require your chronicle," oojavan sent without any noticeable emotion.

"You will have it before I travel to Naah. Is that acceptable?"

"That will be acceptable."

"If you can't foresee me staying alive, then you also can't foresee me dying. Isn't that true?" Looking for something positive about all this.

"Indeed what you say is factual."

"I guess that will have to do. Say, with all your *knowledge*," I say sarcastically, "you wouldn't happen to know the whereabouts of Vienna would you?"

"Of course," oojavan sent. Sounding surprised by my question.

"Well, are you going to tell me?"

"She requested our assistance with an enigma she had discovered on Earth."

"An *enigma* on Earth? What does that mean?"

"She solicited our assistance and we obliged. It was her decision."

"What was her decision? What the hell are you talking about? Where is she?"

"We obliged her travel request to a tranquil planet."

"What? How? Did you give her a spaceship? How did she get there?"

"We assisted her in her quest. That is all you must know. She will return the

moment she feels the need. There is no known danger. Planet Theta 636 is peaceful and populated by quasi-sapient beings."

"Known danger? Like you would know. You don't even know what's happening on this Naah planet."

My palms were sweating and my stomach was churning. I could taste the bile as it rose in my throat. These bastards don't know as much as they think they do. They could very well have put her in real danger. Trying to stay calm I asked, "So exactly where is this Theta 636?"

"The location will not be given. You have your task to complete. If you return successful and Vienna has not yet returned, we will further evaluate your request."

"Damn you," I said, my throat tight with rage.

"Your anger is misplaced and decreases your status. Vienna Pitts is very capable. As you are aware, she is experienced and resourceful at caring for herself. We would have informed her if there were a threat. You have your directive."

Their message was completely understood. Do what you are told and don't ask the wrong questions. Barely able to suppress my anger, I could feel my tension rising. It took a lot of self-control not to strike out.

"Okay, I'll go to this Naah planet and do as you ask. But know this, if Vienna is harmed in any way, you will no longer be pleased with my presence," I promised.

"That does not concern us," oojavan sent, sounding as if he were smiling. Instantly I am back in the cabin's bedroom.

Chapter 17 - Even Gods Have Enemies...

His name is Gwin-o'guin Feht and, according to historical records on the planet Naah, he was conceived one hundred eighty-four rotational cycles previous to this time-space.

At 4 feet 9 inches tall and weighing around 130 pounds, he was smaller than most beings from Naah. And he did not look like your typical Naah being. Some of the more vain Naah might even describe him as ugly. That is, ugly by Naah standards. The reason for this was his overly large egg-shaped head filled with two twinkly green eyes that appeared to bug out in a constant stare. That, and his flat puggish nose, tiny lipped mouth, long almost floppy ears that hugged his head, and the thick curly mud-colored hair growing down his back. These were not typical features for a Naah being. Although he did have the distinctive dark crimson-colored skin common to those who worked under the brightness of the double stars of Naah.

Gwin-o'guin is an uncomplicated being by nature, a gentle soul, humble and devout, not overly influenced by emotions. Having lived his first one hundred thirty-two life cycles as the only son of the successful farmer Kuato Feht, he had never yearned for any life other than that of a steward of Feht land. He lived those early cycles content at working the land with his numerous family members; uncles, aunts, and cousins. On the farm and in daily life they were a close-knit clan. Their kinship was not only for blood reasons, it was the unavoidable bond that forms when beings live and work together for long periods.

Because of this closeness, the Feht Clan became a very cohesive family unit that always enjoyed each other's company. This was true not only during their farm duties, no matter how arduous. It was also true during their more relaxed times. This was especially so after the seasons of Naah changed and the harvesting cycle had concluded. This enduring fellowship of the Feht Clan had been true since time began.

That is, until the intrusion into their serene life by the tribal Merchant Wars brought on by the insidious policies of those in power, the Wisdom Keepers.

Ollo Jurrugu was the leader of the Wisdom Keepers, once known as the Jurrugu Clan. His advisory council was made up of a collective of wealthy elites from the academia and science sects. Historically, the Jurrugu Clan was the most assertive of the twelve original clans that inhabited the planet Naah and the Riim Strand galaxy. They came to power twenty cycles prior to the Merchant Wars. Gaining their power by convincing the beings of Naah that their worldview was so enlightened, so forward-thinking, so progressive, that they would, with little to no

effort from the average Naah, bring equality, harmony, and wealth to each and every Naah being.

Because of the Naah's inborn desire for an impartial and orderly society, as well as their trusting yet gullible nature, they accepted the promise of societal serenity. Allowing the Wisdom Keepers the unrestrained power to implement their plans for a fair and just society.

In the early stages, their innovative ways seemed reasonable, fair, and compassionate. Under their concept, each member of the Naah population was required to pool their productive resources into central distribution centers. Using the stored goods the Wisdom Keepers would ensure every Naah being had precisely what they needed. If a Naah tried to better their personal situation the Wisdom Keepers considered them offenders of social equality. Their efforts were proclaimed greedy and unfair to other Naah, not needed to sustain oneself. They were deemed heretics. Illegal possessions were considered hoarding and illegal, punishable by confiscation and imprisonment.

The Wisdom Keepers used their vast powers to tax and regulate all forms of production that supplied the necessities for all Naah beings. Laws were implemented to determine the type and amount of food a Naah was allowed to consume to stay healthy. Their income was determined by its usefulness to the collective. Movement about the realm was licensed and monitored. The manner of medical attention they would receive to continue life was specific to the productiveness a member was to society. Even strict reproduction laws were enacted and rigorously enforced.

But economic, social, and political chaos was bubbling just below the surface. Because of the constraints on personal growth, the societal structure brought on by the Wisdom Keepers nearly brought down the entire Naah civilization, including the three Naah-inhabited planets of Riim Strand. They too suffered from the depression of the economy. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth cycle, just before the Merchant Wars began, the majority of Naah beings were living in squalor, indolent and starving. Production slowed, unemployment increased and the average Naah family suffered from little or no potential for survival. Of course, not every family suffered. The Wisdom Keepers and those who had supported them lived well, without concern. In the end, the result of the concept of a centralized authority, and the cronyism of elites such a notion typically breeds, was turmoil, death, and devastation of the Naah economy and society.

When the Merchant Wars began, the fuel driving the hostility was a necessity for the continued existence of the individual Naah and their kindred. Unemployed rabble chocked the streets of most large cities. With power in numbers, they band together making up small tribes. These tribes would travel from city and village raiding and killing for what meager goods and dwindling profits they could consume or sell. Marauding barbaric tribes of the destitute roamed the land

causing death and destruction, snuffing out innocent lives and devastating property, wreaking havoc wherever they roamed.

As authoritarian regimes are inclined to do, the first reaction of the Wisdom Keepers was to label the unhappy and displaced as political extremists and terrorists. Their next act was to decree martial law. They sent out armed government troops called the Fairness Enforcement Services to outlying provinces. There they confiscate all stored goods and domestic production for redistribution to the dwindling number of true believers and favored factions.

But this did not slow the growing discontent of the remaining Naah populous. Soon there were also legions of impoverished true believers occupying the streets, begging for their fair share of government-supplied comfort. Martial law was merely a stopgap measure that was only successful until existing resources were depleted. Most of the confiscated stocks became the property of the heavily armed Fairness Enforcement Services. They would seize goods, consume as they wished, then give a small amount to a few supporters rather than distribute them to the stricken Naah populous.

As desperation and disorder intensified, many of the troops in the Fairness Enforcement Services became disgruntled. With their resources drawn down to almost nil, self-preservation became paramount and the neglected soldiers abandoned their posts. Ultimately, they lost their legitimacy and became roving gangs of smugglers, bandits, and extortionists. To survive, they were forced into alliances with the same factions they had been fighting; willingly joining the various tribes. Looking for work and trying to survive, innocent Naah beings and families began to relocate across the territories. But the tribal allies established a trail duty on the routes, the duty was paid in whatever the indigent pilgrims possessed.

Those minimal proceeds paid for their safe passage across territories under the control of larger, stronger tribes. The decrees of the Wisdom Keepers, the continued fighting between established Clans, and the newly improvised tribes, further discouraged the existing production of food and energy. A catastrophe was imminent as agriculture and manufacturing came to a halt.

The more resilient Clans of Naah, including the Feht Clan, would not easily give up their land to these barbaric invaders. In times of war, sides must be chosen. Their only hope was to organize around those Clans who still possessed stocks of food, raw materials, arms, and ammunition. Alliances are formed to balance differences in Clan's strengths. Swallowing their pride, any age-old Clan disputes quickly disappeared making loyalty and cooperation a necessity. When goods and resources did occasionally reappear, they were under the protection of the local Clan Lords. Bartering transactions were conducted, exchanging for needed supplies.

Finding it increasingly difficult to preserve their power the Wisdom Keepers

relentlessly continued their suicide dance. Little by little, they were unable to secure their supply lines or their security as they lost control of the regime. As their power evaporated the more astute Wisdom Keepers realized their impending destiny and slipped away from the capital city, relocating to the off-world territories. The arrogance of the Wisdom Keepers oligarchy had torn apart their once wealthy and vigorous society, driving their empire into collapse.

The Merchant Wars lasted four cycles. In the end, the leaders of the Wisdom Keepers and the remaining Jurrugu Clan members were dethroned, savagely killed, or captured. To the satisfaction of the beleaguered, those who were apprehended were beheaded, their bodies hung on poles in a grand public display.

The fighting and destruction of the Merchant Wars were horrific and costly times. This was true for all the Clans and inhabitants of the six main cities of Naah. The populations of the three outer worlds of the planetary realm were equally affected by the reduction of food and trading of energy and building resources. Resources are typically produced and transported from Naah. While every Naah was affected, for Gwin-o'guin and the Feht Clan the Merchant Wars brought near-total disaster.

The Feht Clan was successful at saving their property by fiercely fighting off the attacking marauders, decisively winning all their battles. The Feht Clan had also been able to protect and save an ample number of their beebyu stock. But in the process, the Feht Clan was devastated and Gwin-o'guin was the last surviving Feht, having lost his parents and every Clan member.

Following the end of the war, Naah was no longer governed as a progressive utopia. The Liberty League was selected to govern the new Republic of Naah. The Liberty League consisted of a combination of Clan Lords, selected by the majority of adult Naah beings through a balloting process, and an unselected group called the Directors, chosen by a consensus of Clan Lords. The Directors were a consortium of the small number of previous owners of the metal, energy, and food processing operations still among the living and still relatively prosperous. This governing body established more liberty-friendly laws that supported individual liberty, freedom of travel, and freedom to own property. They initiated financial rules designed for economic growth. The changes were miraculous. Within five cycles, the ravaged cities of Naah once again began to have robust economic growth. They again became thriving centers of the realm. Products from various crafts became plentiful. Small farms and businesses prospered. With increased production came increased supplies to the masses.

After the war, Gwin-o'guin lived the next twenty-seven cycles completely alone. Living the quiet, lonesome life of the scant number of farmers still working the fertile lands of Naah.

Much of his time was devoted to the usual farm chores of tending his herd of

beebyu and growing long rows of cynga plants. The towering black bark trunk and crimson leaves of the cynga plant were topped with bright red bulbs twice the size of a Naah's head. The bulbs were engorged with a cellulose jell composite that, when fully processed, furnished high energy output. This refined substance was used as the energy source by the planet Naah and the outer worlds in Riim Strand, as well as the propellant for their space travel.

The meat from the great beebyu beasts was utilized by surviving Naah beings and the outer planets for protein sustenance. These unruly creatures stood five times the height of a typical Naah and weighed as much as a hundred Naah. Their furry hides were turned into outer clothing to protect against the colder climate cycle. Clever carpenters used their large bones for building material and talented alchemists processed them into remedies for those who were ill.

The beebyu, being belligerent beasts by nature, would occasionally begin their explosive snorts as they fought amongst themselves for no apparent reason. Their fights were always to the death. They killed one another by rearing up on their hind legs, butting heads over and over until one was down, then stomping and crushing their perceived rival. Afterward, they would announce their glorious triumph with thunderous roars that would shake the trees in the surrounding woodlands. To the dismay of beebyu owners, these killings reduced their herd count. The beebyu had always been difficult beasts to contain. Typically high, electrified fences were required to keep them confined. They were almost impossible to herd and maneuver in the direction you wanted, but their value was well worth the nuisance. Naturally, their aggressiveness made breeding or herding them to market very dangerous for most of the beebyu keepers on Naah, but not for Gwin-o'guin.

During the later cycles of his secluded life, Gwin-o'guin would spend his time away from the farm duties composing melodies to play on his jongee. The jongee was an ancient flute-like instrument given to him by his great grand uncle Okapi in celebration of his 100th cycle. Through the cycles that followed, Okapi taught him to play the jongee's countless range of melodious sounds. Gwin-o'guin would always smile, showing his jagged white teeth, when he thought of his great grand uncle. He remembered Okapi as a proud individual who was also the strangest yet most lovable of all his now-dead relatives, and the one he admired the most.

Okapi was a tireless laborer who didn't speak much during the routine working periods on the farm, performing the many assiduous farm tasks efficiently. At the end of the long harvesting season, when their chores were finally complete, the clan would typically feast on a meal of thick stew made of beebyu meat and pypoo roots. After they'd finished their cleaning chores was when Okapi would become the center of attention. Typically, the entire clan would gather in a large circle with him at the center.

As the shadows from the firelight playfully danced on the dark surroundings, the

members of the Feht Clan would relax. Quietly lounging against the circle of harvest wagons. Setting in the center as if in a meditative state, Okapi would wrap his coarse fingers around the ornate jongee and begin to play its soft harmonic resonance. While he played, he and it, narrated his tales. The delightful, soothing acoustics from the jongee was all that could be heard. In unison, the Clan members would dreamily close their eyes, entranced by the jongee's unique resonance. Tranquil, they absorbed every rapturous note, enthralled by the sheer detail of the sinusoidal waves of images the frequencies produced in their minds. They freely accepted the serenity that would fall over them from the jongee's melodic timbre. The fanciful tales of past Naah crusaders were fascinating; the mystical powers bestowed upon them were extraordinary. The tales would always conclude with the inevitable parable of a future euphoria that would follow with the return of Gaan-Lea.

The jongee was a simple yet beautiful instrument made from the gooch plant, which had gone extinct ten thousand three hundred cycles prior. It had a flawless surface patina of light and dark gray marbled grains flowing through its rich blue body. It was engraved with an exquisite design of ornate lines as thin and delicate as a spider's web. Carved between the lines were elegant symbols in the ancient Naah language of Szal. It wasn't a very large instrument, just half the length of a Naah forearm, with seven holes on the top and one hole on each side, making it easily playable with the three fingers and one thumb of each hand. What made the jongee special was its unparalleled tonal range.

For Gwin-o'guin, it was the time he spent playing the ancient melodies on his jongee that he treasured the most. Through the cycles, Okapi had taught him to play a wide range of melodious vibrations. He always thought the reason Okapi had given him his treasured jongee was out of respect for his youth and many good deeds. But, after a particularly ravaging raid, to his surprise and confusion, as Okapi lay dying in his arms he was told the real reason for the gift.

Okapi had declared; "I offered you the jongee because of your future. A future you cannot begin to imagine. Let Gaan-lea and the jongee show you the way."

This was very puzzling for Gwin-o'guin because he did not believe anyone could truly foresee the future. Not even Okapi. Since that time he had found the true power of the melodies produced by the player of the jongee.

As the lonely cycles passed, Gwin-o'guin refined and enhanced the melodies produced by the jongee. Over time he constructed even more tones, formulating original frequency vibrations that, when played, would keep the great beebyu beasts from becoming restless. In fact, he had learned to control the beebyu by playing the exact frequency vibration that would make the beebyu stand perfectly still, or move right, left, or forward. He was even able to play the exact vibration that would increase their breeding nature.

Every cycle Gwin-o'guin would harvest his crop of cynga plants, load the bulbs into his hover wagon, and drive his herd of beebyu the forty-seven lintars to market in the village Ghalua. He usually made a modest amount on his cynga yield, but always fetched the highest price for his beebyu. He got higher prices because the Feh't beebyu were always the healthiest and easiest to control. In turn, this brought higher prices for other beebyu breeders. Filling the growing need for meat and the pockets of the breeders. Though the calmness of the Feh't beebyu always puzzled his competing breeders they did enjoy the higher price they received for their herds. They only complained amongst themselves and never too loudly.

During this trip, after selling his harvested stock of cynga and twelve beebyu, Gwin-o'guin grew weary from his travels and bargaining with potential buyers. He gained no pleasure from crowds or price bickering. After concluding the sale of his stock it was time to escape the horde. He decided to spend the remainder of his visit in his usual place. A quiet nearby tavern half a lintar from the Merchant Dome and a place not normally frequented by brokers. After drudging through the crowd, he finally made his way to the tavern. Entering through a side entrance, he made his way to an empty table against a back wall and plumped down onto a pillow-filled seat. Silently he motioned to the tavern keeper to bring him a container of distilled pypoo juice.

When the tavern keeper brought the drink, Gwin-o'guin took the small metal stein and, taking a long draught, quickly downed the pale amber liquid. "Hah," he said, licking his lips after finishing.

"Anything more Grandè Feh't?" the tavern keeper inquired.

"I'll have another," he replied, handing the tavern keeper a metal token.

When the tavern keeper returned with the second drink he slowly sipped at it, savoring the refreshing flavor. After making a quick study of the other patrons, he decided it was safe enough to relax, tally his new wealth and make plans for the next harvest.

His cynga plants were becoming more mature and his next harvest should produce about twelve percent more. There were still four beebyu back at the farm, two had mated and were due to produce calves in half a cycle. That would bring his beebyu count to seven and possibly nine by the next harvesting season. Although fewer than this cycle, with the price he received from his beebyu stock and an increase in cynga bulbs, the next harvest should bring more profits.

With the profits from his last two harvests, he had purchased a Puckaa. A low-yield robot designed to till the soil and harvest the cynga plants. This harvest was the first time he had used the Puckaa, finding it consistent when planting but slow-moving during harvest. Overall it was slower than when his Clan worked the

farm, although the work got done in time. Maybe he should purchase another, he thought.

Noticing a newscast, he watched the view-screen on the wall behind the long beebyu bone bar. The talking head on the screen was announcing that the outer world colonies of Ovik, Grau, and Bhut were in dire need of additional energy and food. This brought a slight smile to his face, thinking his next harvest will garner hefty prices.

Gwin-o'guin had never experienced life outside his land, some of the surrounding farms, and the local village. Even during the Merchant Wars, his travels had never taken him farther than a few hundred lintars from his farm. He had never been to the capital city of Gulway or the coastal villages of Sasaloo and Ghar. Nor had he traveled to any of the populated outer worlds within Riim Strand.

Even though space travel within the inhabited realm had been a reality for over half a millennium, Gwin-o'guin had never experienced outer space or seen other planets. At least not in real life. Although he had seen the outer worlds on many newscast images beamed to local video screens.

He had never been on a spaceship or jumped through the hyperspace method of traveling between the inhabited planets. His only experience with beings born of other worlds was through their buyer agents at the Merchant Dome. He had never actually met one.

In fact, Gwin-o'guin was perfectly happy never having the experience of life in space. He still needed to find a mate or the Feht clan would be no more. Ending with Gwin-o'guin.

Chapter 18 - Deadly Double Talkin'...

Earth Standard Time 3249

In this spacetime, Earth's space technology had advanced to the point of enabling human interplanetary travel. The first alien contact was with the Kr'galmaan in EST 2539. Technical trade with the Kr'galmaan had aided in the invention of the inertialess drive in EST 2783. This made intergalactic travel a matter of weeks instead of lifetimes. For the more adventurous Earthlings, such interstellar traffic had become a near commonplace occurrence. They had populated a few of the closer planets and moons. The number of inhabitants of these colonies ranged from a few hundred to a few hundred thousand. It was only in the last one hundred years that a small number of humans spent their lives poking around the outer stars. On one of those trips they had made contact and began to trade with the Naah.

During their explorations of outer galaxies, humans discovered a diverse mix of biological life. But other than the Naah and Kr'galmaan, so far none were as civilized or matched the reasoning intellect of humans. That is, civilized by Earthly standards.

The majority of the humans who inhabited and traveled space were honest operatives, businessmen, and traders. Using pure capitalism as their sixth sense they formed alliances, sold or traded their wears of mined minerals and technology for food and other needed materials. Although most of their trading was with other Earth colonies.

As it is within all intelligent species, there were those who preyed on others. They became criminals, pirates, thieves, scoundrels, and murderers. Although limited, these dregs of humanity used subterfuge, brutality, and at times overwhelming force to get what they wanted. Enforcing legal trade processes and defensive measures was a requirement for all planets associated with interplanetary commerce. Naah in the Riim Strand was no exception.

The Naah realm is one of the more technologically advanced yet socially underdeveloped cultures. It was also one of the realms that participated in commerce with those human traders who occasionally found their way to Riim Strand's double stared cluster.

On similar trips, I would usually arrive and land in stealth mode. But not this time. As instructed by the U.O.H., and before entering the Naah-controlled region, I commanded my Craft to change its size and shape to take on the dimensions of a human Onero-class trading vessel.

I waited just outside the Naah security barrier while I communicated with the Naah Space Command Authority. The virtual neural language mechanism Noiiz had given me worked better than expected, which was a huge relief. It not only translated cerebral but also verbal communications. Using it made communicating easier and allowed me to convince them of my non-threatening intentions for trade.

After a few minutes of persuading banter, I obtained authorization from the NSCA to follow a specified path to my final destination. As a trusted human trader, there was no requirement to be under guard or use a tractor beamed through their airspace. The NSCA had given me clearance to touchdown at the spaceport near the trading village of Ghalua.

Piloting my Craft I slowly descended through the pale blue sky until reaching five thousand feet, changed direction, and headed northeast. Gliding smoothly along the designated flight path, about two hundred feet above the surface, I passed over a vast landscape of rich forest, climbed higher above tall green-topped mountains, swooped lower, and followed a wide expanse of yellow plants with red bulbs. Turning west I flew over another forest of trees and shrubs that abruptly changed into a fertile plain that stretched out across a broad landscape that turned to open terrain until finally approaching the isolated village.

The village was a cluster of stunted, red tile-roofed structures lined up in two rows. I maneuvered the Craft over the domino-like stockade filled with large animals. The surrounding area is fenced by a parade of farmers with merchandise-filled shuttle wagons bringing their products to market. Bringing the Craft around to the outskirts of the spaceport, I hovered for a moment until slowly touching down on the landing field. Far away from the main terminal.

As a precaution, I removed the ring from the middle finger of my right hand and slipped it onto the middle finger of my left hand. The same arm I wore my bracelet. It's much better to be prepared than not, I thought to myself.

Stepping onto Naah for the first time, the air was breathable with a noticeable musky taste. The thick mixture of smells reminded me of open farmland and the smoky atmosphere of Earth before electricity became widespread. Over my Jyotti suit, I wore the appropriate clothing the U.O.H. had supplied. Long tan-colored leather-like pants, black calf-high boots made of animal skin, an untucked top shirt in muted blue, and a black coat that reached mid-thigh. The fabric of the shirt and coat were made of a combination of interwoven odd wool, probably from the hair of some alien creature, mixed with an unknown form of coarse cotton.

As I walked it became obvious the gravity on Naah was weaker than on Earth. If I tried I could have easily jumped fifty feet or more. It took a conscious effort not to go pouncing from one point to another. Off to my left, I noticed another human

trading vessel that must have arrived earlier. Two humans were talking to what must have been a Naah official because he was dressed in a dark black uniform with various patches on his chest and shoulders. It was obvious they were having trouble communicating because they used a lot of hand jesters. Playing it safe, I stayed as far away from them as possible.

These Naah beings were definitely strange-looking with their red skin, oddly shaped heads, large eyes, long ears, and furry heads. The fur on their head turned into a woolly mane flowing from their head and shoulders down the middle of their back, ending at a point just above their waist. Some manes were interwoven with short braids while others were adorned with dull-colored orbs and small decorative beads.

I made my way from the spaceport, through the unfamiliar village filled with colorful vendors. Many of the vendors were unloading crates and unpacking their wear to sell to passersby. I passed through the unfamiliar milieu until finally making my way to a local tavern. This is where I had been informed this Gwin-o'guin Feht fellow frequented. I was posing as the beast buyer Muxk Eutal. Yeah, like I knew what a beast buyer was. As usual, the U.O.H. hadn't given me much information or coaching, but I still had to play the part.

There were only a few patrons inside the tavern. After waiting for about half an hour I felt a sudden rush of warm air. A few feet away a side door had swung open and a Naah being entered. He was dressed in the same rustic clothing as other working Naah beings. Under his dark olive-colored coat he wore a light green shirt, untucked and stained with dirt. His dark brown pants seemed tighter than he was comfortable with. Moving with an air of authority he strolled to a table in the rear of the room and fell onto a padded stool. With his back against the wall and his legs sprawled out from the stool, he placed both elbows on the table. Using a slight finger movement from his three-fingered hand he motioned to the barkeep for a drink. The barkeep had been patiently watching and waiting.

When his drink arrived, he chugged down the fluid in three big gulps, put down the stein, and paid the barkeep. He had returned to his sprawled position when the barkeeper brought him another. This time he sipped at the drink visibly relishing the flavor. After discreetly surveying the patrons he began to stare with an unconnected gaze. He must have been deep in thought because his left hand periodically stroked the soft hair of his left ear.

I was sitting about fifteen feet away at the far end of the ornate bar made of large bones. Just close enough to hear the barkeeper mention his name. So, this is the guy I was sent to charm. He wasn't as big a being as I had expected nor as large as other Naah beings I had seen. By comparison, he would have been considered of smaller stature with an unusually oblong face and sloping thick shoulders. His dense dark mane was well-groomed and had a dull shimmer to it. Unlike other Naah I had seen, his mane contained no vain-induced decorations.

Raising from my stool I approached his table cautiously. His large eyes instantly darted in my direction before his head slowly turned and he looked at me uneasily. Being as benign as possible I said, "Excuse me, sir, I understand you may have a sufficient herd of beebyu I might purchase."

His calm green eyes stared at me for a good ten seconds before he answered. His voice was deep and resonant, "All beast seekers must inquire at the Merchant Dome. Be advised, the sellers are firm negotiators."

"I'm not one to be hindered by restrictive dictates. I prefer speaking directly to the rightful owner, not a broker or agent who takes a cut of the profits."

With his left hand, he calmly reached down and unlock the holster holding his weapon. "I would advise you not to be reckless. Custom and rank must prevail for orderly trade."

Thinking to myself, when two vastly different beings from widely different societies try to communicate, and their true situations are unknown to each other, problems can arise and can be as dangerous as combat. Seeing him ready his weapon was a clear sign I had been a little too impulsive in my approach.

Lowering my head I looked at the ground and said, "My apologies sir. I am inexperienced with Naah tradition. I am a simple buyer ready to purchase. Naturally, never having encountered beings of the Naah Realm I am naive to your ways. If I have insulted you that was not my intention."

After slowly studying me from head to toe he said, "It is known that humans can be quite offensive, disregarding our rituals and traditions. Those who have done so have been ostracized and excluded from further contact. It would be to your advantage to abide by our customs."

"I appreciate you informing me sir. From now on I will make sure to abide by your traditions. Hopefully, with your permission, we can begin again. My name is Muxk Eutal."

Once again Gwin-o'guin stared long into my eyes before answering, "My skill with off-worlders is meager. I will appraise you by your words and deeds. I accept your apology for now, but will wait further before making a final judgment."

Well, that was plain, I thought. Charming strangers is not a strong personality trait of mine. I'll have to be non-threatening and humble or my mission will go unaccomplished. "Thank you. From now on I will conduct my business at the Merchant Dome. There are many things I don't know about Naah. Maybe you can advise me on ways to handle these beebyu animals? For instance, can I transport them alive or must they first be slaughtered and processed? I will be traveling

some distance before delivery to the colonies."

Keeping his left hand close to his weapon, "You appear particularly uninformed for a beast trader."

"As I said, this is my first time in your realm. My orders were to retrieve as many of the beebyu as I could purchase and carry. But I wasn't informed on how it is done. May I ask your name, sir?"

"There will be no commerce between us, so there is no need."

Another failed attempt, I thought. This isn't going well at all. Time to reconsider my approach. "Maybe you could assist me in other ways. As I said, my boss sent me here but didn't tell me enough to accomplish the job. You seem like a friendly and knowledgeable being who might teach a newcomer like myself. As you pointed out I need to become better acquainted with your customs and the beebyu. I will pay for your service."

"I am not an educator nor am I for hire. You would be better served to learn our ways on your own."

Oh, hell, this is getting worse the more I try. A more friendly tactic is necessary, "May I buy you another drink sir? For your patients." Thinking that drink is the lubricant of conversation. "It would be my pleasure."

Gwin-o'guin was accustomed to living alone and being left alone. He did not want company. But it was his nature to be considerate of others. This off-worlder is unpleasantly persistent, yet gaining knowledge of other worlds may be useful. He still had some time before he had to leave and another drink would be refreshing.

"Very well," he said. Keeping his left hand in his lap close to his weapon.

"Excellent, may I set?" I asked, signaling the barkeeper for two drinks.

After a short pause, "Yes." he said, using his foot he pushed one of the stools out from the opposite side of the table.

My first inclination was to pick another stool, but didn't, "As I said, my name is Muxk Eutal. I'm here to purchase a supply of protein for Desaur Minor."

Gwin-o'guin hesitated for several seconds, finally introducing himself. "I am Grandè Gwin-o'guin Feht of Naah."

"Pleased to meet you, sir. You can call me Muxk if you like, that's what others call me. Should I refer to you by your full name?"

Another long pause, “Associates refer to me as Gwin, you may refer to me as Grandè Feht.”

Soon after the barkeeper brought us two more drinks. I paid for them, took the first sip, and nearly gagged. The potent drink was spicy hot and tasted like rotten eggs mixed with grapefruit juice with an aftertaste of pungent ammonia. That one sip sent a burning heat down my throat and into my belly like liquid fire. This is going to take some getting used to, I thought to myself. With a large swig, Grandè Feht emptied half his stein and became silent.

Chapter 19 - flip flop and fly...

We sat quietly for about half an hour as I kept buying drinks. After ten of these grotesque-tasting grogs, my stomach was churning, although the drink was becoming more pleasant to my palate as I choked each one down. Either that or my mouth was numb. Maybe I was just getting drunk. Whatever it was, I couldn't lose focus.

I kept watching this Feht guy closely trying to think of some way to spark a conversation but his fuzzy blank expression was difficult to read. Finally, no longer able to stand the silence, I spoke, "Grandè Feht, do you only breed the beebyu?"

There was no immediate response. Instead, he took another long look at me. I thought I saw a slight twinkle in his eyes. Maybe the drink was finally getting to him too. Finally, he spoke, "Producing the cynga and raising the beebyu is my calling. My ancestors have always been farmers and breeders. We have occupied our land for six hundred eighty-nine generations."

Wow, that was more words he'd spoken in a row since we met. Don't stop now I thought. "An impressive family history. Are there other Feht? Do you have relatives, brothers, or sisters?"

He glared at me with obvious sharp displeasure. Relaxing his glare slightly, he took another long swig of grog before saying, "The Feht Clan is no more. I am the last."

I knew about his family but wanted to see his reaction, "Sorry. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

"There are none. All memories of my Clan are magnificent ones," he said proudly.

Trying to get back to a more friendly conversation I asked, "Could you tell me more about Naah, maybe some of its histories?"

"Naah history is of no importance, only the reality of today and the hope for tomorrow. That is the teaching of Gaan-lea."

"Is this Gaan-lea your god?" I asked.

"You are very curious about matters a trader would typically have no interest in."

Careful where you tread, I thought to myself.

“That may be so. As a trader, I must understand those with whom I do business. A good relationship must be established.”

Minus a twinkle in his eyes, Grandè Feht scowled, “Do you think you will be doing business with me?” The doubtful tone was obvious.

“Maybe. One never knows who they might do business with in the future.” I recognized the obvious reluctance in his voice, maybe learning more about his past would bring us closer. “Please tell me about Naah.”

“The answer to your question is yes. Gaan-lea is our god. Do humans not have a god?”

“Yes, well, sort of. You see, we humans have many gods. Actually, there are different tribal names for the same god.”

I detected a bewildered expression on his furry face.

“That sounds confusing and fatal for a society,” Grandè Feht declared.

“That’s very true. Over the millennia it has caused great religious turmoil among humans. We’ve fought many wars where many humans died over the name of Gods. Humans also struggle between living a life according to their religious text, while hoping for a good spot in the afterlife defined by that text. Most believe a holy prophet has walked the planet and promised eternal salvation to those who follow their tenets.”

“How do humans decide which of your many gods to follow?”

“Like most societies I’ve encountered the introduction of a particular god begins while the being is young, usually directed by the adult.”

“We are born with our belief in Gaan-lea. A belief older than life. We await his exquisite arrival. The words of Gaan-lea give us worth and direction. They enlighten us with the understanding and meaning of the universe he created. Does your god do the same for you Muxk?”

I paused for a long while. At least he is talking, I thought. But should I explain my religious beliefs? If I do, will it help me find a way to get this guy to do whatever it is he has to do? I realize that when trying to make friends it's always best, to be honest, but this is not a normal situation.

My silence was becoming too heavy to disregard so I finally replied, “I’m sure that's true for some humans. As for me, I’m not a religious being. I hold no belief in a god. I'm more of a... heuristic rationalist. To me, the universe has no specific

meaning, it just is. It doesn't have to mean anything, it can just be.”

“That is an interesting way to define yourself Muxk. Would that not suggest you lack the morals and virtue of religious enlightenment?” Grandè Feht asked plainly.

“Hmm. Yes, I guess that could be true for some beings, but not for me. My faith is in myself. Although I admit to trying to live my life by the goodness and values taught by most religions. I’ve found that for me, it’s the best way to live my life. I’ve simply chosen not to participate in the confining rituals of established human religious dictates. There is a tendency for some humans to use religious faith as a pretext and opportunity to impose their ideas of political, cultural and economic power on others.”

"Does that come from the teaching of your adults?"

"No, they followed a specific religion. My belief developed from my many experiences with a variety of religions and civilizations."

“As a sovereign being, you have that choice. For me and all Naah, our belief in the words of Gaan-lea is essential for our society to function. Our trust and obedience to his word are unshakable.”

“Very commendable. I would never dishonor the beliefs of others because I believe in freedom of individual thought. All beings are free to reason as they wish. From my vantage point, it’s entirely reasonable for things to simply exist with no religious explanation. I understand that others may have different beliefs. I honor and respect their judgment if that’s how they achieve a serene life.”

“That is very courteous of you, however, reason has little to do with faith,” Grandè Feht said without a hint of expression.

Was he just being snarky, I thought to myself.

“You speak of the civilizations you have encountered, how many have you come upon?” Grandè Feht asked.

“During my travels, quite a few. That’s why I’m interested in yours?” I replied.

“Did you encounter these distinct civilizations while you were trading?”

Uh oh, this conversation is getting difficult without being exact. “My travels have taken me to many places.”

“What does that mean? I would imagine as a galactic trader you would not be interested in the inner workings of society unless it increased your profit,” Grandè

Fecht sneered, “are you a spy?”

“Who would I be spying for?” I asked, trying to give the words a jocular tone.

“Even today under our new and prosperous republic there are those who desire to have charge over others. It would not be unthinkable for them to use an off-worlder to influence the populous to attain their goals.” Grandè Feht explained.

Somehow, I must get him to trust me. “I understand your concern,” I said trying to sound cordial. “Deceitful beings are a common trait in most societies. Please, tell me more about this new government,” I said, attempting to change the subject.

Grandè Feht furrowed his hairy brows and scowled. Looked me in the eye and said, “you did not answer my question.”

I’m not normally a liar. At the same time, I must be careful of my words. Regardless, I have to be as honest as possible. “Please be at ease. I’m not a spy for anyone in the Naah Realm. As I told you, my boss, the weasel that he is, gave me the assignment to purchase protein for an Earth colony. So here I am.”

“And this assignment was to only purchase beebyu for a colony of humans, is that correct?”

“Yes, well, not entirely,” I said reluctantly.

"What 'entirely' were you assigned to do?"

"I was assigned to be sort of an agent."

His expression turned earnest, “An agent? One might consider an agent to be a spy. Who are you an agent for?”

I guess it's time I came at least partially clean, “A group concerned with the future of Naah.”

Without changing his stern look or tone he asked, “A group? You said you were not a spy for anyone in the Naah Realm. If your group is not Naah, who is this mysterious group of Naah saviors? Where are they from and what do they want?”

This is becoming more complex, I thought. I couldn’t tell him there was a cosmic force whose purpose was to equalize the social direction of the universe. Even if I did he’d think I was even crazier and more dangerous than he already thought. Trying to explain I said, “A group of concerned beings who observe and take rational action when necessary to protect those affected. That’s all I can tell you.”

Placing his hand on the grip of his weapon, “Do you think me a fool? Is that a reflection of the inner values you spoke of? What is the name of this group? What

is their purpose?"

"The group, well... that's complicated. I can tell you they directed me here to locate a savior for Naah. How that will be accomplished is yet to be determined."

"You talk in riddles. Your words portray both deceit and deception."

Grandè Feht abruptly stood, his hand still grasping his weapon, "I have had enough of your pointless mockery. You waste my time and insult me with your obscurity. Thank you for the refreshments," he said and started to leave.

"Wait, please... You're right, I apologize. I'll tell you all I can."

Grandè Feht gave me a long pensive stare and slowly sat down. Drawing his weapon, he placed it on the table pointing directly at me. With an unmistakably frank expression on his face, he said, "If you continue your deception I will end your life. Tell me why you are here and what you want of me."

Just as I was trying to decide how to explain, my Jyotti suit began to tingle. That tingling was the signal the suit emitted when it detected impending danger. Its sensors had identified a nearby threat intent. My first thought was it was signaling because of Grandè Feht's threat. But, exactly two seconds later the front door of the tavern swung open, and in walked the two humans I'd seen at the spaceport. Unhurried, they strolled to the bar, turned, and leaned their backs against it while they surveyed the room. When they looked in our direction they stared for a moment, turned and looked at each other knowingly, and made a move to draw their weapons.

When they entered Grandè Feht had swept his eyes across the room. He was fully aware of them surveying the tavern because he became noticeably tense. Just as they began their grim maneuver he reacted.

Snatching his weapon from the table he turned to his right and discharged his pistol, hitting the human on the right. The impact disintegrated the upper portion of the human's body from his armpits up. Smoke and flaming bits of flesh floated upward as the remainder of his lifeless body twitched and fell forward, hitting the floor with a thump.

The advanced warning from my Jyotti suit had given me an advantage. The instant the two of them made their move I raised my left arm, focused a thought and shot a bolt of energy from my hand. The deadly beam struck the human on the left in the middle of his chest. With a smoldering hole the size of a grapefruit through him, he froze, collapsed to his knees then fell forward to the floor, jerked twice, and went limp.

After the humans at the bar were dispatched Grandè Feht quickly turned the barrel

of his weapon toward me, ready to open fire, just as I put down the other assailant. Gladly he had hesitated, but still kept his weapon aimed in my direction.

Our distrust of each other continued on high alert. In unison, we cautiously walked over to the two awkwardly sprawled dead bodies. The smell of disintegrated burning flesh filled the air of the tavern. With fury in his eyes, he turned to me and bluntly asked, “Are these humans part of your secret group?”

“Why would I kill them if they were?” I responded in a wise-ass tone. “Hey, wait a minute, these aren’t humans,” I proclaim. “See here,” my right foot lifting the corpse of the being Grandè Feht had killed, I pointed, “I’m no doctor but I know human anatomy well enough to know his internal parts are in the wrong place. I don’t know what they are, but they are definitely not Earth humans.”

“Why did these non-humans try to kill you?” Grandè Feht questions.

“Me? I thought they were trying to kill you. Maybe we should leave before the authorities arrive.”

“Perhaps they wanted to eliminate the competition,” Grandè Feht reasons. Then he continued, “There is no reason to leave. Killing villainous humans, or those who look human, is not an unlawful act,” he said, almost flippant about it.

“Well, that’s good to know. Although it’s not very comforting,” I say glibly.

“Why do you think they wanted to kill me?” Grandè Feht asked.

“Hey, it’s your planet, not mine. Anyway, only my boss knows I’m here.”

A crowd of Naah beings began to gather just outside the tavern, some were inquisitively leering in through the door. You could hear them murmuring something about crazy humans when suddenly four uniformed Naah beings pushed through the small crowd and entered the tavern. They inspected the dead bodies and talked to each other for several moments, then one of them came over to Grandè Feht. They took several steps away from me as he and the uniformed Naah quietly spoke, occasionally glancing in my direction.

Grandè Feht seemed to give orders ending with a sweeping hand gesture. The uniformed Naah nodded his head before returning to the others and they started removing the bodies. Dragging them to a back room where, I can only assume, they would be disposed of.

“We should return to our table,” Grandè Feht instructed, seemingly unconcerned with what had just happened. When we got back to the table we both sat down, his weapon was still aimed in my direction.

Grandè Feht asks curiously, "Muxk, I see you carry no weapons, how did you kill that human?"

"Aah... I... can't... speak of it here. We should talk about that somewhere else."

Grandè Feht just looked at me with suspicion, but offered no response.

We both had just taken the life of another being. Yes, it was in self-defense, but for me, taking the life of a living being never sat well. Oh, I could do it without hesitation. I just didn't like it.

Finally, Grandè Feht stood, holstered his weapon as if to leave, and said, "You claim to inform me of why you are here, yet you play games. I have had enough of your questions and lack of candor. You are unimportant. I have chores that require my attention."

Trying to be as forthright as possible under the circumstances I said, "Wait, please. I promised to tell you and I will."

"Why should I trust you? Your words are not reliable, you have explained nothing."

"I'll honor my promise because my word is my oath. I'll explain, but not here. If you must return to your chores, may I offer you a ride? I have a ship and we can be there very quickly. Once there I'll explain."

Grandè Feht never had the need nor the desire to travel in a spaceship. Yet he hadn't been so openly attacked before either. There was a reason these artificial humans were so aggressive, and it is obvious this Earthly human knew more than he was saying. Anyway, this human intrigued him. He was even vaguely likable. Maybe the time has come to experience something unfamiliar. Maybe Gaan-lea was conferring upon him a sign. Grandè Feht sat once again.

"I would appreciate the experience of flight in your spaceship. However, you first must reveal how you killed the... non-Earthling."

Tread cautiously I thought to myself, "I... have an ability. That ability would bewilder less perceptive beings than yourself if they became aware of it."

"This ability, did you acquire it because you are a mutant human? If I do not help you, will you use your mutant ability on me?" he asked suspiciously.

"Mutant? I'm not a mutant. Anyway, you haven't given me a reason nor do I expect that you will. Have I attempted to harm you in any way?"

"Yes, you already have. You have harmed my privacy. Are you saying I should fear you?" he said.

I detected a slight smirk on his furry face. It was obvious he was unafraid.

“It’s not my intent to harm you. I would rather have your respect than your fear.”

With that Grandè Feht said, “It would be sensible for you to limit your expectations. Until I hear your explanation, respect will not occur. Where is your vessel?”

Well, that was plain enough, I thought. “It’s at the spaceport. We can go there now if you like.”

Chapter 20 - Theta Get Your Groove On...

Theta's population of just over nine-hundred-fifty million was spread wide around the planet and encompassed less than an eighth of the landmass of the three continents. Most Theta beings lived in dwellings within the few high-population clusters.

As similar as Theta is to Earth, the genealogy of the inhabitants differs greatly. On Earth, humans went through many millennia of bloodthirsty tribal savagery and barbarism before becoming a semi-cooperative civilization. In those early times of human strife, rulers such as Shaman, Priests, Kings, Presidents, Dictators, and Czars used cruelty and false declarations to separate people into feuding groups as a way to rise and hold power. But in historical terms, the rule of such oppressors and totalitarians was typically short-lived. The memory and impact of such a harsh history made it nearly impossible for individual human Earthlings to be ruled over for very long. Once the minions realized the error of their ways they became defiant. Revolution soon followed and the tyrants were eradicated.

Theta's history was much different. There were no such things as drastic climatic changes from hot, dry tundra to an unbearably cold ice age. The inhabitants had not been afflicted with thousands of years of brutal experiences that would encourage a natural distrust of authority. Even though early in their history there were intervals where some members of the initial nine tribes disagreed and fought small bloodless feuds amongst themselves, those conflicts were quickly resolved. For hundreds of generations, the population of Theta lived cooperative, harmonious lives. They had not developed into vicious, domineering, intolerant, cold, or callous beings. In fact, the most recent generations who live in the lowlands were gentle, kind, passive, submissive, and malleable. This spawned a trusting numbness to the eloquent rhetoric of any charlatan craving power. The low-landers had become a breed ripe for a persuasive overseer such as J'nus to dominate without fear of upheaval.

Vienna arrived on this peaceful planet within a wooded area inside the capital city of Klynash. It was mid-day and the weather was warm and damp. Its yellow star showed bright, beaming life to the human-like inhabitants and all other life forms. The landscape of lush flora and fauna was very similar to those on Earth. The grass-carpeted area where she arrived was filled with various plants. It was surrounded by tall green broad-leafed trees. There were small full bushes of varied leaf sizes and shapes bearing multi-colored blooms. The planet's clear blue sky was filled with puffy gray clouds while cool breezes caused the lush vegetation to move with the rhythm of choreographed dancers.

Much like Earth, where there are plants, there are insects. Insects that crawled, flew, jumped, and floated. Most had ten or more legs, even the flying ones. Wings

and legs and tentacles and teeth. The insects were simply vying for survival. Luckily they didn't seem to pay any attention to Vienna.

Hearing the hubbub of activity Vienna walked toward the sounds. Stopping at the edge of the wooded area, she saw the expansive clearing of a populated urban region. Close by there was a wide walkway of green long-bladed grass. The grassy area surrounded all sides of the three and four-story stone buildings. Everywhere she looked biological growth was abundant, even on the tops of the buildings. Many buildings had vines with infinite shades of green, violet, purple, yellow, and red flowering blossoms growing down their walls. The vibrant colored petals and broad leaves swayed with the occasional breeze.

A very serene and colorful sight, Vienna thought to herself. She had arrived in an area that was - she would discover as she explored - one of many leisure zones scattered throughout the city.

Other than the flowery growth, the city of Klynash resembled cities on Earth in many ways. Businesses and eating establishments, catering to passers-by, occupied the lower levels of the buildings, while the upper portions were being utilized as housing. The beings of Theta were humanoid enough that Vienna, dressed as she was, would blend in without drawing unneeded attention. She directed her Jyotti suit to monitor all its built-in sensors and record her visit using both video and audio. Stepping out of the woods into the clearing she strolled onto the green walkway. It was obvious Vienna blended in because apparently, the Theta beings were unaware of her difference. In her head, she hummed the calming melody from "Lilly Beneath The Falls".

Observing as she walked, one of the first things she noticed was there were no paved roads. Air-born vehicles quietly flew thirty feet above grassy thoroughfares. It was obvious that some of them were private vehicles because of their various colors. The mass transports were pure white and only touched down momentarily at designated areas to load and unload passengers. When she passed by one of the vehicles with the door opened she could see there was no pilot, just a communication hologram. Drones, she thought to herself, their route must be controlled by a centralized transport computer system. As a Theta being entered they would speak their destination, the door would close, and off they went. Larger vehicles looked to be landing on roofs, likely unloading bulk items.

Theta beings were tranquilly moving around the grassy walkway going about their usual business. Each one seemed to walk like they had a purpose. Yet they looked as if they were in their own domain. Each one was so engrossed in their technical devices they paid little attention to other beings around them. Very little eye contact was made with others. Some wore headgear devices that looked like short-billed baseball caps with a display in front of their eyes. Others carried a clear apparatus that looked like twenty-first-century touch computers. Still others wore wide digital devices as bracelets on their forearm.

Oddly she did not notice any children, teenagers, nor any beings that would be considered elderly. Every Theta being she saw looked fairly young. By Earth standards, they appeared to be in their thirties or forties.

Another thing she noticed was the commercial advertising. Similar to what was once seen in the large metropolitan areas on Earth, there were lighted signs and video screens with moving images telling potential buyers how great their products were.

Retrieving the JAR device from her pocket Vienna looked at it attentively to appear more like a Theta being. The screen of the JAR device would change occasionally, but she didn't understand the symbols. She spent the next few hours wandering around the green walkways talking to no one, watching the beings while searching for any sign or reference to J'nus.

While most of the storefronts along the boulevards and side streets had advanced signs and advertising, there was one store that caught her eye. It wasn't much different from any other business in the area except for a single old poster in its long thin window. Curiously it appeared to be marketing vacations or travel destinations. Within the poster was a picture of a building with architecture that resembled eighteenth-century Europe.

Deciding to investigate further she opened the door and stepped inside. When she entered she was greeted by a perky young clerk sitting behind a counter, "Hi," she said amiably, "I'm Samlila, is there anything I can help you with today?"

"I noticed the placard in the window. Can you tell me about the place pictured?" Vienna asked quietly.

By the look on her face, the clerk seemed a little astonished that someone would want information about their old poster. "Are you looking to go somewhere specific?" the clerk asked politely.

Maybe this was a bad idea, Vienna thought to herself. Maybe she should just leave. "No, I just dropped in on the chance... you know, that there might be someplace different I could visit. That picture looked like a place that might be interesting."

The clerk pulled her long red hair back from her face and tied it into a ponytail with a band, touched a point on the counter and a holographic image about two feet square appeared above it. "Your JAR indicates you are an Assent Traveler."

"My JAR... yes, an Assent Traveler," Vienna agreed.

Catching sight of Vienna's bracelet and ring the clerk says, "I see you have the path implements that accompany your travel authorization rank."

“Of course,” Vienna says, not wanting to appear unusual,

“We have numerous locations available that may be to your liking. Of course, any journey for Assent Travelers is solely for the purpose of J'nus service with required purpose documents. Although exceptions have been made.”

When Vienna heard the name J'nus her interest peaked. She had finally found a connection.

“I am interested in the ancient location pictured on the placard. But I don't think I have the required documents,” Vienna says shyly.

The clerk leaned toward Vienna and whispered, “Don't worry we have locations available that do not require J'nus papers. The Beau Monde is very popular.”

“Is that the location shown on the placard?”

“No that is not Beau Monde. I'm not sure if the placard location is one we offer. It is an older image. I'll have to inquire with the owner. He is upstairs, this way please.”

Leading the way Samlila's long red ponytail slapped her back as it swung back and forth. As she climbed the stairs Vienna's boots made a clapping sound on each stair. The upstairs was a small crowded office space with a desk, chair, and bookcase. In one corner there were several containers stacked on the floor filled with dusty, decaying books. Scattered around the desk were papers sketched with crude figures, messages, documents, and what looked like star system charts. Just as they entered from one door, another door in the back of the office swung open and a Theta being entered. He moved with exaggerated caution, looking around as he walked as if to ensure nothing had been touched. His eyes soon locked on Vienna. Samlila and her boss talked quietly for a moment then he said, “My name is Euris, I operate this establishment. I understand you are looking for travel that does not require J'nus documents?”

Euris was rather slender and taller than Samlila but didn't appear very muscular. He wore similar clothes to the traditional fabric of alligator-like textured long pants, a matching vest over a dark purple shirt with no collar. His copper-colored hair was cropped short with gray tones, much like the Elys being she had met on Earth.

When he spoke Vienna felt a misty touch of conscious thought. She had better be vigilant, she thought to herself. Cautiously she answered, “Not exactly. I've just returned from my J'nus service voyage and hoped to find a place to rest. The picture on your placard appeared interesting. I've never visited your establishment, can you tell me what you promote?”

It was the little things that made Euris suspicious and he did not attempt to hide his misgivings. “We deal in justification to travel coordinates. Our customers come to us from the J'nus Archival Restoration Initiative for their primary coordinate integration. If you are already a traveler for J'nus you do not need our service.”

Hesitating for a moment Vienna bit at her lower lip and said, “You are right, I am familiar with the operation of the path implements, so I do not need your service. Thank you for your assistance,” she said, turning to leave.

Noticing details is what differentiates the smart from the brilliant and Euris was one of the brightest of his generation. He knew almost immediately she was an imposter. Yes, her clothing appeared typical and she looked like any other Theta, but it was the way she carried herself and the way she pronounced the words that gave her away.

Before she could leave Euris spoke up, “We may still be able to assist you, if you are willing to pay the price,” he said, his tone changing to pleasant. “You must be new to Klynash. Where are you from?”

Vienna's Jyotti suit began to tingle as a warning. At the same moment, she sensed a mental probe trying to read her mind. She stealthily blocked it with hissing static just as Pu-illeo had taught her. If she had used a wall barrier the originator would surely have known they had been detected.

“What do you mean, where am I from?” Vienna asked in a naive manner.

“I noticed your buckle has an image of an Azhdar from the outer territories. I assume you have a connection with the Phif province.”

Ignoring the implication Vienna calmly said, “The belt was a gift from a friend. What is the price?”

“Are you an infiltrator?” He asked suspiciously.

With a pleasant smile, she shrugged, “Why should you ask that, do I look like one?”

“It is undoubtedly possible. It is very unusual for a JAR operator from the Phif region to be in Klynash. Especially one who requests travel to locations that are not J'nus specific. True pupils of J'nus typically do not have the license to travel wherever they please. Although it is rumored that on occasion latitude is bestowed on those of elevated privilege.”

Attempting to change the subject Vienna looked around the room, “I see you have

several ledgers here. I have attempted my writing skills without success. Have you reviewed them?”

Euris cocked his head to one side as he thoughtfully studied Vienna. Several seconds passed before he answered. “I have read them all. But that was long ago.”

“Do any of them contain material concerning J'nus?” Vienna asks.

There was something behind her eyes that made Euris even more suspicious. Was this a test of his fidelity, he wondered? “These books are very old, written before our rescuer J'nus brought about the renewal. Surely you would be more interested in accounts of the J'nus revival.”

Vienna could feel a faint mind probe strengthen but her empathic static held it back. Slowly the probe decreased as she spoke, “I’m interested in a broad range of observations from our past and the present. May I look at them?”

“As you can see, they have not been disturbed for quite a long period of time. If you wish to look through them you are more than welcome. You should begin with those stored in this container. They are the oldest. But what do these decaying manuals have to do with your desire for travel?”

“I was once an aspiring author. I was thinking I might try again. My idea is to recount the sorrowful life we endured before the historical arrival of J'nus and our awakening.”

An impish smile emerged on Euris's face, “A glorious concept. Please look at any you find that may assist you. I would be delighted if my small collection would benefit your work and the story of our deliverer J'nus.”

Vienna meticulously searched through the containers as Euris and Samlila watched her every move. Some of the books she pull out crumbled when they were opened, only allowing a quick glance of the pages before they came apart. Most were instructional manuals for odd mechanical equipment. She found one or two that were educational on things like structural engineering and horticulture and set those aside. She found similar books as she went through the second container.

At the very bottom of the second container, she found something she did not expect. Amongst these faded books on this alien planet, she discovered a deteriorated copy of an Earthly Bible. Although the black cover was faded, withered, and torn, she could make out the first three washed-out letters “Bib..”, the rest were gone. Vienna knew what it was the moment she saw it because she had her own copy back in the cabin. Even on Earth, finding a hard copy was rare. Data digitalization had taken care of that. She carefully pulled it out and leisurely stacked it with the three other books she had collected.

“Have you found anything of interest?” Euris asked with a cynical tone.

“Not really,” she declared, “What I’ve found seems so sterile. Do you know of somewhere else I might find additional information?”

“You will have to leave Klynash proper to learn the true nature of the unworthy lives we endured before J'nus. I’m sure these old tomes do not tell the true story of the disorder before our awakening. Wait, there is an old building at the edge of the woods northeast of here. I’ve heard it said that it contains a collection of archaic material. It was built in a previous century with architecture that resembles the century before that. In some ways the old structure echoes the end of many things; the end of the path, the end of a time, and maybe the end of your search. I can take you there if you wish.”

Vienna thought for a moment, CW had always reminded her to be dubious of kindly strangers, “Thank you, but I’m not sure I have the time.”

“I have a vehicle, it would not take us long,” Euris said innocently.

Vienna knew she wouldn’t get another opportunity to learn more about this J'nus being. Anyway, all she had to do was touch the red stone on her bracelet and she would instantly be back on Earth.

“How long would it take to get there and back?” she asked.

“I am sure we would return before sunset,” Euris promised.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t ask you to do that,” Vienna paused, “It would take you away from your business. I’m sure I can find my way there.”

“I am certain Samlila can handle whatever may arise here,” Euris reasoned.

“Well, I would like to gather more details,” Vienna confessed.

“It’s settled then,” Euris said with a smile, “Gather what you have collected and follow me, we can leave immediately.”

An hour later they are hovering along a narrow road twisting its way through a tattered decaying city. Along the road lay chunks of debris bisecting the landscape of scattered remnants of fallen buildings.

“What is this place?” Vienna inquired.

“The ancient city of Zoar. It is long dead but the old building remains as a reminder of our unworthy primal times. It is seldom visited.”

At the end of the main road stood the structure Euris had spoken of. The old single-story house was built of gray stone with bluish ivy crawling up its walls. It had a foreboding look as if it had been empty for a long time. The front grounds were unkept and overgrown with thick stalks of green grass about a foot high. Directly behind it was a sweeping forest of tall, broadleaf trees.

Moments later the hovercraft came to rest. With Euris leading the way they made their way through the tall grass and entered through the wide front door. Once inside Vienna examined the interior and decided where the library would be. Making her way through the double wooden doors she entered the room. Once inside her attention immediately focused on the floor-to-ceiling shelves filling two walls. The shelves contained books of various colors, shapes, and sizes.

Walking to the shelves she slowly began studying the titles of the books.

“Can I examine any of these books?” she asked.

“Yes, of course,” Euris replied

Occasionally she pulled out a book, thumbed through it, and place it back in the open slot. Gradually moving along the shelves she noted that the room appeared well cared for. Strange, she thought to herself, these books are not at all dusty. “I appreciate your help, these are very interesting,” Vienna declared to Euris.

She soon turned her attention to a small desk set in a corner just inside the east-facing windows. On it, she recognized a computer much like the one she had seen in Euris’s office. It was not an antique even by an Earthling’s criteria. Vienna thought to herself if there is a link to the Theta systems this computer may help her unravel the mysterious code.

The computer was obviously voice-activated and probably voice-operated. Vienna said, “computer activate” and a holographic image morphed from the top of the desk. When it finished an icon dropped from the top of the image, slid down, and stopped in the center. The icon grew larger until it was almost half the height of the holographic screen. It had two opposite-facing blue and gold crescent shapes. Floating in the middle was a fire-red symbol, unlike anything she had seen before.

At that moment Euris reached out and grasped her wrist with a vice-like grip, his hand covering her bracelet. A menacing smile flickered across his face as he spoke, “you will not be using this.”

“Get off me,” Vienna yelled, trying to slap away Euris’ hand, but his white-knuckled grip held firm. Vienna’s heart pounded as her inner fury swelled. She pulled back her free arm and with a closed fist swung a punch at his face. Just as she swung he quickly moved out of the way, twisting her arm behind her as he moved. Suddenly she felt the stabbing point of a needle as it pierced the muscles

on the base of her neck. Instantly she began to sweat as a deep feeling of weariness filled her body, and her mind became clouded. Her legs felt like soft butter causing her to lose her balance and collapse to the floor. She couldn't move, her sight was blurry, but she could still hear.

She felt Euris lift her listless body and carry her out of the old house and place her into the vehicle. Vienna couldn't see well enough to tell in which direction they flew. She began counting her heartbeats to tell how long they were in flight. It was two minutes and ten seconds before they stopped.

She was again lifted from the vehicle and carried across what sounded like pebbles. While she was being carried Vienna felt a slight breeze that carried the smelled of hay and she heard the sound of small tingling bells. Her limp body was casually thrown onto a soft cushioned bed. She heard the sound of voices that rose and fell musically as if the background conversations were songs from a duet or trio. Vague images and eerie sounds began echoing in the thick fog surrounding her mind. She heard the thumping sound of booted footsteps fade and she was alone.

Unable to move, she tried to cry out, but silence was the result. Her mind burned with frustration. It overflowed with a torrent of questions impossible to answer. Who are these beings? What drug did they give her? Where is she? Why hadn't her Jyotti suit worked? Why didn't it activate and shielded her from being stabbed?

Chapter 21 - The Mule Sings...

Kriibo Nez had purchased a large open field just outside the Ovik mining city of Svalgar. It had taken fifty-seven dags, and hundreds of Naah workers to construct the large stage and production studio. Blizzards of Ovik summer heat had delayed construction by seven dags but the sweaty construction crews, motivated by extra pay, had busily made up the time.

The staging was now finished. The studio was near completion and should be ready in time for Tyrik Guebr's first public speaking event. It was equipped with controls for the center stage including the latest lighting and acoustic enhancement devices and visual broadcast equipment.

Inside the studio, Kriibo was seated in a cushioned chair at a table out of the way of any stagehands finishing their final chores. In front of him sat a small silver box with wires running from it into the wall behind him. Tapping rapidly on the touch screen of a controller, he made minor adjustments to his newest invention, the cerebral amelioration rectifier. When he finished streaming the last line of data into his device it emitted the appropriate ambient sound. When he compared the scan register to his proposed signal, it was a perfect match.

"Flawless," Kriibo said under his breath.

Two hours later Kriibo and Tyrik stood together backstage. True to his nature Tyrik's face showed a nervous unease. The fur down his back glistened with beads of moisture. He was trying to keep his intense fear from overtaking the timidity of his newly found confidence.

"Why do we need such a gathering? Your articles have been published and republished and the airwaves are filled with our slogans. Couldn't I simply make a recording of the speech and have it broadcasted?"

Kriibo smiled, "This is merely effective communication. It's no different from what advertisers do every day. When they repeat a jingle or a slogan a thousand times a day, they're using a psychic technique to make you remember their message. A personal appearance is now necessary to move the campaign forward. Simply remember what we rehearsed, read the words written on the display and you will be successful. Tonight you will make your mark and truly establish the seriousness of your campaign."

Relaxing ritualistic Naah melodies played in the background as the large crowd assembled. Kriibo had arranged for an unlimited supply of food and drink to be provided to the crowd to ensure it would be large and vulnerable. When the time came Kriibo methodically walked to the center of the stage. The dim lights gave off a bluish hue as they showed down on him.

"My brothers and sisters," he said, waiting for the crowd noise to subside. When

the crowd grew quiet he continued. "In his ultimate wisdom, Gaan-Lea has sent Naah a liberator. I am here to support him because I believe him to be our salvation. Do not be afraid to trust him. Do not fear his divine words of truth. They are homogeneous to nature and will be the vehicle for our redemption. Believe in the rescuer Gaan-Lea has sent us. Believe in Naah's salvation through the words of Tyrik Guebr."

The lights of the stage and audience blinked out. A smoky mist was blown across the stage floor. Gradually the center of the stage brightened with a single white light. All eyes turn to the lighted spot on stage, broadcasting cameras swung 180 degrees from the crowd, and subdued applause came from the audience.

Wearing the flowing crimson robe signifying ancestral royalty, Tyrik seemed to float from the rear of the stage. A noticeable flaxen yellow glow shimmered from the edges of the robe as he moved. When he arrived at the center of the stage the light brightened to near sunlight intensity. Tyrik raised both hands, palms up, acknowledging the spectators. The music lowered but remained playing in the background.

Backstage Kriibo tapped on a small control pad. Just as Tyrik began to speak the cerebral amelioration rectifier produced a slight hum and became activated. Strategically located output apparatus began to smoothly reinterpret the traditional Naah melodies into the desired signals. Cleverly embedded in the substructure of these familiar melodies were specific resonances designed to evoke a beckoning euphoria. Suggestive images of Gaan-lea were created in the subconscious of the audience. Images designed to elicit profound emotions. Just as Kriibo had intended, the reverberations imbed in the mind of the hearer the concept of absolute acceptance of Tyrik's words. The integrated resonances touched deep into the psyche of the audience. Each euphonic tone had a distinct purpose, to insert concepts consistent with collectivist conformity while preventing even the smallest hint of the notion of individualism and self-reliance.

Staring straight ahead Tyrik nervously bit the side of his lower lip. The moisture on the light fur on his head and back had increased and was almost dripping wet. When he addressed the crowd the acoustic system turned his voice into deep sonorous tones that belied his lack of stature and confidence.

Looking out over the audience Tyrik recited the words projected on the lens placed in his left eye.

"My fellow Naah, thank you for coming to hear me tonight. There are many important issues for all Naah in the realm that must be addressed. Today we are living with the injustices of a failed system depriving you of your right to equality. The leadership of Prime Juju Ghar and his Liberty League has not brought you the equality they promised. Their failure has caused pessimism to replace our natural optimism. The policies of Juju Ghar have corrupted our

nature. The greed of his wealthy advocates has filled our lives with misery and poisoned our souls. We have not progressed but have shut ourselves in. Juju Ghar's approach has given us nothing and left our souls in want. We have become cynical, hard, and unkind, desensitized not only to sin and evil, but to custom, tradition, beauty, and common decency. The evils of times gone by have again become part of our everyday existence.

Our realm cannot continue in this way. We need change. We need a society built on a foundation of equality and kindness. Without these virtues our lives will be empty, filled with cruelty and all will be lost. The very nature of we Naah cries out for goodness and equality for all."

Tyrik paused. There was absolute silence. He could see the blank eyes of those close to the stage. They were looking up at him expressionless, seemingly mesmerized by the harmonic resonance they were receiving from Kriibo's machine.

Kriibo tapped the machine's controller. Almost instantly shouts of approval erupted as the crowd surged to their feet. The stage vibrated as they stamped the ground in the ritual act of praise and support.

Transmitting across the realm the broadcast journals were commenting with admiration about his directness, honesty, and truthfulness.

Raising one hand Tyrik nodded a thank you and continued.

"Juju Ghar and the Liberty League promised us order and better conditions. They have not fulfilled that promise. They never will! They are drunk with power, freeing themselves from responsibility while their selfish policies enslave every Naah.

Under Juju Ghar our system of support for those in need has become broken. I cannot stand by and allow this to continue. I cannot allow our society to return to the ways of social injustices that assault our future. If you embrace me each of us will become one. As Gaan-lea's words have predicted, each of us will become true rational Naah beings.

The reactionary elements following Juju Ghar lurk within our society, refusing to shed their hateful intent of the false veil of individualism, personal property, and privacy. These ideas are outdated and a menace to social progress. They are not a proper vision for Naah society. They are based on greed and cloak the real problems within. Juju Ghar and the submissive Panel of Principals have not opened their eyes to the realities and hardships of our lives. They have lost their sense of common good and equal justice. Their vision is a vision of decline. Their policies have caused rabble

extremism to grow and ferment dangerous unrest throughout the realm. Change is the only solution.”

Tyrik paused again, this time the crowd immediately began chanting in unison, “Ty-rik, Ty-rik, Ty-rik,” while swaying side to side.

Tyrik let the praise continue for several seconds. Bathing his ego in their approval. Leisurely he raised a hand for quiet and continued.

“I envision a different future for the Naah realm, not a future that endlessly repeats the mistakes of the past, but a great wave of enlightenment. We must break free from this circle of negativity and rise like an arrow into the far reaches of the future - to follow the sacred words Gaan-lea has ordained - that all Naah are equal and can reach their proper place of glory.

My desire is not to be your ruler. I do not wish to dominate anyone. I want to help everyone. All Naah beings are like that. We want to live with happiness, not misery. We don't want to despise one another. There is room for everyone in the Naah realm. Our way of life should be free and equal, but we have lost our way.

In the coming cycles, my voice will reach millions of victims of a system that has doomed too many to failure. To every Naah that will hear me, I say: 'Do not despair,' the misery of greed and inequality now upon us will pass as will those who fear my progressive ideas. Follow me and their hate will perish in the miserable death it deserves. Follow me and the power they took from every Naah being will be returned and will never again be eliminated.

The choice for Prime is on the horizon, when you make your choice, don't choose those who look down on you, despise you, and enslave you. Don't give yourselves to these unnatural feelings. You are Naah! You have love of Gaan-lea in your hearts. The non-believers of Gaan-lea have proven themselves to be haters. Gather with me and we will feast on the corpse of the ideas of Juju Ghar and his followers. Let your choice be heard by them.”

When Tyrik paused this time the chanting became even louder. As it did Tyrik's voice became firm, even, and passionate.

“If you are suffering, in debt, out of work, and scrimping for the bare necessities of life, blame the ineffectual leadership of Prime Juju Ghar. His plan of self-reliance has only intensified your pain while my plans will help you pay your bills and feed your family. My plans will make sure you get the medicine you need. My plans will make sure the young are educated. My plans will return Naah to its natural state. No longer can we permit harm to continue to wreak havoc on the very essence of our realm.

Think of the power of Gaan-lea. It is the same power within you if you have the courage to use it.

Let us unite. Let us fight for a new progressive world, a decent world where every Naah will prosper, a world that will give our youth security and a better future. Don't let inequality and despair rob you of your hopes or steal from you your dignity and pride. Follow me and we will build a brighter future. A future built on equal justice and faith.

Let us fight together to free the realm. Let us fight for a realm of equal justice, equal service, duty, and reason. A realm where I, with help from you, will lead all Naah beings to the happiness foretold by Gaan-lea.”

The crowd was on their feet, chanting his name, cheerfully swaying in unison to the harmonic vibrations sent from Kriibo's machine. Journos were broadcasting across the realm describing the reaction of the crowd to Tyrik with praising words and their connection and acceptance of his ideas.

“I have felt the touch of Gaan-lea's hand upon my shoulder. Together Gaan-lea and I will help you build a brighter future. But you must help us set the stage for that brighter future. Rally behind my words of salvation. Have hope my fellow Naah. We must change so we all thrive. We must change for the future of our offspring.

My message is clear. It is about being alive again with a sense of love and caring for everyone, in touch with our true nature. In the name of justice and Gaan-lea, let us unite! United we will come out of this darkness and into the light. Choose me as your new Prime and we will break through the despair. Choose me and our collective souls will give wing to the power of all Naah and begin to soar. We will soar into the light of hope, soar into the future. A glorious future that belongs to all Naah.

I humbly ask you to praise the almighty hand of Gaan-lea to heal the wounds of Naah and help me restore it to graciousness. Dedicate yourselves to Gaan-lea through me. Heed the words of Gaan-lea for they are meant to soothe the souls of we Naah. Join me for I am the sum of your dreams. Together we will dance on the grave of greed and the follies of JuJu Ghar.

It is written, 'the kingdom of Gaan-lea lies within each Naah'. All of you! You have the power. In the name of Gaan-lea, let us together use that power. Let us together fight to fulfill our dreams.

Finally, my fellow Naah, Gaan-lea has directed me to use the power as your chosen Prime to act on his behalf. Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of

praise, think about these things. Practice these things, and the peace of Gaanlea will be with you and all Naah.”

The crowd roared with excitement. Chants of “Ty-rik, Ty-rik, Ty-rik” continued as he waved to the bellowing crowd. Glancing to his left he saw Kriibo standing at the edge of the stage nodding in satisfaction.

There was a visible self-satisfied grin on Kriibo’s face. He knew it was the intelligent manipulation of consciousness that molds the opinions of the masses. And those who can manipulate this unseen mechanism constitute an invisible overseer, the true ruling power of any world. In the social construct of ethical thinking, the relatively small number of beings who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses are the ones who dominate society. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind. His device had performed as he had expected. The cerebral amelioration rectifier had penetrated the minds of the Naah audience and produced the desired effect.

Chapter 22 - Attune To The Tune...

Grandè Feht and I immediately left through the side door of the tavern and headed for the spaceport. While making our way through the crowded traders I place my hand in my pocket, grasp the iJotter to communicate with my Craft, and focused my thoughts. I had previously altered the exterior to resemble a human trading vessel. Now that I had a passenger, I needed to keep up my charade and transform the interior. I commanded the Craft to alter the interior to resemble what could conceivably be that of a trader's spaceship. Including a large cargo area, a ramp where we would enter, as well as pulsing digital displays, and banks of flickering lights and instrument panels on the command bridge. I also made sure the front of the ship had observation windows large enough for a panoramic view of the terrain visible by Grandè Feht.

As we made our way through the swarming traffic of buyers and sellers many Naah would step aside as Grandè Feht approached, apparently out of respect. It was obvious he was humbled by their actions because he would reply "thank you" each time it happened.

It was also very evident we were being closely watched. There were at least seven Naah beings unmistakably following us through the crowd.

"Grandè Feht, do you know those watching us?" I asked.

"They have been with us for a while. They are monitors from the Clan Lords, they mean us no harm."

"Should I trust you after what happened in the tavern?"

"You may do as you wish," he said without emotion.

"I'm a little paranoid. Especially after finding out that humans are fair game. Please explain who the Clan Lords are and why they would be watching us? What authority do they have?"

"The Clan Lords helped save the realm. Their officials oversee all village markets during the harvest season. How powerful do you think that would make them?"

"I would call them very powerful indeed," I remarked.

The evening temperature was cooling the daily heat as we headed eastward down the road straight toward the spaceport with our watchers close behind. When we approached the two sentries which had been assigned to stand guard at my Craft snapped to attention. Grandè Feht respectfully nodded his appreciation as we

boarded. Once inside he followed me through the ship, curiously inspecting the interior but asked no questions. When we arrived on the command bridge I gestured for him to take the seat to the left of me.

I made several fabricated gestures on a flickering keypad as if to program instructions to the ship. Taking care not to be noticed, I allowed my right hand and wrist to be absorbed into the armrests. A moment later the ship softly maneuvered from the spaceport dock and smoothly lifted five hundred feet from the surface.

Gwin-o'guin Feht had steeled himself. He was expecting a sudden jolt or jerk. The instant he noticed they were airborne he realized he had felt nothing but a slight internal feeling of motion.

"Which way to your place," I queried.

"Forty-seven lintars to the southwest," Grandè Feht directed.

Banking the Craft left I brought it about and began to slowly accelerate. We unhurriedly glided along as Grandè Feht gazed out the window. My flight path followed the razor-thin road slicing through the carpet of the forest below. It was obvious he was in awe as he surveyed the wide expanse unrolling before him.

It took only ten minutes of flight to cover the distance to his home. As we got closer he announced, "There, that is it. I recognize it even from this height."

Pointing to the south he instructed, "Land in the field behind my dwelling, away from the stockade."

I brought the ship around and landed about a hundred yards from his house. Once down I command the ramp to open and we stepped out and began walking toward his house.

"That was very interesting," Grandè Feht said in an unimpressive tone, "Your ship is very quiet. It did not frighten the beebyu."

We were in the middle of the field halfway to his house when he unexpectedly stopped, turned, placed his hand on his weapon, looked me in the eye, and said, "It is time for your explanation."

"That's not a very nice welcome to your homestead," I said.

Without a change of expression or tone, "Why did those non-Earthly humans want you dead, and how did you kill them?"

"Can't you at least welcome me into your home before you question me?"

“You do not lie well, Muxk. And the weak lies you tell are not welcome in my home. I have had enough of your deceit.”

Standing about five feet ahead of me, he drew his weapon and pointed it directly at my face, and growled, “Tell me or die right here, right now.”

I raised both arms to chest level, open palms facing him. “I admit my attempts at being your friend have failed miserably,” I confessed. “Since you put it so bluntly, here goes. I still think those non-humans were trying to kill you, not me.”

“They would have no reason to kill me. They were after you, why?”

“As I said no one knows I’m here except my boss.”

“How can you be sure of that?”

Now that was a good question, I thought. Because Sanduval Mule can also travel through spacetime, he may very well know I’m here. Damn! But where did those non-Earthly humans come from? This mission was getting more complicated with each passing moment. I can’t let on there was any question.

“I’m sure,” I said confidently. “They must have been after you.”

“Why would they be after me? I am a mere farmer,” he asked.

“Because you can stop the evil takeover of your government and preserve the Naah Realm.”

Grandè Feht was silent. I could tell he was trying to decide whether to just shoot me now or listen further. An inquisitive glint seemed to flash in his large green eyes.

“That is illogical. I am not involved in the political leadership of Naah and have no interest in it. Is this another of your falsehoods?” He asked, his grip tightening on his weapon.

“No, no, it’s the truth. Look, I told you I was sent here to help you save your world.”

“Sent to save Naah for another authority wanting control?”

“I will be totally honest with you...”

“That would be unexpected,” he said plainly.

“Yeah, well, it may seem so, but here is the truth. I was assigned to come here,

find you, and do whatever is necessary to help you save Naah. You and me together.”

“You have stated that before without explanation. Assigned... by who?”

“They call themselves the U.O.H. and they are very powerful. They want me to convince you that only you can stop those who would change the future course of Naah.”

“They are from Naah?” He asked.

“Well, no. They are... intergalactic.” I could almost distinguish an eye roll from Grandè Feht’s expression. “Look, I know this all sounds unreasonable. But I am telling you the truth. The being that is orchestrating this transformation is able to change his appearance. The U.O.H. believes he will force an unacceptable change in Naah.”

“Your lies are becoming increasingly vast. Your mysterious group has now become galactic. You have yet to convince me not to end your life.”

“Then end it now. I have told you why I came here and why I’ve contacted you.”

“Yet you have not explained exactly how you killed that being,” Grandè Feht said calmly.

Maybe he was starting to believe me. “Okay, the U.O.H. gave me these gadgets,” showing him my bracelet and ring, “when they work together I can release a highly charged beam of energy.”

“Show me,” he demanded, “but be very careful.”

Slowly turning right to face the forest, I raised my left hand and concentrated. A microsecond later a bolt of medium-strength blue energy exited my hand. The energy stream instantly streaked across the field, flashed as it strikes a tree, and disintegrated a fist-sized hole through the tree’s trunk.

Grandè Feht stood motionless. His weapon still pointing directly at me, “Impressive,” he says without emotion, “Do these instruments give you other abilities?”

I can’t tell him I can traverse spacetime. That would be too much information. I didn’t like it, but I had to avoid the truth. “Ah... that’s enough don’t you think?”

“Exactly what is this danger you speak of and how were you planning to help me save Naah?” he asked.

“To tell you the truth, I haven’t figured that out yet.”

“A group of mysterious galactic protectors told you they somehow know there is a danger to Naah, and you believed them? Even if true, you have no plan to stop whatever the danger is, yet you expect me to disrupt my life and blindly follow you?” Grandè Feht said mockingly.

“When you put it that way, it sounds a little foolish.”

“It would be senseless for anyone to believe such a story,” Grandè Feht said plainly.

His expression slowly changed back into a dull shallow stare. Grandè Feht’s judgment told him to shoot this human, feed him to the beebyu, and be done with it. But the words of his granduncle Okapi’s prophecy lingered in the back of his mind. Maybe Okapi was correct. Maybe Gaan-lea indeed had a plan for him. His faith in Gaan-lea’s purpose compelled him to accept whatever challenges lay ahead. He relaxed and lowered his weapon.

“Come inside, we will talk more,” he said, calmly turning his back he continued walking in the direction of his house.

That took me completely by surprise. I thought for sure my explanation was unsuccessful and I was going to have to shoot him before he shot me.

His large house was solidly built out of stone and bone. It had a sod and cross-timbered roof and deep-set windows. There was a porch made of wood and bone that ran across the front and east sides. It was much larger than one would build for themselves. At one time his whole Clan must have lived there. Once inside he escorted me into an expansive cooking area, retrieved a jug and two clay mugs from a shelf, and said, “Sit, tell me more of your truth.”

I pulled up a chair to a long table constructed of large bones with a surface that had been honed and polished flat. Sitting across from me Grandè Feht opened the corked jug and poured two tall drinks, sliding one across the table to me and asked, “What of this threat to Naah?”

“I’ve told you all I know. There is an alien being who has the ability to shape-shift and will likely cause a change in the beliefs of Naah beings. He is here in the Naah Realm and is planning some sort of alteration to your society.”

Grandè Feht thought for a moment, “What does that have to do with me?”

“You are Naah, do you want some evil being taking control of your realm?”

Grandè Feht was silent. He took a long swig from his mug and said, “There is a

constant struggle between those who wish to control the lives of other beings for their own benefit, and those who wish to see others free so they may fulfill their destiny. Which are you?"

"Unquestionably on the side of individual freedom. I seek no power over Naah or anyone else."

"Don't those who make up your mysterious group want power over Naah? Isn't that why they sent you?"

"No, I don't believe they do. Not if they sent me to stop the one who does. And if I thought they did, I wouldn't have come."

"Do your beliefs reside with this group because they have become your Gods? Is your faith bestowed in them?"

Well now, that was an interesting question. One I hadn't thought of. On second thought maybe honesty isn't the best policy after all. Had the U.O.H. become Gods to me?

"They are not Gods nor do I believe them to be my God. As I said I am a heuristic rationalist. I have no God."

"Then why do you believe in the righteousness of your mysterious protectors?"

"I don't have a reasonable answer to that question. They have only asked that I help others and have harmed no one that I know of. To be honest, I don't fully trust them. And I don't consider them a bunch of deities. My beliefs derive from where I was born and raised, enhanced by my life experiences."

"And you were raised on Earth?" he asked.

"Yes, I am Earthling born and raised. You see, most of the evolution of humans on planet Earth began with tribes that turned into territories we call countries. These countries were usually ruled by strong and many times greedy humans with different ideas on the type of governing needed for their growing societies. Over time we had many wars between those supporters of the various governing ideas."

"You said before that Earth fought wars because it had many Gods. Now you say there were many wars for power. With so many reasons for war, Earthlings must take pride in the death of other earthlings."

"Hmm, it would seem that way without knowing the details. Most humans actually dislike war, but they also want respect for their families, their country, their God, and their method of reaching Utopia. Unlike many other beings I have

encountered, humans are a complex species. You see, we human beings are the only creatures I have come across that can justify killing each other as proof of their humanity.”

“Complex and plainly dangerous. It is evident that a Naah is justified in legally executing any corrupt human. What is the name of the territory you come from and which God did it follow?”

“Justified? Not from my vantage point. Anyway, I come from a country called America. The longest surviving Republic based on liberty of the individual in Earth’s history. The humans in my country are bound together by a love of equality that coincides with advancement, enlightenment, education, individual rights, and the rule of judiciary law.”

“Those sound very much like religious tenets. Did this America succeed because it had one God-like Naah? Is that why it has survived?”

“Maybe what makes it unique is it has no singular God. It has survived because the humans in the American Republic learned to live peacefully believing in all Gods. Look Grandè Feht, I’m asking you to help your fellow Naah beings, that’s all.”

“For your U.O.H. Gods?” Grandè Feht questions.

“No, for your God, Gaan-lea,” I say bluntly. “Have you never questioned his teachings?”

Grandè Feht did not answer immediately. I could sense he was weighing whether to get too friendly with an untrustworthy stranger from another planet.

“In my lifetime I have only questioned Gaan-lea once. It was the morning I spent looking down at the parallel graves of my entire family. I asked him one question. Why were they taken and not me? Yet Gaan-lea’s voice was silent. I lost faith for one quick instance. Then I remembered my Great Grand Uncle Okapi’s words. He once told me that Gaan-lea is not summoned when you think you need him, he becomes evident when he knows your faith is strong during arduous times. That is when he will help you.”

“And has he helped you since that time?”

“Yes, Gaan-lea helped me understand the innate virtue inside all Naah.”

Suddenly there were roars and bellowing coming from outside. It was obvious his herd of beebyu beasts were upset and making the noise. For some reason, the beasts had become enraged. Grandè Feht pushed away from the table, stood, and calmly walked to the doorway, with me following close behind. We stepped out onto the porch where we could see the commotion going on in the corral. Two of

the beasts were head-butting each other while the rest stomped around excitedly. The two that were fighting would rise up and attack with a crashing head-butt then let out a thundering howl. Reaching inside his coat he withdrew a small sticklike object put it to his lips and began to play.

From his instrument came three shrill notes followed by a sweet soft refrain that filled the air. The high-pitched melody pierced through the noise of the howling beasts and they immediately stopped fighting. As he played the two that were fighting suddenly became quiet and simply stared at each other. The rest of the herd slowly grew calm and serene. Gradually each of them made their way to the feeding trough and started to nibble at their fodder.

Immediately the light bulb in my head went as bright as a sun. So this is the power the U.O.H. said Gwin-o'guin Feht held. That power was psychological control through the music produced by his little flute. So that is why I went through all that torture with Noiiz. But controlling the beebyu beasts and controlling living, thinking beings must certainly be more complex. I stared captivated at what I had just seen as the implications and conjectures swirled through my mind.

Grandè Feht turned indifferently and began to return to the house. He paused when he saw the expression on my face and asked, “Is there something wrong?”

I must tread lightly here I thought. “No, it’s just that I’ve never seen anything like that before. You are a very talented player. What kind of instrument is that?”

Grandè Feht was proud of his jongee. He respected its heritage and held fond memories of who had given it to him. It was his finest possession. He was also not a fool. He knew of the power it held and the potential for that power to be used in corrupt ways.

“It is a jongee, presented to me by an ancestor.”

“You play it very well. Do all breeders play this jongee to calm the beasts,” I asked.

“No.” Grandè Feht said bluntly. Seemingly wanting to break off any further discussion.

Finally, I have a sense of a means to stop Sanduval Mule. Determining exactly how is still a question, but Feht’s talent for playing his jongee flute must be part of the answer. Of course, there is also the difficulty in convincing this Feht guy that he must use his talent to save Naah. An obstacle that, at this point, seems insurmountable.

The ugly truth is those non-humans who tried to kill this Feht guy must have been

sent by Sanduval Mule. There are no other explanations at this point. It's obvious he has foreseen the future and realized that Gwin-o'guin Feht is the only Naah being that could disrupt his scheme. This also means he's probably not aware that I am here or he would have sent more killers or come himself. He will undoubtedly try again so I'll have to anticipate it and be prepared. Another thing, where did these non-humans come from? This whole operation is getting more convoluted. I need to come up with a strategy. A feasible strategy. I wish Vienna was here, her assessment and analytical abilities are much more thorough than mine.

Chapter 23 - Sweet Dreams Baby...

When Euris entered the Chamber of Life he instinctively and silently strolled to a white stone table. He stood quietly, arms behind his back grasping his wrists, staying away from the action in the delivery area.

The Chamber of Life is round, clean, and pure white with two enormous sparkling white stones positioned just outside a glowing blue circle in the center. Inside the circle was an enormous floating holograph of J'nus suspended in space as if he were standing there in person. Located on one side of the room was a hospital bed where a female Theta lay accompanied by three medical technicians wearing pristine white robes. She was in the berthing position, her legs open, bent at the knee, her feet in stirrups. One of the technicians was in the delivery position with both hands under the white sheet covering the female. The other two stood on each side of the expectant mother.

The technician on the left was wiping the perspiration from the expectant mother's forehead. On the right, another technician busily instructed the mother.

“Breathe... breathe... push... push... that's it, push again... harder... very good, here it comes.”

Taking several short breaths the expectant mother gives a final push and the baby was born. Next came the sound of the first full-throated cry of a newborn. The delivery technician snipped the umbilical cord and attached a clip on the end attached to the newborn. She handed the newborn to the technician on the left who gently places the child on the mother's breast. Smiling broadly the new mother speaks softly and comforts the child lovingly until it stops crying. Moments later the mother kisses her new child and hands it back to the technician. The proud mother lies back and sighs with relief, her beautiful long red hair flowing down the bedding as she watches and waits.

The technician delicately carries the newborn across the room and gently hands it to Euris. He cradles the baby in his arms and turns it around inspecting its naked body. On each of the baby's upper shoulders are two small red markings. With one hand he held the newborn close to his chest. With the other, he pours warm water into a silver tub. Using both hands Euris tenderly lowers the newborn into the bath. As he does he chants, “I convert you with this fluid, he who comes after will make you his.” When the baby is placed into the warm water it kicks, splashes, and giggles with joy.

Another technician hands Euris a small cylinder with two pointed ends. In one motion he simultaneously injects a small amount of green gel into the left and right shoulders of the newborn, just above the red marks. The newborn produces a faint whimper and then resumes his enjoyment of the warm bath. Another smaller

instrument is handed to Euris and he injects a microchip into the infant's upper thigh. Again the infant only lets out a slight whine and Euris tenderly massaged the leg muscle. After several minutes of soaking Euris cleverly wipes the infant dry and covers its naked body with a brightly colored cloth. Smiling, he kisses it on the forehead.

Once more cradling the newborn Euris walks towards the two towering white stones in the middle of the room. With outstretched arms he holds the infant high in the air, presenting the newborn child to the hologram as he says, "J'nus, we offer you another miracle of your creation."

In a mystic proclamation, the hologram speaks, "A pristine Theta to enhance our collective conscientiousness." The baby giggles and one hand reaches for the hologram. "Rejoice, the journey of this new existence has now begun."

Euris smiles proudly and again hands the newborn Theta child to one of the technicians. The technician cozily holds it close to her bosom as they slowly walked toward a door on a far wall. When the door slides open a long pale blue-colored room could be seen. On the interior of the dimly lit room were several glass cylinders lined up in an orderly fashion. Inside the soft glow of the cylinders lay sleeping infants cocooned in brightly colored cloth. An attending technician stood close by each cylinder quietly waiting to cater to the infants' every need. The echo of soft, gentle music whispered from the room.

The mother looked up with a joyful expression on her face. She weakly waves a hand as her newborn vanishes into the room, the door silently sliding shut behind them.

Chapter 24 - Somewhere from There...

A community of voices echoed in Vienna's head. Her eyes droop, half-open. She is unable to move or see clearly. All she could make out were dark gray shadows. She tried to speak but no sound would come. A silhouette moved nearer and she felt the stab of another injection thrust into her neck. Three or four shadows softly murmured in an unintelligible conversation amongst themselves while the drumbeat of booted footsteps paced back and forth. The mumbling sounds stopped and the footsteps became distant. The next sound she heard was the noisy clang of a metal door slamming shut.

Vienna was engulfed in a trance, fading in and out of consciousness. When she became partially lucid her initial thought was to wonder how long she had been held captive. Vaguely she remembered being stuck in the neck at least twice. Whenever she tried to hold on to consciousness her mind would melt away, back into the oblivion of drug-induced darkness. She remembered mental probes attempting to enter her mind, but her psyche was too strong. Pu-illeo's instruction on how to repel psychological attacks and intimidation had worked well. Her training had worked even though she was drugged. Each time her mind struggled for clarity she would move farther away from unconscious limbo.

Time passed until Vienna's consciousness slowly returned. She was unsure if she had awoken because the drugs had worn off or been prodded awake by her mental determination. Either way, she would embrace it. She was weak and disorientated, wringing wet with perspiration. Her head throbbed with pain. The air was heavy with oppressive heat and numerous horrid smells. The choking smells were a gruesome combination of stale blood, perspiration, and dozens of odors she'd never smelled before and hoped never to experience again. With an immense effort, she struggled to set erect. Painfully twisting her body to the edge of the bed she tried to feel the floor with her feet. Barely able to touch the ground she sat powerless, unable to go any further.

A moment later she realized she no longer wore her bracelet or ring. The feeling of dread filled the pit of her stomach. Her drug-addled mind began to turn over the possibilities. None were pleasant. There was no telling how long she had been in this place. One thing she was sure of, her captors wanted her alive or she wouldn't be. For what reason was unknown.

Wherever she was, it was hot and depressingly dark. The crack beneath the door let in little air and less light. Fear began to rise as she realized this may be her end. In the back of her mind, she recalled CW's guidance, "use the fear..."

In response, her mind reacted and strained to focus her dreamlike thoughts. She still had choices, she told herself. She could either give up to a slow solitary death on a world far from home or do whatever possible to survive. Her character would

not accept being a victim. The only decision she could make was to fight to survive. Her life wasn't going to end here, she thought, not like this.

Achingly she groped around the pockets of her Jyotti suit and found Elys' ring. Apparently, when they searched her they found his bracelet but didn't find the ring. Replacing it, she thought, finally some good news. She needed the slightest hint of something positive if she was to sustain the necessary hope required to survive. The oppressive heat caused her mind to begin to fade as if she was starved of oxygen. But her scrappy nature fought back. *Focus*, she thought. She inhaled deep, the hot air burned her lungs. She couldn't wait any longer, she told herself, she had to get off her ass and fight the drugs.

Taking another breath she eased herself up on the bed and slid forward until her feet touched the ground. Still unsteady, she held onto the bed's headboard for support and stood upright for several seconds before slumping onto the dirt floor. She laid still trying to regain her strength. Slowly she raised herself to a sitting position.

Without warning the screeching sound of steel against steel echoed within the room. A moment later there was a thunderous crash as the door swung open and collided with the wall. The startling blaze of light entering the room momentarily blinded her. Blinking several times, Vienna tried to comprehend what her eyes were seeing. Finally, she was able to make out the silhouette of a towering figure standing in the doorway.

Little by little her sight improved. The figure in the doorway was taller than her, and immense. Probably three times her weight. The glancing rays of light allowed her to see the being had ruffled red hair but shadows framed its unfamiliar face. The garments he wore were peculiar. His entire body was hidden from view. It was wrapped in an all-encompassing gray cloak that nearly touch the floor.

Vienna froze and glared at the stranger with disdain. If this alien was to be the last thing she would ever see before retiring from this life, she thought, she wanted to face death with courage. Defiantly she continued her glare and gave a feisty upward head nod. Robbed of her strength, she swallowed hard, clenched her teeth and pulled herself away from the bed then struggled to her feet. Wincing in pain she pitched forward as the ground beneath her slipped away and she again fell to the floor.

Curiously the stranger moved closer and helped her to her feet. Vienna was now able to get a closer look at the stranger's chiseled facial features. When he smiled his crystal blue eyes told her he was not a threat. In a gravelly voice, he said, "I will help you walk."

The stranger helped her to her feet, but after a few steps, her body again crumbled. When the stranger caught her he calmly said, "Let me carry you."

With massive hands, he picked her up and placed her in his arms. All she could do was put both arms around his thick neck and hold on tight. Oddly she could smell clover. The stranger quickly made his way out of the room, turned down a hallway, around a corner, through another doorway, and out into an open space.

Once outside the stranger took two huge steps and leaped as if to jump over something. Vienna felt the wind suck passed her and heard a fluttering sound as his long gray cloak turned into wings. Another lung and they were in the air.

Startled, she realized they were getting higher and instinctively huddled close against the stranger, holding on even tighter. When she looked down she could see they were flying above a misty forest with just the treetops peeking out of the mist. As they flew the ground kept getting further and further away. When turned her head again she saw they were headed toward the rough uneven cliffs of a rugged mountain range

“Where are you taking me,” she asked weakly

“Away from the malignant ones, to true Mogrif Territory,” he explained.

Vienna held on to her rescuer as tight as her weak muscles would allow. They continued to fly higher and higher. The higher they flew the colder the air became, chilling Vienna to the bone. Leveling off for a moment they suddenly turned right, dipped, and dove, their velocity increasing as they dropped. Catching an upward draft their descent slowed until they abruptly turned and headed straight toward a mountain of rusty red cliffs. Vienna’s heart was pounding. She gasped and closed her eyes as they soared through an entrance hidden to the naked eye, and into a large cave. The cave turned into a corridor with pale reddish-orange walls stretching as far as she could see. They continued their flight down the passage until finally a light could be seen just ahead. They were deep within the mountain lair of the tremendously fortified, superlatively armed fortress of the home of the last of the true Mogrif.

When the light grew stronger they entered a large chamber. Gradually slowing, her rescuer’s body stabilized and became vertical, the steady rhythm of his undulating wings kept them almost stationary. They hovered in place for a moment then the stranger took three giant steps and gracefully landed on solid ground.

“Are you strong enough to stand?” the stranger asked.

“Yes, I think so,” Vienna replied.

She was still a little unstable but strong enough to stand on her own. Remaining motionless for a moment she gathered her strength. The cold caused her body to

shiver. The stranger opened a wing and wrapped it around her trying to keep her warm.

“This way,” he said, giving her a slight nudge.

As they walked Vienna asked, “Who are you?”

“Answers will come soon,” he replied.

The stranger guided her across the cavern where they had landed. They made their way along a pathway and up some stairs toward a thick wooden door. As they approached, the door silently slid sideways and opened. Once through the doorway, they entered a brightly lit room with numerous flickering blue computer displays hanging on the walls. The light from the screens gave the area a haunting feel. Off to one side, several beings were gathered together.

With her rescuer’s help, they slowly approached the group of five or six obvious Theta beings. Each appeared to be wearing long flowing capes, which, she assumed, were in reality their wings. No one was talking. It was evident that the larger being of the group was the one in charge. His broad width was covered with a dark slate cape that glimmered bluish hues when he turned to face them. Long disheveled crimson hair filled his head. His eyes were a deep sapphire blue. His face was weather-beaten and lined with age. When he spoke his voice was a throaty whisper.

“Jokul, you found her. Very good.”

“Who are you?” Vienna weakly asked.

She wondered what evolutionary path caused these airborne human-like beings to develop their wings. Calling to mind that in some of Earth’s historical past, these flying beings could very easily have been mistaken for angels.

“I am Thrufi, Sachem of the Synods, the one who assisted you is my nephew Jokul,” with a hand motion he said, “These are members of the Synods. The elders of the Synod Mogrifs.”

Vienna stared in silence. Confusion filled her still-medicated mind. “Ah.. glad to meet you. I’m Vienna,” she said in a dry voice, then feigned a smile on her face.

“Would you like something to drink”, Jokul asked. handing her a glass mug.

“Yes, thank you,” Vienna replied. Taking the mug, quenching her thirst with the cool water.

“It’s not every day we meet such a strong female like yourself,” Thrufi admits.

“Thank you,” Vienna says. “What did you say you were?” she asked, in an inquisitive yet pleasing tone.

“We are Mogrifs. We have resided on Theta since the beginning of time. We are the original inhabitants.”

“I am confused,” she admitted, “who are those beings in the cities? Are they not Theta beings?”

“Yes Vienna, they too are Theta.”

“I don’t understand.”

“That is to be expected. Before I continue, we must know of your origin. It is evident you are not Theta. Your pheromones make this fact quite clear.”

Vienna knew she was trapped. These flying Theta beings had saved her from Euris and whomever he worked for, probably J’nus, but she may still be in deep trouble. She had to explain or she might never retrieve her bracelet and ring. Without them, there would be no possibility of her returning to Earth. She needed to keep her spirits high. Her substance had to be tough, personal, yet truthful if she wanted their help. In measured yet proud tones she said, “You are right. I am not Theta, I’m from the planet Earth.”

“For what reason are you here?” Thrufi questions.

Vienna hesitated as she considered how to answer. “I discovered an alien being on my planet, who turned out to be from Theta. He said he reported to someone named J’nus,” she explained. “I came to Theta to make sense of why this J’nus being was sending someone from here to my home planet.”

“I assume this being was a Walker?” he challenged.

“Walker?” Vienna asks in a questioning tone. “Yes, I suppose so. He did not have wings if that’s what you mean. Do you separate Theta beings in that fashion?”

Without answering Thrufi asks, “It is our understanding that you possess one of the JAR devices. Where did you get it?”

“I took it from the Theta being on Earth.”

“Where is that Theta now?”

“He’s dead,” Vienna says bluntly.

“Did *you* kill him?” Thrufi asks in an aggressive voice.

“No, of course not,” she proclaimed innocently. But I would have if I needed to, she thought to herself.

“What happened to him?”

“He was somehow killed because he didn’t communicate on the JAR device on time. I secured the device as he died.”

“Did you obtain his path implements as well?”

“Yes, I took them from him before he died, but I no longer have them. They were taken from me after I was drugged,” Vienna admitted.

Thrufi paused. No one else spoke. Vienna could sense their distaste for what they were hearing. An uneasy silence filled the air as the moments passed before Thrufi continued his probing questions.

“Did you use the path implements to travel to Theta?”

Vienna again hesitated, She had to consider the implications of answering truthfully. Gradually her expression turned to resolve, “No,” she says plainly.

“Then how did you get to Theta?”

Vienna was reluctant to answer. Still, she wanted to be honest with these beings but knew she couldn’t tell them too much. In a humble tone, she said, “I had my own.”

“Your own path implements?” Thrufi asked skeptically.

“Yes. They are my personal implements and have nothing to do with J'nus,” she explains. “They were also taken from me, can you help me get them back?”

Thrufi looks startled. He and those he called the Synods exchanged questioning glances. Two of them looked her way, their icy steel-gray eyes glaring at her. They huddle in council, speaking quietly for several minutes until Vienna finally remarked, “I’ve told you what you asked, now will you explain why you helped me?”

Turning away from the Synods Thrufi answered, “We were informed that a non-Theta being was making inquires about J'nus. One of our scouts observed you being taken into their encampment. Following your capture and imprisonment, we decided it was in our best interest to secure your safety. Your path implements, how did you come by them?”

“I’d like to keep that to myself,” Vienna said in an unquestioning tone.

“I see. Yet you desire that we help you retrieve them.”

“Yes, if you would be so kind. I would like your help,” she pleaded with a smile and pleasing tone.

“For what purpose?”

“So I can return to Earth. Without them, I will be isolated here.”

In a dull emotionless voice, Thrufi asks, “Why do you assume we would help you return?”

Stunned, the forced smile ran from her face. She could only stare blankly. She had no words. In the back of her mind, she wondered what she had gotten herself into. Maybe there was a way, she thought.

“Is there any way I can help you so that you can help me,” she asked.

“What do you mean? There is nothing you have that would be of any benefit to us.”

“Then why did you take me from them? Why do you think the J'nus followers wanted me and kept me alive in the first place? They must think I am either important or a danger to them, or they would have simply killed me.”

“We may simply eliminate you and be done,” Thrufi says without emotion.

“Look, I don’t want to die here, I’m *sure* I can be of some assistance in some way. Tell me why you hide and why you’re not part of the J'nus sect. Why are there two separate kinds of Theta?”

“It has crossed our minds that you could be a collaborator for J'nus. That you were imprisoned as bait to draw us out and locate our refuge.”

“Ask...” Vienna turned and looked at Jokul “What was your name again,”

“Jokul,” he says with a slight smile.

“Yeah, Jokul... ask Jokul if he thinks I was faking being drugged or not knowing anything about you folks,” Vienna argues.

Jokul does not speak. He simply looked at Thrufi and gave a side-head shrug.

Thrufi glanced at the Synods for approval, then calmly declares, “We need not

press on with this matter. Jokul, show Vienna to a room so she may refresh herself, and allow her something to eat.”

He turned and looked directly at Vienna with an unbending stare, “We will continue when your strength and reason are restored.”

Chapter 25 - What's Goin' On...

As the dual suns of Naah rose over the capital city of Gulway, the faint glimmer of the first sun, Hyoni - the furthest from the planet - caused a crimson glow to encircle the crystalline stone shrine to Gaan-lea. Several seconds later the radiant glow of the second sun, Hmoni, began to rise and the monument embarked on the daily event of casting its impressive shadow.

Several moments pass and the shadow gradually lengthens down the Oyarsa Promenade until it touches an imposing building of rock, steel, and glass. The building, referred to as the Deitas, is the seat of the Naah Republic's governing consortium. Situated on the uppermost floor of the Deitas were the offices of the Prime. The floor below housed the expansive assembly areas for the various factions of the Liberty League. To the right of the structure was a hedge-lined garden filled with various colored flora boarding a green walkway leading to the monolithic Imperial Magistra, the building where the 39 members of the Judicature Supreme deliberated.

Inside the plush office of Prime JuJu Ghar, his head of staff, Roaf Ogygia, one of many advisors, was seated at the enormous wooden conference table giving his daily report.

“Have you seen the recent broadcasts? Over the last ten dags, there have been eight bombings of government buildings, four on Ovik, and two each on Grau and Bhut. There have also been six riots from the daily protests on Naah. These anarchist agents are chanting for “equal justice” while demanding an uprising against those they consider the “elite profiteers.” Our intel indicates these disturbances are being mounted by several groups associated with Saalva Lanski. These radicals are a danger to our society.

Also, twenty dags ago on Ovik, an unexpected political movement began from an unknown challenger named Tyrik Guebr. Everyone who has read his opinion articles or heard him speak has been impressed. Many of those who hear him are convinced he is Naah's savior. Our selection campaign is becoming a challenge.”

Feeg Eutal, JuJu Ghar's Consul of Patrons, was seated at the table two places down, “Challenge is a mild appraisal,” he said sarcastically. “The disturbances are growing. There is potential for this unrest to become a disaster for our campaign. Every dag the journos' reports include ominous claims against the Clans and the Directors. They are being vilified and portrayed as greedy and intolerant. The publicity respecting the Directors is no longer about ideas or policies, they have become attacks on their character. In many cases, their operations are sustaining significant damage from the actions of these radicals. We are beginning to see a slight reduction in our funding support. It is time we crack down on this rabble.”

Sling Bunpik, JuJu Ghar's Security Consul, entered through a frosted glass door separating the main conference room from a private entrance. He strolls across the room, silently pulls out a chair, takes his place at the table, and immediately speaks up, "It would be a mistake, at this time, to go all military on them."

Prime JuJu Ghar sat at the head of the long table seemingly engrossed in his terminal display, calmly listening to the discussion of his advisors. His stately appearance; clear jade-green eyes, impressive graying mane, tall stature, and resolute faith in Gaan-lea, made him appear both stately and photogenically attractive. In previous selections, his knowledge of the issues and persuasive verbal skills had afforded him an intimate bond with the public. His professional background as a staunch capitalist and his love of individual liberty had given him unique practical knowledge. His principles of limited governing drove his policies which had increased the chances for prosperity for the masses.

During the Merchant Wars JuJu Ghar had led the Clans during their fight against the marauding tribes and remnants of the Wisdom Keepers. He had personally taken the lives of many misguided Naah and was instrumental in establishing the Liberty League. At the end of the war, the public had selected him as Prime by a large margin.

Since those turbulent times, he had seen similar events in the course of prior selection periods. As the first Prime of this new Republic he had smothered previous social upheavals when they threatened peace, but this time the opposition was different. They seemed more ambitious, more widespread, more lawless, more menacing, and more anti-individual liberty. His first inclination was to go on offense, but that would have proved nothing. It would alienate the public and further discourage his supporters.

Looking up from his display, "No, that would be a strategic mistake. It is exactly what is expected of us. We cannot allow these instigators to drive our policies or our campaign. Any hostile actions from us will simply play into their hands."

"But our support is wavering, even being diminished," says Feeg Eutal.

"Yes, these events are making our operations more difficult. The journos have always shaped their message against our faith in individual liberty," JuJu Ghar agrees, "but if Gaan-lea determines it is our destiny to lose this selection, so be it. I will not be the cause of bringing harm to any innocent Naah. Sling, do you have any new information about the attacks or these extremists?"

"Our operative on Bhut identified a Saalva Lanski underling as the coordinator of their disturbances. Someone named Bucha Hyminie. His followers are weak and easily persuaded into the collectivist ideology. Destruction and vandalism are their weapons of choice. Other than that there is nothing new, but I am not troubled. I have agents within most of these groups. All of our agents are on operational alert, they will uncover more."

“Sling, what is your opinion on the increase in violent protests and the selection challenge from this Guebr fellow? Is it a coincidence they are happening simultaneously?” JuJu asked.

“Our intelligence analysts have thought for some time that the Guebr promoters and these terrorists had covertly joined forces,” Sling responded.

“If so it is proof that we can no longer wait, something must be done,” Feeg Eutal insists.

With a tempered voice JuJu Ghar orders, “You are right, Feeg, but we must be smart with our response. Roaf, I want you and Sling to work together to find out who the hell this Guebr guy is and who is backing him. Sling, keep me posted on what you find out from your operatives. I need some answers. Feeg, call a meeting with the Clan Lords to take place here in three dags. I want to hear what they have to say about all this.”

Without hesitation the advisors scurry off to execute their new orders, leaving JuJu Ghar alone. Several taps to the display showed a communiqué from a private agency he had hired countless cycles ago to find his infant son who had gone missing during the Merchant Wars. His optimism surged until he read they were still questioning witnesses and suspects in the area of his last known location. After a discouraging sigh, JuJu Ghar stood, turned, and calmly strolled to his private quarters. Once inside he entered a small quiet space where he offered a daily devotion to Gaan-lea. Crouching to his knees he placed his hands, palms down, on top of his thighs, looked fixedly at the small statue of Gaan-lea, and recited a prayer; “Gaan-lea, I open my life to you. I can do all things through you. May your words give me clarity. May the light of your words usher me to the truth. Remove this cloak of uncertainty that clouds my thoughts. Strengthen my troubled heart and mind. Help me find inspiration in the faith and truth of your sacred words.”

Chapter 26 - What'Cha Got Cookin' ...

My stomach let out a loud growling reminder that I hadn't eaten since yesterday. "Hey, Grandè Feht, do you have anything good to eat?" I asked.

"As a visitor, you are quite demanding," he replied stoically.

This guy sure can be snarky at times, I thought to myself. In my opinion, that's a virtuous characteristic. It must come from his Irish-Scottish heritage, I muse.

Grandè Feht opened the door of a tall storage cupboard, grabbed a large pot, and placed it into a square box sitting on the counter. Three seconds after touching a display on its surface he removed the steaming pot. The box made no noise, as a microwave oven would have, so it must be another type of food-heating device. The odor of hot food filled the room causing my stomach to growl again. I didn't really care how the food got hot, just that I was going to eat.

"Get some bowls from that shelf," he ordered, pointing to an open shelf where a collection of plates, bowls, and cups were stacked. I got two large bowls and set them on the table. Grandè Feht placed the large steaming pot in the middle of the table, turned, and collected from a drawer a long wooden ladle and two smaller spoons carved out of bone. Using the ladle he scooped out and filled a bowl with what looked like a stew. Handed it to me and filled another for himself.

We sat facing each other at either end of the long table. I picked up my spoon and started to take a bite just as Grandè Feht looked at me with a stern glare. I put the spoon down and waited. Grandè Feht bowed his head and prayed: "Thank you Gaan-lea for giving us another dag to honor your words. We treasure the life of that which we consume. Inspire this human to know your grace." Raising his head he nodded, giving me permission to continue.

"What is this?" I asked.

"It is braised beebyu, fhang, and pypoo. We call it Gusada."

"Fhang? What is that?" I asked uneasily.

"Fhang is a root-like pypoo, do not worry it will not harm you."

It was my first meal of beebyu and root stew. It wasn't the best stew I'd ever eaten but fairly tasty with the musty flavor of spoiled beef and fermented licorice. Surprisingly the food grew more appealing the more I consumed. As we ate I again tried to start a conversation.

“Can you tell me more about this flute you play, that jongee thing?” I asked.

“No.” Grandè Feht said bluntly.

The wrong course of action, I thought to myself. He’s not involved in the politics of Naah so no discussion of that. He’s not interested in talking about the beebyu, but then again, neither was I. I was eating one. He seems to enjoy talking about his God maybe that will get a conversation going, so I said, “Okay, how about telling me more about Gaan-lea.”

Grandè Feht looked at me with a questioning expression and says, “Are you honestly interested in Gaan-lea, or are you looking for ways to malign me or my faith?”

“I would never find fault with anyone’s faith in their deity. I am simply trying to understand more about you and Naah.”

Grandè Feht waited a few moments before continuing. “Gaan-lea defines right from wrong and helps us fulfill our destiny. Maybe he will help you fulfill yours,” he says bluntly.

Trying not to be insulting I replied, “Anything is possible, although Gaan-lea may have a hard time finding my inner spirit.”

“His spirit lives within us all. His words are universal for all living things.”

Hesitating for a moment I wondered if I should continue with this talk of religious belief. But I had to get him to open up so I can find out more about this talent of his.

“Please understand, I am not trying to insult you or your religion. If you remember I told you that I'm an empiric rationalist. To me, the universe has no specific meaning or a supreme being. It is completely understandable that most living beings need a belief to follow. A way to explain all that is around them. To think that reality has to *mean* something.

In fact, those beliefs affect the reality of those who believe in them. They organize themselves in support of their loyalty to a belief. In doing so they invent rules that direct how they must live their lives. If they follow these rules they will reach a sort of peaceful nirvana. If they do not conform, they are damned.

This is a perfectly logical and natural endeavor for intelligent beings of all forms. And those who need and receive such reassurance through their beliefs are better beings for it. One fact remains absolute, the beings who truly believe will never have complete knowledge of the truth of their faith until death.”

“You are indeed a sad human if that is what you honestly believe. Your skepticism

has hindered you from the privilege of acceptance of the value of faith. There must be an explanation for all things, for all life,” Grandè Feht insisted.

“Your opinion of me may be true. But in my mind, things can simply exist without a need for a logical explanation or the belief in an omniscient deity. I’m sure playing the jongee requires a certain natural talent. I suppose it was Gaan-lea that bestowed upon you the talent and ability to play your jongee?”

Grandè Feht gave me another stern look. He took two more bites of his stew before answering, “Yes, Gaan-lea gave me my *talent* for the jongee, yet much of it occurred over time.”

“I’m sure it did. Didn’t Gaan-lea also give you that time? So in a way, he gave you the talent and the time to perfect your playing,” I reasoned.

Grandè Feht pondered for a moment, “Your logic is curious for one who is irreverent. Obviously, you are intrigued with the jongee, so I will tell you all you need to know. The jongee is an instrument for spiritual enlightenment. It has been a part of our tenet for more than ten thousand cycles. The jongee is a gift from Gaan-lea. It is used to praise him, to teach by use of parables to further his moral words and celebrate his return. At one time there were many clerics who performed jongee prayers in reverence to Gaan-lea. They have all passed. I first learned jongee melodies from my ancestor. He was the last rector of the jongee. I received my jongee as a gift from him. After my family perished, with the help of Gaan-lea, I constructed many new melodies. Does that satisfy your curiosity?”

“Yes, that was very helpful.”

“Then no more will be said about it. There is no magic here,” Grandè Feht proclaimed.

“I agree, there is no magic. But there is strength and ability. The strength to perfect your playing and the ability to sway the psyche of the beebyu. I would guess you also have the ability to sway the psyche of beings.”

Grandè Feht was silent for a very long time. I could sense he was both agitated and reflective. He obviously knew the power of the jongee. I could understand why he was hesitant to admit it to a stranger from another planet.

He was about to speak when there came a muffled roar from the beebyu. The sound made him stiffen in anticipation. He silently placed his hand on my forearm and said, “Someone is near.”

Quickly downing his drink he stood, walked to a cabinet, and retrieved an odd-looking rifle wrapped in dingy cloth. “Do you need a weapon?” he asked, then gave me a never-mind look.

Without speaking we slyly watched out the window facing the road that passed to the west of his house. He stared for several moments, motioned to me, and pointed. At first, I couldn't see clearly what he was pointing at. The plants on each side of the road swayed with the breeze, a moment later I noticed several plants move against the direction of the others. That's when I saw a reflection, a quick sparkle of light just above ground level. The road was no longer silent. There was one Naah being walking along the edge, no, to be more precise there were six Naah approaching riding in a hover-car driven down the middle of the road.

I put my hand in my pocket and touched the iJotter, focused my thoughts, and commanded my Craft to switch into stealth mode and to raise to treetop height.

Effortlessly, he said, "The Zarna Clan. Neighbors returning from market."

Grandè Feht put his rifle back into the cabinet. I followed as he walked to the front door and stepped outside onto the porch. Both of us stood there waiting for the group to arrive. They were typical-looking Naah beings, none of them stood out as exceptional. Their hovercar came to a jolting stop in front of us. It still wasn't obvious who the Clan elder was but it soon became apparent. He was the chunky one riding in the backseat. The one who puffed out his chest and was the first to speak.

"Gwin, how are you?" He yelled.

"Very well Smrgo, please enter. The road is long, would you and your Clan care for refreshments?"

"Indeed," he said motioning to the others, "come enjoy Gwin's hospitality."

The rest of the Clan enthusiastically leaped onto the porch and went into the house directly to the cooking area. They each poured themselves a mug of pypoo juice. Grandè Feht waited for Smrgo to slowly walk up the steps. With their open left hand, they each touched their right shoulder in a friendly salute.

"I have never known you to befriend humans Gwin," Smrgo declared, "who is your visitor?"

"Forgive my lack of protocol," Grandè Feht requested, "Smrgo meet beast trader Muxk Eutal. Muxk meet Smrgo, friend, neighbor, and wise chieftain of the highly respected Zarna Clan."

"Are you trading your beasts outside of the Merchant Dome?" Smrgo asked suspiciously.

"I'm sure you would enjoy fewer competitors next season," Gwin mocked, "I

would not give you such relief.”

“I would expect nothing less of you,” Smrgo said with a laugh. “So tell me, beast trader, what are you and Gwin planning?”

“I am a new trader and was late and unprepared for beebyu trading this season. Grandè Feht has unselfishly agreed to help me further understand the beebyu beasts. I have many customers, so hopefully, with his kind teachings, I will be better prepared next season,” I explained.

“You must be prepared with a heavy purse, his beasts fetch the highest of prices.”

“And rightfully so,” Gwin interjected, “my beasts are the fattest and their meat is more flavorful.”

“Indeed,” Smrgo agrees. “Have you received your summons to Gulway?”

“Summons, no. We just returned and I have not examined my dispatches. Who would summon me and for what reason?”

“Prime JuJu Ghar has summoned all Clan Lords to Gulway in three dags for a dialogue. I will be leaving tomorrow and take an overnight stop in Sasaloo.”

“A dialogue on what subject?” Gwin asked.

“True to form for you Gwin, you are not aware of what is happening around you. Not of the dissent that has grown throughout the realm nor, I suppose, are you aware of Tyrik Guebr of Ovik?”

“You are correct, I have not heard of this Tyrik Guebr. What makes him important.”

“He is challenging JuJu Ghar in the upcoming selection for Prime. I have heard he speaks with the voice of Gaan-lea and his crowds are growing larger. I could never support him but obviously, JuJu is worried. I have also heard he has the support of the Nez Clan. At least that is the talk.”

“As I recall the entire Nez Clan was wiped out in the war.”

“That is so, I recall the same, but during war, information can be mistaken. The talk is that Kriibo Nez is backing him with substantial funds. Have you heard of this Kriibo Nez?”

“No. my only contact with anyone of the Nez Clan was in the battle at Moof Valley. It was in that battle my Clan was lost. I am sure the Nez Clan was completely decimated as well. Does not the monument in Gulway say the same?”

“Apparently not. Anyway, we can see the monument when we are there. Do you want to travel together tomorrow? This Guebr fellow is giving a speech in Sasaloo and I plan to attend. Merely to hear what he has to say, of course, then continue on to Gulway.”

“I always enjoy your gracious company Smrgo,” he said as he glanced at me, “but Muxk and I must return to Ghalua to retrieve my hover-wagons.”

I nodded my head in agreement.

“You will be at Gulway of course?” Smrgo asked.

“Of course. If Prime JuJu Ghar has requested our presence how could I not? Whatever his concern I am confident it is driven by what is best for Naah.”

“I will see you there. Come lads, we must be home by dark,” he ordered.

The Zarna Clan loaded themselves into the hovercar and continued on their journey.

After they had gone Grandè Feht stood with his back to the door. He had a strange unfamiliar look on his face. He was pensive, absorbed in thought - as if his mind was caught in a trap. Moments later he turned his head and looked at me just as a memory flickered in his mind. Something he was remembering. “I was there,” he said.

“What do you mean,” I asked as non-intrusive as possible.

“I was in the fight at Moof Valley. I was wounded and nearly met my death. I saw two of my cousins blown apart. I witnessed my many relatives being slaughtered by a vile caste of savages. While injured I held my uncle as he died. I also witnessed the violent death of all members of the Nez Clan at the hands of those butchers,” he described.

“One must have escaped,” I commented, “if what your friend Smrgo says is true.”

“That is not possible. In the end, only six Naah endured. None were of the Nez Clan.”

“Exactly what are you implying?” I asked.

“A significant string of factors unlikely to be coincidences. The being claiming to be of the Nez Clan is not probable. Which would bring into question the authenticity of this Tyrik Guebr.”

“Can’t it simply be politics? You know, money backing a guy you hope will be favorable to whatever your cause.”

“That is not the Naah way of politics.”

“If that’s the case, my thinking is that Sanduval Mule is trying to manipulate your political system and the outcome of your selection for his own purpose,” I reasoned.

“If what you have said is true, that would appear to be a possibility,” Grandè Feht agrees. “We must go to Sasaloo to observe and hear this Tyrik Guebr. We might meet the one calling himself Kriibo Nez. That is the only way to resolve my uncertainty.”

“That’s what we’ll do then,” I agree, “Let’s go, we can take my Craft and be there in no time.”

“Haste is not required. Tomorrow will be soon enough. That is when he will speak. Stay the night and we will travel to Sasaloo in the morning.”

“Then you are going to help me?” I suggested.

“Your conclusions for the scenario you described are not believable. I concur there is a level of uncertainty and I plan to inquire further. That is all.”

“That’s good enough for me. ... for now.”

Chapter 27 - Eyes Open, No fear...

Vienna was exhausted. After she had eaten a meal of some sort of vegetable soup and dry bread she was shown to a small sleeping quarters with a bathroom and single bed. The moment she laid down on the bed she immediately fell asleep, sleeping hard for ten hours.

Vienna gently drifted in and out of slumber until she slowly awoke. When she finally opened her eyes and looked around it took her a moment to remember where she was. After a muscular stretch, experiencing minimal pain during the effort, she realized her body had somewhat recovered.

Even so, her mind had not fully recuperated. During this whole experience, she had been able to successfully suppress her emotions. But now she was feeling depressed, which was unusual for her. Unsure if she was sad or angry her conflicting emotions made her want to laugh, scream and burst into tears all at the same time. She wasn't sure if she would ever get back to Earth or ever see CW again.

“Enough of this self-induced suffering,” she told herself, “you will not become a victim.”

Gathering her strength she sat up and promptly pulled up the hood of her Jyotti suit. Instantly the face shield slid closed, the suit sealed and automatically pressurized. Immediately turning into a sleek protective spacesuit. With a raspy voice, she commanded the suit to replay its visual record from the moment she arrived on Theta.

Watching the replay displayed on the visor she gave another voice command and fast-forwarded through the first hours to the moments just before being taken by surprise. The suit should have vibrated to give her an indication of danger. There was none. It hadn't detected any danger at all, which was odd. The suit had never missed potential danger before. As she watched from that point forward there were hours of blank visual records and no noticeable sound. Her vital signs suggested she was in a deep sleep. The drug she was given didn't register on the sensors monitoring her bloodstream. Tracking what little reliable visual record there was she was unable to identify any facial forms behind the dull blackness. The suit's time frame indicated she had been held in that room for three days before Jokul showed up. Its physical summary of her now said her vital signs were all well within normal range. Which made her feel a little better.

At least now she knew how long she had been on Theta, four days, and how long she had been held captive. Her next objective besides staying alive must be to convince these flying Theta folks to help her retrieve her bracelet and ring.

The door to her room suddenly slid open and Jokul stood in the doorway, “You do not need the protection of a spacesuit here,” he said.

Vienna gave the voice command to open the face shield and collapse the hood, curled her lips in a halfhearted smile, and said, “I was just testing it to make sure it was still in working order.”

“Understandable. Now that you are refreshed, Thrufi would like to continue.”

“Let me, huh, relieve myself first,” indicating she needs to use the toilet.

“Certainly, I will wait outside and escort you when you are ready,” Jokul said as he turned to leave.

“Do I need guarding?” Vienna asks indolently.

Jokul turned and smiled, “To show you the way Vienna. Thrufi does not want you to get lost in the caverns.”

“Oh!” was all she could say, feeling a little embarrassed.

A few minutes later Vienna pulled the latch that opened the door to the hall where Jokul was patiently waiting.

“Okay let’s go,” she orders.

As they walked in silence through the long dirt-walled hallway she became curious as to why they were living underground. So far Jokul was the more congenial of the Mogrifs she had met. Of course, he was also the one who had whisked her out of captivity, so she felt comfortable with him. Considering his massive size he always had a cheerful twinkle in those crystal blue eyes of his.

“Tell me Jokul,” Vienna started, “why are the Mogrifs living in these caverns?”

Jokul didn’t say a word. He was trying to decide if he should answer and if he did, how to answer. He had been instructed not to engage in extended conversations. According to Mogrif regulations, detailed knowledge of their current location to outsiders was strictly forbidden. But Jokul had always been somewhat defiant when it came to rules. As the proud son of the previous Sachem of the Synods, he had been taught to always respect authority as an example to others. Still, as the nephew of Thrufi and a ranking officer of the Raiders, his position demanded he follows orders. Even so, his inherently rebellious nature had gotten him into trouble many times before.

“I am not obliged to give answers to your question,” he finally said.

Vienna looked a little surprised but continued, “Why is that? Are you still afraid I’m a spy? Maybe you’re afraid I will run away and tell those ‘walkers’ where you are. I’ll bet they already know why you live here,” she said snidely.

In typical fashion, Jokul only smiled. “You would not find that an easy task,” he quipped. “You are right, the walkers are well informed of how we live, but not where.”

“Then telling me *why* shouldn’t be a problem.”

“A well-reasoned response,” he said with a snide grin, “I can tell you this, do not fear us, we are not the same as our brethren the J'nus followers. And do not fear Thrufi. He is reasonable and will inform you of all you require. But do not think him weak either, he will have your life if he believes you are a threat to Mogrif.”

“Thrufi might take my life, but I shouldn’t fear him? That’s illogical.”

“Personally, I do not believe you are a threat nor do I believe he does. But you should be very careful. At present Theta is in a delicate position. Thrufi will protect the Mogrif at all costs. It is a duty he takes seriously.”

“Thrufi appears to be the strongest of the Synods, is that why he is Sachem?”

“He draws his strength from his experience as a warrior,” Jokul explained.

“Experienced warriors usually command an army rather than preside over a society?”

“That may be true in other societies, but not the Mogrif.”

“How long has he been Sachem?” Vienna asks.

“Within the Mogrif there is a mysterious illness that affects only a few of us. Our scientists have been unable to identify the source of this ailment.

Until his unexpected death from that disease, my father Haviju was the Sachem. For a long period thereafter we had no Sachem. The Synods were unable to reach an agreement on who should be Sachem.

When he was younger Thrufi was a Synod. There were many matters where he and my father did not agree. To reduce the tension between them Thrufi chose to live in seclusion far away in the eastern mountains. After he was informed of the death of my father he knew his duty was to serve his native sect. After his return, the Synods quickly agreed that he should be the new Sachem.

Many cycles have passed since that time. Thrufi's many cycles of seclusion had a lasting effect. Even today he sometimes seeks solitude and retreats to a private place to reflect."

Vienna did not speak the rest of the way. That small piece of historical information was invaluable. She couldn't take the chance of interfering with the societal evolution of Theta. If she did the U.O.H. would know and the consequences are certain. All she wanted was the return of her bracelet and ring. The only way to accomplish that will take working and joining forces with these Theta fliers. And doing it without her actions being responsible for any change that may occur. A delicate balance for sure. They knew more about J'nus and his operation than she did. With their help, she may have a chance. Without their help, there was no chance.

Vienna realized the grade of the hallway had changed making their walk a little more difficult. They had been gradually moving upward for the last few minutes. Just ahead she could see they were approaching an opening. When they reached the doorway they stepped out of the hallway onto an expansive terrace of rock. Off in the distance, the night sky was crystal clear, she felt a crisp breeze blowing. Overhead loomed the bright light of the Theta moons with a background of billions of stars. Vienna turned to look back and realized she had been inside an ancient stone fortress. The fortress is set within the tallest mountain on the planet, twelve thousand feet high. The panorama was impressive. Rolling smaller mountains to the left and sheer rugged cliffs to the right. Faint lights from a city could be seen across the plains beyond the lower mountains.

Thrufi and several other Theta beings, members of the Synods she'd seen before, sat at an oblong table. When she approach they offered her a place.

"Thank you," she said cordially as she took the seat directly across from Thrufi.

Thrufi leaned one elbow on the table, propped his chin on his hand, and watched her intently. "You look rested. Are you feeling better?" He asked.

Vienna gave him a tight smile. "Yes, much better. Thank you for your courtesy."

With a pleasant voice, Thrufi began. "Vienna I wish to be direct, there is no reason to mince words. There are important issues that must be clarified. I hope you realize that we are not attempting to keep you here against your will. Also, realize that if you return to Klynash you will likely be captured and killed. Understand too that your presence here causes us great concern. We know there are those who seek you. Can you tell us why?"

"I can only guess. I think they know I'm from Earth and that I could disrupt whatever they are doing on my planet. I don't really know, but they don't know that. Just the fact that someone from Earth knows of them would be considered a

danger.”

“You are unaware of the reason they are traveling to your planet?”

“Yes, that’s right. Do you know?” Vienna asks.

“We will leave that discussion to another time. Tell us exactly what you do know.”

That was interesting, Vienna thought. Apparently, he does know why they go to Earth but is unwilling to tell her.

“I don’t know much. I know there are about twelve Theta beings that travel between here and Earth regularly. I learned that from the Theta that died on Earth. Elys was his name. He said he was collecting data on something he called human cluster-flux modulations. He also said they have been traveling back and forth for many years.”

Thrufi glanced around the table as if to get confirmation from the others before continuing. Each one of them nodded in agreement.

“Actually, their recurring travels date back two hundred Earth time cycles,” Thrufi explains.

Surprised, Vienna asked, “How do you know this? Why are they going to Earth?”

“That information will remain undisclosed for the present.”

Vienna tried to reach out with her mind as Pu-illeo had taught her. She wanted to dig for knowledge, to find anyone who may be thinking of the reason, but to no avail. She could only sense a slight undertone of noise, no cognitive thought.

“Well,” Vienna says, “since we are being honest with each other, can you explain why there are two separate Mogrif societies on Theta? How do the ‘walkers’, as you call them, have favor over other Mogrifs?”

Thrufi leans back in his chair and looks skyward as he considers his response and the consequences of giving such information to this Earthling. After a moment he said, “Under normal circumstances, we would have already put you to death, but circumstances are not normal. Not only is the survival of Mogrifs paramount, but now the survival of those on Earth must also be considered.”

Vienna’s heart began to thump wildly. What is he talking about? Are the people on Earth in danger? From what? From who? These J’nus followers? Further mind-probing found nothing. From that point on she paid careful attention to Thrufi’s every word.

“There are many factors that must be carefully weighed and it is important that you understand all that is involved,” Thrufi explains.

“If Earth is in danger I need to know everything. Go on,” Vienna says bluntly.

Thrufi, still reluctant, spoke with controlled emotion, “The Mogrifs are native inhabitants and the first species on Theta capable of rational thought. Unlike humans, we are blessed with the ability of individual flight. The Mogrif have resided in the mountains of Theta for more cycles than can be remembered.

Eight generations previous an evolutionary change occurred that spread across communities all around Theta. The result of this change caused many of our young to cease developing wings when they reach puberty. All Theta are Mogrif by birth so of course they were still Mogrif, but they were not capable of flight. That is the reason they are termed ‘Walkers’.”

He waited before continuing, studying the expression of interest on Vienna’s face before continuing, “A term the walkers themselves decided on. At first, there were a few Walkers born in each community. Even though they were considered unusual they remained active members of our society. The small number of those who mated with the Walker bore infants without flight abilities. As the Walkers matured it became obvious that living in the mountains could be dangerous without the necessary abilities. A more suitable location for them to live out their lives was necessary. That is when we established lodging regions in the low country. The Walkers lived there freely and quite comfortably. Over time, and with the use of our technology, they became self-sufficient. As more time passed they improved their quality of life.

Each cycle, more Walker offspring were born than winged Mogrif. But that evolutionary change had another detrimental effect. You see, the normal lifespan of a Mogrif is over six hundred cycles. Sadly the lifespan of the Walkers was shortened to less than two hundred cycles. Even with a shortened lifespan their population steadily increased until their camps became large cities. That is when J’nus arrived. After his arrival, their numbers rapidly increased until they nearly outnumbered winged Mogrif.”

Vienna started to speak but held her tongue. She knew that was not typically how biological evolution developed. Such dramatic genetic changes did not evolve out of the blue. Evolutional changes in a species occur out of necessity. The necessity for safety from predators, or to increase the number of offspring, or a longer lifespan so a species has more time to reproduce and thrive. What Thrufi described was not a typical evolutionary mutation. Those changes must have been stimulated by some other means.

“Fascinating. Were there other unusual occurrences after J’nus arrived?” Vienna asked.

“Yes,” Thrufi continued. “Almost immediately the entire population of Walkers began following his religion. Many of his religious leaders became involved in our governing body, the Council of Ushers. Some of the more eager Walkers quickly climbed to prominence. Many of our laws were revised to follow J'nus' religious teachings. These laws caused more separation between we Mogrif. Even though under our laws all Mogrif are considered equal, new laws requiring “Species Equity” were approved. One major law ordered species purity throughout all territories. The consequences of these new laws shifted our once calm, unified society into factions.

The teachings by the hierarchy of the J'nus religion generated fear among the Walkers, which soon changed to an ingrained hatred for winged Mogrif. Over time winged Mogrif were considered abnormal and unnatural. Ultimately all contact with a winged Mogrif by a Walker was prohibited.

Fifty-two cycles ago we were consigned to obscurity. Since that time the winged Mogrif has strengthened our will and resolve. We are determined not to be relegated to the status of langsyne.

But the Mogrif Walkers, each and every one, are no longer free. They have become passive and do not think for themselves. Each one has a predetermined societal role directed by J'nus. They receive daily instructions through a J'nus-inspired medium.

Worst of all, we must watch as this J'nus religion destroys our fellow Mogrif. It goes against our nature. Against our inherent traditional belief that every Mogrif is an individual with an innate right to be free and a natural right to excel. The J'nus religion has removed that belief. It has been extinguished in the Walkers. The religious teachings of J'nus have wiped traditional thinking clean and imposed his will. It is death, death of the spirit. There is a massive unspoken obstacle on Theta waiting to sink the entire world. And now it may sink your world as well.”

That last comment sent a tingle down Vienna's spine. “How is Earth involved in all this other than their visits,” she asked anxiously.

“Many cycles ago our informants advised us that J'nus followers were traveling to another planet hospitable to Theta life. Which planet was unknown. They have been traveling to study the planet as preparation. Preparation for what is currently unknown.

While there the travelers would release a biological microbial enzyme that would infect the male inhabitants. Our scientists have determined the males exposed to this enzyme would either quickly perish or become sterile. Evidently, Earth is that planet.”

Vienna had patiently listened, hesitant to say anything, wanting a better understanding of the facts. She couldn't get mixed up in any Theta disputes but this new information was alarming. Her choices were narrowing while becoming clearer. Getting involved would risk the wrath of the U.O.H. But she couldn't just let Theta continue down this path of destruction. Nor could she stand by and do nothing to stop the death and sterilization of humans on Earth. All Vienna wanted was her bracelet and ring so she could return to Earth. But if the safety of Earth was compromised she had no other choice.

She finally spoke up, "I'm not a geneticist nor am I an evolutionologist, but I do have an educated understanding of the established rationale for evolutionary advances. First, when mutations occur the change is spread over the course of longer periods of time than a few generations. Second, what you have described is not a normal metamorphosis through evolutionary selection. A mutation of such magnitude would be harmful to the species. And, it's unlikely that all the offspring of the mutation would reproduce the same atypical change. What you described is an indication not of evolution, but intervention."

Everyone sat in stunned silence. Vienna could see the suspicion in their eyes. Finally one of the Synods spoke, "I am Viiza, principal science advisor of the Synods, exactly what are you implying Vienna?"

Vienna was hesitant to continue, "I'm... I'm saying it's... *possible* that the mutation did not happen as a natural course of evolution. That it is a planned artificial deviation. Possibly chemically induced. If J'nus can synthesize an enzyme to affect humans as you have described, there is no reason to think he couldn't also make something that caused the change in the Mogrif."

"He intentionally inhibited wing growth? Is that possible?" Viiza asked inquisitively.

Without hesitation, Vienna proclaimed, "Using advanced Mitochondrion technology, it's very possible."

"Would not such a genetic transformation only be required for a few generations, after which it would be inherited?" Viiza asked.

"Not particularly. If somehow, after gestation and birth, a wing-stunting substance was introduced the original gene would still be intact and a dominant characteristic. Any offspring would still have the gene. On Earth, the theory of inherited traits has been widely examined. Cut off a thousand dogs' tails, and the dogs will still produce puppies with tails." Vienna explained. She wasn't sure if they knew what a dog was, but the similarity of Earth's experience may be relevant enough for them to grasp.

“I suppose so,” Thrufi said with a quizzical expression. “We had suspicions that J'nus was taking advantage of the Walkers, but it had not occurred to us that he would have instigated the transformation. If what you say is true, and J'nus is the architect of this heinous crime against the Mogrif, it must be stopped,” Thrufi said.

Vienna shook her head, “No, you must find out for sure. A blood sample of a Walker may show you something. But if I'm right, such a drastic change can be achieved by modifying an embryo or inoculating a newborn.”

“Fertilized Mogrifs are taken to the infirmary to give birth. Under the new laws no one except chosen caregiver staff and a J'nus rector is allowed into the Chamber of Life,” Viiza says.

“You must find out exactly what is going on inside that chamber. It's possible that I can help, but not without my bracelet and ring,” Vienna suggests.

“If you are correct, is it possible to save the Walkers by reversing the alteration?” Thrufi asks.

Vienna didn't answer immediately. With brows pinched and sadness in her voice, she said, “That's extremely doubtful.”

Chapter 28 - Doppler Shifting...

Aboard the *Milvago*, Kriibo sat at his control room desk waiting for the right moment for him and Tyrik to take his shuttle to the surface of Naah. It was essential they make their entrance in grand style. Kriibo had given advance notice to the journo's of the exact time and location of their arrival. He wanted to take full advantage of the crowds' enthusiasm and ensure it would be reported and broadcast throughout the realm.

Installation of the broadcasting equipment at the Gholes Arena in Sasaloo was complete. In preparation for Tyrik's next speech, Kriibo was making two minor computational modifications to his cerebral amelioration rectifier. His meta-analysis identified the adjustments needed that would enhance the harmonization of the psyche-altering resonance within the traditional Naah refrains. Changes that would gently transform the melodies to focus the resonance wave spectrum more effectively. His mathematical algorithms of euphonic codes were now perfect.

One of Kriibo's operatives had informed him that several Clan Lords had planned to attend Tyrik's speech. This was the perfect opportunity for his cognitive persuasion technology to implant acceptance of the spiritual values of Tyrik into the minds of members of JuJu Ghar's trusted power brokers.

Tyrik looked tired and frayed. His mane was dull, his eyes were red and sunken. He wasn't accustomed to the busy work required of someone running for political leadership. The constant travel from place to place and planet to planet and the intense public scrutiny were draining. He took several naps a day, especially after his speeches. He had allowed himself to be completely controlled by Kriibo, who was intolerant of his views and ignorant of his personal needs. All this made him feel even more useless than normal.

Motivated by a feeling for company, friendly or not, Tyrik joined Kriibo in his office. When he entered Kriibo paid no attention to him. He stood quietly for a moment, cleared his throat, and in a mumbling manner said, "I'm not feeling well, suppose we postpone this speech? There have been so many, missing one couldn't hurt."

Annoyed by his constant weakness, Kriibo started to snap off a snarling answer. He could feel the aura of spineless dread coming from Tyrik. As if he were concerned, his right hand came up and stroked the light fur on his chin.

"Are you sure that is what you want? Remember, you are not the only one affected by your actions. Your family is also subject to the consequences of our failure," Kriibo says in a tranquil voice.

Tyrik grunted in disgust, “Yes, of course I remember.”

Kriibo forcefully urged, “There will be no further talk of you abandoning your pledge. Accept your obligation and move forward. There is still time before you speak. Time enough for you to study your speech and re-energize yourself.”

Tyrik’s sullen eyes looked at the floor as he paced without purpose, “Yes, I... I think I will,” he agreed.

Even more depressed, he returned to the private chamber Kriibo had assigned him. The door slid closed with a clunk, the sound echoed within the metal-walled room. Holding his sanity together with a thin thread of fear he sat quietly on his small bunk reflecting on the situation he now found himself. If things go as planned he will soon have all the power he needs to be untouchable. If they don’t go as planned, this time there will be no escape. Drearily he picked up his tablet and slowly scanned the speech Kriibo had written for him.

Suddenly there was an orange flickering cue on the holographic image above Kriibo’s desk. The signal indicated an unstable activity originating from one element of his operational sectors, Vitala Cluster KV8.56 Quadrant 9. The location gave him pause but he was confident it was secure from scrutiny by the U.O.H.. There was no possibility they had discovered his methodical refinement of that society. It had been evolving for far too many generations. The probability of even a minuscule algorithmic miscalculation was unlikely. His ciphers were not prone to errors. Still, he must investigate.

With a small movement of his index finger he tuned his visual receptor feeds to the numerous holographic images scattered around the planet. Observing the various feeds for several moments, there was no indication of disruption. Another move of his finger isolated the signal onto a single being.

“Euris, I sense discomfort. Is there cause?” He questioned.

Euris sat cross-legged inside his cathedra within the chapel walls facing an undulating crimson shrine. His eye closed in meditation, his arms outstretched with his open palms facing upward. When he heard the voice of J’nus he raised his head and opened his eyes. Within the shrine was a holographic image of J’nus.

“Divine J’nus, a female human has unexpectedly appeared. I took it upon myself to deal with her directly,” Euris responds.

“Did this female human possess psychic interaction abilities?”

“No Devine One. Following your instructions multiple attempts were unsuccessful. It is a weak female. Her awareness is negligible. We are investigating all possible methods of her arrival, but presently it appears

inadvertent. I will dispose of her and can assure no further distractions.”

“Virtuous Euris, my confidence in you has again proven valid.”

With that Kriibo dismissed the alarm.

Chapter 29 - Tribute To The Ghosts...

Grandè Feht and I made our way through the audience inside the Gholes Arena in Sasaloo. The half-circle arena, enclosed with stands on three sides, was filled with Naah. There were thousands of them dressed in varied attire from working-class to upper-class. Unlike humans who tend to separate themselves, grouping together by class, the Naah freely intermingled within each class. Many expressed their personal pride with fleecy-coiffured manes. You could immediately distinguish the stage of life differences by their styles. The older more mature Naah had well-maintained satiny manes, some with simple braids, while the younger Naah were a little more scruffy and ornamental. Their manes were braided with various colored baubles or beads and wavy ringlets.

It was obvious I was the only human in the expansive room. Even so, I did not feel unwelcome or unwanted. I experienced no odd stares from any of the Naah beings. I was accepted simply as a stranger and felt no hostility from anyone.

In the background, I heard music playing. The music was, I assume, a traditional melody of the Naah realm. The sound was somewhat pleasing to the ear and the timbre was similar to a trio of wind instruments playing a sonata. Many of the Naah were familiar with the tunes because they swayed with the rhythm while making conversation.

Because there were no open seats available Grandè Feht and I positioned ourselves in the rear of the stadium with a few other attendees behind the hundred or more rows of those already seated.

Abruptly all lights in the room went dark except the faint mellow glow of stage lights. In smoothly flowing motions a Naah being arrived on the stage. When the lightning changed his stately figure was framed in a bluish hue. He appeared excited, poised, and ready. He told the crowd he was Kriibo Nez and spoke in glowing terms of the return of Gaan-lea and how Tyrik's words were the true gospel. After a few moments of speaking the lights dimmed. The music volume increased for a split second then gradually lowered into the background. There was muffled silence in the audience. A white-robed Tyrik Guebr seemingly floated through a floor-hugging fog into a bright center-stage spotlight. Just before he spoke I felt the air crackle and sensed a buzzing hum in my head.

The instant he spoke I got the sensation of a slight pinprick at the base of my skull. Compelling sounds spun in my head, then burrowed deeper until they formed a soft whispering voice as if I was talking to myself, telling myself that Tyrik Guebr was the messiah, anointed by Gaan-Lea himself.

Gradually the caress of the warm voice faded away as reason returned. I realized

immediately that within the music was an utterly precise, diamond-clear thought attempting to invade my mind. It made no difference to me. I felt no desire to believe. Maybe the reason is that I was human, either that or my conversion by Noiiz had worked. Whichever it was, it helped me detect and repel the attempted mental suggestions.

I turned and looked at Grandè Feht just as he looked at me, “Did you notice that too?” he asked in a low voice.

“The emotional impulse, yes,” I whispered, “I sensed a subliminal hypnotic frequency being transmitted from within the music. I’m surprised you realized it.”

Grandè Feht nodded, “Do you see the others? Look at their eyes, they are enraptured, captivated. Why am I not affected?”

“Maybe you are resistant because you play the jongee,” I explained.

“Why are you not affected? Because you are human?” he asked.

“Maybe, but more than likely it's because I went through a living hell to become immune. I’m impervious to mental connections between sound and emotion. I can’t feel it anymore. If you hear and feel it, can you interpret what is being triggered?” I ask quietly.

In a hushed voice, he said, “Emotional phrases such as; ‘I and everything about me is real, open your heart and your mind, be harmonious with me, transcend with my words to peaceful rapture. I am the torch of life, accept me as your teacher.’ This is followed by a specific motivational timbre followed by: ‘you are a disciple of my flock; do not stray from the purity of my words. I will care for you, lead you to the truth, and you will no longer suffer. You must believe to receive.’ This is being repeated. Each time with slightly greater dramatic emotional insistence.”

“The minds of your fellow Naah are being irresistibly altered. Their reasoning is being interfered with. Reshaped to be subservient to this guy.”

“Yes Muxk, that would seem to be true. We should leave,” Grandè Feht said as he turned and started to leave.

Grabbing him firmly by his forearm I said softly, “No Gwin, we have to stay. If we leave now whoever is doing this will know we are not affected and will be suspicious.”

When he turned back around he asked in a low but bitterly intense voice, “Who would be doing such a thing?”

“I told you Sanduval Mule would try something. What I’m wondering is how he is doing it. I’m certain he knew you wouldn’t be affected. That is why you were attacked. I’ll wager my last wit that he is here right now. Shape-shifted into someone else. Into a Naah.”

“How could you know who he is?” Gwin asked.

“Like a Sorosian eunuch, he’ll be the one in the background, pulling the strings of his puppets.”

“It has to be this Kriibo Nez. Remember, I was there and no one from the Nez Clan survived the war. He is funding Tyrik Guebr and seems to be in charge.”

“The thought does you credit my friend. We’re probably being watched right now. We must pretend to be affected. We’ll have to stay here until the show is finished and discreetly make our exit.”

Gwin stared straight ahead impassively trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. You could tell by the expression of frustration on his face that he was having difficulty controlling his anger. The freethinking minds of his fellow Naah were being held hostage by the mind control embedded in the music, and he couldn’t do anything about it.

The audience seemed completely unaware of the mind-encroaching resonance, seemingly enjoying their oblivion. The fixed glare in their eyes was a gaze of euphoric stupor. It was another ten minutes before Tyrik Guebr finally stopped speaking. When he finished the spotlight went out, and the stage turned black. Slowly the spectators again became conscious, suddenly erupting into loud applause. After several moments of ovation, the audience gradually began to file out. Staying tucked away amongst the crowd Gwin and I quietly made our way into the street and headed toward the spaceport where my Craft was located.

On our way, we saw Smrgo, chieftain of the Zarna Clan, and other members of his clan just as they noticed us. Gradually they made their way threw the crowd to us.

“Wasn’t he exactly what Naah needs?” Smrgo said excitedly. Members of his Clan seemed to agree. They said, “right, yes indeed, very good.”

“He was imposing,” Gwin said unemotionally.

“You’re just being your usual elusive self, Gwin. I thought he was very impressive. He knows exactly what is needed to lead Naah forward. I’m inclined to support his selection.”

“Are you not making an unduly quick decision, my friend?” Gwin asked politely.

“My instincts tell me he will be our next leader. His words were beautifully sharp and clear. They are truly those of Gaan-lea,” Smrgo insisted.

“It’s quite clear you have made up your mind. I have yet to make such a determination,” Gwin stated plainly.

Smrgo smiled, “As usual, I fail to completely understand your hesitation. I’m sure you will agree in time. But for now, we must go. See you in Gulway tomorrow.”

“Yes,” Gwin agreed, “tomorrow.”

With that Smrgo and his clan went on their way. Gwin and I continued on our way to the spaceport.

As we walked Gwin urged, “We must inform the other Clan Lords of this perversion.”

“Wait a moment, didn’t you notice how Smrgo was convinced? How many Clan Lords did you see in there tonight?” I asked.

“I recognized three Clans in the audience, but there are twelve clans that are members of the Clan Lords. The others should be unaffected, would you not agree?”

“I’m not sure. We don’t know if his manipulation also works over the broadcasts. My guess is, it doesn’t. But we can’t be sure. Maybe your Prime was watching. It’s very possible his mind may be reshaped as well.”

“The meeting tomorrow will be our opportunity to make that determination. It will also give us a chance to inform the Clan Lords and Prime JuJu Ghar of this coercive influence instigated by this Tyrik Guebr. His manipulations of Gaan-lea’s words are a weapon in the hands of an evil demagogue.”

“Yeah, *if* they aren’t already crusaders for Guebr. If they aren’t, I think you should tell them. But, you should also have a plan to offer as a way to stop it.”

“What do you mean? Arresting Guebr and the false Nez is all that must be done.”

I hesitated before responding. It was obvious Grandè Feht did not understand the nature of politics and political power.

“Doing that would be political suicide for your Prime and turn Tyrik Guebr into a martyr in the eyes of the public.”

“I see. But what else can be done?” Gwin questions.

“There is another way,” I said, as we rounded a corner.

Just as we did my Jyotti suit started vibrating. Once around the corner, we came to a complete halt. We were face-to-face with five unfamiliar, very mean-looking, very well-armed aliens. They weren't very tall but they were bulky. They wore dull black armor and had faces that looked almost dog-like with savage eyes that glared at us. At that moment they leveled their weapons and opened fire.

When they did I ducked and rolled to the left. Gwin did the same to the right, drawing his weapon in one easy motion.

A volley of white-hot energy bolts shot toward us. They continued their advance, blasting away with each step. Their shots missed us but struck one of three beebyu tired to a tree across the ally behind us. The force of the blast pushed the beast back a couple of steps. It then let out a curdling roar, reared on its hind legs, and collapsed, green gooey blood spewing from the wound. The other beasts went wild. Stomping the injured beast while wailing loud howls.

Just then Gwin lunged low and fired three quick rounds. His first shot struck the left leg of one of the attackers causing him to drop his weapon and fall. His second shot seared a hole in the chest of another, but his third shot missed its mark.

When they fired another volley one of their shots hit me in the chest, knocking me off my feet. Stunned, I lay looking at the sky for several moments. I could smell smoke coming from the burning hole in my clothing. Quickly inspecting my Jyotti suit I realize it had protected me once again from certain death.

Crouching on bended knee I raised my left hand and sent a ten-foot-wide razor-thin energy bolt toward the remaining attackers. Their weapons turned quiet after the energy bolt cut them in half just above the waist.

With shocked expressions, the attackers stood motionless. Their bodies gradually split apart, sliding sideways as their pieces fell to the ground. Gwin stood and calmly walked to the attacker he had hit in the leg. The alien moaned in pain as it struggled to grab his weapon, hoping for another instant of life.

Gwin ended his pain with a shot to the head. Brain matter went flying in all directions. Dark blueish-brown blood oozed and puddled in the street around the now limp corpses and body parts of our assailants.

"These barbarians are neither Naah nor human," Gwin observed suspiciously.

"I guess the Mule knows we're here," I sneered.

Chapter 30 - Them's Fightn' Words...

Following the assault, Gwin and I quickly made our way to the spaceport and my Craft without further incidents. Once onboard we took our seats and I asked, "How do I get to Gulway?"

"It is 1240 lintars northwest of here," Gwin replied.

I command the Craft to steadily raise to five thousand feet, turn to the northwest and gradually gain speed.

"We should be there soon, but your meeting is tomorrow," I said. We could have been there in seconds but I didn't want Gwin to know the full capability of my Craft.

"Yes, I know," was all Gwin said. As we flew he was quiet. He seemed deeply troubled, which was understandable. His friends, in fact, his entire species, were being coerced and manipulated, deceived into believing something untrue. That their god had sent them a savior but the reality was an evil being is using their religion to gain control of their lives, and their government.

Several minutes went by before Gwin finally spoke. "Back in Sasaloo, you said there was another way. What did you mean?"

I was hesitant to answer. I was sure he would be reluctant to do what I had in mind. In fact, his religion probably wouldn't permit it. "For my plan to work it'll take the recognition by you that it's the only way," I say pointedly.

"Your evasiveness grows tiresome, Muxk. Explain yourself. I will make..."

"Wait..." I interrupted. The Craft had suddenly sent me a warning. A squadron of three attack interceptors had dropped out of space behind us, heading our way and rapidly shortening the distance. I command the Craft to reshape its exterior to its normal teardrop configuration for better maneuverability. At the same time, I gave the command to scan communication frequencies. I wanted to hear what these attack dogs had to say. Maybe I could find out where they came from. I already knew who sent them, I just didn't know where he was.

The Craft's sensors indicate the ships were heavily armed, equipped with high-tech firepower of laser cannons and proton rockets. I wasn't worried, the Craft's defensive screens were powerful enough to withstand multiple strikes from these types of weapons and its speed and maneuvering ability are second to none.

The Craft translated communications coming from these attackers but it was garbled. All I could pick out were random words, "break out... slip to ala

tiankel...Umda..."

The Craft sensors indicated two of the ships had abruptly pulled away, moving out of formation in opposite directions. They are turning to circle around, I thought. Seconds later they were coming at me from three sides, repeatedly firing their laser cannons as they approached. I turn to the right and head straight for one of them, zigging and zagging as I dodge its laser fire. Just before we collide, I dropped low, weave right then left, and immediately turn and reverse course. Ending up behind and below the attacker.

Matching the speed of the attacking interceptor I quickly pull up from beneath to within a few yards of its hull. I command the Craft to fire a one-foot circle of energy up into the ship's power source. A moment later the ship explodes with a bright flash. The explosion sent chunks of debris barreling out in all directions. I then instantly drop lower, turn left, twist, and speed higher looking for my next target.

Suddenly I felt a jolt as my Craft's protective screen takes two forceful proton rocket strikes from the attackers directly behind me. Instantly I came to a complete stop and the interceptors zoom past. I immediately increased my speed to match one of them and maneuver about thirty yards above it.

I heard one of them utter, "z9m9z... center run... lyran left... cut the gun... dragglepat..."

The interceptor I was tracking turns its nose up and climbs higher and higher until we are above the atmosphere. It banks left, right, then upside down trying to escape, but I am locked on, matching its course and velocity. Using the Craft's interface I can sense and anticipate his every move, so I close in. By now I'm shadowing him barely a hundred feet away. Just as it levels off I send the command to fire an energy beam at its power source, turn left, and speed away. The interceptor exploded into flashes of red and blue as spiraling burning fragments float in uncontrolled trajectories into the vacuum of space.

Turning nose down I dive toward the surface looking for the third ship. Just as I see it, the interceptor darts lower and tries to flee, but I follow. He was fast but not fast enough. Pacing it, I pull alongside and can see the pilot's face. It's another alien like the ones we had fought back at Sasaloo. This time I command the Craft to send a one-inch spear of energy through the pilot's cabin.

I heard the pilot say, "yac.. to.. mal..."

A moment later the energy spear penetrated the pilot's helmet. I see his head bobble and drop forward. With the pilot crippled the vessel careens out of control towards the surface. Exploding in a ball of fire when it hits the side of a mountain.

“You are quite a good pilot,” Gwin compliments.

“Thanks, my ship is better than most.”

“Could you tell who they were?”

“Yeah, the same type of beings we met before.”

After taking out the fighters I reduced speed and command the Craft to return the exterior to its previous disguise as a trader's vessel. Now at five hundred feet above the surface we slowly sweep across the Naah terrain to the seashore and curve north above the soft waves of the ocean's shore until turning west into a long canyon. After following the canyon for several minutes, in the distance, I see the tall steel-blue buildings of the city. Just as we reach the outskirts of Gulway I receive a hail from Naah security.

“This is NSCA command, you are in a restricted area. Illicit traffic is forbidden, identify yourself or be fired upon.”

I instruct my Craft to come to a complete stop. Unsure how to respond I turn to Gwin, “tell them we're friendly,” I insist.

“How do I do that?” He asked.

“Just speak, I'll make sure they hear you.”

“I am Gwin-o'guin Feht of the Feht Clan. I have been summoned to confer with Prime JuJu Ghar.”

“You are traveling in an unauthorized vessel. You have two seconds to identify yourself.”

Directing the Craft to send a real-time visual image of Gwin to the security command over their hailing frequency I insist, “Tell them again.”

“I am Gwin-o'guin Feht of the Feht Clan, summoned by Prime Ghar,” he repeated.

Several seconds went by before we received a response, “Grandè Feht. You have permission to proceed. Dock at Gulway Spaceport, terminal S9L.”

“Thank you,” Gwin replied. He turned to me and asked, “Do you know where that is?”

“I'll figure it out,” I said as we gradually began to move. We continued on our path until I caught sight of the spaceport. The black and silver buildings were

brightly lit and active with ships going in and out as if moving along invisible wires. I approached with caution following the detailed directional markers. Once at the spaceport, I hover along the tarmac until I could identify the designated docking station. There was a mild jar as the Craft completed the docking maneuver. I didn't particularly like the idea of docking in a public space but had no other choice. Even with its disguised outer shape, I would have preferred a location where I could hide the Craft in stealth mode.

After the Craft's simulated hatch opened we left the ship and made our way through the busy spaceport until we found a for-hire hovercraft station. We secured a vehicle and once we were inside Gwin gave the pilot our destination - "the Deitas".

Inside the back of the hover-cab, I asked Gwin, "Where are we going?"

"To see JuJu Ghar." he proclaimed.

"Now? Why are we going there now?" I questioned.

"We must speak to Prime Ghar before the meeting. We must learn if his psyche has been distorted."

I knew the final decision, out of necessity, would have to be a political one, so I understood Gwin's reasoning that he must involve JuJu Ghar. It may sometimes involve violence, but politics in any realm is a mixture of compromise and brute force.

"Good idea, but if he has been turned, what then?" I asked

"We will meet that challenge after we appraise his state of mind."

While we travel through the city I noticed how clean and orderly it was. Thoroughfares teamed with hovercraft traffic while Naah beings were busy entering and leaving tall steel buildings. The obvious restaurants and businesses were alive with patrons. The hover-cab turned onto a wide expansive boulevard filled with other hovering vehicles moving in both directions. Directly ahead was a towering and impressive metal, stone, and glass building surrounded by well-manicured shrubs and well-maintained foliage. When we got closer I could see numerous security guards stationed along the front walkway. As the hover-cab approached the building it circled right, made a quick left turn, and stopped exactly in front of two hefty and well-armed guards.

When we got out Gwin headed straight for the entryway but the Naah security guards blocked me from going any further.

"I'm with him," I said cheerfully.

That didn't faze the guards. With their weapons drawn and aimed at me, I wasn't going anywhere.

Gwin quickly turned around, "I'll be responsible for him," he informed the guards, "search him if you like, you can see he is not armed." A statement that wasn't totally true. I wasn't *obviously* armed.

After a painfully gruff and thorough search, they finally let me pass. We made our way through the wide front entrance into a chamber with a domed ceiling supported by ornately sculptured columns. From the ceiling hung several faded murals depicting events of Naah's past. We found our way to a glass-enclosed elevator and rode it to the top floor of the building. From there we walked down a long hallway, encountering several more well-armed guards on the way until finally reaching a receptionist seated behind an ornate bone and wood desk busily moving images on a clear glass screen. The receptionist gave Gwin a knowing look and motioned us toward two ten-foot-tall embellished wooden doors. We both stared at the sentinel camera until we heard the slight click of the door unlocking itself. The door automatically swung open and we stepped into JuJu Ghar's meeting room. Inside were multicolored lights imparting an impressive sunset glow to the room.

JuJu Ghar sat at the head of a long table slowly turning an ornate porcelain glass between the three fingers and thumb of his left hand, apparently absorbed in thought. Several members of his staff filled the seats around the table. Each one sat stiffly erect, almost at attention.

When we entered JuJu Ghar looked up, "Gwin," he said in a delighted voice, "it is nice to see you again. You are early for our meeting, but no matter, I'm glad you are here."

"It is good to see you as well Prime," Gwin said respectfully.

"Join us, we were just conferring about tomorrow's meeting."

"It would be beneficial if we might speak in confidence before that meeting," Gwin stated bluntly.

JuJu cocked his head to one side and gave Gwin a puzzled look. "If there is an emergency my staff should be involved?"

"A situation only you should be aware of. If you wish to inform your staff after we speak, that is your choice."

Still somewhat confused, JuJu motioned to his staff to leave. Dutifully they stood and filed out. After we were alone he asked, "Who is your companion. I've never

known you to associate with alien humans.”

“Please forgive my lack of grace,” Gwin declared, “this is the beast trader Muxk Eutal.”

JuJu gave me a head nod and asked, “Is he relevant to this issue?”

“He is the one who informed me of potential risk. I have observed this menace myself.”

“Very well, tell me specifically what you are talking about.”

“First, I must ask if you observed the recent speech in Sasaloo from your opponent Tyrik Guebr?”

“Personally, no. I instructed members of my political staff to watch and report back to me on what he said. Does your concern involve this Guebr fellow? He is becoming a significant challenge to my selection.”

“It is quite disturbing. You see, Muxk and I attended his speech. During that speech we identified a deceptive influence being subliminally transmitted from within the background audio. Those hypnotic instructions were telling the listeners that Tyrik Guebr is a prophet of Gaan-lea and they must follow him unquestionably. The minds of each Naah who experienced that audio was reconstructed, indoctrinated into obedience, not for Gaan-lea but for Tyrik Guebr.”

With a doubting expression, JuJu asked, “Are you sure? How can you be sure if you were there and heard it too?”

At this point, I thought it was time I spoke up, “I have been trained to identify and be immune from such mind-altering intrusions. Gwin here must be resistive because of his talent with the jongee. We both saw the audience’s reaction. The change was obvious and alarming.”

“I have received information that following his speeches the crowds were enthusiastic, but that does not prove anything. Political speeches are designed to appeal to the masses,” JuJu comments. “I had a notion something was strange with this guy. I believe you Gwin, but I must have undeniable proof.”

“I am sure you are acquainted with Smrgo of the Zarna Clan,” Gwin remarked.

“Of course, he is a Clan Lord member. He has always been a strong advocate of our policies.”

“I talked with him at my home the day before he attended the speech and, as you

say, he was very supportive of you. When I talked to him after the speech he was convinced that Tyrik Guebr was a prophet and would be the next Prime. I also got the impression he would work towards that objective,” Gwin said bluntly.

“If that is true your conclusions seem reasonable. But how is it possible?” JuJu asked uneasily.

“If I may Prime Ghar,” I interrupted, “It is proven fact that the brain craves pattern and meaning. It is also known that our beliefs are motivated by emotion. I’m sure you realize that once an idea has been emotionally implanted it takes hold in the brain and is almost impossible to eradicate. A being can try to ignore it - but it stays there.

There is an imitation Naah being calling himself Kriibo Nez. This fake Naah being is deviously gifted and impressively intelligent. I suspect that he has created a device that alters the brain's cognitive process. His objective is simple in its complexity and twisted enough to make every Naah a slave.”

“Kriibo Nez, isn’t he the one who is supporting Guebr?” JuJu Ghar asked.

“Yes, he is,” I agreed, “and he probably controls whatever device is causing the psychic changes. The device would lower the subconscious defenses we normally have when we are fully conscious and makes our thoughts vulnerable. It uses various tones and resonances that are designed to inspire distinct emotional responses with a specific philosophy. It washes away the concept of individual liberty and self-direction. It coerces the hearer to adopt the ideological credo of unequivocal collectivism. In essence, it erases one concept in the mind and implants another,” I explained.

“Gwin said you are a beast trader, are you also a neuroscientist? I have a hard time believing such a thing is possible,” JuJu’s face revealed a serious, somewhat troubled expression.

“No I’m not a neuroscientist, but I do have observational experience in behavioral and social psychology, as well as the cognitive function of an intelligent being.”

Deep in thought, JuJu Ghar stared out the window for several moments before he spoke. “Let’s say I believe you.”

“What he says is true, I experienced it,” Gwin chimed in.

“And how do you know that Kriibo Nez is not a real Naah?” JuJu asked.

“I was at the Moof Valley battle when every member of the Nez Clan was killed,” Gwin explains. “I can assure you, he is not a Nez.”

“If this is true,” JuJu continued, “we have nothing that will counter this vile being or his infernal machine. Without resorting to excessive security, which could lead to violence and would be politically untenable, there is no way to negate the sorcery of this deception.”

“Prime Ghar, there is a way,” I asserted passionately.

“And that is?” JuJu asked curiously.

I looked at Gwin. The expression on his face and unmistakable suspicion in his large green eyes revealed nervous anticipation of what I was about to say.

“I know it’s an undesirable solution, but it’s the only plausible one.”

“Stop being evasive,” Gwin demanded.

“To counter this device Gwin must use his talent with the jongee to obstruct its effects and stimulate rational thought. He must re-install the concept of independent thought for all Naah. It is the only way,” I say bluntly.

Gwin gave me a disapproving look and quickly exclaimed, “That is against Gaan-lea’s teachings, I will not do that.”

JuJu agreed, “I could not expect anyone to act against our religious beliefs.”

“Gwin, I’m saying you have the power to help your fellow Naah beings, that’s all,” I insisted.

Gwin did not comment immediately, but then explained, “Gaan-lea’s words have told us we must confront our challenges, prevail over our doubts and trust our faith in him. Yet he also instructs the player of the jongee not to use it as a tool to embrace a political doctrine or use it to persuade others in affairs of state. It has been so since time began. Ancestral players believed in this gospel of Gaan-lea and did not intrude in the affairs of governing.”

“I completely understand your hesitation Gwin, I do,” I said, glancing at JuJu Ghar who showed no reaction.

“Let me ask you this. Do you think your ancestors would want you to save your fellow Naah? Do you think Gaan-lea would want you to save all Naah descendants from servitude?”

Without hesitating, Gwin said, “Like all Naah, my ancestors followed the words of Gaan-lea.”

“I’m sure his words were rational in times past. In fact, I’m sure his words are, for

the most part, just as relevant today. But technology, run by an evil being, has changed the situation. The circumstance today are not the same as they were in the past.”

“Naah morality stems from ancient Gaan-lea teachings and can not be modified as the whims of society change,” Gwin countered.

“I would never propose such a thing if society were advancing naturally, but what is happening now is not natural. It is contrived. Do you believe previous jongee players would simply let their fellow Naah suffer what undoubtedly will happen? If not you then who will stop this travesty set to besiege the Naah?”

“I do not know what other players would do, but I do not have a choice, it is my faith. You are asking me to betray my faith.”

“You do have a choice. You can reinstate the free will Gaan-lea endowed on the Naah, or let an alien use Gaan-lea as an excuse to control every being in the Naah Realm. You can ignore that reality but you can’t ignore the consequences of ignoring that reality. The way I see it, you are not betraying your faith, you are honoring your faith. By removing these sacrilegious dictates you will be returning the Naah to the true words of Gaan-lea.”

Gwin’s mind raced. This was no ordinary scheme of politicians competing for power. It was bigger, deeper, far more sinister. He began to realize his initial reaction was superficial emotion, not thoughtful faith as Gaan-lea’s words required. Nevertheless, Muxk’s logic was undeniable. He did have a choice.

Gaan-lea would expect him to respond in accordance with his faith and, as his words demand, behave with wholehearted determination. He shook himself and breathed deep. His humble desire to protect his fellow Naah was coming to grips with his dedication to religious reality. He must not let his religious belief overshadow his loyalty and obligation to save Naah. In reality, the teachings of Gaan-lea declare them both equal and morally imperative. Deserving equal respect and commitment. His only possible course of action was to let Gaan-lea direct his steps along the path of truth.

For the last few minutes, JuJu Ghar had stood motionless, not saying a word as Muxk and Gwin debated. Finally, he spoke, “Gwin, I have a suggestion.”

“What do you suggest?” Gwin asked in a weary voice.

“I know this suggestion will be asking a lot of you, but why not try what this Muxk is asking. Would it be irreligious if you played the appropriate tune during tomorrow's meeting? Is it possible to direct your melodies only to those Clan Lords who could have been affected? Let’s determine without a doubt if their minds have been polluted. And if they have, will one of your tunes reestablish

their logic and reason?"

Gwin thought for a moment. He faced a quandary of duty with no easy answer. "That is a reasonable request. I must reflect on Gaan-lea's teachings. If I do as you wish it would require the construction of the proper melody."

"Then you will consider it?" Juju asked.

At first, Gwin was reluctant to answer. He knew full well that if he agreed to JuJu's suggestion the results will compel him into further action to counter the threat, only on a larger scale. Finally, in a tempered voice Gwin said, "Yes, I will consider it."

"Gwin my friend, you clearly have a lot to reflect on. You can advise me of your decision before the meeting tomorrow," JuJu said.

Chapter 31 - Five By Five >

Vienna felt the encroaching murmur of a psychic probe. It was attempting to peer into her mind so she spontaneously stiffened her mental guard. The psychic static she constructed blocked any further intrusion.

Jokul cleared his throat, “Are you okay,” he asked.

Vienna quickly blinked twice to bring herself back to now. Her eyes swiftly shot towards him, “Yes of course.” she said, her inner voice was instructing her, *‘I must come to terms with this course I have taken’*.

“You seemed to be in a trance for a moment,” Jokul observed.

“I was simply daydreaming. Theta have daydreams, don’t you?” she queried.

“Daydream? What is that?”

“It’s when you let your mind wander. You relax and think of things other than the present. I guess Theta don’t have them?”

“I have never heard of anyone doing that,” Jokul responded.

“It’s a human thing, I guess. Did you want something?”

“Yes, Thrufi would enjoy your presence in the Crypto Chamber.”

“Of course. What is a Crypto Chamber?” She asked.

“You will soon know.”

The Crypto Chamber is located another two miles within the mountain and several levels below the lowest level Vienna had been allowed to wonder.

With Jokul’s assistance, they made their way through the subterranean tunnels until reaching a very modern-looking elevator door. Jokul pushed a protruding glowing blue button to summon the lift. Vienna leaned against the clay wall of the cavern waiting for the elevator to arrive.

“Do you know what he wants?” Vienna asked Jokul.

“I’m sure it will interest you.”

“Then I guess I’ll just wait for Thrufi to explain.”

Jokul smiled, “Yes, that would be best.”

Once inside the elevator Jokul touched another button at the bottom of a line of six buttons with odd markings. After several quiet moments, the elevator reached its destination. When the door opened Vienna entered a room filled with Mogrif seated in small divided areas partitioned from each other by frosted glass. In front of each was a floating glowing screen where they studiously touched moving symbols. She had seen similar screens and symbols when she first arrived.

Hunched forward over an illuminated table were Thrufi and several other mature-looking Mogrif. He shot a glance at Vienna as she approached.

“Vienna, you are doing well?” He asked.

“As well as can be expected given my circumstances,” she replied honestly.

“That is the reason I summoned you. We have been speculating on how we might assist you in retrieving your property.”

“My bracelet and ring?” She asked excitedly.

“Yes, as well as how you may assist us.”

Vienna's eyes squinted, she cocked her head to one side, “And you need me for what purpose,” she asked uneasily.

“We are of the understanding that you possess computational knowledge. That knowledge may offer us incite into a cipher we have retrieved from a J'nus-related terminal.”

“I'm afraid there is little I can do. I've tried to break the code on the device I got from Elys. I used every deciphering method I could think of without success.

“With failure comes enlightenment. What did you learn during your attempts?” Thrufi responds.

“Hum. What does this have to do with me getting my bracelet and ring back?” she questioned.

“I sense your reluctance to help if there is nothing to gain.”

“Not at all, I don't mind helping, I just need to understand how this relates.”

“Very well, we have located your property. They are being stored at the location where you first met Euris.”

“Will you take me there so I can get them back?” Vienna asked bluntly.

“In due time. First, we desire your assistance with a perplexing computational matter.”

“Okay if it will get my stuff back, what’s the problem?”

Thrufi turned to introduce another Mogrif, “This is Jamzillia the chief of our Cypher and Biotic Analysis team. She can give you the specifics.”

Jamzillia was obviously one of the more mature female Mogrifs. Her brownish-gray wings were tucked tight behind her. She had frizzy graying red hair loosely pulled back revealing her weathered face. Even though she showed her age she was still somewhat attractive with sharp cheekbones and an expressive, thin-lipped mouth. She wore a light blue tunic and similar colored loose fitting pants. Her effortless smile was friendly and amenable. “Hello Vienna, it is nice to finally meet you. I have heard that you were visiting.”

“Visiting... that’s a pleasant way of putting it. What can I help with?”

“Very well,” Jamzillia responded, “we obtained a data terminal from a J'nus outpost. We were able to interface the terminal with our own computer systems and have been attempting to delve further into its core. Our efforts ceased because it requires an undecipherable key code. Possibly an invertible steganography encrypted key code.”

“Exactly what are you trying to accomplish?” Vienna inquires.

“Each day J'nus transmits instructions to every Theta Walker through their devices. Those instructions tell them exactly where to go, what to do, and what to believe. They are prisoners to these J'nus commands.”

“And you want a program that will cut this dependence cord to J'nus?”

“We have written a program that will untether this connection but are unable to get through to the core because of the encrypted key code,” Jamzillia explains.

“I see. During my work, I found the code was not simply encrypted, it is a mutating polymorphic cryptogram requiring a metamorphic cipher key. It is regulated by the encoding in a robot.pmrfile.cyp file.”

“Very interesting, we have used such encryption ourselves but in this case, we are unable to detect the mutating algorithm. It does not correlate with any of our own.”

“That is because the code is... babbling,” Vienna responded.

“Babbling?” Jamzillia said inquisitively.

“That’s just how I describe it,” Vienna explained. “It’s an oscillating key. The key code is not stationary within the system’s core code structure. As the operating program runs the key bounces from one data point to other data points. To decrypt it you must know the exact route, sequence of links, the next connection point, as well as where previous parallel associations will converge. With that data, you can construct the key code.”

“Very interesting,” Jamzillia noted. “The only way to obtain the key code is by using a regressive pathway spawning decryption algorithm structured within an elliptical curve. And the only way such an algorithm can be implemented is directly into a matrix terminal.”

“That was my conclusion as well. Do you have such an algorithm? I found a connected terminal but was stopped by Euris. Can I see that terminal’s code?” Vienna asked

Jamzillia did not answer. Instead, she looked at Thrufi as if to get further instructions. Thrufi nodded in the affirmative. Jamzillia said, “yes... it’s right over here.” She escorted Vienna to a large floating screen hovering above a holographic keypad displayed on the tabletop.

Vienna scanned the symbols on the screen for several minutes. Even though she didn’t understand the meaning of the symbols, she detected a recognizable pattern. A pattern she had seen before. It was a spatial diagram mapping a decoupled spiral boring a striking resemblance to that of the double helix of DNA. Only this diagram was different. Even though it had the fundamental molecular pattern of the DNA double helix it wasn’t a biochemical code, it was a computational code.

“Are you sure this is the operating system?” Vienna asks.

“We thought so at first. Later we realized it is a parallel hybrid kernel running within the operating system, not the operating system itself.”

“I know this,” Vienna pronounced. “The architecture looks very similar to the double helix of DNA. Are you sure of this code?”

“As sure as we can be. It was retrieved directly from the terminal we acquired,” Jamzillia confesses.

“It’s an obfuscated protected code using DNA sequencing as the kernel’s interrupt byte-code. Except for this part right... here....” Vienna says, pointing to a group

of three joined symbols.

“You are right. I did not notice those before. Wait...” Jamzillia said, “let me pull up a recent sample.”

“Sample of what?” Thrufi asked.

“A project we started working on after we were informed that J'nus might be retarding wing growth.”

Jamzillia observed, “You see, this is a normal Mogrif DNA helix, this is the DNA of a Walker, and this is the helix of the computer code. See that, right where Vienna indicated, it is a nano-fabrication. It must contain a self-replicating synthetic organism within the genetic code.”

Thrufi interrupted, “Are you saying the computer code is based on DNA?”

“Yes, and no. The program within the computer code uses the DNA helix as instructions to perform a sequence of tasks. The executing program instructions use the DNA helix as its source algorithm. I think this is the formula for the DNA modification done to Walkers. It is my understanding the only way to deliver such a thing is by using a targeted protein nanoparticle. Is that not true?” Vienna added.

“That is correct Vienna,” Jamzillia agreed. “And once it delivers its protein, probably delivered using annexin A12, it dissolves away. That nanoparticle must be given the proper instructions. This program must execute those instructions.”

“Where was the terminal with this program located?” Vienna asked.

“It was taken from a research laboratory just outside Klynash,” Jamzillia informs.

“This lab, what do they do there? Could it be where the wing growth vaccine is produced?”

“We were unsure of what was being produced, but apparently it is,” Thrufi answers.

Vienna compressed her lips while she further studied the symbols. Silence filled the room. She took a deep breath and finally remarked, “If that’s the case, with this sample it’s possible to write code to redirect the instructions of the nanoparticle and imbed it within the program. Although there are still many unknowns involved. Even without the key code, we still have to write and test the proper cipher. Then somehow connect to their secure matrix network so the cryptogram can be input.”

With a mischievous gleam in his eye, Thrufi said, “Jamzillia, do you agree that to

be possible?"

"If we decrypt the code key and if we produce the proper program, I would say.... yes, it is possible. But, as Vienna detailed, there are many obstacles that must be overcome."

Thrufi looked directly at Vienna, "If you help us I will ensure the return of your property."

Vienna knew she had to help them, but whatever she did would be violating her assurance to the U.O.H. not to interfere. And the consequences may be fatal. Still, she had no other choice if she was ever going to get back to Earth. More importantly, she had to find out about their plan for Earth. After an uncomfortable lull, she finally agreed, "I will help where I can. But there is one thing that must happen. If we're successful, I must have my bracelet and ring before you try to load the program."

"Why do you make such a stipulation?" Thrufi asked.

"Because I can also help you install the program, but not without my bracelet and ring."

"Do not the bracelet and ring solely move you from one location to another? I can not see how that could be helpful except for you. It would not help Jamzillia place the program into the network's data."

"The bracelet and ring possess another ability. They can stop time for a short period. Stopping time could provide the chance needed to input the new program."

The room fell silent. Any second thoughts Thrufi had about Vienna had gradually disappeared. She had proven herself to be both knowledgeable and helpful. Turning to Vienna, Thrufi smiled and declares, "We will be able to assist each other after all."

Chapter 32 - > Side By Side...

Hours upon hours of analysis, code writing, and discarding numerous failed attempts had nearly exhausted Vienna, Jamzillia as well as her team. Still, they felt confident they were getting very close to a resolution. Using intricate parts of the ChuckK-QD code they had finally produced a decryption algorithm that would spawn regressively along the oscillating key code pathways. With that knowledge, they were closing in on the sequencing of parallel associations and their projected convergence.

“I think we finally have it.” Jamzillia proclaimed. Vienna wearily drifted to her side at the workstation and watched a moving stream of code on the screen above. With a gesture pointing to the screen, Jamzillia observed, “Notice the code stably follows until the operation terminates at the end of program instructions. That is the extent of its progress until we connect to a network terminal. Once connected I am confident it will allow us access.”

“Good,” Vienna responded. Pointing to another monitor she added, “I think we also have the necessary instructions for the nanoparticle. Jamzillia, could you have your teams double-check the code? The program should constrain the initial commands and force the nanoparticle to break down and dissolve prior to linkage.”

Moments later Thrufi and several members of the Synods entered. With them was a young female Mogrif whom Vienna had no difficulty recognizing. It was Samlila. Vienna’s eyes narrowed, “You, what are you doing here?” she questioned.

“I brought her here,” Thrufi pronounced, “Jamzillia, did I hear you say you were able to accomplish the necessary programming changes?”

“I believe so,” Jamzillia said proudly. “And Vienna has written the code to reprogram the nanoparticle. The precision of her algorithm is currently being evaluated.”

Vienna couldn’t let go of Thrufi’s dismissal of her question that easily. “Explain why she is here,” she demanded.

“She is working with us. Her assistance will be needed if we are to accomplish our goal,” Thrufi proclaimed.

It was obvious by her expression Vienna was stunned. She was confused, not sure how to react or if she should continue to trust Thrufi.

In a calm yet direct voice Thrufi states, “We have suspected for many generations that the religion of J'nus was not as altruistic as it first appears. To verify our suspicions we have inserted infiltrators in the J'nus faction for quite some time.” he explained. Looking directly at Vienna, “She is one of them. She is the agent who found the location of your property. I instructed her to take possession and bring them here. It was a dangerous endeavor. Because of that she will no longer be able to gather further information and could well be killed on sight. But this is an important task.”

Suddenly Vienna excitedly cut in, “You have my bracelet and ring?”

“I have them, yes, I also have the bracelet you took from the Walker killed on Earth,” Thrufi explained. “There is more if you will allow me to continue,” he said in a condescending tone.

“I’m sorry, please go on,” Vienna replied humbly.

“The fact that this would be the last assignment for Samlila we needed to gather not only your property but as much information as possible. Our engineers developed a stealth data gathering apparatus. When this small tool is placed next to a terminal it reads and transmits the data to a receiver a short distance away. After retrieving your property, Samlila was able to accomplish this on the Euris office terminal. I have the data here,” Thrufi explained as he hands a small device to Jamzillia.

Jamzillia took the device, hurriedly walked to a terminal, and started studying the details of the stored data.

Vienna felt foolish. She shifted uneasily, “Forgive me. I was unaware Samlila was working for you. Thank you Samlila for getting my property, I hope you stay safe.”

Samlila didn’t offer a response. She simply stood quietly beside Thrufi.

“Vienna, you must see this,” Jamzillia insisted in a worrisome voice.

Vienna took notice of the concerned expression on Jamzillia's face and quickly made her way to the terminal. She curiously studied the screen for several moments. Her eyes narrowed as her wrath grew, “how long have they been doing this?”

Jamzillia touched several symbols, the screen changed to show a different set of data.

“What have you found,” Thrufi asked.

Jamzillia looked at Vienna then back to Thrufi. “According to this information J'nus has been dispatching Theta agents to Earth at specific timelines. There are records of several trips every Earth cycle beginning in the Earth year 2824. That is earlier than we thought. There is also a list of locations and completed operations. It appears these agents have been delivering a nanoparticle virus into the local atmosphere. According to these details, the delivery apparatus has an effective range of about fifty Earth miles before the compound's active dosage dissipates.”

Vienna broke in, “Specifically the virus is designed to alter the molecular structure of the male sperm so the female egg will reject the fertilizing male seed. This will greatly inhibit the reproductive ability of humans. If I read this action plan correctly... by Earth year 3148 a majority of Earth's population will be passed prime combatant maturity. The projected number of adversarial combatants will be trivial. Few enough for a successful invasion by an army of five million heavily armed Theta combat troops.” Vienna swallowed hard, “This can't be allowed to continue. I must do something.”

“*We will*, do something,” Thrufi stated unequivocally.

Vienna's mouth twitched with anger, “Your problems may get solved but it won't help what's happening on Earth. If identifying the DNA molecule that affected Mogrif wing growth can be achieved, we can certainly find a solution for the virus they're spreading around Earth.”

Jamzillia declares, “We now have the passcode, we must first get access to a matrix terminal to input our modifications to the system protocols. Once our new program is installed it will allow us access to alter the formula for the wing suppression vaccine. It will also permit us to monitor or alter their directives to the Walkers.”

“Are you sure this program will enable us to impede their communication network?” Thrufi asked bluntly.

“With some minor programming adjustments, it is very probable,” Jamzillia replied.

Thrufi thought for a moment then looked at Vienna, “Then we must get you and Jamzillia to a terminal. Once the program is installed, we will take you to the laboratory where Jamzillia can make the necessary changes to the suppression vaccine. While there Vienna can use their equipment to make whatever you need for your planet.”

Vienna winced, as disagreeable as it was, she knew she had no choice but to follow Thrufi's plan. “And my bracelet and ring?”

“I will return them when we are ready to leave,” Thrufi promised. “You have

agreed to use them only to ensure access and input of our program. You will be held to that agreement."

"Thank you for clarifying that," Vienna said dryly. "I know of an isolated terminal where Juris drugged me. Do you know where that is? It was in an old house outside a run-down city about an hour from Klynash. It was near a wooded area. I think the name of the town started with a 'z'."

"It must be Zoar," Jokul spoke up. "It is not far from the location I recovered you."

"Zoar, yes, that was the name," Vienna agrees, giving Jokul an uneven smile.

"I assume we are prepared, is that right Jamzillia?" Thrufi asked.

Jamzillia looked around the room at her team of programmers and scientists, then back to Vienna, who gave her a consenting nod.

"I believe we have everything we need. We will be ready when you give the order."

"We leave at dusk," Thrufi ordered.

Chapter 33 - Music for The Mind...

The twelve Clan Lords were milling around the large meeting room on the top floor of the Deitas. Their friendly conversation ceased when Prime JuJu Ghar entered through a side door. He walked around the room personally welcoming each Clan Lord with the standard respectful salute of the open left hand touched to the right shoulder. He intentionally made sure Gwin-o'guin Feht was the last to be welcomed. I stood quietly against a wall in the back of the room trying to be invisible. Which was impossible being the only human in the room.

After greeting Gwin, in a quiet voice, JuJu Ghar asked for his decision.

Gwin discreetly responded, "I have thought about it at length and have decided to follow your suggestion. But first, you must question the Clan Lords to determine who will support you and who will not. That is the only way to determine if their mind has been altered and then returned."

"Agreed," JuJu calmly declares.

JuJu walked across the room and positioned himself at the head of the table, "Please my friends, be seated, we have much to discuss."

After they were all settled JuJu continued, "I am pleased you made time to attend this important conference. I not only value your friendship, but I also value your opinions and counsel as well. As you know there has been recurring turmoil and unrest within the realm. These events challenge the peace, endanger the innocent and cause property damage. Also, I am involved in a very vigorous selection process. That said, it is important that I have your support during this selection. I know our goals for Naah are identical, I also know we have our differences in how to accomplish those goals, but we have come together and balanced those differences. To begin I would like a show of hands from those who still concur with our goals for Naah of individual liberty and responsibility."

All but three Clan Lords raised their hands in agreement.

JuJu added, "I am sure you are fully aware of my opponent, who here has heard this Tyrik Guebr speak."

Four Clan Lord members indicated they had heard his speech.

"And what knowledge did you glean from his presentation?" JuJu asked politely.

Without hesitation Nennau Ayoso, Lord of the Ayoso Clan spoke up. "I take no pleasure informing you, but I believe Tyrik Guebr has the correct plan for the

future of Naah. He truly speaks for Gaan-lea. I am convinced current policies have been harmful to Naah with many unfulfilled promises.”

Lord Stintr Dalvik of the Dalvik Clan commented, “I watched the broadcast of his speech in Sasaloo from my home. My impression was not favorable. His speech was filled with untruths and inane drivel.”

Next to speak was Lord Fruble Nefru of the Nefru Clan, “I am required to agree with Nennau. Tyrik Guebr spoke the words of Gaan-lea. There is no doubt he is our savior sent by Gaan-lea.”

Smrgo of the Zarna Clan responded, “JuJu, you are a friend and have advanced Naah after the war with your strength of character and spirit. But I have heard Tyrik Guebr speak. He is indeed our savior. During his speech, Gaan-lea spoke to me personally. He denounced your policies and enlightened me on the path of Tyrik Guebr. I plan to give him my support and toil for his selection.”

The room fell uneasily quiet for several moments before JuJu spoke, “Thank you for your candid opinions. As always, I will consider them. Before we continue, I have asked Grandè Feht to provide a chorale to encourage our partnership and elevate our mutual strength of Gaan-lea’s lessons.”

Gwin removed the jongee from the pocket of his jacket. When his three fingers and thumb were positioned, he placed it to his lips and began to play. As the rhythmic frequencies floated weightlessly through the air everyone closed their eyes. Soon all within earshot had descended into a drowsy state of trance-like slumber. Most had euphoric smiles on their faces as their mind and hearts synchronized with the resonance.

The sounds of the tones he was playing had no direct effect on me except to make me feel slightly cold.

Suddenly the bodies of Clan Lords Smrgo, Nennau, and Fruble went rigid. They heard a sound like that of a rodent gnawing on a bone, which rapidly turned into the jingling of coins and then into the clanging of ringing bells. They heard an emotional melody of a frequently played tune from when they were children. Their hands tightly grasped the arms of their chairs in a death grip. Their eyes were closed but their lids fluttered and their eyeballs quickly jerked back and forth. Their expressions became perplexed then turned to distraught as emotional waves ripped through their mind.

Unconsciously they grasped at spiritually friendly straws in a desperate attempt to prop up their faith in the implanted ideology. Their foreheads dripped with moisture and their manes glistened as the mind-bending sequences continued. They felt terror as the flawed rational tried to save itself, forming frightening images of the dismembered death of family and friends. In the next instant deafening wails from each of them pierced the air.

The sounds I was hearing were soft and melancholy until the sudden screams nearly made me jump out of my skin. Apparently, no one else heard them because they stayed in their raptured trance.

As Gwin continued to play thoughts of Gaan-lea's words flashed through the minds of those whose judgment had been altered. Their demons were gently being removed, disassociating their twisted thoughts back to rational reasoning. Slowly they became less tense. Suddenly, just as thunder precedes flashes of lightning, the real knowledge of independent thought exploded within their consciousness as the notion of compulsory dominance vanished. In that instant, a euphoric expression appeared on their faces. You could tell by the unclenched state of their bodies they were more at ease. A moment later the measured sonic waves from the jongee discreetly faded into their mind's shadows.

Several moments passed before JuJu spoke again, "Thank you, Gwin. As usual, your melodies are reverent to Gaan-lea. They help us understand his teachings of ourselves and our place in the scheme of Naah life."

The other Clan Lords were in agreement and extended Gwin their compliments. With sweat still dripping from his brow, Smrgo spoke, "Gwin I now understand Gaan-lea's enlightened lesson for individual liberty through freedom of thought..."

Before he could continue Fruble excitedly interrupted, "Gwin, my thoughts are clear, you have released me from the illusion of tyranny as freedom. You have rescued me from carrying out a galling deed against my fellow Naah. How could I have fallen for such a fraudulent prophet?"

"It is not your fault," Gwin started, "you were covertly persuaded by Tyrik Guebr pretending to be the oracle of Gaan-lea while collaborating with an off-world villain. A human brought this evil scheme to mine and Prime JuJu Ghar's attention."

Silence filled the room. At first, the expression on the faces of the Clan Lords was shock, which gradually turned to resentment and then to loathing. They all began to speak at once demanding immediate action. JuJu raised his hands for calm and interjected, "My friends, Gwin has done us a great service, but we must focus on the larger issues. Everyone that hears a speech from Tyrik Guebr is affected by this hypnotic spell. Our fellow Naah must somehow be awakened to the reality they are being orchestrated by a malicious traitor."

"You Gwin, you are the only one who can release the Naah from this vile affliction," Nennau remarked.

"I am in agreement, but that decision is completely up to Gwin," JuJu pronounced.

Gwin did not answer. He sat expressionless, gripped in serious thought about his future. He did not like being placed in this position. He knew what the reaction would be the moment he made the decision to follow JuJu's proposal. He knew it, but he still felt troubled.

Despite being Prime, JuJu was a solid Naah with no illusion of self-importance and would be the last one to ask Gwin to do something against his beliefs. He also knew Gwin would not hesitate to sacrifice his life for Naah, nor would he hesitate to sacrifice his life for Gaan-lea.

Gwin was fully aware that the role of the faithful was fraught with inner conflicts and incompatible, challenging events. In this case, the expected and necessary solution required a thorough understanding of Gaan-lea's words and a personal commitment to his faith. As he considered the request, he pondered the implications. While doing so he recalled one of Gaan-lea's teachings; "I have made you to have dominion over the works of your hands." For Gwin the substance of the meaning was clear. Only when a Naah has freedom of individual liberty can he implement the personal responsibility Gaan-lea has entrusted to him. Gaan-lea had given Gwin this power and he must decide whether to use it for this purpose or not, and either choice has huge consequences. If he did not, Naah would be doomed. No Naah would ever again be responsible for their own works and Gaan-lea's words would have no meaning and would not be followed.

Finally, Gwin spoke, "I can not, of course, deny your request - unless I be a fool - for it would be immoral to take no action and allow this travesty to continue. If this is the destiny Gaan-lea has chosen for me I must accept it. I have one caution for everyone to consider. When I play I will promote in each Naah an unconscious application of the primary truth of Gaan-lea. That truth is to overwhelm their condition of prejudice, lethargy, and dependence. In its place, I will inspire rigorous faith in individual liberty and responsibility. I will not direct them in any manner other than faith in Gaan-lea and dependence on their own freedom of thought, logical judgment, and confidence in reason."

"Thank you, Gwin, that is all I or anyone here would expect," JuJu agreed. "The liberty of free thought is the foundation of Gaan-lea teachings. The issue before us now is to find a way to persuade others to hear Gwin. Politically I can not and would not demand that of all Naah, it must be voluntary."

That is when I spoke up. "If I may offer a solution to your problem."

Immediately, and in a distasteful expression, one of the Clan Lords asked, "Who is this human?"

JuJu quickly replied, "He is Muxk Eutal. It was he and Gwin who brought this corruption to my attention. What do you have to offer Muxk?"

"Thank you Prime Ghar," I replied. In a humble tone I continued, "In many

societies, there are scheduled events to mark special occasions. On Earth, we call them holidays. During those times musical performers play traditional music for the crowds to enjoy. Are there any such occasions here?"

"Yes, but there are none scheduled in a reasonable time," one Clan Lord states.

I continued, "I have witnessed leaders of other societies organize special events to acknowledge a recent civic accomplishment or to salute elders and prominent persons. Is that a possibility?"

JuJu explains, "Only if it is organized in a non-political fashion. If a private corporation were to organize and finance such a gathering it might be possible. But how could Gwin be involved?"

"Since Tyrik Guebr claims to speak for Gaan-lea and, of course, it is well known that you Prime Ghar are a devoted follower of Gaan-lea, wouldn't a 'Wisdom of Gaan-lea' or some sort of cultural gathering be plausible? Part of the gathering would be various religious entertainers playing traditional songs. Gwin could take part. "

JuJu questioned, "If Gwin's melodies are played at this function will they also affect those who have listened to Guebr's broadcasts?"

"Apparently the alien's machine does not alter the minds over a broadcast medium. The proof of that is you," I pointed to the Clan Lord that watched him from home, "Even though you watched you were not affected. I'm confident that Gwin can devise a way for his melodies to impact those who may have been affected. This way anyone who heard one of Guebr's speeches will undoubtedly be reformed."

"Is that actually possible Gwin?" JuJu asked.

Gwin looked at Muxk expressionless but did not give an immediate answer. He thought for several moments then said, "It has never been attempted before, but it is theoretically plausible."

"Does anyone know of a private business that would assist in organizing or sponsoring such a gathering?" A different Clan Lord asked.

Clan Lord Baiqr spoke up, "I have a close friend, the owner of a broadcast company. If he and I combined our resources we could organize such an event very quickly. His name is Phut Lulling. We have recently spoken and I can assure you he is not tainted by Tyrik Guebr's insanity."

"That is excellent Baiqr," JuJu responded, "contact him and plan an event in two dags. Is that reasonable?"

Baiqr nodded, “I’m confident we can make this happen by that time.”

Suddenly there was an explosive rumble. Automatic security alarms blared and echoed off the walls. A mechanical voice dryly instructed everyone to stand still or be fired upon. The doors of the room flew open and the Prime Protection Force flooded in, weapons drawn. A high-ranking officer dressed in defensive gear calmly entered the room and approached Prime Ghar. He leaned over and whispered something to him. JuJu responded and the guard motioned for the others to lower their weapons, but stand at the ready.

Unruffled, JuJu turned to the group and informed them, “A foolish band of protestors set off a small-scale blast causing no damage. It is yet another attempt to prompt us into taking heavy-handed action, but I will not. We will find those responsible and they will be charged with a crime.” He turned to Gwin, “Can you be ready in two days?”

Gwin responded, “Do not worry Prime Ghar, I will be prepared. Nothing will hinder us from repairing this festering cruelty that has been wrought on all of Naah.”

Chapter 34 - The Power Of Dreams...

Pre-dawn is the calmest time on Naah. The easterly winds were slowing to sporadic breezes as Gwin-o'guin Feht kneels facing south. The crisp air is cool with a mustiness typical of the season. Occasionally a current of misty air blew across his furry face causing the fine hair on his chin to flutter. With his eyes closed and brow slightly furrowed he observes his morning prayer to Gaan-lea. When he finishes his prayer he opens his eyes and stares for several moments directly into the faint red and orange light of the horizon just before the double-dawning of the Naah suns.

I stood behind him waiting along with the four guards JuJu had assigned to ensure Gwin's safety. The guards stood at the ready, the fleece of their stony faces and manes were pale black; they kept their hands hidden in the wide folds of their thigh-length tunics.

Gwin calmly stood and turned toward me. His expression was peaceful with a relaxed smile; his large green eyes showed a glassy moistness I had not seen before.

"It is time to begin," he pronounced serenely.

"Yes, you go do your thing and I'll see you later."

"Are you not going to attend?" Gwin calmly wondered aloud.

"It would be unlike the Mule for him not to have spies everywhere. It's very likely he is fully aware of our plan. He isn't going to simply let you go through this without a fight. I'd guess he has some of those alien killers somewhere around here right now. He won't discard his evil scheme easily."

"That may be so, but there is tight security everywhere on the planet. JuJu made sure of that."

"You don't know this guy like I do. I assure you, he'll try something to stop you."

"What are you going to do?"

"Just concern yourself with your recital. I'll take care of the Mule."

For the first time since meeting Gwin he looked at me with a warm expression, "Be safe my friend," he said earnestly.

I nodded in the affirmative as I turned and briskly walked away. Clutching my

iJotter I commanded my Craft to go into stealth mode, undock from the spaceport, raise to five hundred feet and float just above me. Using the Craft's sensors I had it monitor 360 degrees of both upper space and the ground below for any potential hostile intent.

Tens of millions of Naah had spent the night along the Oyarsa promenade celebrating the new festival commemorating the 'Virtue Of Gaan-lea'. In the center and to one side of the long promenade sat a small stage. Erected to announce the various events. The festivities had begun mid-afternoon of the previous day and lasted all through the night. The entertainment had included performances by roving bands of musicians, displays of time-honored sculptures and paintings, a parade of Clans dressed in tribal costumes, and various jugglers and gymnastic artists. Prayer sites were set aside for offering of devotions to Gaan-lea along with plenty of food, drink, and folk dancing. The observance was to conclude with the morning sunrises of the Naah suns Hyoni and Hmoni.

Floating twenty-four thousand miles above the city of Gulway, Kriibo Nez restlessly stood in front of a bank of monitors intently watching the broadcasts of events below. This Feht Naah had been extremely lucky so far, he thought. He and a common human trader had defeated some of his best Moolala warriors. That naive trader had somehow out-manuevered an assault from three of his more experienced combat fighters. Regardless, their luck would soon come to an end.

A Moolala warrior wearing a hooded cloak to conceal his identity, inched his way through the jubilant crowd of Naah. Nearby Gwin was making his way to the stage for his performance. When the Moolala had crept to within a few yards of Gwin he raised his weapon and fired. One of the security guards escorting Gwin quickly identified the threat and reacted, swiftly jumping into the line of fire. The Moolala's first laser shot hit the guard in the shoulder. The guard moaned in pain and took the second shot to his torso. He immediately went into spastic twisting and dropped to the ground writhing in pain. At exactly the same moment two additional guards sprang into action and covered Gwin with their bodies. Another guard squeezed off two quick rounds at the Moolala from his electron gun, hitting him both times. The shot first blew off the Moolala's left arm and the second hit him in his left thigh, spinning him to the ground. The guard quickly ran over to the attacker and fired another shot to his head, killing him instantly.

Gwin scuffled away from the guards protecting him with his own weapon drawn. The Moolala attacker now lay dead a few feet away. Gwin quickly moved to the wounded guard laying in agony and placed his hand on the wound to his torso trying to bring some relief. The guard, half-conscious, smiles up at Gwin, "are you all right Grandè?" he asked. Gwin smiles, "yes, thanks to you."

Almost immediately several medical personnel arrived and quickly began treatment on the wounded guard. Gwin stood up and out of the way, quietly observed for a moment, then continued his walk to the waiting area just behind

the stage.

Simultaneously, I was on my way to the top of an adjoining office building when my Craft provided me a sensory visual of the attack on Gwin as well as the scuffle that followed. "I was afraid of that," I told myself. Still grasping the iJotter I summon my Craft as I raced to the roof of the building. When I got there it was waiting, floating two feet above the flat roof. After boarding, I quickly made my way to the command seat and engulfed my hands in the armrests. The Craft's sensors had identified and were monitoring a stationary gravitational flux in space twenty-two thousand miles above. It had to be Sanduval Mule, I told myself, commanding the Craft toward the gravity wave variation.

At the same instant Kriibo Nez turned the dials of his bracelet to the specific coordinates of a location on Naah just behind the stage along the Oyarsa promenade, and five minutes into the past.

I was there within a fraction of a second. There was no doubt the disturbance in gravitational space was the Mule's spaceship. Why else would it be hiding? I command my Craft to return to its normal teardrop shape for better maneuverability but to remain in stealth mode. Using its sensors I aim and fired a full-power, one-meter circular energy beam at nothing, nothing visible to the eye anyway.

When the energy beam strikes the Milvago's shields it caused a brilliant flicker and the ship lurched sideways. Inside the Milvago alert warnings blared. When the ship jerked Kriibo Nez lost his balance just before touching the green stone of his bracelet. Startled, he loses his shape-shifting concentration, instantaneously revealing his true identity as Sanduval Mule. Taking quick action he immediately returned to his desk and gave orders to his ship's crew to commence firing on the attacker, while at the same time dispatching four Moolala interceptors.

Meanwhile, the celebration on Naah was coming to an end. Phut Lulling gave a signal and the broadcast cameras turned to him on the stage. "My fellow Naah, this has truly been a glorious celebration of the virtues of Gaan-lea and the blessings his words bestow on all Naah. As is tradition, we will mark our expression of faith in Gaan-lea with a performance by a devout jongee soloist."

In reverence to traditional Gaan-lea faith, the crowd became hushed. The broadcast medium all turned their attention to the corner of the stage where Gwin-o'guin Feht calmly stood. After the crowd became quiet he sat down cross-legged on the floor of the stage. The huge crowd followed suit.

Gwin began his performance with a traditional melody that every Naah had heard many times since childhood. As he played, the audience reverently closed their eyes and within seconds became blissfully mesmerized. Inside their brains, swarms of neurons began firing across synapses on their way to the optic nerve

toward the membrane on which images are projected. With each melodious resonance, the pinging neurons caused various shades of purple clouds to appear within their minds' eye. Gradually an out-of-focus figure dreamily floats within the billowing bluish-red clouds. As the clouds slowly gather together the face of Gaan-lea materializes. The face slowly fades as the melodious timbre changes it into a pulsating white mass. The power of the harmonic resonance moves deeper through the tangle of the emotional maze of each Naah until the pulsing replicates the exact beat of their heart.

At that very moment, waves of acoustical sounds from Gwin's jongee began to narrate emotionally stimulating tales. The tales begin with the story of the creation of Naah. Music with different parts successively began the same melody. The notes merged until each tranquil Naah visualized the image of a colorful glowing shower of falling stars flashing across a dark sky. The flashing stars formed and reformed in kaleidoscope-like fashion into ever-changing geometric patterns of colors until finally the sky is filled with the rainbow hues of twinkling stardust. The glittering stardust floats like falling snowflakes until gently settling onto a dull landscape of brown and red wasteland. Out of the bluish mist above come two massive hands. The hands gently gather the glimmering stardust and skillfully mold the first Naah being. The giant hands tenderly lift the new being high into space toward the smoky-silhouetted face of Gaan-lea. The Naah being is then brought to life by the warm breath of Gaan-lea. Instantly every Naah felt the sensation of that breath on their face.

Within a billionth of a second additional tonal tales sped through their psyche. The reverberating tones continued weaving an ever-changing selection of images. Images of various historical Naah beings diligently building shining cities, heroes struggling and winning against oppression, and hard-fought battles against mystical villains. Each of these epic tales was declared successful by channeling the divine words of Gaan-lea. The tales strengthened the unshakable morality and virtue of the Naah individual. The lessons made clear that every Naah was a conqueror, no matter their life's condition. That every Naah was a uniquely courageous and independent sole within themselves. That each sovereign Naah freely accepted Gaan-lea's gifts of freedom and obligation for themselves and others, thus enjoying oneness with the Naah family.

At this point, Gwin sent tonal commands for psychic nano-bombs to seek out and destroy the molecules connecting the neurons of the implanted thoughts from the alien's machine. His final instructions were to reject the idea of groupthink and willingly accept the essence of individual rationale. They were to accept this natural condition of reasoned thought the moment they were touched by the dawning shadow of Gaan-lea. The broadcast audience was told to do the same the next time they saw the figure of Gaan-lea. Gwin ended his solo with a composition of soft sonatas accompanied by the rhythmic cadence of a joyful chorus of voices sung by all Naah.

Back in space, my initial attack had exposed my position to their scanners. Two Moolala interceptors emerged directly in front of me repeatedly firing their laser cannons. I rolled to the right, turned my nose upward and climbed, leveled out, rolled to the right again, and again leveled off. The skillful pilots of interceptors had followed my maneuvers and ended up behind me, so I suddenly came to a complete stop. Surprised by my action one of the interceptors swerved to avoid a collision. As it flew by I fired an energy beam directly at its power source. It exploded in a bright reddish-yellow ball of fire. The other interceptor had also weaved and flown by me and was immediately hit by hundreds of spiraling fragments. I now turned my attention back to Sanduval Mule's warship. Even though it was still invisible to the naked eye my Craft's sensors were honed in on its location.

Aboard the Milvago Sanduval Mule commanded his ship's weapons crew to begin firing. Almost instantly three-photon beams struck me hard forcing my Craft into an uncontrolled tumbling trajectory away from the ship. Sanduval had also given the command to ready his Voidray. It took several minutes for the Voidray to charge so he ordered the ship to continue firing its photon beams and antimatter cannons in my direction.

It took me several seconds before I was able to regain control of my Craft. Just as I did I received a communication from NSCA / Space Security Force, "Muxk Eutal this is Admiral Qhuano of Naah Space Security. Prime Ghar has instructed us to offer our support. I have dispatched a squadron of seven Tactical Vessels to assist and two of my battlecruisers are closing in on your position. What are our instructions?"

I immediately sent out my position and replied, "Welcome Admiral, if you can keep his fighters busy I will take care of the warship."

"My Tactical Vessels will do as you command."

"Thanks," I said hurriedly.

Just then six more interceptors sped out from an open hatch of the Milvago. An instant later the Naah Tactical Vessels appeared and flew into action. Three of them intervened, circled around and behind two of the interceptors. Firing repetitive laser blasts they quickly dispatched them both, causing them to explode into a fireball of thousands of pieces. The other four interceptors scattered and became engaged in an aggressive dogfight with the Naah Tactical Vessels. During the fighting one of the Naah vessels was struck, it plummeted toward the surface before bursting into flames.

My turn, I thought. I began zigging and zagging, tumbling and turning as I weaved and dodged the torrent of continued blasts being unleashed from the Mule's warship. As I closed in I command the Craft to accelerate directly at the

ship at maximum speed and stop ten yards from its surface. In an instant, I was hovering near the center mass of the ship, well inside the firing range of the fix-mounted beams and cannons. It was obvious the ship's protective screen was still activated and it wasn't going to be easy disrupting it. According to my Craft's calculations, it will take a continuous blast of energy for exactly 192.346 seconds before the shield would be damaged enough for a clear shot at the outer hull of the ship. Only then could I cause any actual damage. Backing away and floating fifty yards above the ship, I start firing a continuous full power energy beam directly at its screen. The screen flared and began to wax and wane an irregular orange hue.

The horizon glows brightly as the suns of Naah rise. Moments later the slow motion of the shadow of Gaan-lea's statue progressively lengthens along the Oyarsa promenade. The shadow gently reaches out and touches each Naah being along the way. As the shadow contacts an infected Naah a small nano-explosion disintegrates the offending molecule synapse within their minds, cleansing their thoughts. Random shouts of agony followed by lusty sounds of climaxing ecstasy are heard as the shadow moves along its unstoppable path. Murmuring voices of content come from every direction as irrational thoughts are systematically replaced. The euphoria of Gaan-lea's love and the enlightenment of liberty and rational reasoning is again ingrained into their minds.

Gradually the broadcast cameras turn, slowly panning the crowd along the promenade until they transmit the glowing image of the statue of Gaan-lea to every Naah within the realm.

Inside the Milvago Sanduval Mule sits at his desk still monitoring several images. One is the attack on his ship; another observed his ship's shield integrity, three others witness the result of Gwin's performance on the surface of Naah and throughout the realm. At the same time, he contemplates this unexpected turn of events. He broods for the slightest of moments. With all his cleverness and forethought, he has made one small mistake that will never happen again. The miscalculation was the unexpected depth of involvement of a human. One trivial human trader had intervened and disrupted his plan. Is it possible this is the same human who involved himself in his business once before? That answer will unquestionably be discovered in due time. If it is the same human he obviously has a connection to the U.O.H. No matter, the universe will soon be cleansed of this human menace. There's no escaping their destiny. Regardless, this is a minor occurrence having a minuscule influence on the multiple time-space regions currently following his preordained objectives. His cerebral amelioration rectifier had functioned as expected and is a valuable addition to the techniques available to achieve his goal. It will be utilized again when necessary.

A metal door slides open and a terrified Tyrik Guebr enters. Nervous and confused he snivels, "Who are you," Tyrik whined. "Where is Kriibo?" Sanduval Mule simply gave him an intolerant smile, pulled out his weapon, and fired a single shot from his laser pistol. The shot left a burning hole through Tyrik's forehead. His

body instantly crumbled to the floor like a marionette's puppet whose strings had been abruptly severed.

Taking a slow deep breath to control his innate impatience, Sanduval calmly and precisely turns the dials of his bracelet, then touches its green stone. His ship instantly disappears.

Chapter 35 - Wind Beneath My Wings...

It was just before sunset. Vienna sat in her room finishing an early meal when she heard a polite knock at her door. The latch slowly turned and Jokul cordially peaked around the threshold and said, "I am here to escort you to the departure point."

"Come in," Vienna replied.

When Jokul stepped into the small room he presented an imposing figure. He wore a dark purple, almost black outfit with heavy padding on the thighs and knees of the pants. The legs of the pants were tucked into tall black well-worn knee-high boots. Covering his head was a helmet with a clear pull-down shield to cover his eyes. Over the tight-fitting shirt, he wore a combat breastplate. The arch of his wings had padded protection as well. Strapped around his waist was a wide black leather belt where he carried a holstered pistol on one side and a sheathed sword on the other. A strap for the rifle on his back ran across his chest. Jokul wisely concealed his rugged fighting abilities behind his pleasant sunny nature and easy smile. Nonetheless, when it became necessary he could kill quickly without a scrap of hesitation or animosity.

Pushing back a strand of hair from her face Vienna stared momentarily at his stunning appearance. She stood, her voice relaxed, "I'm ready."

They made their way along a maze of corridors, turns, and doorways until finally came to two tall wooden doors. The doors opened to an expansive terrace. At the opposite end was a large cave entrance. Outside the cave, Vienna could see the evening sky just beginning to turn to nightfall. Thrufi, Jamzillia, and several other Mogrif were assembled nearby.

Altogether there were seven going on this mission. Two Mogrif fighters who, like Jokul, were dressed in combat attire and armed with pistols, rifles, and swords. Thrufi, Samlila, and Jamzillia were also fully armed and dressed for combat.

When they arrived Thrufi walked up to Vienna, with an outstretched hand, he returned her bracelet and ring. "I trust you will use these as agreed," he frankly insisted.

Vienna looked directly into Thrufi's eyes and said proudly, "My word is my promise."

Thrufi calmly turned to the group and declared, "This must be a stealth operation. If Euris or anyone else realizes we have changed their computer systems they will take corrective action. Also, we must realize that our undertaking tonight will

forever change our world. The weight of our actions will cause our fellow Theta much pain and confusion and lead to challenging outcomes for our future. After tonight it will take courage, wisdom, and compassion by everyone to ensure an optimistic destiny for Theta.”

Everyone was quiet. Thrufi’s accurate description of the outcome of their undertaking was enough to make them all take a moment to ponder their future. They knew not what the future held, yet they were determined to free the Walkers and regain control of their planet.

Moments later Thrufi commanded, “We shall proceed as planned.”

Thrufi gathered Samlila into his arms and Jokul did the same with Vienna. Jamzillia could fly by herself.

Two by two they stepped onto the rock mantel of the cave entrance and took flight. Diving toward the surface they checked their descent at two hundred feet above the treetops, hovered for a moment, and with wings moving in perfect cadence, began to fly north.

The waxing crescent light from Theta’s two moons gave the night a somber feeling. In tight formation, the flock quietly swept across the endless tapestry of the star-studded sky. In unison, they gradually glided lower until they leveled off just feet above the shadowy forest below. As they smoothly wing their way above the treetops Vienna could hear the low buzzing hum of insects coming from deep inside the forest.

In sharp contrast to the bird’s eye view of the drab forest, the moonlight reflecting off the tranquil prairie made the open land ahead faintly visible. When they reached the grassy plain the old house came into view. The closer they got the faster Vienna’s heart pounded. Deliberately arriving from the forest side, the crew silently swept low, stopping to hover fifty feet above the house. Two guards could be seen standing at rigid attention in front of the main entrance. With slow, silent wing beats they gradually drifted back toward the rear of the house.

Using his left hand Thrufi made a silent gesture to the others. A moment later the two fighters quietly touched down and took up defensive positions. Thrufi and Jokul gently landed a few meters from the rear of the house and released their passengers. Jamzillia came down just behind them. Sneaking closer Thrufi detected the glowing light of a security beam bordering the window they had planned to enter. Silently, he gave another hand signal. Unzipping his pack one of the fighters pulled out a long strip of reflective material and hands it to Jokul. As cautiously as possible Jokul patiently places the reflective strip along the four sides of the window’s frame.

Using his sword Thrufi gently pried open the window. With another hand signal, he gestures to one of the fighters who folded his wings and got down on his hands

and knees. Thrufi points to Jokul then to Vienna, then Jamzillia and Samlila, motioning them to enter.

With extreme caution, Jokul led the way. Each one stepped on the fighter's back and ducked through the window into the back room. The same room where the terminal is located. Jokul drew his pistol and stood guard at the doorway.

Remembering the computer was voice-activated Vienna stooped as close as possible and whispers, "Computer activate". Immediately a holographic image unfolded from the top of the desk. When it finished a Rorschach-like icon dropped from the top of the image and slid to the center. It grew larger until it was almost half the height of the holographic screen. After the startup icon image finished Vienna touched an icon on the screen. Instantly a password field appeared.

"Password? Jamzillia can you get past this?" She whispered.

"Probably," Jamzillia replied, her voice hushed, "but it may take more time than we have."

Samlila whispered, "Do you think Euris might use the same password as the terminal in his office?"

In a low voice, Jamzillia asked, "Do you know it?"

"Yes, I've watched him input it many times. Let me try."

"Wait," Vienna softly cautioned, "If you are wrong it may set off an alarm. It might even wipe the main drive."

"We'll have to take that chance," Jamzillia quietly declared.

Vienna hesitated, nodded and Samlila touched several key images projected onto the desktop. The screen instantly changed. Hundreds of lines of code scroll by until the operating system showed a blank root screen with a blinking cursor.

Jamzillia pulled the small device out of her pant leg pocket and set it on the desk next to the terminal then typed in several commands. "This may take a few moments to upload," she said in a low voice.

Time seemed to stand still as everyone waited in silence. Jokul maintained his defensive position at the main door, Samlila stood to one side in silence, while Jamzillia and Vienna intently watched the holographic screen. Complex code scrolled across the screen for several seconds as the computer did its work.

"The spawning decryption algorithm worked. It connected to the matrix array," Jamzillia whispered. "Now it's loading our new program instructions into the

network.”

A few moments later Jamzillia softly said, “The process is complete.” Removing the device she placed it back in her pocket, and in a low voice told the computer, “shut down”. Instantly the holographic screen collapsed.

Undetected, they quietly crawled back out the window, remove the alarm bypass, and silently lifted off, heading west toward the research laboratory.

As they flew higher, Vienna shivered with the cold. “We will be there soon,” Jokul reassured her.

The facility was located in a desolate stretch of wilderness over seventy miles outside the city of Klynash. It took twenty minutes of silent flight through the gloomy moonlight before the laboratory came into view. As they approached it was obvious the two-story rectangular building was important because it was well protected. There was a ten-foot-high fence emitting a form of energy force field surrounding the whole compound. Sentinels armed with automatic weapons were stationed in four looming towers. Heavily armed sentries patrolled the perimeter of the fence and two additional guards were positioned on the roof.

From this height it was unlikely they would be detected, but getting in and out without being seen was going to be a challenge. Thrufi gave a hand signal to the others.

In near stationary flight, they waited a few moments until a slow-moving cloud began to block the light of the largest moon. Just as the moonlight dimmed two Mogrif fighters raced into action. Folding back their wings like a Paragrinn Hawk after its prey, they dove straight down. When they closed in on the roof one fighter spirals and quickly streaks by a guard. The glint of the fighter’s steel sword could be seen just before he cuts the guard’s throat, almost decapitating him. The guard immediately crumbles, shakes several times, and quietly dies. At the same time, the other fighter threw himself onto the remaining guard taking him down hard. The guard snarls and grabs for his weapon. Standing over him with his foot on his chest the Mogrif fighter drove his sword through the guard’s neck. The guard’s face contorted into a horrified sneer followed by a muffled sound of gurgling as he gasped for breath. With impending death in his eyes, he could do nothing as the blood escaped his body with each rhythmic pulse of his heart. A pool of dark red fluid formed around him until his heart finally stopped.

“Hold on tight,” Jokul told Vienna.

Complying, Vienna tightened her grip around his chest and broad shoulders. A moment later he folded back his wings and he and Vienna plunged straight down toward the center of the building. Just before crashing into the roof, Jokul spread his wings wide. He arched his back while tilting his body upward, produced

several quick strong beats of his wings, and leveled off. Instantly they were floating just above the rooftop until gradually touching down. Jamzillia and Thrufi soon join them and quietly land.

Once on the roof, they quickly made their way to a staircase at the far end of the building. One fighter stationed himself at the doorway while the other led the way as the group descended the stairs. With the Mogrif fighter leading the way they hurried along a dark corridor, past branching hallways until stopping at a metal door. Moving quietly through the door they enter the main corridor lined with glass-enclosed rooms. At this time of night, the rooms were empty of any workers so they quickly made their way down the hall to another set of metal double doors. Next to this door was a touch screen security panel. Samlila moved to the front and quietly touched several symbols. The clunk sound of a latch release was heard as the door unlocked and both doors slide open revealing a large, dimly lit room. They lingered at the doorway for a moment scanning room, then cautiously entered. Once the team was inside the double doors automatically slide closed.

A quick study of the room revealed storage racks lining the back wall and a raised island in the middle of the room. On the island were numerous terminals with transparent screens floating above them filled with moving data. Protruding from the back of the terminals were metal conduits branching off toward two humming machines set off to each side, one larger than the other. To the left of the island was a glass-enclosed botanic habitat filled with a myriad of odd-looking plants growing out of clear containers. Each container was filled with a different colored fluid. Above each container were artificial light sources making the plants glow in dissimilar hues.

The larger of the two machines was rectangular, made of dull slate-grey metal with a square transparent door in its center. There was a spigot at one end slowly dripping a sludgy green substance into a small crystal vial with more vials waiting in a line. The smaller machine was cylindrical in shape girdled with rib-like fins made of polished material. The whole mechanism was mounted on a square support frame. Surrounding the frame was a series of chrome tubes connecting it to an array of what appeared to be compressed gas cylinders, each with a different emblem attached. Sticking out the end of the machine were four small silver vapor canisters.

Suspended from the ceiling above the center island was a floating platform surrounded on four sides by translucent walls. An instrument console could be seen inside the clear cubical. A maze of electrical cables snaked their way from the console, along the ceiling, then dropped down into the back of each machine.

Jamzillia took several moments to survey the operation and layout of the contraptions in the room. Finally, she turns to Vienna and says, “We need to get up there,” pointing to the platform.

They made their way to a staircase behind the larger machine, up the stairs, and into the console area. Inside there was another transparent screen floating above a more complex tech station terminal.

“If our program worked correctly we should be able to access their program through this controller,” Jamzillia remarked.

When Vienna touched the floating screen it came to life. Multiple frames of interface images opened on the screen. One frame displayed a 3-D schematic cross-section of the larger machine. The rest of the frames were filled with a myriad of streaming analytical data; flowing DNA simulation maps, lists of raw materials in use and their levels, timeline monitors, icons of control buttons, and digital gauges.

Jamzillia set the small data drive next to the console and Vienna began to touch symbols on the screen. Her program was designed to converge multiple input data streams that cascaded into a single dynamic river of self-destruction for the nanoparticle. When she touched one of the symbols the data streams on the screen slowed and the large machine came to a complete stop. The gauges adjusted their levels of raw materials and the machine again began its rhythmic hum.

“That should do it,” she says to Jamzillia.

“Good,” Vienna says as she touched another screen icon. When she did a three-dimensional schematic of the smaller machine appeared on the display.

“This must be the device they’re using to make the Earth virus,” she says.

When the smaller machine was displayed the data in the other windows also change.

“I need the formula,” she says anxiously as she touched the screen, scrolling through the various data streams.

“There, there it is. Can we load that onto your device?” she asks.

“This is a one-way device. Upload only, no downloading from this console,” Jamzillia admits.

“Damn,” Vienna grumbled.

Suddenly six well-armed and aggressive guards charged through the double doors rapidly firing their laser rifles. Laser beams were bouncing off the walls and ricocheting around the room. Thrufi, Jokul, and the Mogrif fighter squatted low and begin firing their projectile rifles, promptly taking down three of the guards. Loud grunts and moans were heard as each one was struck.

“We must leave... NOW!” Thrufi yells to the others.

“Not yet, I need that formula,” Vienna shouts.

Jamzillia raced over and snatches up the device, grabbed Vienna by the shoulders, turns her around, and forcibly pushed her out the door and down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs, Vienna struggles loose from Jamzillia’s grip. With laser blasts whizzing by her head, she stayed low and ran toward the smaller machine. Grabbing one of the completed containers she immediately thrust it into her pocket, and dove to the floor. Moving swiftly she removes the ring from her left hand and slides it onto the middle finger of her right hand with her bracelet.

With three guards down the others rushed the intruders with swords drawn. Jokul fired and killed one with a shot to the head, Thrufi swung the butt of his rifle knocking another guard to the ground, then turned to fight the other guard. He gracefully pulls his sword from its scabbard and with a side swing of his blade, he slashes the guard across the abdomen.

Suddenly the downed guard came off the floor and thrust his blade at Thrufi, slicing him in the left thigh. Thrufi winced in pain and fell to his knees. The guard raised his sword and started a deadly thrust toward Thrufi’s chest. At that moment Vienna directed a round one-inch-thick energy beam from her right hand. The energy beam passed completely threw the guard’s neck.

Shocked, blood spurting out both sides of his neck, he turned and stared at Vienna before collapsing to his knees, doing a face plant into the floor.

Surprised yet curious Thrufi glances a Vienna and gave her a thankful nod of his head.

Now that the guards were eliminated the intruders regrouped next to the doorway. Jamzillia promptly inspects Thrufi’s thigh injury. Acting swiftly she heats her sword with her laser pistol and cauterizes the bloody gash. Thrufi’s body stiffened, but he releases no sound. He was wounded but still able to move and fight.

“We leave now,” Jokul insisted.

As Jokul leads the way the intruders rush out the double doors. They were rapidly moving along the corridor when a klaxon trumpeted the warning alarm. Moving as quickly as possible they made their way through the next doorway, and down another hall until they reached the base of the staircase to the roof. Behind them, they could hear the thumping of multiple footsteps advancing on their position. The group hurried up the stairs. The Mogrif fighter bringing up the rear crouched low, taking up a defensive position at the doorway.

More footsteps could be heard as even more guards responded. When the oncoming guards appeared the Mogrif fighter empties his projectile rifle down the hall. He followed the others up the stairs and took another defensive position at the top of the staircase. Ejecting his empty cartridge he quickly slams another in his rifle and continues firing down the stairwell at the advancing guards.

On the roof, Jamzillia yelled to Thrufi, "I'll carry Samlila," as she scoops up Samlila, takes two large strides, then leaps high and forward into the air. With her wings flapping hard and fast, she propels herself forward, gains height, and is swallowed by the darkness of the night sky.

The fighter at the top of the stairwell suddenly takes a hit in the chest, stiffens, and collapses, his limp body tumbling down the stairwell. Quickly taking his place the other fighter continues firing at the guards below. Jokul hurriedly grabs Vienna and leaps into the air.

Thrufi shouts, "withdraw," as he and the remaining fighter quickly leap off the roof and take flight.

After the guards from the stairwell stormed the roof they began firing at the retreating raiders. Abruptly Jokul takes a laser hit to his left shoulder, and grimaces but keeps flying. Vienna, facing backward, raises her right arm and discharges a thin, ten-foot-wide energy beam at the guards on the roof, striking two of them. Their bodies were cut in half, the pieces slid to the ground, twisted, and flailed until death finally arrived. With wings flapping to stay aloft Thrufi and the other Mogrif fighter turned to face the rooftop. While gaining height and distance they continue to fiercely exchange fire with the remaining guards.

Wounded, Jokul was losing blood and weakening just as another shot hits him in the right-wing causing him to wobble to one side, almost dropping Vienna. Still clutching her as well as he could, but unable to maintain his momentum and altitude, he banks right and glides toward the forest. Moving as quickly as possible Vienna removes the ring from her right hand and puts it back on her left hand.

Jokul was flowing in and out of consciousness when he spots an open area of the forest devoid of trees. Using all his strength he willed himself to adjust his glide path toward the clearing. Drifting lower and lower he was unable to control his descent and they began to plummet. Gaining velocity as they plunge, Vienna tries to rouse Jokul to no avail. Thinking quickly, just before they hit the ground Vienna touches the blue stone on her ring and stops time.

Wiggling her way out of Jokul's clutches Vienna inspected the ground where they were about to crash. The area is flat, covered with mossy grass and small stones except for a basketball-size rock half-buried right where Jokul's head would land. She frantically started digging around the rock but isn't able to unseat it.

Realizing that moving the rock was a lost cause she forcefully pushed the floating Jokul to one side just as time restarts. Jokul hit the ground with a gentle thump, letting out a slight moan.

Rushing to give him aid, Vienna struggles and strains until finally wrestled the hefty Jokul over onto his back. With a pained expression on his face, he looked up at Vienna, gave her a steely gaze, and tells her, “Depart, now! Do not wait.”

“Absolutely not,” Vienna says matter-of-factly. “Get up and move,” she demands.

Vienna grabs Jokul’s right arm, puts it around her neck, and with great exertion helped him to his feet. Standing, but unsteady, Jokul leaned toward her for support. He was taller and easily three times her weight so she was having a hard time carrying even a portion of his bulk. With much effort, they slowly start to trudge their way across the field toward a wooded area. Just then a shadowy figure stepped out of the forest. They both froze. Unable to move with any speed, they simply stood and waited.

A moment later they recognized Thrufi limping his way toward them accompanied by the Mogrif fighter Lieutenant Gwoza. Running to assist, the Lieutenant relieved Vienna and helped Jokul make their way toward the tree line. It took a while for them to cross the short distance to Thrufi. Once together the small group of injured raiders made their way into the sanctuary of the forest canopy.

They hadn't gone far into the interior when they found a secluded meadow of emerald-green moss among the towering trees. It was a good place to rest and attend to Jokul’s injuries. The hole in his shoulder, still reeking of burnt flesh, had finally stopped bleeding so Vienna bandaged it with pieces of cloth from Lieutenant Gwoza’s utility pack. The wing injury was more worrisome and would require a splint. Vienna and Lieutenant Gwoza cut some small branches and were able to secure them to his wing with a thin rope, also from Lieutenant Gwoza’s utility pack. His wing needed to be set properly which made it essential they get back to the mountains as soon as possible. Daylight was on its way and if there were any J'nus troopers out trying to locate them it will make finding them much easier.

“He needs better medical attention,” Vienna says as she tried to make Jokul more comfortable.

“I’ll be okay,” Jokul claimed, brushing Vienna away, “I can still walk and shoot. Thrufi, how are you doing?”

“I am fine. Still able to fight and I can fly. Glad Jamzillia took your sister, if she were captured I would be unable to forgive myself.”

With a quick head jerk, Vienna turned and gazed at Jokul, a look of shock and confusion on her face.

“Samlila is your sister,” she asked. With another turn of her head she looked at Thrufi, “that means... she is your niece?”

“Yes, Samlila is the daughter of my brother Haviju,” Thrufi admits. “Thank you for taking out that guard back there. You killed him with some kind of power beam. Where did you get such a weapon?”

Vienna was hesitant to answer. She couldn't tell them anything that might cause the U.O.H. to think she had changed their society. Deciding that a small amount of knowledge wouldn't hurt she began to explain, “Well, my bracelet and ring...”

Lieutenant Gwoza, says, “Quiet,” making a gesture to listen.

The humming sound of a low-flying craft could be heard coming toward them from the south. Quickly grabbing their weapons they took cover under the wide leafy branches of the trees. The sounds grew louder as a heavily armored flying vehicle slowly buzzed overhead.

“We must leave here as soon as possible. If there are hovercraft then ground troops can not be far behind,” Thrufi observes.

“If we go too deep into this overgrowth we will be unable to gain flight. If we are going to survive we have to get back to the clearing and launch from there,” Jokul added.

“Jokul is right,” Thrufi agrees. “Lieutenant you carry Jokul, I can carry Vienna. If we fly low and steady we can make it back to the mountains by mid-morning.”

Meanwhile, it had taken over two hours for Jamzillia and Samlila to eventually reach the mountain fortress. After arriving Jamzillia immediately informed the Synods of what had occurred at the laboratory and their narrow escape.

“You have to help them. They could be hurt or captured,” Samlila anxiously insisted.

“Worry not Samlila, we will,” Brevet Marshal Ravaluf assured her.

Without delay, he briefed and dispatched a squad of Mogrif Raiders. They were assigned to find Thrufi utilizing the tracking device embedded in his combat suit. Moments later a squad of ten fighters leaped two by two out of the cave entrance and took flight.

Back in the forest, Thrufi hobbled along leading the small group as they made

their way back toward the clearing. Just as they arrived at the fringe of the open field they noticed assault troops entering the open space from the opposite side. The troops were led by a pair of ferocious Klachan-Cur hounds making snarling, snorting sounds.

“We don’t have much time,” Thrufi’s voice rumbled as he suddenly lifts Vienna in his arms and lamely began to run. After taking three lumbering steps they were airborne. Vienna’s stomach tightened as she strained to hold on to Thrufi. Directly behind them, Gwoza awkwardly lifted Jokul, struggled with the extra weight but was finally able to take to the air.

As quickly as they could the foursome gained altitude. Unfortunately, the setting moonlight gave off just enough ambient light for them to be noticed by the oncoming troops. Immediately they began blitzing the fliers with rapid laser fire while quickly advancing.

Under heavy assault, the flyers weave and dodge the incoming salvo. Now airborne they promptly turned away from the charging assault troops and headed back toward the wooded area. Flying just above the treetops they noticed the hovercraft returning and headed straight for them.

As the hovercraft closed in on the escaping fliers it fired two missiles. The missiles streaked toward the fliers at warp speed. Quickly veering in opposite directions Thrufi and Gwoza swerved out of the way and the missiles flew by harmlessly.

Just before the hovercraft could begin its next assault the squad of Mogrif Raiders arrived. Launching their attack from high above, they began firing their projectiles at both the ground troops and the hovercraft.

Out of the flock two of the Raiders dove in unison directly toward the hovercraft. As they plunged lower they dodged the hail of laser fire. At the last moment, the two made a high-speed maneuver. Rhythmically they peeled away, banked laterally, nimbly swirled, and swooped down both sides of the hovercraft. As they passed they tossed two magnetized explosive devices that attached themselves to the hovercraft’s outer hull. The Raiders quickly streaked away, distancing themselves from the hovercraft as fast as possible. Seconds later it exploded into an orange ball of fire. Large pieces of flaming debris tumbled toward the troops on the ground.

In the sky above the forest, the two teams eagerly regrouped. Now under the protection of the squad of Mogrif Raiders, Thrufi, Lieutenant Gwoza, and their passengers hurriedly winged their way toward the safety of the mountains.

Chapter 36 - Humor and Rapture...

Sanduval Mule's warship had abruptly vanished. One instant I was vigorously assaulting the ship's defensive screens; the next I was firing into empty space. After it vanished, I directed my Craft to scan for his location projected out to the maximum range, with negative results. There was no telling where or when he had escaped, so following him would be impossible.

"Damn," I said aloud, "The bastard ran. I wanted to end his life once and for all."

Contacting Naah Space Security, "Admiral Qhuano, the villainous reprobate has retreated," I informed him.

"My forces are prepared to follow on your command," Commander Qhuano said enthusiastically.

"His location is unknown, so at this point that's impossible," I replied.

"Companion Muxk, if your objective has been achieved are you in need of further assistance?"

"No, your support is no longer needed thank you. I'm sorry you lost one of your pilots."

"He followed his duty and is now with Gaan-lea," Commander Qhuano said plainly. "If you require no further assistance we will return to the NSCA operating station."

"Thanks again for your help," I responded.

The fighting over, I took the opportunity to ponder my situation. I was already floating far above Naah, which was no longer in danger from the Mule. I could very easily go back to Earth and tell the U.O.H. my assignment here has been accomplished. Anyway, I needed to get back and find Vienna as soon as possible. That is if those scumbags will tell me where she is. On second thought, I really should see Gwin one more time. I'd grown rather fond of that furry flute player and should wish him luck before I go.

Remaining in stealth mode, I headed for the surface. Moments later I was floating just above the building where I had boarded. After stepping out onto the roof, with my hand on the iJotter, I ordered my Craft to again change its shape into a trading vessel and remain in stealth mode until it had once again docked at the Gulway spaceport.

Once back to street level, I roamed through the loitering throngs of joyous Naah.

Oddly enough in their jubilation, they took little notice of an alien-human walking amongst them. I finally located Gwin surrounded by a phalanx of well-wishers, admirers, and flatterers. He looked very uncomfortable amid all the attention and admiration.

Making my way through the crowd I finally made it to within a few yards of him and offered him a way to escape. "Grandè Feht," I said loudly, "Prime JuJu Ghar would like an audience."

Gwin recognized my voice, turned his head, and gave me a nod. The mentioning of JuJu Ghar was reason enough for him to kindly excuse himself from the crowd and we, accompanied by several guards, headed toward the Deitas. "I take it by the number of admirers your performance was successful?" I speculated.

Gwin was still coming to grips with the enormity of what he had done. He had graciously accepted the responsibility Gaan-lea had bestowed on him and was now subjected to the consequences. Over the cycles, he had become a solitary being and did not relish this outpouring of attention. "I hope to soon be away from all this. It was not my intent."

"You should be proud. The result of your efforts has saved the Naah from a future of subconscious slavery. They can now live in peace."

"I am pleased by the outcome, of course," Gwin said humbly, "but there will always be those who wish to control others, so our peace may be fleeting. Although you are correct, at least for a short period. Do you know what JuJu wants of me?"

"Well... to be honest, JuJu doesn't really want you. I made that up so you could get away from the crowd," I confessed.

"You tricked me, and lied... again?" Gwin said with a slight chuckle in his voice. Turning serious, "Were you able to locate that fraudulent Naah being?"

"I found him and he revealed his true cowardly self and ran. I don't know where."

"It is peculiar that no one has seen nor heard from Tyrik Guebr this morning. Where could he be?" Gwin wondered aloud.

"Since their plan has failed, maybe the Mule took that Guebr fellow with him."

"That is a distinct possibility," Gwin agreed. "The selection is tomorrow, so we shall see if he makes an appearance. Will you be able to track the foul heathen?"

"I would if I could, but I have no way of knowing where he went."

“Does this mean your task here has been fulfilled?”

“Yes, my... task, has been completed.”

“What will you do now?”

“I guess I’ll go back to trading.”

I didn’t dare tell Gwin the whole truth. There were still some secrets he need not know and I wasn’t going to divulge.

“But you do not have your required inventory,” Gwin stated.

“That won’t be a problem, I’ll let my boss know the difficulty he caused by not fully informing me of all the details. Although I would like to take a small amount of that beebuyu meat with me for personal consumption. I’ve acquired a taste for them.”

“Of course, would you like a keg of pypoo juice to wash it down?”

“Huh... no, that won’t be necessary, but thanks for the offer.” I don’t think I could stomach any more of that unpalatable spicy drink. Anyway, I need to keep my single wit at least somewhat composed.

“What of those galactic beings who gave you your weapon, you know the ‘concerned ones’ you spoke of? What of them?”

“I’m sure they know by now that Sanduval Mule’s plan has been thwarted. If they are true to their nature, which at times can be contradictory, my return to Earth will be encouraged.”

“I hope you have a pleasant and uneventful return. I assume we will meet again,” Gwin said as he put a friendly arm around my shoulder.

“Sure, I will return if you like. I’ll bring my mate the next time.”

“You have not mentioned a mate before,” Gwin remarked, “are you ashamed of it?”

“The issue was never pertinent. By the way, she is not an ‘it’ and no, there is no shame. She is intelligent, strong, and alluring.”

Gwin was thoughtful for a moment and said, “Mates are important. I hope to find one myself in the near future.”

“I’m sure there will be plenty of lovely Naah females for you to choose from now

that the Gwin-o'guin Feht name is widely known.”

Gwin turn his head toward me and allowed a sly grin to peak through his typical deadpan stare. An expression I hadn't seen from him before. He nodded his head in agreement. Obviously, he had thought about that himself.

By this time we were nearing the Deitas. Out front, there was a large group of politicians and bureaucrats gathered together wanting to take advantage of being seen with Gwin, the hero of the moment. I didn't envy the problems he was about to encounter. But he was intelligent and strong-willed enough not to be manipulated by his newfound fame or the misleading vows of political jackals.

I stopped before we got too close to the crowd. It would serve no good purpose for me to stay any longer. Naah's future has been preserved, it's beings were now able to use their free will to determine their own future. My purpose for being here is over.

“Gwin my friend, I will leave you now. You have more than enough obstacles facing you than to have a human around causing you more difficulties. When you see JuJu Ghar thank him for me for sending his security fleet. They were very helpful. Chasing the Mule would have been much harder without them. I think both you and JuJu Ghar will honor your ancestors by building a world fit for your descendants.”

“Humans are of no consequence,” Gwin quipped out of character. “Muxk, if not for you we would have been unaware of the attempt to control the Naah Realm. We owe you our gratitude. I am sure JuJu will want to personally thank you,” Gwin confessed.

“I'm honored by your words, but no one owes me anything,” I replied. “As a recent friend suggested, the only appreciation necessary is you be ready to serve other beings if they need assistance. Anyway, it was you, your faith in Gaan-lea, and the wisdom of JuJu Ghar that saved Naah.”

Even though Muxk had professed his disbelief in a deity, Gwin knew by his words and actions that his moral compass conformed to many religious convictions. Which, in Gwin's view, made him an honorable human. “Will you continue looking for that Mule being?”

“That heinous creature has proven to be very elusive, but I'm sure he'll eventually reappear to cause problems somewhere. Although, right now he is not the highest of priorities for me.”

“Then you should return to your mate. Remember, you will always have a friend on Naah.”

Muxk extended his hand. Gwin took a moment to look at this gesture, then reached out his furry hand and they shook. It was the first time Gwin had actually performed this Earthly gesture of friendship. At least the ending of this journey was more satisfying than the beginning, I thought.

“Be safe my friend, I will see you again,” I said. With that, I turned and headed for the spaceport and my Craft. I needed to get back to Earth 3124 to make sure Vienna was safe. The U.O.H. may be powerful but they were not trustworthy. Nor were they virtuous enough to acknowledge whether or not she was in danger.

Chapter 37 - What A Wonderful World...

Once back aboard my Craft I merged with it and commanded it to plot the fastest course back to Earth 3124, making sure it included in the calculations my ability to travel through time.

Under normal circumstances, I would make the trip to Earth in the current timeline and then alter my timeline once I was there. But I wasn't sure that was the fastest way home.

Because the universe is always expanding, combining space travel with time travel can become complex. But the way I figure it, because I'm still within the Laniakea Supercluster, if I can go back in time when the Sol system was closer to the system of the Naah Realm, it may take less time to get back to Earth.

I felt a tingling chill that made me shiver. There was a prickling sensation in my head as the Craft compiled various astronomical computations. They included the trajectory of our course as well as the position and velocity of celestial bodies. A moment later I got a flash of increased data input. According to the Craft's calculations, going back in time 20,699 Earth years, and at maximum speed, I could be back in 61.544 Earth hours of my now time. Once I was again orbiting Earth, I could return to Earth year 3124.

"Sixty-one hours, that isn't too bad," I tell myself. Following this plan will take me to a historic time on Earth I've never been to before. Of course, I won't be able to spend any time exploring Earth in that time-space even though I'd like to. Anyway, if either me or my Craft were seen some 20,000 Earth years in the past it would clearly unnerve the humans of that time. The majority were simple hunter-gathers busy trying to survive, and farmers living in small clusters.

Commanding my Craft to rise to ninety thousand miles above Naah I configure the front one-third of its structure to be transparent. Floating in space the planet's appearance was deceptively tranquil. Slowly turning the dials on my bracelet to exactly match the computed timeline of Earth's past, I pause for a moment. Studying the star-studded panorama of hanging lights against the black void of space I mentally arranged them into patterns I could remember. Out of habit I take a deep breath and hold it as I touched the green stone of the bracelet. Instantly the star patterns changed. The planet Naah hadn't changed much at all, but the surrounding star-scape certainly had.

At that point, I instructed my Craft toward Earth at maximum speed.

The ability to reshape the Craft's interior at will is extremely handy. All I had to do was think of a comfortable room with modest furnishings and within seconds

my Craft obliged. Concentrating again, in the background, was the sound of Toad Field playing their syncopated song 'Doubtful By Nature' filled the room. The melancholic lyrics filled with cynicism and distrust contrasted perfectly with the undulating exuberance of the jazzy rhythm. Exhausted, I lounged back on the long soft couch, closed my eyes, and took the time to relax.

Uncontrolled, my memories wander back in time; to a time before I possessed the bracelet and ring time devices. Before first meeting Vienna many time journeys ago. A time when I was an unimportant writer plagued by fear and restless despair. A despair that increased as I grew older until I was terrified of everyday life. The more I had tried to tilt the scales of life in my favor the more discouraged I became. Degree by degree my consciousness drifted until I descend into a deep slumber.

Chapter 38 - The Wicked Or The Divine...

The planet Vaalai, located on the outer parameter of the yellow sun Mu Abell d44, lay in the biological Goldilocks Zone for anthropoid habitability. As the fourth planet of eight circling this young yellow star, it had more than enough of the necessary elements for life.

Out of nothing, the Milvago appears in stationary orbit five thousand miles above the surface. Gradually it moves downward following a trajectory toward a large creator on the southernmost continent. The dark barren landscape of the creator floor was pockmarked with towering jagged rocks that gave off an eerie feeling of hell. The Milvago slowed as it closed in on the center of the creator. When it reached the nucleus, the Milvago came to a complete stop and floated over an undetectable crevice. Lingering in place for a moment the ship slowly began to sink into the deep gorge until disappearing below the surface, descending into the creator's inner recess.

Six miles down the Milvago settled onto the crevice floor. Sanduval stepped from the Milvago onto the familiar rocky knoll entrance to his headquarters. There was a reason he had chosen this location for the nerve center of his operation; it was totally secure. The mineral formations of the steep rocky walls made cerebral interaction impossible. Here he was veiled from detection by resonance frequency scans and completely out of intrusive telepathic contact by any U.O.H. element.

Obviously bristling with disdain from recent events, Sanduval walked with a purpose. He possessed no patients for anyone who would disrupt him from reaching his intended objective.

Well inside this fortress was an enormous nerve center where hundreds of untiring workers meticulously attended the consoles of their workstations. Each one meticulously monitored real-time observations for nanosecond deviations from Sanduval's sociological algorithmic modulars. Their task, usually a mundane exercise because his modules were so precise, routinely required nothing more than a simple code verification input.

These working minions knew all too well not to cross Sanduval's path. In the past, those who made such a mistake promptly ceased to exist in a prominent fashion.

Internally Sanduval was irate at the results of his latest venture. It had not been as effective as he had anticipated. Yet further rage would have been wasted energy. Although he had successfully removed a large portion of the remaining obstacles to his plan, the end result remained inadequate.

The abrupt intrusion by an arbitrary human had reshaped the outcome and forced him to withdraw before his plan fully materialized. Even so, the progression of his

overall operation was only minimally impeded. His strategy was far too vast for such a small incident to thwart its ultimate progress. His objective was too noble and he was too strong for any meager human's attempt at obstruction.

Breathing in the pure clean air as he walked gave Sanduval a slight buzz of all-knowing enlightenment. Once inside the command post, he relaxed in his armchair, leaned back, and stretched out his long legs. With a wave of his hand, two floating crystal spheres materialized above him representing two planets. The spheres slowly rotated showing the exact location of each of his last two acolytes. He spent the next few minutes deep in thought as he gazed up at the spheres.

As the architect of the fundamental transformation to revolutionize cosmic societal harmony, Sanduval possessed no skepticism. With one mission remaining, his mind continued to refine his strategy. Through the cognistream connection to his computer, he uploaded a new adaptation of the program containing the formulaic elements of his most reliable mathematical module.

That module had sown the same seeds of societal transformation in eight different locations around the galaxy. Those seeds had taken root and their evolution is destined to progress without interruption. They will evolve with ever-increasing speed until all resistance and immoral perceptions have been vanquished.

With this modified modular, single beings will unconsciously identify any minor non-progressive alteration in their society and automatically regard it with disdain. This contempt will cause an unconscious yet shared reaction. The change will be swiftly dealt with by the psychohistory mechanism of collective societal response. The inhabitants will respond obediently and generate the disciplinarian leader needed to continue on their progressive course. There was no need to hasten the inevitable; there is still plenty of time.

A blinking indicator on one of the spheres interrupts Sanduval's analytical serenity. With the movement of a finger, one sphere is instantly replaced with a holographic image. The face of Sector Lord m48 appears on the screen.

With his head bowed in awed reverence and a grave look on his face, Sector Lord m48 says, "Deviser, my apologies for the interruption. A Quadrant 9 data point with an unpredicted variable requires your attention."

Sanduval's left cheek twitches with contempt at the intrusions. "Very well," he sneers, disconnecting from m48 with another flick of a finger.

Moving with precision, he pulled up the corresponding data stream, studied the scrolling records until he finds the variable. It was a unique yoctosecond imbalance between the predicted orientation and the authentic path timeline data of Theta.

Annoyed, Sanduval summons a direct light-speed connection with Euris.

The call comes in as Euris is directing an inspection of the production chamber at the refining center. Raising his hand Euris touches a point on a floating holograph. The face of J'nus instantly appeared.

Euris responds with reverence, "Divine One."

"Virtuous Euris, my attention has been drawn to an undesirable interruption that appears worrisome. Is there reason for concern?"

"Divine One, the disturbance is a trespass of our refinery. A full analysis is now complete. Manufacturing of the purifying compound was briefly interrupted but is now continuing on schedule. A single vile of Earth vap.mb9 is unaccounted for but is expected to be located soon.

"Are you convinced nothing more was tampered with?"

"Yes, Divine One. The technicians have completed a full assessment of all stock and verified the quantity of both the purifying compound and the vapor canisters. Nothing was altered, a single vile is the only thing unaccounted for at this time."

"Do you know who is responsible?"

"One of the intruders was killed trying to escape. It is confirmed that elements of the local Synods sept are the perpetrators."

"I assume the Protective Force sentinels terminated the remainder as well."

Euris was quiet for a moment, then said, "Regrettably, the others eluded the guards."

"That is unfortunate," J'nus observed, "Have you identified any connection between this event and the sudden appearance of the female human?"

"A Protective Force sentinel reported the Mogrif were transporting Walkers. It is not known if the human is one of them."

In an irritated tone, J'nus states, "It is my understanding the human had been terminated."

"The human escaped before disposal could be completed."

"The human escaped, how?" J'nus asks with contempt.

“This trespass suggests a distinct possibility her escape was also at the hands of the Synod Mogrif. Four squads from the Klynash Protective Force are in pursuit. Presently their whereabouts is unknown.”

“The human escaped, the trespassers escaped, and the Mogrif responsible cannot be found... obviously this is a complication requiring an instant resolution.”

“The responsibility is mine Divine One. The elimination of the human female should have been immediate.

“Incompetence will not be tolerated,” J'nus says plainly.

“I accept the consequence Divine One, although I'm...”

“Undeniably,” Sanduval Mule says as he touches a small icon on his screen. Euris suddenly flinched and collapses to the floor. His torso shivered for a split second, gave off a momentary yellow glow then flamed red. Suddenly there was a flash as billions of fragmented molecules making up the form of Euris floated upward like a reverse flaming snowstorm.

Sanduval again makes a precise finger move. This time he connected to Admiral Rubaak, commander of Theta's Annex League fleet. He is on the Annex League's space-based headquarters the Shoghal Lupulella, orbiting four thousand miles above Theta.

Instantly the image of J'nus appears on his communicator. “Devine One,” Admiral Rubaak says with respect.

“I am bestowing upon you command of the Theta Protective Force. Contact the local agents and immediately instigate the eradication protocol for all remaining Mogrif in the Klynash region.”

“Divine One, Klynash records indicate no Mogrif have been sited in multiple cycles. Their presence is without influence,” Rubaak observed.

“Their presence is distasteful and represents a dangerous culture. In absolute terms, their society is evil, perverted, and based upon corruption and hatred. Need I question my belief in your dedication?”

“Absolutely not Divine One. Your sacred instructions will be fully obeyed,” Rubaak says with pride.

“Notify the Rectors in the districts of Ephato, Maati, and Carthium and instruct them to launch their eradication protocol for the Mogrif septs within their domain.”

“By your command Devine One,” Rubaak replies.

“Our objective is advanced. Activate the deep space security array on all stations, and prepare all elements of the Annex League and interstellar cruisers for departure in four cycles. I will arrive soon. Until that time I leave these matters in your hands.”

“Your orders will be achieved Devine One.”

With the single tweak of a finger Sanduval disconnects. He was prepared for any possibility of course, although he had not anticipated the refinery event. Why had it come at this time? There was no way to reverse it as present time had moved past the delineation position.

His psychohistory algorithmic modulars had guided him to Theta. Their methodology had indicated the evolutionary course of Theta society was fragile and unsuitable. Before he had arrived the Mogrif culture was, moribund, burdened by artificial tranquility. More importantly, the beings there were almost identical to the only planetary beings that could thwart his plan, humans. His calculations on predictable social evolution had determined a ninety-eight point seven-two percent probability of success for reshaping Theta inhabitants. All that was needed was a resolute overseer - a God with a firm hand to move it forward on a more acceptable path. J'nus was conceived as the modifier their species needed to advance.

Still, small things can bring on unexpected surprises. It is well acknowledged that humans are an unpredictable species with complex individual objectives. The majority of them will uniformly follow psychohistorical predictive analysis equations of group dynamics.

It is also well established that a reoccurring mutation every 24.183 generations produces a singular human who develops a more deviant disposition. The evolutionary brain of that particular human has a Pleomorphic mutated chromosome generating an uncommon mindset. A mindset that can produce erratic and even more unpredictable behaviors than normal. He had seen them before. In the early phases of their life, the human's mutated personality manifests itself as self-loathing depression. Typically, if not contained or eliminated, the evolutionary pattern of psychological maturity of that particular human transforms into traits of a renegade paladin.

Is it possible the human creature who thwarted his plan on Naah was just such a mutation? Or was it the Comstock human? No, that was too simplistic an explanation. Such reasoning is highly unlikely. He had traveled back in Earth's spacetime and discreetly eliminated the last probability of another mutation for multiple future generations. Even more unlikely is the possibility of any such human having the slightest knowledge of Theta.

He must not fall victim to overconfidence or succumb to carelessness and miss the window of opportunity that Theta provides. There was a limited set of causes that could successfully explain this anomaly.

Furthermore, the probability of more than one mutated human in the same time-space was algorithmically null. His genetic prohibition modular forbids such multiple mutations from occurring. Obviously, there was more to this aberration than his assumptions suggest, for now.

The human female Euris stumbled upon is unquestionably a U.O.H.-inspired traveler. Another explanation would be implausible and at odds with his experience. If true, which generation could she have originated and exactly how is the U.O.H. using her?

Using his right hand he removed a small device from his pocket. With slow even pressure he closes his hand until the device was totally encapsulated in his palm. Slightly touching the right pressure points activated it. The device connects his mind to the Milvagos control terminal. After a few brief finger caresses, his directives are sent and the device vibrates signaling the reception of the commands.

Unhurriedly Sanduval rises from his chair and leisurely makes his way back to his ship. Once aboard, it took just a few seconds for the ship to smoothly climb out of the creator to ten thousand miles above Naalai.

He took a deep breath and projected a wide band of telepathic thoughts millions of miles into space. He detected random mumbling patterns but nothing worth tracing to its source. Every attempt at identifying or locating the human female through cerebral connection had been unsuccessful. Each time the results were merely fleeting connections followed by unyielding waves of imprecise static. He will try again at another time.

Sanduval turns the dials on his bracelet to the Earth year 3124 and then touches the green stone. Giving the command to the Milvago's crew the ship quivered as it moved into slip-space toward Theta.

Chapter 39 - Incubo Can Be Deadly...

Vienna and I sat next to each other, holding hands while quietly talking. We were in an outside cafe on a street filled with casual shoppers of both humans and non-humans. Suddenly the sky changed. The ground vibrates and we hear the purring sound of machinery grow louder. At first, it sounded like a train was headed toward us, but the sound gradually morphed into the obvious rumble of an alien flying machine. When I turned away from Vienna, I saw a dark gray cloud, half-mile high, steadily rolling through the sky headed our way.

People started to scurry in all directions, running away from the cloud. Out of nowhere, I heard Vienna's voice ask: "What's wrong with our sun?" Just then a group of alien warriors drop out of the sky and began mechanically marching down the street, killing everything alive. I reached for my ring but it was gone, as was the bracelet.

In a flash the scene changed, everything started to spin and fade in and out.

I was standing in an open field; shimmering raindrops were falling onto the field around me. As each raindrop hit the ground it caused a small burst of flames and the ground around it melted.

Hearing ghastly voices, I turned my gaze and see Vienna tied to a thick slab of wood with coarse ropes. The slab was being carried by a bunch of bizarre-looking naked beasts through a hellish landscape. They tromped over a terrain blanketed by twisted dead bodies with shattered bones protruding from broken limbs. A stone altar stood high atop a mound in the center of the bodies. As they walked, they poked and prodded her with knives and pointed swords. With each thrust, Vienna winced and moaned in pain. I heard her cry out to Jesus. As she whined and cried out in horror the hideous creatures were laughing in a sickeningly high-pitched tone.

I heard a raspy voice whisper, "There is no hope. You are ours. We own your soul and will suck the life energy out of you until you die."

A dark rage began to grow within me, my eyes turned red with anger and my body started to shake. I could feel myself getting hotter by the moment. The ropes binding Vienna began to smoke and burst into flames. Unsettled, the creatures drop her onto the carcass-littered ground and slowly backed away. When they looked in my direction, they regain their composure and draw their weapons: jagged toothed swords, dual tipped daggers, and clubs with long rusty spikes.

I felt myself gliding toward Vienna. Without warning, a beast, his sword drawn and blood in his eyes, charges. When he got close, I grab the sword with my bare

hands. It melts from the intense heat. The demon looks at me confused. I seize him by the throat, slam him to the ground, and stomp, crushing his skull. Immediately all the demon beasts were charging me.

With uninhibited fury I slay all within range, ripping off heads and arms, stealing weapons, and killing them with their own blades. It was a swarming hell-storm as hundreds of creatures converge on me. I sadistically pummel and kill all I can touch. When one beast lay on the ground laughingly mocking me, I crushed his skull with a blow from the butt of a stolen sword.

Once all the demons were dead, I was left standing in the middle of the battlefield splattered in blood. I had a crazed glare on my face; my brow was beaded with large drops of blood-tinged sweat. My heart was racing and I was breathing heavily.

Somehow, I force myself to concentrate and focus my thoughts. For what seemed like hours I lingered in a hypnogogic state. That uneasy threshold between conscious thought and peaceful sleep.

Bolting straight up from the couch I was disoriented. My first reflex was to immediately activate my Jyotti suit and then check to make sure I still had the bracelet and ring. Only then did I realize I was breaking free from the shroud of an unsettling, loathsome dream.

I don't normally dream, at least not the kind I remember once I'm awake. And I'm not the type of person who psychoanalyzes their dreams, but this one was not only weird, as dreams are likely to be, but very disturbing. My head was pounding. Groggily I reach for the bottle of painkillers stored in my side pocket and quickly down three. I must have been sound asleep most of the trip, I reasoned. Stretching out on the couch I allow myself a few more minutes to recoup and let the pills work their magic.

A good twenty minutes went by before I felt like I'd recovered enough to function. My headache was finally getting bearable so I made my way to the command seat and immerse my hands. The status from my Craft said I was still a few minutes from arrival back at Earth so I instruct it to make the front of the ship transparent. The sudden burst of light from the glow of Sol temporarily blinded me, causing my head to start throbbing again. My Craft was quickly passing Mars. Moments after I pass, I could make out the blueness of Earth shining against the blackness of space. It was like a living, sparkling ice-blue diamond in a cluster of dull floating rocks.

Requesting an update from my Craft, it informed me that my arrival time to Earth will be 10:31:44, June 22, Earth Standard year 20,699 BCE. The return trip had taken exactly fifty-eight hours, forty-six minutes, and eleven seconds. Slowing my approach, I think the command to maintain a geosynchronous orbital at 17,900

miles above the African continent.

From this distance, it was obvious Earth was in a severe Ice Age. The northern pole glistened with bright white glaciers extending as far south as the middle of Europe and Russia. Glaciers from the southern pole had advanced so far north they touched the southern tip of the African continent. I could see heavy snow on the higher mountain ranges of Europe, the Middle East, and northern India. The surrounding mountains east of a gigantic Lake Victoria in southeastern Africa were also covered in snow. There were two active volcanoes west of the lake continuously puffing billows of ash and gas-filled clouds high into the atmosphere. The prevailing winds swept the clouds west across the middle of the continent and out into the Atlantic Ocean. Waves of flourishing green foliage extended from the middle of Africa north to the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Part of this immense green savanna would be the future Sahara Desert. A vigorous-looking wall of Monsoon storm was sweeping southwest across into the Gulf of Aden.

I would love to fly around in stealth mode until I found some homo sapiens to observe. That would make a very interesting story. Human archeological science of this time-space had determined the last Neanderthal were dying off in Northern Europe and would soon go extinct. Science also estimated there were a little less than a million various evolutionary species of homo-sapiens scattered around the continents. I'd like to find out how accurate those archeologists were. Most of the humanoid population was migratory as they followed their animal food sources. There would be only a few early humanoids bunched together in hunter-gatherer communities. Most were still nomadic tribes.

Wait a minute. There is an unnatural-looking circular complex in an area that will someday become southeast Turkey. Amazingly the arrangement appears to be manmade and in the process of being constructed. Even from this distance, the site looks huge and certainly out of place for this time-space. Oh well, I'll have to save any investigation of that for another time. For now, I need to get back to Vienna.

Turning the dials of the bracelet to Earth year 3124 I touch the green stone and I'm instantly transported to that time-space. It was like I hadn't moved in time at all. Earth was again in an Ice Age. Only this time technology had helped some of humanity adjust and survive the changing climatic conditions.

I knew from past travels that about nine hundred Earth Standard years ago the global transformation brought on by the new Ice Age began to rapidly increase. This hastened an international collapse already spiraling toward decline that had begun centuries earlier. A decline instigated by the multi-national governance and economic control of the power-mad bureaucrats of the United Nations. A union of elite academia, known as The Progressive Reimaginists, had convinced members of the UN to use centralized rules based on computational theory to

implement global asset and wealth redistribution. The UN devised rigid regulations based on mathematical calculations that restricted national and individual sovereignty. They then gave the Progressive Reimaginists the authority to closely supervise all global financial institutions, international commerce, and entrepreneurial ingenuity.

The crippling outcome of these arrogant measures ground the golden age of entrepreneurial and scientific discovery to a halt, hitting the bioengineers the hardest. Bringing a stop to their quest for genetically enhanced, habitat-symmetrical humans. Cultural decay and economic stagnation ultimately led to uncontrolled migration. Devastation from naturally occurring global climatic events further destabilized the collapsing world's economies, bankrupting countries and crippling their ruling authorities. The vacuum produced by this breakdown of authority forced what was left of commercial enterprises and mankind into survival mode. Not only to struggle to recover but in many cases simply to survive.

Over the dreary centuries that followed, more than sixty-eight percent of the human species tragically perished. The majority lost their lives within the last one hundred years. In this time-space, there were just over one billion humans inhabiting planet Earth, most of which live within 35° north and 30° south latitudes of the equator. There were also a few space colonies that had succeeded in sustaining life. Greenhouse farming and nominal production of useful rare minerals were suitable enough to keep them alive and somewhat successful.

Luckily inside the currently useable landmass of Earth, there were a few areas that still had automated machines that had maintained basic agricultural production. Using available fossil fuel refineries there was more or less stable production of materials like stone, iron, and quartz.

In Earth Standard year 2539 the moon base Blue Loonar Gateway DS-11 made first contact with an alien species. That contact came from friendly merchant explorers originating from the dominion of Kr'galmaan. Cordial relations were established and intergalactic trading contracts were agreed upon.

Technical knowledge from the Kr'galmaan was traded for Earth's coal resources. The Kr'galmaan needed coal to survive. Actually, they extracted the minerals vitrinite and inertinite from the coal and then absorbed them as nutrition. Trading was profitable but haphazard. Because there was no central governing body on Earth the Kr'galmaan had to maintain trade contracts with each company.

As their relationship grew, the new scientific knowledge drove further development of Earth's space technology. The Kr'galmaan helped Earth scientists develop the inertialess drive in 2783, which facilitated additional human colonization and trade.

In the latter part of Earth Standard year 2842, a group of egalitarian merchants and power brokers consolidated their worldwide assets to rebuild Earth. Using long-established promotional methods they debunked the quasi-tribal concept of nationalism and replaced it with Earthism. Insisting it was the only rational solution, they signed the Human Preservation Charter. The document established the Earth Salvation and Resurrection Alliance, ESRA, as the planet's governing body.

ESRA established an 'Earth Capital' in the town of Cairn. A small village in the mountains of South America, once in the country of Brazil. From there they focused their strengths on charting a new beginning for mankind.

The ESRA consortium formed a new economic structure based on free enterprise and intergalactic trade using the new Gavvo monetary unit. Lightly supervised financial institutions were established as a depot to facilitate the storage and transfer of Gavvo units. ESRA also instituted an Endorsement Tariff of three percent on all transactions at every processing stage from seed and stone to the end product. It wasn't long before scientific development, manufacturing, and agriculture on Earth and its colonies began to grow and prosper.

The proceeds amassed from the Endorsement Tariff funded the administering of societal governance. ESRA established the Committee for Human Order to devise a framework of laws. The Humanity Proctor Core - HPC, oversaw their laws. The efforts of the HPC successfully eliminated nearly all crime and skullduggery in the remaining enclaves of humanity. Even though the HPC was at times ruthless in administering its laws, soon the majority of people were prosperous, peaceful, and happy. It became more important for ESRA to maintain social harmony through a prosperous society than to spend billions of Gavvo units fortifying Earth's space defenses.

Being familiar with the technology of this time-space I command the Craft to scan and monitor Earth's surveillance systems. Seconds later my Craft gave a warning signal indicating the presence of scanning probes. The scans were being relayed from Earth to the Moon's Blue Loonar station. That station was normally used as a waypoint for loading, unloading, and transporting materials from space traders to processing locations on Earth. It was also a launching point for planetary mining operations and housed several mining equipment repair facilities. Being in stealth mode the scanning probes weren't a concern, but it did indicate there was at least some security in place.

Earth also had another more extensive space station located on Mars, aptly named the Black Pelicinus because it resembled a nine-legged spider. Its primary use was as a launching site for interplanetary vessels. Those ships were typically bound for mining facilities on Jupiter, its moons Europa and Ganymede as well as those that traveled to and from Kr'galmaan. Obviously, their security was lacking since the station hadn't noticed me as I passed.

There are hundreds of communication satellites circling the Earth at low and medium orbiting altitudes. There are also two very large space stations in geostationary orbit; one at 1,163 miles and another at 12,237 miles. The Crafts sensor indicated these space stations were manned and functioning but no defensive weapons were detected. Trading was important of course but security was vital. And from a security standpoint, Earth's planetary defenses were feeble compared to other galactic life forms.

In this time-space Earth had the most advanced technology in the solar system. This made ESRA rather imprudent when it came to defensive safeguards. But even with the resources and materials from the colonies and knowledge obtained from the Kr'galmaan, Earth still lacked the needed technical expertise for adequate security. Polarity leaser array defensive screens and subatomic particle beam weapons were still engineering theories.

Earth and its colonies could never withstand a major attack from any of the advanced galactic powers I've seen. This made it a ripe target for any unfriendly intergalactic species possessing weaponry far beyond their comprehension.

I can't concern myself with that now, I tell myself, I have bigger things to worry about. Anyway, it's not my problem. Right now I need to contact the U.O.H. and find Vienna. I command the Craft to head for the cabin and within moments I'm hovering above the stone slabs of the landing pad.

Exiting the Craft, Earth's crisp air was a refreshing change. I picked up my pace and hurried up the stairs and into the cabin. After searching the cabin for any sign Vienna had returned, it was obvious she hadn't been here since my last visit.

"Those bastards," I said, slamming my fist on the kitchen counter.

Chapter 40 - Mind Guerrilla Waltz...

Turning the outer dial of the bracelet three turns to the left, three turns to the right, I hastily touched both the red and green gems.

Immediately I am again standing in the middle of the familiar breathing chamber with its intense bright lights.

Instantly I felt the sharp ache in my head brought on by mental communication, *“Welcome C.W. Comstock. As expected you have diligently completed your errand.”*

So now I’m considered their errand boy, I sneer to myself. “Yes, I hope it meets your satisfaction,” I say with contempt.

“Your efforts were adequate and have safeguarded the future of the Naah civilization. You should be proud.”

“I am, and will be more proud when you tell me where Vienna is. You gave me your word if she hadn’t returned by this time you would tell me her exact whereabouts. So where is she?”

“You must not concern yourself. She is in no danger. You were informed of the realm where she resides is peaceful with humanoid variant inhabitants without chronol disturbance.”

“Okay, I’ll take your word for it,” as I thought, you slimy bastards, “if it’s peaceful, telling me exactly where the realm is shouldn’t be a problem for you.”

“Your requirement for accuracy continues to be an admirable trait. Precisely, planet Theta 636 is located in the Vitala Cluster KV8.56 Quadrant 9. Our covenant has now been fulfilled.”

“No, I need the exact coordinates. Do your brain-spike thingy and give them to me.”

“The information you request would be an unnecessary burden on the stability of your psyche.”

Sure, as if they’re concerned with my mental health. As usual, I’ll have to drag the information out of these scum-sucking scoundrels little at a time.

“I appreciate your concern. Can you tell me what she is doing there, or do you even know?”

“Again, Vienna Pitts requested our assistance to resolve a matter of unique importance to herself. The realm is unremarkable, we graciously consented to her travel within U.O.H. ordinance - PLQ-5.23n9 to be exact. As you are aware, it is not our custom to interfere in the personal affairs of a preordained galactic beings use of the transfer devices. A chronicle tome is all that is required. The tome of her experience will be shared if you desire.”

What the bloody hell are they trying to say? These guys wouldn't recognize the truth if it ate them. Of course they interfere, the requirement for a tome is interference. But it's the cost one must pay for using the devices.

These cretins undoubtedly have vast powers. Their sheer ability to manipulate universal chronology is proof of that. I can't ignore that or brush it aside. But I think they have diluted themselves into believing they are infallible. Obviously, she should have been back by now.

“She has been there a long time, don't you think she should have returned by now?” I asked as meekly as possible considering my distaste for their continued condescending evasion.

“Your chronol perception is irrelevant to universal frequency. There is no need for alarm. Vienna Pitts has the ability to return if she wishes to do so. Do you not have faith in her and her skills?”

“You gave her a return trip? How, using her bracelet? And exactly how would she get back if she couldn't reach her bracelet? Would you even know if she were in trouble?”

“The U.O.H. possess observational awareness of all chronol disruption.”

“Okay, so tell me the exact location of this Theta 636 and I'll make sure you're right.”

“That information will not be forthcoming. Your arrival is not required nor advisable. Your presence could create disruption to societal evolution resulting in deadly consequences for the inhabitants and the possibility of chronol interruptions of the quantal ora.”

I was frustrated and visibly tense. I tried to hold my emotion back and relax, but couldn't, I could feel my face getting fire hot. “Do you expect me to just wait on Earth for bad news? That, I will not do. I did as you asked, now prove to me whether I should trust you any further.”

“We have awarded you the information which completes our agreement.”

“Your information was not specific enough. Are you going to give me her exact

coordinates or not?"

I waited, but there was no response. Evidently, my question was being ignored. All I could feel was the jumbling sensation of mumbled vocal vibrations. The same sounds I felt when the U.O.H. was in cerebral conversation mode amongst themselves. Time ticked by for what seemed like half an hour before there was a reply.

"We are counseled regarding an unrecognized vessel resembling that of Sanduval Mule's cruiser transcending a detection point. Its trajectory coincides with Vitala Cluster KV8.56. This information requires a microtonal reassessment of our observational data within that quadrant. Consequential projections are in process."

A dozen scenarios ran through my mind. "That's the same place you let Vienna go. So your infinite wisdom may have put her in danger," I said sarcastically.

The mumbling static increased and more time passed before oojavan finally communicated. This time the brain pain nearly seared my skull.

"Obviously our assignments have enhanced your instincts which exhibit a promising advantage. As a gesture of our continued virtue, the U.O.H. has agreed to inform you of the coordinates for Theta 636, if you commit to abiding by our request."

Another request, I thought, fighting off the pain as best I could while trying to control my reaction. "Look, just tell me where this place is. You've trusted my judgment before, maybe I can offer a reasonable path for achieving your objective," I say as conciliatory as possible.

"The deficiency of the human psyche prohibits comprehension of the aggregate of infinite knowledge possessed by the U.O.H.. Therefore the substance of your perspective is rendered insignificant."

I thought to myself - you arrogant, conniving vermin. If it weren't for this deficient human you would be scratching your bizarre heads searching the heavens for ways to stop Sanduval Mule. "Are you saying there are no uncertainties in your knowledge? If so, I find that to be arrogant and ignorant of the complexities of reality."

Instantly the brain pain became white-hot, "Do not deceive yourself, C.W. Comstock. We allow you the continued possession and use of the traversing devices as a convenient imperative to our purpose. It is unwise to compel a reevaluation of your contribution."

The agonizing pain was becoming unbearable. It felt like oojavan had my brain in a massive hand and was slowly closing into a clenched fist. On second thought maybe my blunt honesty isn't the best policy in this case. I had clearly gone too far. If I was going to find Vienna I had to keep my emotions and attitude in check. Trying to ignore the raging headache I confessed, "You are correct and I apologize. I will do as you request?"

The pain subsided slightly, "*A sensible decision. The evolution of your reasoning capabilities has thrived under our tutelage. Here are the coordinates to Theta 636.*" With that came the piercing sting at the base of my skull.

"You are required to find Sanduval Mule, analyze his intentions then contact the U.O.H. for additional instructions. Take no further measures without our counsel and consent."

"Why don't you just go back in time and eliminate Sanduval Mule? Wouldn't that solve your problem? Hell, I'll go back and take care of him."

"That is not possible. The U.O.H. cherishes many of Sanduval Mule's historical tomes. Most of which are suitable and conform with our fundamental purpose"

"During my first assignment, I researched and analyzed his writings so I have a good understanding of how he thinks. Most of his tomes were theoretical, inspired by his horological constructs of psychohistory. My previous experience tells me his theories are the antithesis of reality. They are not based on the intuitive truth of independent thought and action nurtured by individual liberty," I asserted.

"Obviously our intimate counsel has provided you a perspective the average being could never realize. Prior to Sanduval Mule developing a tyrannically rogue persona, his accomplishments were virtuous."

What's obvious is they like his writings because they verify their own diluted assumptions. Sometimes talking to these guys makes me feel like I'm a reality savant explaining the Popperian Theory* to a bunch of dull-witted guttersnipes. "Then take him out just before he turned rogue?" I say frankly.

"The U.O.H. has rejected that naive concept. Such a course of action would require fundamental alterations in the quantal era resulting in unacceptable consequences for universal inhabitants, including your Solar System."

"So it's acceptable for the U.O.H. to rely on me or others to stop his every move rather than eliminating him completely."

"The undeniable truth is the ultimate future of the universe depends on his eventual defeat. However, each component of his endeavors, and our interactions, influence the course of the universe toward a specific point in that future. Careless

acts magnify the plurality of futures.”

“What is all that suppose to mean?” I asked.

“As previously stated, your conjectures are reasoned from an incomplete understanding of statistical disciplines and sociological forces that influence spacetime events. This leaves you fundamentally incoherent of future outcomes.”

Well, that was clear as mud. I felt helpless. A knot in my stomach rises up but I push it down. Now wasn't the time. I'm obviously getting nowhere with these egotistical alien goons. I guess I'm as stuck in this situation as they are.

“How about Vienna? If I can get her back to Earth safely I will do that first?”

“That topic is resolved. Vienna Pitts is capable of returning if the need arises. It would be wise for you to focus on the task at hand. You will follow our instructions absolutely.”

Man, these witless clods sure do piss me off.

*Austrian Professor of Philosophy Karl Popper's theory proposed that closeness to the truth is a function of two factors - truth and content. Two famous quotes: 1) *“In so far as a scientific statement speaks about reality, it must be falsifiable; and in so far as it is not falsifiable, it does not speak about reality.”* 2) *“Our knowledge can only be finite, while our ignorance must necessarily be infinite.”*

Chapter 41 - Call Of The Mous...

Winging their way south the leathery wings of the phalanx beat in unison as they flew in protective formation. Their destination, the sheer cliffs of the soaring mountains half an hour ahead.

Vienna turned her gaze to the right and looked westward. Beaming rays of sunlight crested over the far horizon painting the dawning sky with sporadic blood-red streaks. Turning to look eastward she saw pale clouds riding the wind as they slowly crept toward them. In the breeze, she detected the faint smell of ozone suggesting rain was imminent. Looking down her eyes studied the flow of a winding river to its natural starting point. A waterfall dumping crystal clear water from a narrow gorge cut into the twin peaks of the lower mountain range.

The flock of weary fighters had wasted no time getting back to the refuge of their lair. They approached the mouth of the cave entrance in pairs. When they arrived each one arched their wings wide to slow their speed and descent, executed two strong down beats, then stepped onto the surface of the ledge as if they were out for a morning stroll.

The first two to touch down were Thrufi and Lieutenant Gwoza carrying their passengers. Once the Lieutenant landed, Jokul was immediately led away to the Sector 5 infirmary for much-needed medical attention.

When Thrufi landed carrying Vienna he suddenly released his tight grasp. Somewhat surprised by the shift of momentum she staggered forward. Luckily Jamzillia was there waiting, catching her before she stumbled and fell.

“Are you all right?” Jamzillia asked, an expression of concern on her face.

Vienna shook her head, “Ah, I think so.” Standing straight, showing half a smile, “I’m just not used to flying or landing like that.”

“Hopefully it will no longer be necessary.” Jamzillia declared.

Vienna turned and watched as the rest of the platoon of Mogrif Fighters safely landed. Without hesitation, each one immediately headed straight for Thrufi to check on his condition. Standing tall and proud with a grateful smile he assured them he was in good health. Afterward, the group of fighters formed around Thrufi in a semicircle and repeatedly bumped their fists against their breastplates as a sign of strength and victory.

Brevet Marshal Ravaluf loudly ordered, “Debriefing, Sector 3 in two.”

The fighters immediately froze and became silent. Dividing themselves into two-by-two formations they obediently marched in unison out of the landing area and down a nearby hallway.

A moment later Brevet Marshal Ravaluf approached Thrufi. “Sire, our monitors are indicating enemy activity composed of several squadrons of airships, apparently searching for our position.”

“How close are they?”

“Just below the eastern cliff face in the canyon below. Close enough to be revealed. Our lower levels are on high alert.”

Together Thrufi and Ravaluf walked to the edge of the rock ledge and looked down. The normal morning mist had swallowed the forest below. Through the mist, two miles east and over a mile below, half a dozen low flying hovercraft peaked in and out of the drizzly veil of haze. The low rumbling sounds of their engines drifted up as they flew in circular search patterns.

“I guess sneaking into their research facility stirred up a nest of vipers.”

“As expected, sir,” Ravaluf agrees. “They have not yet discovered us. We will remain secure if they stay at low altitudes. If we engage their military fighters there is the danger of detection.”

“It can’t last. Sooner or later, they will find us and J'nus will initiate offensive actions,” Thrufi reasoned. “We must be proactive or we will lose this opportunity. I will consult with Jamzillia and the Synods to resolve the best course of action for implementing the code we installed on their data system. Ravaluf, you should coordinate with your commanders and their counterparts in the other districts. A strategy for a coordinated full-scale strike on the Protective Forces is imperative.”

“Yes sir,” Ravaluf responds respectfully. “I believe our numbers match those of the Protective Forces and our weapons are equal. But the Annex League has hundreds of thousands of troops stationed on their spaceships. If they are employed to fight against us, their fighter squadrons alone would guarantee our defeat.”

“It is doubtful J'nus would use the Annex League. Any combat losses would leave them without the necessary force numbers to invade Earth.”

Thrufi turned from Ravaluf and stiffly limped to the back of the landing area to join Vienna and Jamzillia. “After you are refreshed, I would like you both to meet with the Synods and I in the Crypto Chamber.”

“What do you need me for?” Vienna asks reluctantly.

“Your advice has given us a valuable perspective that would otherwise have eluded us. I hope you accept. It would be greatly appreciated.”

Vienna was hesitant. She needed the cure to the Earth virus and Jamzillia's team was the only way to get it in time. Finally agreeing, “Okay, but we must also talk about the danger to Earth. And I'd like to use your scientific knowledge to help make a vaccine against the virus J'nus is spreading on Earth.”

Jamzillia, “I would be happy to assist. I'm sure others would as well.”

“You have shown yourself true to your word and I will be true to mine. We will discuss all that and more,” Thrufi makes clear. “Does this imply you do not intend to return to Earth as you planned?”

She could return to Earth right this moment simply by touching the red gem on her bracelet. But there was too much at stake for her to leave now. “If you are agreeable, I'll wait while we look for an antidote.”

Thrufi looked and Jamzillia, who nodded in agreement, “You may stay as long as you wish.”

“Thanks. I'll see you in the Chamber,” Vienna says, turns, and leaves.

From the cave entrance, Vienna took her time making her way along the corridors and turns on the way back to her room. She still had many questions about the danger to Earth. But right now she was tired, sore, dirty, and emotionally drained. She hadn't bathed for days and felt miserable.

When she finally made it to her assigned room, she turned the latch on the door and entered. Immediately crossing the small area, she went directly to the bathroom area. The lights automatically snapped on when she entered. She took a moment to examine herself in the small mirror on the wall. Vienna never considered herself to be a beautiful woman, although she did have well-proportioned features. But now she looked worse than normal. Her face looked haggard and beat. It was covered in reddish-brown dirt that enhanced the wrinkles she really couldn't do anything about. Her recent experience caused the creases to appear deeper and she had puffy bags under her eyes.

Reaching into her right pocket she took out the vapor canister she had stolen from the lab. Inspected it for a moment and decided to save further investigation for later. She took off her boots and set them aside. Removing her shirt and pants she laid them neatly on the counter by the sink. Promising herself she would wash them by hand later. Her Jyotti suit and undergarments were next to come off. After relieving herself of nature's call she started the water in the open shower and stood naked and impatient waiting for the water to warm.

After testing the water temperature once more she stepped under the warm spray

and immediately began to feel refreshed. Allowing the water to flow down her body, she slowly turned to wet down every part of her skin. Taking the soap in her hands she lathered from head to toe washing off the sweat and grit. The soapsuds felt soothing and gave off a faint fruity smell that filled the air.

After a thorough cleansing, she stood under the clear falling water as it cascaded through her hair and down her body, washing away the remnants of built-up grime. Closing her eyes, she listened to the water drops splash onto the stone floor, puddle together then gurgle down the drain.

At times like this Vienna craved the purging catharsis of a good cry. Her eyes swelled as tears began to develop. Tightly clenching her fists, she dug her nails into her palms until finally pushing the tears away. She wouldn't give in to such an emotional display. Not now, and not within earshot of others.

The refreshing cleansing made her mind wander. She missed the joy of CW's company. She missed his proud strong will, sarcastic honesty, silly humor, and especially his loving touch. She wondered where he was. Even if he was still alive. He must have returned from his assignment by now. He didn't know where she was so the U.O.H. would surely tell him.

Gathering up her clothes Vienna soaked them under the falling water and rubbed them with the soap. After rinsing them twice with clear water she rang out the excess, leaving them clean but damp. Her protective Jyotti suit had dried almost instantly so she quickly put the skin-tight suit back on.

She stood in front of the mirror for a moment studying her clean face for any more lines. "Oh well," she thought to herself, "life has a way of showing itself on a person's face." She began brushing her hair while thinking about what she should do next. She needed to help Jamzillia find an antidote for the gas in the cylinder as soon as possible. It was going to take her and her whole team to come up with what she needed.

Suddenly she felt the pinprick of a psyche trying to invade her mind. She focused a stare on a spot on the wall to increase her level of consciousness. Concentrating inward Vienna summoned her well-worn armor of distrust and kept the probe at bay. It was obvious the probe had originated from a long distance because it was fairly weak and she had no trouble blocking it.

This was the third time since being on Theta she'd felt this attempted intrusion into her thoughts. It wasn't uncommon for a thinking being to unconsciously have a probing thought. Most of the time it was nothing more than an uncontrolled glancing query from someone who didn't realize they possessed the ability. But this time it felt more pointed, directed at her specifically. She needed to find the source.

Pu-illeo had helped her realize the strength of her mind and trained her in the

technique of probing the mind of others. She had also shown her how to follow any mind-probe directed toward her. Since leaving Kr'galmaan Vienna hadn't practiced her telepathic training, only using it occasionally, although it had helped her find Theta. And she had promised herself never to use it with CW. But now she needed to find out who was trying to connect.

Closing her eyes as if in a meditative state, Vienna put her emotions on hold, concentrated, and sent out a psychic probe of her own directed to trace the attempted intrusion. But it was too weak and irregular to follow, so she cast a wider net trawling for a psychic link. There was nothing concrete, just the prattling activity of unconscious thought from those without the cognizant command of their psyche.

In response to her probe she felt the spark of a familiar thought. A sudden flash of recognition. It was the same cognitive wave frequency she had often felt on Kr'galmaan. Pointing her probe directly at that single thought-wave she refined the link. It was weak at first but gradually Vienna was able to fine-tune her connection.

Immediately her head began to throb with an incessant beating; her thoughts were being forced inward. She felt as if shackling brain-chains were being attached to her mind, tethering themselves to her thoughts. With a single-minded resolve, she stubbornly fought the unwelcome bind by sending a flurry of incoherent illusions followed by rolling waves of false consciousness, until the manacles released their grasp.

Her mind raced until she regained control. As gently as possible she persuaded the thread of thought to invert. With a soft touch, she hung silently in parallel thought with the intruder.

Presumably unnoticed she hovered just below full cognition, maintaining her discreet surveillance as she tried to identify exactly whose mind she was now connected. Hesitant to organize any hard adjustments to her probe she enhanced it with small tweaks as she shadowed the being's thoughts. Little by little she began to close in on the source.

An icy coldness ran through her mind as the power of the originator's psyche gradually grow stronger, when abruptly her telepathic tether fell into oblivion.

Vienna's heart was pounding. She felt sick and uneasy, her stomach was in tight knots. She knew she had felt that noetic wave pattern once before, then she remembered the source. It was Sanduval Mule, and he was getting closer.

Chapter 42 - Kindness of friends...

Back at the cabin, I changed into the Theta clothing the U.O.H. had supplied and started packing a few essentials. Suddenly, appearing out of nothing in the middle of the living room, my old friend Pu-illeo materialized.

Pu-illeo wasn't a human but did appear humanoid. She was thin and impressively tall, at least seven feet. Her skin was copper color and impeccably smooth. The sharp contrast between her skin color, and the fact she had no eyebrows, eyelashes, or hair, made her large radiant blue eyes look luminescent. With the exception of thin transparent flaps covering her nostrils, that silently fluttered as she breathed, the shape of her nose was ideal for her human-like appearance. The contour of her mouth was accented by full luscious lips. The combination of these features gave her a stunningly beautiful face.

Being a previous member of the U.O.H. her natural form of communication was through telepathy. Also, like the U.O.H., her communications could be painful to humans.

"Colleague C.W., how are you?" Pu-illeo whispered.

"Pu-illeo, what a surprise to see you. I'm well. How are things going on Kr'galmaan?"

"Our future is bright. I trust it is similar with you. Where is my sister Vienna? I wish to bestow you both a gift from Dr. Rabbet."

I really didn't want to tell her where Vienna was or that she might be in a dangerous situation. I'm sure she understood a violation of U.O.H. directives for interfering with Theta's societal evolution had serious consequences. Still, knowing Pu-illeo she would insist on getting involved.

"We are fine. I was just leaving to meet her on another mission for the U.O.H. It's really nothing urgent, just a ... recon mission," I said with a straight face.

"I see," she sent. *"In that case, here are the gifts from Dr. Rabbet. A pair of new suits. I trust you will ensure Vienna receives hers."*

I could tell by the feeling of her voice in my head that she didn't believe me. "Of course. Upgraded Jyotti suits, that's great. I'll call them "J-Suit 2.0," I quipped. "I'm really glad you brought them. Do you know what's different about them?"

"Dr. Rabbet informed me this design includes enhanced protection from newly discovered weaponry. For you, deploying the head covering connects you to your

spaceship and will limit unwanted psychic intrusions while expanding psychic abilities. Dr. Rabbet said it will eclipse the innate psychic strength of the wearer.”

“I certainly need mind protection,” I say jokingly, “but Vienna probably doesn’t.”

“A profound truth. Vienna’s spirited intellect is indeed a blessing. All the same, the capabilities of the suit will be crucial.”

“No doubt. I’m glad Jyotti keeps us in mind. We treasure his knowledge and friendship, as we do yours, my friend.”

“It would be advisable for you to use the suit during your upcoming travels.”

That had an ominous feeling to it. It made me wonder if she knew something that I didn’t. “Good idea, I’ll change now.”

Stripping back to bearskin, I select the suit tagged “CW”. The inside surface was silky smooth which helped it easily glide on. Once the garment was on it immediately tightens, hugging my body like a second skin. An instant later a shimmering bluish glow from the protective shield became obvious. Once I activated the hood, I noticed I felt lighter, calmer, and more relaxed. The thoughts in my mind seemed to flow freely as if I were narrating an ancient story. As a test, I formed a specific thought; *“Thank you Pu-illeo.”*

Abruptly, and with no accompanying pain, I hear, *“You are welcome.”*

Retracting the hood, I say aloud, “That is really something. Please thank Jyotti for me... and Vienna. It seems your timing is perfect. I’m certain my mission will now be successful.”

Pu-illeo’s plump lips puckered slightly, *“Nothing in this universe is precisely as it seems. Nothing is completely knowable or certain.”*

Where did that come from, I thought. “That’s true, but I have a pretty good idea of what’s going to happen.”

“I did not mean you should not make assumptions about your ideas, just be prepared to be surprised when things don’t happen exactly as you believe they will,” Pu-illeo explains.

Now I’m worried. Am I mistaken or does Pu seem to know something she’s not telling me? “I’m sorry I don’t have much time to catch up, I really need to go.”

“Quite understandable. You must attend to your mission and secure Vienna, so I will leave you now. Give her my best, and both of you be safe.”

With that, Pu-illeo disappeared as fast as she had appeared

‘Secure Vienna’, proves Pu-illeo knew more than she was letting on. If she knows something, then more than likely the U.O.H knows more than they’re telling me. That doesn’t surprise me and I wouldn’t put it past those scum-sucking egomaniacs to keep their vague uncertainties to themselves.

Still, I know Sanduval Mule is headed toward Theta and Vienna, so I’d best be on my guard. This new suit will certainly come in handy if I met him again. The last time he invaded my mind until Vienna turned it around. Next time, and with the capabilities of the new suit, I’ll be more prepared.

After getting dressed, I packed Vienna’s new suit and headed for my Craft.

Once seated, I command it raise to ten thousand miles straight up. Calling to mind the location stamped into my head by the U.O.H. I have the Craft compute the travel time at maximum speed. According to the calculations, I will reach the Vitala Cluster in twenty-eight hours sixteen point three four two minutes. Long enough for me to continue analyzing the symbols on the ring for more clues. My next command to the Craft is to immediately head for Theta.

Chapter 43 - We And Thee And Theta Makes Three...

As I tore through space, I utilized my time trying to unscramble the ring's markings. Some of the markings were obviously dialing instructions for the bracelet but my interpretation of the symbols made no sense. The symbol rubrics on the bracelet didn't parallel the ciphers on the ring.

Apparently, I was chasing my tail with my current line of reasoning.

Anyway, I was closing in on the Vitala Cluster so I put away my magnifier and tools and commanded the Craft to make its front one-third transparent. Plainly visible was the beaming K-type giant that is this system's central star. The coordinates from the U.O.H. specified Theta was the second of five planets orbiting that shining disk. Of the five planets, Theta was the only solid rock planet in this solar system. The other four were gaseous. The two furthest from the star had a few very small rocky moons orbiting them.

Approaching from space it was hard to tell which planet was more beautiful, Theta or Earth. Like Earth, Theta looked like a twinkling blue crystal in a sea of blackness. The planet appeared tranquil with its immense frozen ice caps glittering white at its poles and fluffy white clouds drifting over massive blue oceans. The oceans separated three landmasses each with a wide belt of lush greenery unfolding north and south from the planet's equator.

Theta was smaller than Earth, about the size of Mars. And like Mars, it had two orbiting moons. The closest of Theta's moons, smaller than Earth's moon, orbits about the same distance. The other, much larger moon, was twice as far away but orbited one and a half times as fast.

At twelve-thousand miles, I stop and watch as the planet slowly rotates. It was at that point I noticed something I wasn't expecting. Cresting out of the deep darkness of space, sliding over the western rim of the planet, was a large space station floating in stationary orbit. It was so large it blotted out the stars. As it came into view, I commanded my Craft to float in that direction slowly. Data from my Craft indicated the space station was orbiting about fourteen thousand miles from the surface.

As the distance closed, I noticed three immense Siege-Class Dreadnoughts docked at the station. The Craft's data indicated each ship was 7.5 miles long and 2.3 miles wide. The bustling activity around the ships was stunning. Hundreds of cargo vessels and patrol ships were traveling to and fro between the ships. There were also numerous freight vessels and shuttlecraft commuting from landing sites on the surface and into their cargo decks. There was obviously an enormous amount of preparation for who knows what in progress.

I command the Craft to survey all frequencies for any defensive surveillance arrays. Being in stealth mode I wasn't concerned about detection, but I did need to understand the capability of their defensive technology. There was nothing out of the ordinary, just typical flight control systems used for position and identification of incoming and outgoing flights.

Suddenly my Craft detected four erratic long-range scanner strikes. The strikes were not intense or intrusive, probably uncoordinated system check scans. As expected, there was no indication I was noticed.

Further inspection sweeps by my Craft showed the dreadnought cruisers were made of a dense metallic structural mix of nickel and iron. At their core was a hollow globe of high-density energy. Surrounding the globe was a shield of pure titanium nanoparticles. Obviously, this was the driving force of its power and probably its weapon systems. The heat and radiation from this type of power source would be devastating to any organic tissue. Any required maintenance would undoubtedly have to be done by robots. In all respects, this means they had some pretty advanced technology.

Continuing on my way I broke through the atmosphere and directed the Craft toward the surface in route to where the U.O.H. said Vienna had arrived, the city of Klynash. I had the Craft dive into the middle of the rolling surface of an ocean and level off at one hundred feet down. Submerged, I turned to the west and smoothly cruise for another few minutes until reaching the natural upheaval of land. Easily resurfacing, what lay before me looked very much like the landscape of Earth. A carpet of expansive rolling plains shimmered like a green-brown savanna. As the Craft continued on path, we reached an area of rolling hills. The hills rose and fell like a sea of lime green waves. Between the hills were sporadic herds of grazing quadruped animals. Within minutes I was across this region and approaching Klynash.

Unsure of what to expect, when I closed in on the city, I increased my altitude to five miles. I crept along at a slow steady pace until I got directly above the city where I hold my position, hovering in place. I wanted to observe this civilization before starting my search for Vienna.

The city below was a busy metropolis of plain-faced shops, factories and dwellings. Scans by my Craft advised me there were millions of inhabitants calmly going about their business. Girding the city to the east and southeast were sweeping open farmlands. Spread out beyond the farmlands were countless rows of enclosed greenhouses. Two hundred miles to the northwest was an immense spaceport bustling with activity. A little over four-hundred-fifty miles directly south the land again turned to forests then sharply surged upward until reaching a majestic range of towering snow-capped mountains. This huge mountain range spanned west to east, cutting the continent in half.

Even though it looked earthly, there was an unmistakable difference between an Earth city and a Theta city, most noticeably the absence of designated transportation routes. There were obvious converging passageways from the outskirts of the city and between buildings, but they were covered with grassy vegetation. Creeping plants blanketed the tops of the buildings and overflowed down their walls. The majority of the visible color came from these plants. The vines were loaded with blooms of infinite shades and intensities of yellows, crimson, and blues.

At one thousand feet above the city, a squad of twenty mailbox-sized drones silently crisscrossed the sky. At lower altitude, I could see flying hovercrafts moving from place to place. They ranged in size from small bus-sized vehicles to larger freight vessels. It was obvious the bus-size vehicles were transporting a multitude of Theta beings from one staging area to another, while the larger vessels delivered materials atop the three and four-story structures.

But there was something else. My Craft's sensors detected an awesome amount of data flowing at quantum speed to and from each of the inhabitants. The Crafts detection scans also picked up controlling sequences for the drones. They were being orchestrated for eye-in-the-sky surveillance above the city.

Puzzled by this impressive network, I had the Craft run a traceroute to follow the paths of the data streams and give me a visual image of its flow. The image was like a complex spider's web. Apparently, the nexus of data streamed to and from each inhabitant is linked to their device. Incoming data was generated from various receptor nodes located throughout the city. The outgoing data from the inhabitants were being routed to centralized substations that channeled the data to the main hub located somewhere at the northern pole. The Craft was unable to follow the stream's path any further than that central point. From there the data was being beamed by light speed transmission to an unknown location in outer space.

The U.O.H. may consider Theta safe and "unremarkable," but I find these new details very disturbing. Yeah, nothing says unremarkable like a fleet of dreadnoughts and a population being controlled from somewhere outside their galaxy.

I direct my Craft lower to a secluded landing area just outside the city. A small clearing in a lush terrain surrounded by tall green-leaved trees. Leaving the Craft in stealth mode with a background thicket of growth is always a reliable place to hide. The Craft's sensors indicated the air on Theta contained slightly less Oxygen than on Earth. The variance of the other gasses was minor so the air was obviously pure enough for human breath.

After landing I stayed onboard and directed the Craft to scan a radius of one

hundred miles in all directions for Vienna's bracelet. Since our bracelets had a unique energy signal they were only detectable using the Craft's Quasiparticle sensors. But the scan was unable to find even a trace signal from Vienna's bracelet.

Again the Craft found something unexpected. It detected a group of six similar but weaker variant signals. The energy marker of these bracelets had no equivalence to the power and distinct signal of our U.O.H.-inspired bracelets. Their energy curve formation had an alternative particle structure. This too was troubling.

Even though they're secretive the U.O.H. would surely tell me if they had other operatives on Theta. It would serve no purpose for them not to, so obviously they must be unaware of the existence of these bracelets. If Sanduval Mule is headed this way the bracelets are obviously an intricate component of his objective.

If the U.O.H. has no knowledge of the existence of these bracelets it makes this trip more treacherous. And if Vienna has somehow been found out there is no telling what lies ahead. I'm positive Pu-illeo knew something or she wouldn't have given me hints. She's a friend but she's also an ex-U.O.H. member so she couldn't be specific. As usual, I must be ready for the unexpected. There's no time to waste, I have to find Vienna. The best place to start is one of those data hubs. I command my Craft to mine the data flow for any possible reference to Vienna.

While my Craft did the monitoring I took my first step onto the planet Theta. The weather here felt a little humid but the occasional cool cross breeze helped create a pleasant climate. I walked about a mile before I reached the outer workings of the city.

There was a thin stream of vehicles hovering along the grassy passageways carrying their goods while some inhabitants casually strolled along the wide grassy pathways. These Theta beings appear humanoid all right, I thought. It should be simple to mingle with them as long as I keep my interactions to a minimum.

Walking among them I did my best to remain unnoticed while being careful to avoid any direct eye contact. This was easily done since every Theta I saw had no interaction with anyone else. They had their eyes glued to their handheld device. This made it simple for me to keep in contact with my Craft. I just kept my iJotter in hand and my head down.

The Craft monitored several transmissions coming to and from the devices these Theta beings were so engrossed in. Apparently, it was a daily prayer accompanied by instruction. Worrisome, but not unexpected, and nothing I haven't seen before.

Like a naive band of slaves, the beings living on Theta seemed content with their

every thought being furnished to them. Millions of beings living in their own little worlds. All the while a space armada was organizing and preparing to mount a war with someone, on some other planet, under their name. Apparently, the leaders of this world are like most world leaders I've seen; charismatic, egotistical, and authoritarian.

After walking about five miles the Craft indicated I was nearing one of the transmission relay hubs. At the same time, it sends me a recording of a cryptic broadcast from the previous day. The recording mentioned a "female human" that had "escaped" with the help of some rebel group called the Synods, and their current whereabouts were unknown.

Very interesting, I thought. Vienna is somewhere with a bunch of maverick Theta beings. I wonder if this is some dissenting class of Thetas out to challenge the ruling authority? She knows the U.O.H. rules, so it's not like her to get involved without reason. But she had escaped from someone other than those Synods, so she must have been discovered and captured by someone else. And exactly what is the motivation of these nonconformists who are helping her?

My Craft immediately recounts an incoming communication transmitted from somewhere outside the solar system to an unknown receiver here on Theta. They were instructing an armed assault on those Synods.

Well, that settles that. I know Vienna is with these Synods and, for whatever reason, they are being tracked down. I tell my Craft to scan for concentrated military or police force movements. Other than the spaceport to the north the only focused activity was scattered patrols at the base of the mountain range to the south.

* * * * *

Admiral Rubaak was busy in his quarters on the command dreadnought Shoghal Lupulella orbiting Theta when an unexpected communiqué appeared on his monitor. The incoming call was from Vossk T'Monts the commanding officer of Theta's Protective Force.

"Admiral Rubaak, excuse the interruption, we are observing a male inhabitant who appears to be untethered," Vossk T'Monts informs.

A recording of the main pathway on Klynash appears in the corner of Admiral Rubaak's monitor. The scene showed hundreds of Theta beings going about their business. On the screen, floating above each inhabitant, was a box with the device identity emblem and real-time data transfer information, except one.

"That is not possible. Are you confident your monitoring sources are unimpaired?" Admiral Rubaak inquires.

“Yes sir. We have triple-checked our transmissions, scans, and monitors.”

“He appears in possession of a device. Could it be malfunctioning?”

“As you can see, our monitors confirm his demeanor appears normal. He does seem attentive to a device, yet there are no resolute transmissions.”

“Continue your observations and send a notice to each inhabitant within a one-mile radius. Alert them of a possible transgressor. Consign a squad from the Protective Force to his location. They must seize him and confiscate all possessions,” Admiral Rubaak commands.

“On your orders,” Vossk T’Monts replied.

* * * * *

I felt fairly comfortable walking among these Theta beings, but that feeling soon began to fade. At first, everyone seemed to be going about their business as usual. An instant later some of the Theta began to raise their eyes from their devices. This was obviously an abnormal reaction from what I had observed of these beings so far. Some of them seemed to be more watchful, even suspicious of their surroundings.

That’s not being very friendly, I thought to myself. If I were on Earth I wouldn’t know them from any other Earthly human, how could they have discovered me?

In the twinkling of an eye, the Theta beings traveling along the grassy walkway started to move a little more quickly. Not running mind you, it was more a faster walk. I also observed the absence of any hovercraft floating nearby. Just then my suit tingles the signal for potential danger.

Down the main thoroughfare, I saw about two dozen uniformed men wearing police-style gear intently studying the passing crowd. They were armed and headed in my direction. I stopped and watched for a moment, then nonchalantly turned and tried to mingle with those going the opposite direction, becoming one of the moving crowd.

I continued worming my way through the dwindling crowd until I approached the outskirts of the city. Finally away from the crowd I quicken my pace and retraced my steps through the terrain of bushy growth until reaching the clearing and my Craft. Just as I started to step out into the clearing I heard the approach of one of the drones the Craft had detected earlier, and quickly step back into the trees. Staying concealed, I watched as a drone slowly passes overhead. It turned south for a moment then turned east as it began to circle back.

One quick thought and my suit instantly initiates its hood. The hood’s HUD

showed the incoming signatures of two additional drones as well as the position of each Theta being within a two-mile radius. On the HUD the elements of the armed patrol force were identified with a glowing gray-blue hue, and they were closing in on my position.

With the Jyotti suit's hood up I communicated directly to my Craft. Immediately I send the mental command to remain in stealth mode and hover across the clearing to my location.

Before my next eye blink, the Craft's opening is one step away, right in front of me. Entering, I immediately direct the Craft to hold a position fifty thousand miles from the surface. I felt no gravitational change, but within a fraction of a second, we were floating in the vacuum of space.

Even though I was in the relative safety of space I felt an increased urgency to find Vienna. If I had been detected so quickly there is no doubt Vienna would have been found out quickly as well. If there was military activity headed toward these Synods and Vienna was with them, she was in danger. The Craft had indicated a large amount of activity near the base of the mountains to the south. Obviously, that was where they were being hunted. That's where I need to go.

Instantly I dive for the mountain range. Within seconds I was approaching the shimmering snow-capped mountains, stopping and hovering just above the peak of the tallest mountain. On one side the sheer cliffs rose straight up from the waves of trees flowing along the valley floor. On the other side were miles of jagged rocks with an occasional group of freestanding rectangular stones piercing through the ground, each one at least fifty feet tall. It was a desolate terrain where only a mountain goat might feel at home.

Hanging in midair my Craft's sensors showed the interior of the mountain was honeycombed with tunnels and caverns. A surge of delight came over me when a blinking green indicator showed that Vienna's bracelet was located several levels within the mountain. But unlike in the open ground, the heads-up display of the Jyotti suit didn't show the location of the beings within the mountain. I guess even Jyotti's advanced technology wasn't advanced enough to see living beings threw the solid rock of this mountain. Oh well, nothing's perfect.

That's when a half-considered thought bloomed in my brain. From the crest of the mountain, I slowly glide north, pass over the summit, and maneuver lower toward an entrance to the mammoth cave system. When I reached the opening I shifted to one side, letting the tip of the Craft protrude slightly in front of the entrance. With the Craft's front quarter transparent I watched for a few minutes until there were no guards close by. I'm not doing this unarmed, I tell myself, and slide my ring off my right hand and onto my left hand with my bracelet.

Mentally commanding a small opening in the front of the Craft I jumped the few

feet to reach the cave's edge. Just as I make my leap a sudden rush of wind blows me off course. Grabbing wildly I was able to clutch the ledge of the cave's floor and climb up. I laid flat and waited, almost without breathing, until I was satisfied my near-miss had gone unnoticed.

Doing my best to remain unseen, while being careful to avoid tripping over every rock along the way, I snuck further into the cave. Once inside, I kept low and scrambled into a dark corner where I freeze in position, waiting for a moment to make sure I wasn't detected by any monitoring system.

The interior of the cavern was larger than I expected, fully one hundred feet wide and twice that deep. Along a wall and around the corner there were containers stacked so high they nearly touched the tall, three story ceiling. Several large armed beings wearing military uniforms and long capes were on patrol, others dressed the same roamed about performing what looked like their routines duties.

Twenty feet away was the opening to the passageway I wanted. Being as quiet as possible I stayed in the shadows and silently crept along the cave wall until I was within a few feet of the tunnel. Just as I was about to turn and duck into the tunnel two armed beings came through the entryway, one striding behind the other. I was able to stoop low and back just in time. Fortunately, my reaction was quick enough to avoid being discovered.

The Craft's scan indicated Vienna's bracelet was six levels below and about a hundred yards further into the interior of the mountain. Hiding in the shadows of the large room I study the HUD's schematic image of this anthill-like maze of tunnels. At the end of the tunnel I had just tried to enter, was a long vertical shaft, probably an elevator. A complex network of tunnels and caverns extended out in all directions from that main shaft. There had to be a staircase or another way to get down that many levels, but none were obvious. And there were only a few side tunnels to hide in even if I found a way down. At that moment an idea came to me. Why not test the new telepathy powers of my Jyotti suit? Concentrating on Vienna I sent a thought, "*This is CW, Vienna, are you there?*"

Even though the connection was brief, Vienna was still recoiling from her telepathic contact with Sanduval Mule. She sat motionless, her shoulders rigid, staring grim-faced into empty space when suddenly she felt the surprise communication. Still guarded, she didn't reply. She had never received or sent mental communications with CW, so the identity of the thought was unfamiliar. She hesitated to respond at all. Yet the thought, isolated directly at her, was neither invasive nor threatening. In a defensive reaction she sent a probing thought rather than a communicative one. From her probe, she felt kindness, deep affection, and a witty passion for life.

Vienna cocked her head to one side, closed her eyes, and sent a tenuous reply, "*CW, is this really you?*"

“Yes... it’s... me,” came a distorted, shy response.

Still somewhat hesitant she sent, *“How?”*

“Jyotti invented new suits that help my weak mind do what comes naturally for you.”

From his clever reply, she could feel the inner warmth of his psyche. That was all she needed to confirm it was CW. Immediately an elated feeling came over her. Unconsciously she smiled. Vienna felt her loneliness begin to fade, she was no longer isolated on this strange planet. Her confidence rose as she realized she now had another way home.

“Where are you?” She quickly sent.

I could feel the flow of her voice just outside my thoughts. I was linked to her in a way I’d never experienced before. And it didn’t surprise me to discover Vienna’s surface mind was sharp, clear, controlled, and uncluttered.

“I’m just inside a large cave at the top of the mountain. There are armed guards everywhere. I’ve come to get you.”

“Be careful,” Vienna warns, *“No wait,”* she interrupts, *“stay there, I’ll come to you.”*

“Are you able to move about?” CW asked.

“Yes, don’t worry, the guards won’t bother me, I have their confidence.”

“Not surprising. I’ll wait here, maybe take a nap,” CW quipped.

Vienna finished dressing and hurried towards the door. When she opened it Jokul was standing at the door ready to knock.

“I’ve come to escort you to the gathering in the Crypto Chamber,” Jokul explained.

“Thank you, but I can find my own way,” Vienna says nervously, turning to continue on her way. *“I must first return to the upper-level cave entrance where we landed earlier.”*

Curious, Jokul asked, *“Is there something I can help you with?”*

Stopping in her tracks Vienna turned to Jokul uneasily, *“I need to retrieve an important item.”*

Jokul's eyebrows pinched in a quizzical expression, "Have you lost something?"

"Huh, as I said, I must pick up an important item. I want to find it before the meeting."

"You appear nervous and very mysterious. Should I be concerned?"

"Don't be foolish," her face breaking into a brief smile, "haven't I given you reason enough to trust me for a little while?"

Jokul became tense. Something was definitely going on, that was obvious. He trusted Vienna, to a point. Nonetheless, he was now suspicious and sharpened his defenses.

"I do trust you, just not absolutely," Jokul stated plainly. "I will accompany you and help locate your lost item. Thrufi will not wait long."

She knew it would be useless to try to convince him otherwise. Without another word, Vienna spun in place and said, "Come along if you must."

Taking long strides they made their way through the passageways to the elevator. Without further conversation, they rode up the six levels in silence. Once the elevator door slid open Vienna quickly walked down the hall and into the chamber of the cave. She went through the motions of looking around for something lost while she surveyed the area hunting for CW.

CW stood waiting quietly in the shadows. When he caught sight of Vienna his attention went directly to the very large, intense-looking guard following close behind.

CW sent a thought, "*to your left.*"

When Vienna received his thought she turned and noticed CW just as he stepped out of the darkness. His left arm was extended ready to send a deadly bolt of energy toward Jokul.

When Vienna noticed CW's offensive stance she put both hands out gesturing for him not to fire. At the same time, she sent a thought, "*don't shoot.*"

Jokul's attention was suddenly drawn to Vienna's unexpected movement as something that had been lurking in the shadows was now moving toward them. When he turned he saw CW advancing and reached for his weapon.

Out of the corner of her eye, Vienna saw Jokul's right arm cross his torso. At that moment Vienna touched the blue stone of her ring and stopped time.

Chapter 44 - Madness Of Strangers...

They stare at each other for a moment until Vienna could no longer resist the impulse to jump into CW's arms.

"I'm really glad to see you," she crooned, wrapping her legs around his waist, smiling her crooked smile.

"I can tell," CW responded with a sly grin as he pulled her close, "I'm glad I found you. I didn't know where you were and I was worried."

"Get rid of that hood so I can give you a kiss."

"I kind of enjoy that mind-to-mind talking," CW said with a grin. "But, I'll take a kiss anytime." With a quick thought, his hood retracted. He looked deeply into her twinkling green eyes, slowly caressed her neck with his hand, and gently coaxed her face closer. They drew each other tighter and eagerly kissed with the hunger of long-lost lovers.

After the lingering kiss, Vienna unhurriedly drew her head away as she let her feet touch the ground. Their bodies remained tightly pressed against each other. Vienna asked, "Didn't the U.O.H. tell you where I was?"

"Actually the U.O.H. was useless. They wouldn't tell me anything until they realized Sanduval Mule was headed this way. After that they made me agree to do nothing but find and observe him and not look for you. As you can see I broke that agreement."

"I'm glad you did," Vienna said softly. "I knew he was coming. I've been getting telepathic probes."

Finally pulling apart I took Vienna's hand, turned and started to leave. "Let's go, my Craft is right over here."

Vienna wanted to follow and just leave this place, but she knew they couldn't. She tugged on my arm and said, "We can't leave now, there's too much at stake."

"Why? What do you mean there's too much at stake?"

"Time will restart soon. I'll explain later. You have to meet the Mogrif first. That's Jokul over there, he's okay, just defensive about their headquarters."

I was hesitant but yielded, "Ah... okay if you want, I'll meet these guys. But I'll take this guy's weapon first."

Three strides brought me close enough to Jokul that I could touch him. Calmly looking him up and down I studied him with the curiosity of a biologist inspecting a strange animal. At that moment I realized just how big this Theta being was. He towered over me by about a foot and was so heavily built he looked half-again my own weight. He had deep-set eyes and gaunt features. His posture was straight, which spoke of military training. He wore a complex mechanism attached to his right shoulder. Reaching out, I smoothly removed the weapon from his holster and returned to Vienna. We were standing together when time restarted.

With a sudden gasp of breath, Jokul came to life just as his hand grabs at nothing. He stood erect with a shocked look on his face. Confused, all he could do was scowl at us.

My lips twitched into a dubious smile, “Hi, my name is CW. I’m... a friend of Vienna’s.” I was trying to be as cordial as I could under the circumstances.

Unafraid Jokul takes two long steps toward us before Vienna put a handout and spoke up, “Jokul he’s a friend and he can help both of us.”

With a glaring expression on his face Jokul replied, “If he is a friend, he will return my weapon before I summon the guards.”

My expression was intense. I slowly took a small step toward Jokul and handed him his weapon. Never changing my firm gaze I stepped back to Vienna’s side.

“Let me take him out now and be done with it,” I quietly say to Vienna.

“That’s not necessary,” Vienna whispered.

“You are mistaken if you think your reckless words frighten me,” Jokul said, holding a confident gaze.

“Jokul he means no harm. CW, you’ll understand more once we meet with Thrufi and the Synod.”

Jokul made a high-pitched whistling sound and with a jerk of his hand, he summoned the guards. Within seconds six guards with their weapons drawn sprinted to his side, quickly encircling Vienna and me. In a stern voice, Jokul said, “Thrufi is waiting. Your friend will accompany us, I’m sure Thrufi will be very interested in meeting it.”

“It?” I said mockingly, giving Vienna a questioning look.

Vienna just smiled and shrugged.

Turning to lead the way, Jokul motioned for them to follow. Escorted by the guards ready to react if necessary, we were hustled out of the cavern, and down a long corridor toward an elevator.

“Are all of these Synods this pleasant,” I asked as we walked.

“Their situation is dire so it’s understandable they’re suspicious of everything, especially strangers,” Vienna explained. “Is your Craft in a safe place?”

“Of course. And available when needed. Where are we going and why?”

“We’re going to meet their leaders Thrufi and the Synods. They’re in a planning room called the Crypto Chamber. Thrufi’s reasonable but I don’t expect him to be happy to see another human. There is a lot going on here. I will explain when I can.”

“Wouldn’t now be a good time?” I counter.

“I guess so,” Vienna agrees. “The Synod and five other tribe-like factions are Mogrif. The Mogrif are native to Theta and their entire culture, across the entire planet, has been displaced with a mutation of themselves called Walkers. Sanduval Mule calling himself J'nus is the one who set that mutation in motion. Mule or J'nus or whoever, has also hatched a fiendish plot concerning Earth. He’s been spreading a virus on Earth and is now reading his assault troops to invade.”

“Well, you’ve been busy, haven’t you? Your explanation only stirs more questions. Like why would Mule want to replace these Mogrif? Why are their replacements called Walkers? What type of virus? Where does Earth fit in, how did you find out, and how in the hell did you get here?”

“That’s where things get a bit more complicated. I noticed one of the Walkers on Earth and caught him.”

“Caught him? What did you do with him?”

“He’s dead,” Vienna said sadly.

“You caught him and killed him?” I asked nonchalantly.

“No,” Vienna said bluntly, although she held herself responsible for his death because he was naive and innocent. “I watched as he was somehow atomized, probably the Mule as J'nus. I did talk to him long enough to find out where he was from.”

“So he told you he was from Theta and you just had to come here?”

“He told me more than that,” Vienna taunted, her crooked smile making me feel like an idiot for asking. “He said they had been traveling to Earth for centuries collecting some kind of data. But he didn’t know the real reason was to spread the virus. Anyway, I’m sure you would have done the same thing,” she said confidently.

“Maybe. How did you get here without a spaceship?”

“As you know, the U.O.H. hasn't told us of the full power of the bracket and ring. But they unwittingly provided a window into that power. For one thing, if you dial the bracelet just right you can travel from one world to another, but you have to be absolutely accurate. According to the U.O.H. I could only do it once. They gave me very specific dialing instructions and here I am.”

“At first I thought the U.O.H. might have transported you here but they said you could return to Earth if you wanted to. Given that, I knew the bracelet had something to do with it. Yet you said the Walkers are able to easily travel from Theta to Earth many times? From what the U.O.H. told you, how is that possible?”

“I don’t know. They told me I could do it just that one time. If I tried it again without their permission it would, uh, you know, self-destruct.”

“Yep, they like threatening us plebeians with death. The Craft identified six bracelets on Theta that have a different energy signal than ours.”

“I guess the Mule’s bracelet and ring design must make it easier to travel world-to-world. Anyway, using the bracelets to travel to Earth, these Walkers have been spreading a virus. The virus is designed to cripple the ability of human males to reproduce. The objective is to reduce the human population to the point that survival of the human species is questionable. Anyway, a reduced number of humans would be easily conquered and more susceptible to servitude.”

“I know some humans where a virus-like that would be useful.”

“Now, now. We both know you wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“Still...” I said with a sly grin. “Were you exposed to this virus?”

Vienna thought for a second. Her expression changed. She hadn’t considered that before. She hadn’t seen Elys spread the virus and he didn’t have a canister with him. “I, don’t think so,” she replied.

“Good. I knew this jewelry could do more, but let’s leave that for another time. Tell me more about what’s going on here on Theta. What motivates these Synod

Mogrif?"

"As you can tell the Mogrif are very human-like. Except they can fly."

"What do mean fly? You mean they can fly without a mechanical device, like Superman?"

"Yes and no. Yes, they can fly, and no not like Superman. Those things that look like capes are really wings. A few hundred years ago Mule used some genetic manipulation to transform their newborns. The transformation halted the growth of their wings on a cellular level so they would look more human, thus they became Walkers. Apparently, the Mogrif Walkers were also naive enough for Mule to introduce a new godly overlord named J'nus. He convinced the Walkers to follow him and over time they outnumbered the flying Mogrif and took over the governing body. That is what motivates them to rise up. They're to the point of laying down their lives, kill or be killed by the J'nus forces, to regain their planet."

"Okay, it's a noble cause. It's no wonder you decided to help. So Mule as ... what's his name, J'nus, runs the planet and is going to use these newly mutated Mogrif to invade and occupy Earth. Have you worked out a plan to stop him or are we at the beck and call of these Mogrif fliers? And what about Earth, do we have to fight their war against the Walkers first?"

"I helped them get into the J'nus computers and planted a airt rootkit program. In turn, Thrufi has someone trying to find a cure for the virus and I promised to help her. They are also making plans to remove the leaders of this J'nus cult. Maybe you can help them with that. I know they are also worried about their kin, the Walkers, and how a war would affect them. We're headed for that strategy meeting now."

"About the invasion of Earth, I've seen their fleet and it's impressive. The Craft's scan of their weapons systems suggests Earth's defenses will be no match for them. Billions of humans are vulnerable."

"I confess I don't like it, but that part hasn't been worked out yet."

I felt a chill creep up my spine. "How lucky of us to have hit the trifecta of our own demise. Mule's mutant army just might kill us here on Theta. If we live through that, Mule will invade Earth and wipe out all of humanity. And if we somehow lance those pesky boils off our backsides, we are interfering with Theta's evolution so the U.O.H. is going to kill us."

"I know you will help the Mogrif no matter what happens. That's what you do, and you're good at it. So don't be so negative," Vienna harassed.

I knew she was right but I still had to complain if nothing more than to keep myself grounded in reality. “Shouldn’t you and I be concentrating on what’s going on with Earth? Maybe this time we should let these aliens fight their own battles. Earth should be our primary concern.”

“I agree, but let’s get to the meeting first and see what they have planned. Thrufi asked that I help them and I said I would. I’ll keep that promise. With your experience, you could help them too.”

“We’ll see, maybe together there is a way. I guess we’ll have a better idea about what we can do after talking to this Thrufi guy. But we must keep Earth’s future as our top priority.”

“Of course,” Vienna agrees, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt.

After several moments the elevator slowed and came to a stop. When the door slid open I muffled a gag as the musky smell of sweat and old leather waft in. We stepped out and the elevator door clanged shut behind us. Leading the way this Jokul fellow guided us through a side corridor and into what must have been the Crypto Chamber.

The chamber was a large cavern with a high crested ceiling. Around the perimeter were operators in various stages of communication and monitoring, busily tapping their screens and talking into small microphones attached to their ears. At the center was a group of obviously prominent Mogrif beings gathered around a long table. Their stately attire was evidence of their importance.

The room seemed unusually quiet considering the number of operators and the thirty or so notable Mogrif beings in an intense discussion. It was as if the acoustics of the room dampened all sounds. When we entered the conversation abruptly came to an end.

Halfway inside the room Jokul stopped and gestured to the group of Mogrif beings. One of them turned and looked in our direction. The chiseled features of his face made his deep-set dark blue eyes more striking. He wore what was clearly high-ranking attire. On his uniform, just above his left breast, was a gold insignia that undoubtedly indicated his nobility. He crossed the room with the flowing grace and dignity of a leader. The poise of his stride showed an air of certainty that obscured a subtle limp. With each step his cape billowed and rippled behind him.

After a quick survey of the beings in the room, it was undeniable why he was the one in charge. Compared to the others his commanding frame and stature had no equal. As he got closer I started to step forward and hold out my hand as a greeting. Vienna softly grasped my wrist to hold me back. When I turned and looked her way she gave me a gentle ‘don’t-do-that’ look.

When Thrufi approached he paid no attention to anyone in our group except Jokul. “What have you brought us?” He asked in a resonant, almost metallic voice.

“Vienna and another human. She informed me it is a friend that can assist us.”

What is this ‘it’ stuff, I thought to myself? These Mogrif look just as human as I do except for their cape-like wings. What is this Jokul guy trying to do by being so rude?

After a long thoughtful pause, Thrufi addressed Vienna. “I see this friend of yours also wears the bracelet and ring. Does he possess the same powers as you?”

“More,” Vienna said without hesitation.

“Very well,” Thrufi said thoughtfully. “Why did you take it upon yourself to involve your friend?”

“I didn’t. He came here on his own,” she explained.

Thrufi finally turn his attention to me. His eyes were intense. He took a long time studying me from head to toe before bluntly asking, “What do you want here?”

“Let me introduce myself. My name is CW Comstock and...”

Thrufi’s voice cut me off like a cleave from a katana, “Who you are is of no interest. Why are you here?”

With a reluctant smile plastered across my face, I replied, “I came here to get Vienna. Now that I’m here I will support her however I can.”

“Did she send for you?”

“No, as she said I came here...”

“How did you arrive?”

“That is confidential.”

“Did you arrive using the powers of the bracelet?”

“Not exactly.”

“Most won’t admit it, but I think it best to look truth in the eyes. Yet I see the human trait of deception is foremost with you. It is insulting, we will have none of

it," he snapped. "Vienna has proven herself trustworthy, so far. Can you be trusted?"

"If you trust Vienna, you can trust me," I vowed.

"That has yet to be determined," he countered. "Are you ready to die for her?"

"Yes, if need be," I said without hesitation.

Thrufi's eyes focused deep into mine. "Tell me, what do you know about Theta?"

Unruffled I answered, "I don't know much, only what Vienna has told me. That you are planning to regain your rightful authority from someone named J'nus and my experience might be useful. She also said you are working on an antidote for the Earth virus."

"What do you know of J'nus?" Thrufi coldly asks.

"Nothing other than he is your enemy," I said in a controlled voice. "Vienna told me she helped crack into his computers and thought I might be able to help with your battle campaign."

"Are you experienced in military strategy? Is that why Vienna believes you can be of assistance?"

Not wanting to sound egotistical I placidly said, "I've been in many battles, and taken many lives. I've fought side-by-side with many brave warriors to obtain liberty and cleanse their worlds of tyrants. I know how tyrants think. I also know in a competition for power, second place is last place."

"Hum, were you summoned by those worlds, or were you dispatched to them?" Thrufi asked suspiciously.

I didn't give an immediate answer. Giving Thrufi too much information would serve no purpose. Finally, I said, "I was asked by some and sent to others."

"Who is it that sent you to those places?"

"No one you would know."

"What does that mean? Is this how you prove yourself honest and trustworthy? If you will not be truthful, trusting you will be a difficult task. I will ask again, do you have allegiance with another tormentor waiting to take advantage of the conditions on Theta?"

"Not at all. As I said, I'm here to help Vienna and if by doing so I assist you, all

the better. There is really no use in continuing this cross-examination. You are asking questions I honestly can't answer. In some cases, because I don't know the answer, in others because you wouldn't understand them or they're none of your business."

Apparently, this insulted Thrufi and he snapped, "We decide what is understood and what affects Theta. The issues here are complex. Do you understand that? No, I can see that you do not," Thrufi said in a scolding tone.

Staying as composed as possible I responded, "I understand enough of your situation to know I'm not part of your problem."

"That has yet to be proven," Thrufi scowled.

Several tense moments passed without another word before Thrufi turned away and walked back to where the other members of the Synod had been patiently waiting. With unspoken consent, it was obvious he expected us to follow.

Once everyone had assembled, including Vienna and I, Thrufi touched a symbol on the panel of the long table in front of them. Instantly a holographic image appeared. The floating image was a geographical map of Theta marked with various blinking signals. Thrufi explained, "The red indicators are the locations of the Theta Protection Forces. The Mogrif contingents from throughout Theta are shown in blue. As you can see, even with additional Mogrif forces from Maati and Bihnwa joining us, we are outnumbered, although we will have the advantage of catching them unprepared.

Our Walker infiltrators have been assigned specific hovercraft to disable at their local base in the cities. We have assigned assassins to dispose of each of the five bracelet holders currently on Theta. The sixth has recently transported himself to Earth. There are also two assassins assigned to each of the four highest-ranking J'nus agents. They will proceed on our mark.

Once our assault begins, the remaining forces assembled in the northern spaceport at Nanrik and eastern spaceport at Carthium will undoubtedly be deployed to support the Theta Protection Force.

Jokul will lead a squad of Raiders to preempt any counterattack from the Nanrik spaceport. A similar group from Ephato and Phif sects, led by Commander Flowta from Ephato, will attack the Carthium spaceport. The eastern spaceport at Minawa is now depleted of both troops and aerial vehicles. All troops and equipment from there have been reassembled on the space stations. Troops from the spaceports will, in all probability, not be mobilized.

The high altitude aerial vehicles at the Nanrik and Carthium spaceports must be disabled and their troops crippled before they are allowed to respond. All actions

will follow Jokul's initial assault on Nanrik."

"If you agree, it would be my pleasure to accompany those attacking the Nanrik spaceport," I requested.

Thrufi studied CW's face, "I assume you are armed with the same weapon as Vienna. Are you aware of the weapon systems possessed by the Protection Force?"

"To answer a previous question, I've observed the layout of that facility from my ship and am aware of their abilities."

Thrufi looked questioningly at CW then back to Jokul, who gave a hesitating nod of agreement and said, "Very well, if that is your preference. You can deploy as a member of Jokul's Raiders as long as you fully understand, Jokul is in command. He will assign you a flight partner and you must coordinate all of your actions with him."

"That will not be a problem," I agreed.

"All assets will remain in place until Jokul launches his mission. That will signal the beginning of our resurgence," Thrufi made clear.

Jokul stepped forward, "My Raiders will arrive from the south silently gliding in just above the treetops. At that altitude, the Protection Force's monitors may detect us before being disabled. I anticipate only a few Raiders may be lost. Those that get through will disable the troops and plant their explosives to cripple their aerial fighters."

I couldn't help myself. I had to speak up, "Sorry to interrupt again, but if surprise is your prime weapon, that plan is madness. As soon as you are detected the entire base, as well as the other bases, will be alerted. Even if their communications are disrupted, they will have backup ways to sound an alarm. Your surprise will be lost and more Raiders will die."

"Mogrif Raiders are willing to offer their lives to further this cause," Jokul proudly insisted.

"The bravery of you and your Raiders is commendable and not in question, but there's no need to throw the lives of your Raiders away unnecessarily. May I suggest a different course of action?"

"Only if your recommendation will enhance our strategy," Thrufi said plainly.

"I think it will," I said confidently. "In my experience, a successful battle plan is one where the strategy puts the odds in your favor. Your strategy for surprise does

improve your advantage. As I said, I have a ship. It is capable of flying in stealth mode. My ship can carry about ten of your Raiders. I can land them undetected inside the Nanrik facility. If they go about their business quietly, they can plant their explosives unnoticed. That should improve the success of your plan.”

“Is this ship of yours readily available?” Jokul asks.

“It can be summoned whenever needed,” I replied confidently.

The entire room went quiet. Several moments passed before anyone spoke. “I will accept your offer,” Jokul agrees. “Right now our success is most important. Can your ship hold more than ten?”

I knew I could reconfigure my Craft to hold as many as needed, but they didn’t need to know that.

“How many do you want to carry?” I asked.

“It would be to our advantage if you could transport the full complement of fifteen Raiders.”

With a curious smile, I asked, “Are they all as large as you?”

“I am the smallest member of the team,” Jokul replied in a somewhat jovial manner.

“Hmm, well, if you squeeze together it can probably hold all fifteen,” I simpered. “Once their fighters are disabled the... what are they called, Protection Force... will be ruthless in their counter-attack.”

“And we will be ruthless in return,” Jokul immediately replied.

“A counteroffensive is expected,” Thrufi says confidently. “Their effort will be vigorously eliminated. That is what the Raiders are trained for.”

One of the Synods spoke up, “The human’s stealth ship will be of no assistance to those attacking the Carthium spaceport. For utmost force effectiveness under this new strategy, would it not be wise to redeploy additional warriors to Commander Flowta’s unit? This will ensure maximum results.”

“An excellent observation Jaikoz,” Thrufi agreed, “we will boost their numbers with an additional squadron of Raiders to increase their odds of success.”

Thrufi waited for other comments from those assembled. When none came he said, “We are in agreement. In thirty-eight hours our assets will be in place. The vanguard will be Jokul’s Raiders launched at his discretion. The full engagement

will follow.”

A moment later the door at the far end of the chamber suddenly hissed open, then quickly closed as another Mogrif entered. It was evident this being was an elderly female.

She had random streaks of gray running through her fading crimson hair, her face showed age wrinkles but her smile conveyed a friendly quality. Her chestnut-gray wings were motionless as she walked. When she approached the group Vienna turned and looked at her, giving her a friendly head nod.

After joining the group Thrufi said, “Welcome Jamzillia. It is my understanding Vienna will be assisting you with the computer code, is that correct?”

“I gave my word and I will honor that pledge,” Vienna said calmly.

Jamzillia nodded in agreement, “I have a team currently working on the anti-virus. Deciphering the complex genetic architecture variants is taking more time to unravel than expected. Although we have determined the virus only affects the virility of the human male. After we find the cure we must formulate and produce an anti-pathogenic serum in the required quantity.”

“Before you continue on that important quest, you and Vienna must ensure the code you implanted in the J'nus computer system is ready to be activated. It is vital the program be prepared to decouple the device connections with the Walkers and all communications within the Protection Force when Jokul launches his strike.”

“With Vienna’s assistance, we can accomplish what is needed. Vienna and I, with only a few members of my team, can prepare and initiate the embedded program. It will be available to launch on your command. The others will continue their work on the Earth virus.”

“Very well. Let us continue our preparations,” Thrufi orders.

“Have your spies been able to pinpoint a timeframe for the Earth invasion force?” Vienna asked.

Thrufi took several seconds to look around the group of Synods. None of them said anything or gave any indication for him not to continue. In an uneasy tone, he said, “We do not know exactly. Our latest information indicates deployment will begin in approximately forty-six hours. That is the reason their invasion force will not be used to counter our assault.”

Vienna had a startled look on her face. She turned and looked at CW and frowned, then looked at Jamzillia and said, “That doesn’t give us much time does it?”

With a doleful look on her face, Jamzillia just shook her head.

I looked at Vienna and whispered, “Finding the cure still won’t stop the invasion of Earth. Look, the Mogrif can fight their fight here, but we have to alert Earth. A task that’s becoming increasingly challenging and increasingly important. Anyway, I’m working on a plan.”

Puzzled, Vienna quietly asked, “You have a plan already?”

“Maybe. What’s the use of having these time devices if we can’t use them to change destiny and save our own planet? Remember the old saying, ‘those who control the past control the future’.”

“Isn’t that the credo of the Mule? Anyway, if the U.O.H. aren’t going to be angered enough by our helping the Mogrif, that would really piss them off. Then again, maybe the change you make is the real destiny of Earth,” Vienna replies.

“Don’t get me started on possible variables of the future caused by our time travels. It would take forever.”

“You’re always so reassuring,” Vienna says with a sly grin.

Vienna and I turned to leave the chamber, “I thought I had a good idea,” I said, “but that forty-six-hour time frame makes it near impossible. I’ll have to think of something else.”

“What was your first plan?” Vienna asked.

“I was going to return to Earth, then to Earth’s past. The plan was to influence them into preparation for an invasion by a bunch of aliens. But even with the Craft traveling at top speed, there isn’t enough time to get from here to there, then back again. A one-way trip takes just over twenty-eight hours.”

With a twinkle in her eyes, Vienna abruptly says, “Wait a minute, I just thought of something. Maybe your plan can still work.”

“What do you mean?”

“I recovered one of the Mule’s brackets from Elys, the Theta who died on Earth. I wonder if you could use it to get to Earth in time?”

“I’d have to see the bracelet first. If it works anything like ours it’s possible I could use it to travel to Earth’s past. If I do it right, from there I can create the foundation for the sequence of events needed. Where is this bracelet?”

“Thrufi told me Samlila had retrieved my bracelet and ring from Euris. He took the bracelet from me when I was taken, so it could have been in the same place. Maybe she got his bracelet when she got mine.”

“If Thrufi does have it, will he give it up?”

“All we can do is explain your plan and ask,” Vienna replies. Pulling on CW’s arm she immediately turned around and headed back into the chamber.

“Thrufi may we speak to you in private please,” she said as they approached.

Thrufi turned his head and gave her a steely glare, “There are no secrets here.”

“The question is about the Earth invasion, not your operation. If that involves the Synod we can discuss it here,” Vienna explained.

“As I said, we have no secrets,” Thrufi harshly replied, “the Synods are fully aware of the danger for Earth. Our main concern is Theta. We are helping the humans where we can.”

“There may be another way you can help Earth,” I said as politely as I could.

“And that is?” Thrufi reluctantly asked.

“Vienna told me there might be a J’nus bracelet available. That bracelet could be very useful for someone who knows how to use it. Do you know where it might be?”

Thrufi’s left hand strayed toward a pocket on his uniform and he drew out the dull yellowish colored bracelet.

“Good, you’ve got it,” I say.

“Yes, although it requires a compatible ring to function properly, which I do not have.”

“But I do,” Vienna says.

Chapter 45 - Making Cairn Able...

A quick study of the design of Sanduval Mule's bracelet revealed it was primitive compared to the ones given to Vienna and I by the U.O.H. Naturally it had two gems, one green and one red, but the dials and symbols were very basic, and it was obvious how it functioned.

Essentially it was a single-point instrument automatically calibrated to send the wearer directly to one location, Earth. Simply dial the desired spacetime and touch the green gem, then return to Theta by touching the red gem.

The pattern of the ring was also very plain. There were no markings anywhere on the surface or the inside. There was simply a single blue stone set atop a loop of gold.

For safekeeping, I stored my own bracelet and ring in the thigh pocket of my Jyotti suit under my outer clothing. The time had come for me to initiate my plan. From inside Vienna's room at the Mogrif mountain headquarters, I gave her a long hug and kiss. We hadn't wanted this battle but, no matter the danger ahead, we were determined to win. We had to. Without a word, the look in Vienna's eyes said please be safe.

Turning the dials on the confiscated bracelet to the appropriate date I touched the green gem and returned to Earth in the year 3004. In this time my children, their children, their children, their children, and their children have passed long ago. My presence, my life, would not occupy a minuscule yanosecond of thought in anyone's family history. That's probably a good thing. I caused my children to suffer a pain I could never undo, so I'm glad the history of my earlier life has been entirely forgotten.

I'd brought with me a bag of natural Painite crystals that were abundant in the caves of the Mogrif mountain headquarters. On Earth, a bag of Painite crystals this size is worth hundreds of trillions in Gavvo units. Using the crystals as collateral I established five separate financial accounts under the name Cooper Wade. Two days later, I purchased an obsolete weapons manufacturing company in what was once northern Brazil. A facility once owned by the Italian security company Leonardo de'Finmeccanica.

I knew my old friend Dr. Jyotti Rabbet was on Kr'galmaan so I used the sub-space communication link to contact him. Once I explained the situation, he volunteered his services.

Jyotti arrived within a few days aboard a Kr'galmaan trading vessel. At our first meeting, we decided to rename the company Cooper Wade Technologies or CWT.

Over the next several months Jyotti recruited some of the best scientists and engineering experts from around the world in this space-time. Because of his expertise, he was in charge of the design and development of all new weaponry. Under his guidance, and using a variety of Kr'galmaan technology previously unknown on Earth, we began manufacturing high-tech weapons.

During that same period, I employed several experienced and well-connected weapons salespeople. It wasn't long before they had secured contracts with various security divisions within ESRA. CWT quickly became the main source supplying weapons to ESRA security as well as civil security services. We started by supplying them with high-tech leaser rifles and small-scale photon cannons. Our reputation as experts in developing new weapons quickly grew.

The time had finally arrived to get serious about pressuring ESRA to escalate the security of their domain in space. In my persona as CEO of CWT, I traveled via hover-liner to the ESRA capital city of Cairn. The drastic cooling of Earth's climate and advancing polar glaciers had forced Earth's population, guided by the wealthy and powerful, to higher, warmer surroundings. Cairn sat nineteen degrees south of Earth's equator and over 3000 feet above sea level.

After weeks of trying, I finally negotiated a personal meeting with the minister of the Humanity Proctor Core - HPC. A man named Troon Aodh. I wanted to discuss the possibility of CWT supplying improved weapon systems for Earth's security services. He was the man I needed to convince of the necessity for our new defensive weapon. In preparation, I brought with me several fundamental diagrams to ensure he understood our research was well on its way.

In typical office drone fashion, the receptionist was ignoring me. She was busy talking on her communicator about an obviously non-work-related subject, while I waited. I was seated quietly in a spacious lobby with stone walls and floors. Several bunches of bright yellow flowers and other imitation green potted plants decorated an otherwise empty space. I finally got her attention by standing in front of her and knocking three times on the top of her desk. She jerked her head and looked at me with disgust, but finished her call. When she ended the call, her gray eyes returned a look of anger, "I'm sorry for the wait, I think Mr. Aodh is able to accommodate you now," she snidely said. She then escorted me the six steps to his office door and held it open while I entered.

Troon Aodh was tall with a slim build and a narrow face, which made his round nose and portly cheeks look larger and more prominent. His pointy chin, squinty eyes, and droopy mouth gave him a perpetual expression of suspicion. His dark auburn hair, filled with wavy curls long enough to touch the collar of his pale green shirt, showed wisps of gray at its roots. With a name like Troon, along with his hair color and oblong-shaped face, it seemed obvious these were genetic relics of Gaelic heritage.

His office was ordinary, a desk and a couple of plain leather-covered chairs, a small wooden filing cabinet with folders sloppily stack on top, and a door in the rear leading to a bathroom. There was a cool breeze blowing in from an open window. The busy sounds of ground level and hovercraft traffic could be heard even though his office was one hundred twenty-four stories up.

I was dressed in typical attire for the time, dull gray loose-fitting slacks and a dreary blue tartan shirt. Not wanting my apprehension to show, I sat quietly across from Aodh, one leg limply crossed over the other, waiting for his attention.

Aodh's hazel eyes flicked to an instrument on his desk. He touched a button and a floating screen appeared. "What is your opinion of interstellar trade?" he asked.

The question was baffling, but I answered, "As long as the outcome of the trade is fair and equitable, intergalactic trade brings a degree of order. Such trade should be considered good for the economy and society."

Aodh didn't acknowledge my answer. He said nothing and his expression revealed nothing. No annoyance, hostility or agreement. His attention remained focused on the lines of moving data on the screen. He continued tapping until finally touching a button that made the image disappear.

Slumping back in his chair, he cupped his hands together across his stodgy belly and gave me a sour glare. "I trust you had an uneventful journey, Mr. Wade."

"Yes, it was a pleasant trip," I graciously replied.

In a hard voice, he asked, "Exactly what is the purpose of this meeting? I usually speak with your representative Margo Thayer."

"First I'd like to thank you for taking the time to see me, Minister Aodh. Margo is working on a new project with our science team so I thought I'd take the opportunity to make a personal visit. As you know my company is supplying the finest equipment to the military and police forces of the HPC."

"Your weapons are cost-effective and good quality," Aodh sighed.

"Thank you, we work very hard to meet and exceed your high standards. We also explore ways we might offer our support in the future. That's one of the reasons for this visit. Our engineers and scientists have developed some advanced weapon systems designed for the future security of ESRA."

"You don't say," Aodh says nonchalantly.

"We have expanded our product line to include a polarity array protective screen and subatomic particle beam weapon. These new products were designed to

reinforce the security of your resource colonies on the outer planets. They will be essential elements for both defense and offense from any assault by an alien force. And for Earth's defense, we are in the final stage of an incredible new offensive weapon, the High Energy Lethal Yttrium Europium Synergy system, which we fondly nicknamed the HEL-YES. It's a very effective offensive weapon comprised of sixteen satellites working in unison."

"These new weapons of yours sound interesting, but we already possess a wide range of viable offensive weapons; so there is no need. Anyway, the funds needed for such armaments would be too great, our budgets won't allow it."

"Wouldn't it be wise to spend the money now, and be prepared to strike an initial death blow, rather than attempt to obtain the necessary weapons during turbulent times," I replied.

Aodh got up from his chair, "Would you like some Canephora coffee" he asked reaching for a pot on a table behind him.

"Yes, please. With a dip of sweetener."

"Just as I like it," Aodh replied blandly.

As he handed me the cup of coffee, I caught sight of dull gold peeking from beneath his long sleeve shirt. Could that be one of the Mule's bracelets, I asked myself? Not likely, I thought, dismissing the idea as me simply being overly suspicious.

"An attack from an unknown force is highly unlikely," Aodh continued with a smug expression on his face. "We are allies with all known evolved species in the galaxy."

I waited a moment before saying, "It occurs to me, as I'm sure it does to you, that even the slightest possibility should concern ESRA. There may very well be other alien beings more aggressive than the Kr'galmaan. Their purpose may even be the conquest of the galaxy."

"That is doubtful unless you know of such aliens. Do you?"

Yes, I thought to myself, the Mule for one. And in my travels, I've personally visited more than a dozen other such places, but I couldn't tell him that. Anyway, that's an odd outlook from someone assumed to be intelligent, knowledgeable, and responsible for the security of Earth.

"It seems to me, bearing in mind the number of galaxies and planets in the universe, that it's crucial to realize a large number of other technically advanced planets might exist," I explained.

Aodh blew over the top of his cup and slowly took a sip of his coffee, “Again, do you know of such places?”

“I know the odds are very good,” I said, trying not to show my disgust. “You don’t expect some ruthless adversary to file flight plans for their battleships, do you?”

Seemingly unshaken by my snide remark he replied, “Well, ESRA and our consortium of esteemed intellectuals and senior scientists have analyzed all available data and determined there are no other occupied planets within the known universe, so additional security measures are not needed. Earth is safe.”

Fascinating, I thought to myself. This guy is obsessed with the idea that scientists know everything and common sense is pointless. Anyway, why would the community of scientific scholars deny the possibility of the existence of other extraterrestrials? One should never underestimate the stupidity of academic elites. This guy needs a strong dose of reality. Once the Kr’galmaan arrived how can ESRA not be concerned.

“If the Kr’galmaan had been conquerers instead of traders do you think our situation today might be different?” I asked.

“Perhaps, but ESRA is in agreement. Therefore, it is unlikely another species from an unknown galaxy would come all the way to Earth just to conquer our meager planetary system.”

My jaw tightened, 'Meager system?' I thought. I can’t imagine this guy actually is unaware of the possible dangers? Earth and the surrounding planets, moons, and asteroids in the solar system are rich in mineral resources. It’s delusional for ESRA to think simply because they’ve been unable to take full advantage of these resources, others would not. Or if other beings would have any concerns for the well-being of Earth or any living thing on it.

I was getting frustrated. We sat quietly for a while taking small sips of our coffee. After a bit, I asked, “Has anyone from ESRA had conversations with the Kr’galmaan about the possibility of other planetary races?”

“They have not offered nor have we asked. We trade only in mineral goods with the Kr’galmaan, which has a minor overlap with technology. Our relationship does not include intergalactic affairs of state.”

“Speaking frankly, maybe I should discuss my proposal with those in a higher position,” I said rather impatiently.

Aodh nervously squirmed in his chair and in a stern, insistent voice he responded,

“Let’s not stray from the subject at hand.”

I’d hit a nerve and immediately regretted my comment. Staying as composed as possible I calmly said, “That is the subject. If ESRA gave it a little thought, I’m sure they’d agree. There may be villainous beings out there and ESRA should be prepared.”

“I fail to see the need. As I said, the possibilities are minimal and it would be expensive.” He said coldly. His jaw tightened and the small amount of warmth in his eyes disappeared, “I think it’s unnecessary and candidly ill-advised for you to involve others in this matter.” His left hand slowly moved toward a ring on the little finger of his right hand. I hadn’t paid much attention to it before. Suddenly time stopped.

I stayed motionless, knowing if I made any perceptible movement it would tip my hand. I watched as he walked around his desk, opened my briefcase, and rummaged through its contents. Out of his pocket, he removed a small device and recorded the weapon diagrams. When he finished, he hurriedly made it back to his seat just as time restarted.

Continuing as if I hadn’t noticed, “Yes, I’m sure you’re right. Earth security measures are under your expert authority. There’s no question you have more accurate information than I.”

Clearly, it would be unrealistic to waste any more time trying to change his mind. It’s time to start considering a new tactic. A new approach that would at least, have the potential for success. Of course, I could take this charlatan out right now, but that wouldn’t accomplish anything other than make me feel better. I’m in the past so removing him now would also tip off Sanduval Mule, which I can’t allow. It’s evident he isn’t going to agree to my weapons plan, yet something must be done.

My thoughts raced. It was now clear that Troon Aodh was not of Gaelic heritage as I had previously assumed. He was Theta, or he wouldn’t have that type of jewelry. It was also clear that despite his gruff exterior he was still an altered Theta being, a puppet of that J'nus being. That meant he possessed a weak, unstable mind that was easily influenced.

I know the human mind has tremendous latent psychic capability. In fact, some people, like Vienna, can use it at will. According to Jyotti, my new suit is supposed to grant me more forceful mental powers. I was able to mentally communicate with Vienna, but that was fairly easy. Why don’t I put the suit to a real test?

It’s apparent I’d be better served if I worked with Aodh. That is if I can control him well enough to make him do what I need to be done. Hopefully, my mind has

the strength to do what's necessary. Maybe this trip will be successful after all.

“Mr. Aodh, last night I had dinner at a seafood restaurant and I'm afraid I ate some poorly prepared shellfish. My stomach has been rumbling all morning and I'm feeling a little nauseated. If you would be so kind, I'd like to use your lavatory facility? I won't be long.”

A repulsive expression came over his already unpleasant-looking face, “Go ahead,” he said reluctantly, “just make sure you use the deodorizing unit when you're finished.”

Once in the bathroom, I activated the hood of my Jyotti suit, closed my eyes, and concentrated on Aodh. It took a few moments before I got the perception of anything. At first, it was just a sense of inert static. After that, for a split second, it was like two minds arguing with each other. His mind submitted and my mind's eye visualized a panorama of gray vapor rolling across the scene like a cloud of thick smoke. I concentrated harder and the vision plunged through the cloaking curtain of murk into a frenzied spectacle of electrical flashes. The image continued gliding through the flaring bolts toward a central point of a bright radiating corona. Once the vision passed through the corona, I could sense Aodh's essence, his mind was all around me. I could see what he saw, taste what he tasted, and feel what he felt. I could sense his life's patterns, his fear, rage, dreams, prejudice, trust, and passion. It all felt very real, with no resistance and no noticeable awareness of my presence.

The sheer quantity of conflicting sensations was unimaginable. My mind struggled with a paradox of contradicting senses inundating my psyche.

Focusing my thoughts, I concentrated on my objective. Instantly I felt the sensation of his fingers touching the buttons on his desk. My mind's eye visualized his sight as it shifted to the image on the screen. The screen changed to a spreadsheet of contracts and invoices. With further concentration, I managed to guide his fingers as they typed the necessary information for the purchase of the HEL-YES system. Next came the construction contract, deployment, and maintenance for the sixteen satellites. The satellites would be deployed into geostationary orbit 50,300 miles from Earth's surface.

My heart was pounding. I was sweating like an excited rabbit with a stuffed toy. The immense sensation from two bodies and two minds engulfed my psyche. I felt beads of sweat rolling down my back but I couldn't tell if it was my back or his. My nerves were tense; my perception of time was distorted. I wasn't sure how long this was taking. After a few more taps on the buttons, the screen returned to its previous location.

I tried not to panic but without the concept of reality, my anxiety had increased tenfold. Concentrating again, I focus my thoughts to wipe the images and gestures

of the recent movements from his short-term memory. My stress level was mounting and I wanted out... now! Immediately I retrace my little safari into his mind. On my way out I erased any trace of my presence.

I mumbled: “Let go, let go, let go,” until I finally disconnect. When I did, my psyche felt a forceful snap as I returned to my reality. The whole experience made me dizzy. I felt as if I was going to pass out. Somehow, I managed to fight the urge and forced myself to jerk eyes open.

The Jyotti suit’s display revealed the whole process had taken just under two minutes in real-time. After deactivating the hood, I used the small towel hanging next to the sink to wipe the dripping sweat from my forehead. Without warning my stomach began to rumble and churn. I felt a tremor just before I dropped to my knees, gagged, and, completely missing the toilet, deposited my breakfast onto the bathroom floor.

Man, I sure hope that doesn’t happen every time, I thought to myself. The task of cleaning up the mess took longer than expected, but I did as best I could.

Straightening myself as much as possible I returned to Aodh’s office. He was sitting at his desk, hands unmoving, staring at the floating screen in front of him.

In a somewhat shaky voice, I said, “Thanks for the use of your bathroom.”

Aodh offered no response. He was sweating profusely; his facial expression was blank as if he was in a trance.

I repeated myself, this time stronger and a little louder, “Thanks for the use of your bathroom.”

There was still no response. I walked to the chair in front of him, sat down, and waited. Several moments passed before his expression unexpectedly changed. He opened his mouth, made a choking noise, then closed it. His posture changed and with a wide-eyed glare, he mumbled, “Those teddy frog’n idiots are barbarians. Origin must take precedence over species.”

His obscure comment was unexpected. He didn’t seem consciously aware of what he had said or my mind-to-mind contact. I simply smiled and calmly asked, “Who are you talking about?”

At first, he scowled, then his eyes twinkled as if he was suddenly hurled back to reality from a half-conscious daydream. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket he mopped his drenched brow. “I hope.... you’re.... feel better?” He says awkwardly.

“Yes, I’m feeling much better thank you. I appreciate your hospitality.”

Aodh stuffed the wet handkerchief back into his coat pocket and seemed to somewhat compose himself. Out of nowhere, he announces, “You’re probably unaware but other than the occasional small-time crook, there hasn’t been a major security breach anywhere on Earth for more than fifty years.”

“A testament to your agency’s professional skills,” I replied. “You should celebrate this great achievement. Seeing that the Academy is one of our best customers, and in honor of your accomplishment, it would be my pleasure to treat you and your family to dinner tomorrow evening.”

Aodh shrugged, “That won’t be possible. I have no family here,” he said sullenly.

“Oh, where are they?”

“That is not your concern,” He scolded sharply.

I guess I hit a nerve there, I thought. “Why don’t I have Margo meet you for dinner to celebrate? I understand there’s a Floatball playoff game between the Millennium Force and the Steel Dragons at the Dome of the Rock tonight. How about dinner at the Bear Traxx restaurant and watching the game from our Gold Chamber seats at the Dome?”

He shifted positions, leaned forward, and with a somewhat pleasant tone he said, “Sure, I’ll let you and Margo pay. Why not?”

“It’s set then. I’ll let Margo know it’s dinner tonight at Bear Traxx at say 6:30 and after that, the game. All on Cooper Wade Technologies.”

Aodh appeared pleased with those arrangements. We exchanged a few more pleasantries, and I took my leave.

Traveling on the hover-liner back to the research and manufacturing facility, I arrived early that afternoon. The first thing I did was inform Margo of the arrangements. She agreed and moments later left to catch another hover-liner back to Cairn. Next, I went looking for Jyotti. I wanted to confide in him about my mind-to-mind experience.

After my description of the event, he said, “Ah, so it worked.”

“Yeah, but it made me really sick. I threw up all over his bathroom. It took forever to clean up the mess.”

“No matter,” he said nonchalantly, “I’m happy it functioned as intended without massive brain trauma or a morbid physiological response. An anticipated outcome considering Pu-illeo perfected the physical interface method.”

“Yes. I’m glad there wasn’t a ‘*morbid*’ reaction too,” I snidely agreed.

“Jyotti, I think it’s time I get back to Theta. I’ve been talking with Guzzoni and Jhane about taking over the management of the company. They weren’t keen on the idea at first but saw the potential and finally agreed. I sort of promised them you’d stay on for a while to make sure the transition goes smoothly.”

“Rather presumptive of you don’t you think,” Jyotti replied with a sly grin.

“I’m sorry if I promised something I shouldn’t have,” I said sheepishly.

“I think Guzzoni and Jhane will do that which is necessary,” Jyotti agreed. “Their creation of the HEL-YES target-tracking algorithm was brilliant. They are finalizing those ciphers now.”

“Agreed,” I said. “They’ve proven themselves to be intelligent and fully committed to the HEL-YES project. They’re perfect to see the project through to completion. Both are young enough, strong-willed, and fully understand the operation of the company. They are also aware of the possible dangers the future could bring. But, if you agree to stay a while longer I’d be grateful.”

Jyotti hesitated several moments before answering, “I will remain if you think it’s best. But I can only stay for a short while. I gave my word to Pu-illeo to return as soon as possible. We have several unfinished undertakings that require my attention.”

“Thanks, Jyotti, you’re a good friend.”

For the next few hours Jyotti and I discussed the progress of the HEL-YES system and how the company should go forward. I again thanked him for his help.

Typically Jyotti is a very matter-of-fact realist. That’s probably why I liked him as a friend. We had that in common. But this time, after we said our final farewell, he expressed something quite out of character. For some reason, he got philosophical and said, “In the end, the personal liberty of all beings in the solar system, and Earth, in particular, must be preserved.”

Knowing him as I do, it was a curious statement. Obviously, spending so much time with Pu-illeo has rubbed off on him.

I made my way to a secluded location and touched the red stone of the Mule’s bracelet and instantly disappeared. I was immediately transported back to Theta 3124. Reappearing in Vienna’s room inside the Mogrif mountain base.

Chapter 46 - Throw Down The Sword...

When I returned it was just after midnight Theta time. It was obvious Vienna was extremely glad to see me. The look in her eyes revealed both relief and affection. She came to me and pressed her body against mine, leaned her head forward and kissed me hard. It was then that our clothes began to fall away, and our naked bodies moved close together. I embraced her tightly in my arms. My hands stroked and caressed her satin skin. Falling back on the bed, I lay above her as we kissed long and lovingly. Our passion grew and I moved against her with the assurance I could do no wrong. Vienna gave out a slight quivering sigh as I enter her. Perhaps she knew this might be our final joining of flesh.

At first, we moved together slowly, enjoying the sensations. Gradually the shared fire inside us grew until we indulged our desire with the fury of untamed animals. My back and hips felt strong as I swung inward and upward, inward and upward, moving with easy confident strokes, lifting her to ever-higher levels of excitement.

Vienna clung tight to me, matching my every thrust perfectly. The rhythm of our movements was a flawless melodic dance. The steady flow of our tempo increased until our passion ended with mutual satisfying explosions.

Afterward, we lay together holding each other close. Both of us were sweaty, sticky, and exhausted. Both of us had taken pleasure in our rare feeling of oneness. Both of us drifted off into a tranquil slumber.

Three hours later I heard an unfamiliar noise that triggered me awake. Vienna lay next to me still in peaceful sleep. Her hair spread out on the bare mattress framed her face making her look even more beautiful. I propped myself up on one arm and watch as her slow breathing became almost hypnotic.

Her breathing changed slightly, her eyelids twitched once, twice, then slowly opened. Looking up at me she smiled her crooked smile and asked, "We're still on Theta, aren't we?"

"Yeah, we're still here," I said grudgingly. "You know, we really do need to get going."

"Can't we stay like this a little longer?" she pleaded, snuggling closer.

"I only have a short time to get ready and meet that Jokul guy and his assault team."

Vienna shifted her body, stretched, and yawned. "Yeah, I guess I should check on how Jamzillia is doing with that anti-virus," she drowsily replied.

We unhurriedly dressed, gave each other another hug and kiss, and headed out the door.

Standing just outside were two armed Mogrif guards with wide smiles on their faces. I guess they had heard our lovemaking and thought it entertaining. Vienna's cheeks flushed when she looked at the guards, then glanced around as if she was slightly embarrassed.

Their expression quickly changed from amused to serious when I asked, "Which way to Jokul and the departure point?"

"Our orders are to escort you both to where you need to be," said the bulkier of the two guards.

"Then let's get going," I demanded.

I looked at Vienna and smiled, she perked up a little and we went our separate ways. Vienna and her guard headed down the hallway while my guard and I strolled toward the elevator.

* * * * *

Jamzillia was hunched over her workstation in the lab. She was frowning so severely her forehead formed wrinkles. She slowly reached out and typed several shapes representing the Theta language into her terminal. A blue indicator light glowed showing the simulation was in process. The glow lasts only for a second before several areas on the translucent display began flashing red.

"Did you make the corrections to the formula we discussed?" she asked her assistant nearby.

"Yes," he said turning to face her, "and I checked it twice."

"Then the formula is still unworkable," Jamzillia said in a frustrated tone.

"Where are we going wrong? The spore sequencing is in order, the nonallele is non-competitive, the suppresser structure is intact, and the markers are distributed sequentially. Yet the virus construct remains virulent. I've never seen anything like this. I thought after the nanobot fractured the cytomembrane the nucleus would be exposed. But this mutant acaryote resists endospore assimilation."

Jamzillia sat down and put her head in her hands just as the door to the laboratory slid open and Vienna entered.

Curious at the concerned expression on Jamzillia's face Vienna asked, "How's the

antidote coming?"

"Not well," Jamzillia confesses. "We have been unable to fully synthesize the DNA mutation of our nanite structure to affect the virus molecules. Not only is the cell structure of the virus filled with nucleus-free acaryotes, but our nanobot mechanism also seems inadequately coded for exon hormesis when the molecular components of the antibody are introduced into the post-mitotic neurons of the virus. This miscoding mutes the nanobot's lifespan. We have been unable to stimulate a positive response that would extend that lifespan. My team has tried everything we know, yet each time the results are negative."

"Don't blame yourself, it's not your fault. This virus is one the most sophisticated and complex any of your scientists will ever come across," Vienna says in a comforting tone.

"I'm sure you fully understand there is a significant difference between Earth-born human DNA and Mogrif born DNA," Vienna continued. "Yet there are indeed many similarities between the two. Does your nanobot programming incorporate a translation of the UDP pyrophosphate phosphatase defense mechanisms in the i-motif knot? This portion of the human genome structure may not be present in Mogrif DNA. It's possible this may be resulting in a biochemical immunity response."

"That is an excellent point Vienna, and one we have not considered. The nanobot is attached to the ECYT4/ HIF2A mutation of the Hominidae gene linkage. It is a helix-loop-helix dimerization domain protein using Cytokine to regulate signal transduction pathways that respond to oxygen levels. When the vapor is introduced, the virus molecule is transported directly into the subject's metabolism and quantizes the protein turnover of the chaperone cluster functions of TBX15 and WARS2. If the oxygen level intake is outside a nominal range then HIF2a intracellular translation and conversion will not take place. The general function prediction of UDP pyrophosphate phosphatase has not been considered in our transport secretion because it does not have a major influence on the Mogrif genome profile. I will make an adjustment taking your idea into consideration."

On her terminal, Jamzillia typed in several lines of data into the nanobot programming algorithm, touched an icon in the corner of the screen, and waited for the mechanism to signal the invisible gas was present in the waiting container.

She connected a feed tube from another container with the new nanobot formula into one beneath a small glass cylinder. A faint light within the cylinder appeared. After a short pause, it brightened and a stream of various colored bubbles began to work their way through the cylinder in random formations. Shafts of green, yellow, and blue, shifted through the cylinder in an irregular series of graceful shapes. A grouping of shafts formed into a bright red stream until nearly filling the inside of the cylinder. The stream vanished for a moment then graceful swerving

curves of dark red, midnight blue, and purple, mingled with dark gold, and rare flashes of bright white filled the cylinder.

“Pay close attention to the cylinder,” Jamzillia instructed. “One, two, three,” at that moment she touched an icon on her console, and a bright blue beam directly above the cylinder abruptly lit. The fluid inside the cylinder instantly changed shape and color. The bright pattern of nanobots dissolved, first into a drab muddy brown then into a sickly olive-grey.

Desperate moments passed before her display began flashing green, “Confirmed. All readings are stable,” Jamzillia blurted out excitedly. “Vienna you are brilliant.”

“It was a lucky guess,” Vienna humbly replies.

“Nonetheless, we can now begin producing the antidote. My hope is, we are not too late.”

“That’s my hope as well,” Vienna agreed.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, my escort and I made our way back to the entrance of the miles-high cavern. When we arrived, I headed straight towards the entrance where my Craft was floating in stealth mode.

In the interior section of the cavern, Jokul and his team of fighters had assembled. They were checking their equipment and stretching their wings. Each one went through a routine of spreading their wings wide and flapping them several times to hover in place. When Jokul did the same, I noticed the mechanism attached to his shoulder that I’d seen earlier was fastened to his wing’s upper carpal joint. A battle injury no doubt.

When he saw me, he strolled over and asked, “We need to depart soon. If your ship is on the surface, we can fly to its location. Where is it?”

“Not to worry, my ship will be here in just a few moments.”

“It’s coming here?” Jokul asked somewhat surprised.

“Yes,” I replied confidently.

Placing my hand in my pocket, I grasp the iJotter and concentrate. Unseen by anyone, my Craft changes its shape into an industrial Donnager-class short-winged transport. With further concentration, the ship suddenly appears holding its position at the cave entrance. A moment later the rear loading ramp opens and slams against the floor of the cave. The look on Jokul’s face was priceless.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” I shouted, climbing aboard and heading straight to the front of the ship.

Jokul summoned his squadron of raiders and they filed up the ramp. Inside there were eight closely packed fold-down seats lining each side of the cargo area.

“Take your seats and make sure your harness is tightly secured in case I need to take evasive action,” I instructed.

The raiders wedged themselves tight together and strapped themselves into the cramped seating. A hush fell over the band of warriors as the boarding ramp silently closed.

Acting as if I was prepping for take-off, I touch buttons and punch code into a fake digital controller. Placing both hands on the armrests I concentrate and the ship goes into stealth mode and begins to slowly move away from the cave entrance. About one hundred feet from the cave entrance, I command the Craft to dive.

The Craft instantly turns its nose down and dives for nearly two miles. Just before reaching tree-top height, I pull out of the dive and easily turn parallel with the ground as we continue across the wooded terrain.

Had the J'nus forces been scanning the area, even using their high-resolution sensors, they wouldn't have noticed our approach. The Craft's camouflage was far superior to any of their technology.

Jokul and I had determined the best course of action for this mission was for me not to land, but to allow the Mogrif Raiders to exit while I hovered in place. This would allow them to quietly swoop in from above and neutralize any threats.

“Get ready, we’ll be there soon,” I tell the raiders.

Cruising at one hundred feet above the surface, a few moments later we quietly pass over the city of Klynash. I then veered northwest and followed the well-traveled path to the outskirts of the city toward the spaceport.

Stopping just outside the spaceport to get my bearings, I silently glide west to a deserted area, a location where the dreadnoughts had been constructed, then stopped and hover in place.

“Holding position at two hundred fifty feet. Opening the rear ramp,” I inform the raiders.

As the ramp opened Jokul gave a quick gesture to his team and they instantly snapped into battle mode. One by one they stood, paused momentarily, exchanged

quick personal looks, then stepped to the rear of the Craft. Once the ramp was fully open they jumped out in succession. Disappearing into the darkness.

With the combination of the Craft's scanners and sensors feeding data to my mind's eye, I was able to observe as each of the raiders swooped down and began their assault.

While I monitored the fighting I thought to myself, individually these raiders were savage fighters, but together they were a devastating force. And Jokul was probably the best and more brutish of them all. In a blur of speed, I watched him spin, draw his saber in midair, and thrust it across an Annex League soldier's belly. The soldier's entrails spilled out and he died trying to replace them. Still flying low, he gracefully pitched left, stabbed another soldier in the heart, turned right, and killed three more. Beheading each one as he zoomed by.

It was obvious the sudden attack from the Mogrif Raiders had caught the Theta Protection Force guarding the spaceport by surprise. After their initial strike, there was a rapid series of defensive laser bolts. But the raiders were too fast. They would turn in the air, flip, and hit the ground running just before striking their next astonished victim. It only took a few minutes for the Raiders to take out the entire contingent of soldiers defending the Nanrik spaceport.

At the same time, and after a short battle, a team of Raiders had commandeered the central transmission substation in Klynash. Once inside Jamzillia's technicians used their previous intrusion of the computer program to gain control over all data broadcasts throughout Theta. The first thing they did was to jam the frequency of the devices directing the Walkers. Without direct instructions from J'nus, the population of Walkers would no doubt become confused and disoriented.

Finally, Jamzillia's technicians sent a directive to each device telling the Walkers, "for the safety of everyone stay off the thoroughfares and remain indoors until further notice."

Across the planet, several minutes of eerie silence passed before the roar of multiple explosions began. Within the two spaceports, the explosions disabled hovercrafts and destroyed barracks. Splinters of metal and twisted slabs of debris were being thrown in all directions after a steady stream of blasts.

With the Raiders' assault going well, I command the Craft to accelerate toward space and the Earth-bound Annex League ships. Arriving moments later it was obvious the dreadnoughts were preparing to leave. There were no longer any outside activity and all docking bay doors had been secured. The ships had begun to gradually stage themselves into fleet formation.

As they hung weightless in space, one by one the dreadnoughts engaged their hyperdrive. A moment later a light flickered behind each ship in sequence and,

with a faint blue flash, the whole fleet instantly disappear.

I know the Mule is near, I thought to myself. And more than likely he will go to Earth to make sure his plan succeeds. I've got to get to Earth ASAP. Activating the hood of my Jyotti suit I send a thought message to Vienna.

"I hope this works," I say out loud.

Vienna's Jyotti suit gave her a slight squeeze. Immediately she initiates her hood. With her hood activated a sudden thought flooded into Vienna's mind causing her to smile to herself. It was the now recognizable thought pattern of CW.

"The Mule's warships are gone," CW sends. *"They're headed for Earth. I have to go and help."*

"I thought we decided to return together," Vienna sends in reply.

Surprised these newfound thought communications worked, he sent, *"No time. If the Mule is there, must act quickly."*

"If you must, then go. But be careful," Vienna appeals.

"Of course. See you soon."

With a quick thought command, my Craft instantly accelerates. Like a silver comet, I streak towards Earth.

* * * * *

Vienna suddenly winced when a dull pain entered her mind. Out of nowhere, a whispering voice had snuck into the recesses of her psyche. It whispered softly until her psyche defenses were alerted. Instantly she realized someone was attempting to enter her mind and snatch control of her thoughts. Her adrenaline spiked; her throat was trying to close in panic. Instinctively, her subconscious sent a blocking array of static.

She felt her heart start to beat hard. Her nose began to hemorrhage. She could taste the blood in the back of her throat. Blood began to slowly slide down her upper lip.

With the hood of her Jyotti suit still activated she sent, *"If you want a battle of wits then a battle you will get."* Instantly her primal reactions took over. She focused a blazing offensive thought echoing a direct line to the source of the intrusion.

Sanduval's eyes were closed. He sat motionless behind the sprawling desk in the command chair of the Milvago. His mental probe had found a human mark, but

the link had suddenly vanished. In its place, he felt something unexpected, the extreme heat of flames scorching a nanoscopic point in his mind. He sensed a swarm of white-hot lightning bolts headed his way and immediately disconnected from the mind he had invaded.

Astonished, his eyes sprang open. That was unexpected, he thought. It was peculiar for a human to possess such a degree of psychic power not normally found in that species. He won't make that mistake again. He will be better prepared the next time.

Vienna deactivated her hood and plummeted back to reality. She had an overwhelming headache that showed on her face.

Jamzillia looked at Vienna with a puzzled expression.

"You are seeping," she said.

"What," Vienna asked in surprise. She then noticed a small drop of blood fall onto the front of her clothing.

Wide-eyed, Jamzillia asked, "Why did you do that? Are you all right?" Holding out a cloth wipe to Vienna.

Taking the piece of cloth and swabbing the blood from her nose Vienna replied, "Yes, yes I'm okay. I just have a headache."

"Does your helmet actuate when you have head pain?" Jamzillia quizzed.

"Not exactly," Vienna says without further explanation. "But this time I needed it."

Still confused Jamzillia offered, "I have something that may help," reaching for a small container in her pocket. "I take one occasionally for similar ailments," she explains, handing Vienna a small yellow pill.

"Thank you, but no," Vienna declined. "I prefer not to intake chemicals. I'm sure it will pass."

With a grim expression, Jamzillia replied, "As you wish." Studying Vienna closely, she returned the container to her pocket.

"Shouldn't we be getting that antidote made and ready? We'll need enough to be dispersed in Earth's atmosphere," Vienna instructed.

"How much do you think that will take?" Jamzillia asked.

"A lot more than we have now, probably hundreds of times more."

“It will take us a while to manufacture that amount.”

“Then let’s get that formula to your refining complex so they can get started,”
Vienna urged.

Chapter 47 - Black Swan Event...

Earth standard year 3124

Nine days into the month of October, the ESRA Space Monitoring Bureau detected unusual activity near the Uranus moon, Oberon.

Just outside the orbit of Uranus the Theta battle cruiser Shoghal Lupulella, named for a military hero some five hundred cycles prior, suddenly materialized into the empty vacuum of space. It instantly appeared with its leading edge radiating bright crimson, an inevitable result of interstellar hyperspace travel. A millisecond later two identical ships, the Blatta Cerastes and Dom Plattiwea, appear and move into side-by-side formation. From there the Theta Annex League armada began threading its way inward through the solar system.

Two weeks later the space mining conglomerate Astral Deep Space Excavations reported they had lost the EarthLink LS connection with their research and mining colony on Jupiter's moon Europa. Eight days after that, all communications with the three human habitats on Mars suddenly ended. Just before the connections went dark, one of the Mars monitoring satellites transmitted images of a decimated operations center and the complete destruction of the habitat structures. By all accounts, none of the one hundred sixty-three thousand residents remained alive.

Four more days went by before the Theta Annex League armada parked in translunar orbit 108,000 miles from Earth. Six hours later the three flat-black cylindrical-shaped alien ships separated and simultaneously began their assault. Without warning or provocation, they began to lay waste to everything.

One ship set about savagely pillorying the colonies and bases on the Moon. Within the Moon's Spider outpost the pulsating red light of the battle-stations alert sounded. Suddenly the Araneae outpost on the Moon exploded with activity. The Moon's defensive weapons sprang into action and responded the best they could. But their weaponry was outdated and they were soon overwhelmed, rendered useless against Theta's advanced technology.

Another Theta ship began bombarding Earth's southern hemisphere concentrating on South America. Still another lashed out on northeastern Eurasia slowly working its way southwest toward the African quadrant.

Flashing out of the huge warships came forth a bright orange beam. With pinpoint accuracy, the godlike valance of double-ionized helium particles of the Nyhilator Beam violently impacted Earth's surface. Within a brief instant of time, the half-mile-wide beam wreaked havoc on everything in its path. Manmade structures

were destroyed, and the inhabitants within the area of the attack were subjected to enormous temperatures. Their bodies instantly flamed, a femtosecond later their flesh boiled from their bones and turned to liquid. Millions of humans were killed. Everywhere the beam touched turned into a white-hot cemetery.

It had taken thirty-five years to complete the HEL-YES satellite array. For the following eight and a half decades it remained operative, manned, and ready. Throughout those decades some members of ESRA considered the maintenance and updating of HEL-YES, a waste of time and money.

They continued to believe it illogical for any superior civilization to exist outside the known star systems. Their computer model projections were all the proof they needed. Even in the remote chance their meticulous mathematical calculations were wrong, to their way of thinking, any scientifically advanced civilization would most assuredly be just as virtuous and peaceful as they themselves. Until now.

Safely isolated in ESRA's underground Operations Center, the governing body, headed by Provost Tanaka F. Ru, hung their collective heads and ultimately admitted their naïveté. But this was not the time to dwell on their failure or what might have been. Considering the alien fleet's behavior and the possibility of the annihilation of humanity, immediate action was required.

"Throm, update us on the current situation," Provost Ru ordered.

Throm Poots, Minister of the Planetary Defense Force, replied, "I'll get right to it. Most of you are aware of the events up until now, including the devastation of our outer colonies."

He paused to look around the room before continuing. In his forty years of service, this was the first instance he could remember having the full attention of all members of ESRA.

He continued, "Our surveillance intel has confirmed the devastation of the operations on Europa. All colonies on Mars have been destroyed except the underground outpost of Inca City near the southern pole. There are ongoing attacks on the Moon and now on large areas of Earth."

"Yes, yes, we know all that," Provost Ru anxiously interrupted. "We need to know who is attacking us, why they're here, what they're after, and what we can do about it?" He demanded.

"The invaders are of unknown origin," Minister Poots explained. "Their ships have unknown configurations. But their objective is obvious. They are here to eliminate the advances of mankind if not mankind itself. And they have more than enough firepower to render Earth's current defenses useless in a matter of days."

There was total silence throughout the room.

“Without a doubt what is unfolding cannot continue. Is there nothing we can do?” Provost Ru finally asked.

“Only one thing comes to mind,” Minister Poots replied. “Some of you may have heard of an obsolete satellite-based defense system, I think it was called the HEL-YES. I believe it’s still operable. If it is, it may be our only hope to at least put up some form of resistance.”

Sensing total destruction was rapidly approaching, members of ESRA realized the only possible hope for the survival of the human species was the intervention of the HEL-YES satellite array. Following Minister Poot’s recommendation, Provost Ru ordered the immediate activation of the HEL-YES weapon.

Finally, their moment had arrived. The HEL-YES operators quickly initiated the energizing process. Each of the sixteen satellites making up an array was equipped with twenty-four multidirectional beam emitters. Mere seconds after being fully activated the salvos began.

The HEL-YES systems spewed forth a relentless series of bright red beams intersecting into multiple amplified flares of quantum positronic crystal shards. With singular programming precision, the crystalized projectiles targeted each of the invading warships.

Twelve milliseconds later the first projectiles hit their target. Each strike from the galvanized particle shards gradually began to deteriorate their target’s protective screens. Under a rapid succession of strikes, the first and second protective screens of the massive warship assaulting the southern hemisphere began to fail. The barrage continued until moments later the particle shards sliced through the final screen.

Like a white-hot icepick piercing cold butter, the next blitz vaporizes the warship’s innermost armor, disintegrating large holes through the ship’s hull. The velocity of the HEL-YES bombardment continued until the devastating blows damaged the warship so severely it abruptly retreated to the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. When it retreated, the ship attacking the Moon quickly took its place.

The onslaught from the HEL-YES continued until it ultimately eliminated the warship attacking the northern hemisphere. One instant it was a two-thousand-foot-long structure of dull metal, the next instant it was a savage flaming core of expanding gas, ragged fragments, and burning rubble.

The gigantic eruption was seen around the globe. Most of the torn fragments were

launched into the immensity of outer space, but, like a meteor shower, some of the twisted wreckage flamed and burned as they entered Earth's atmosphere. The larger pieces not incinerated on entry caused geological spasms when they struck the Earth's surface.

Soon thereafter, the crippling HEL-YES attacks forced the other warship to also fall back to the asteroid belt. It wasn't long before the two remaining ships once more attacked the Earth and once more, they were repelled. Again retreating to the asteroid belt.

* * * * *

Aboard the dreadnought Shoghal Lupulella, the atmosphere inside the Theta Annex League command center was tense. Admiral Rubaak and the two remaining dreadnought captains were bewildered by Earth's unexpected defensive weapon.

"I have never seen anything like it," declared Captain Ferae of the Shoghal Lupulella, the first to retreat. "Almost immediately upon our arrival the Terrans executed their freakish weapon. The Dom Plattiwea was completely destroyed."

Over the communications link Captain Amniota of the dreadnought Blatta Cerastes explained, "Admiral Rubaak, we have adjusted our sensors and identified the source of their weapon. It is an array of satellites orbiting five thousand miles from the surface. The satellite weapons produce multiple beams of unknown complexity. Also, master repair specialists require an additional twenty hours to complete their restorations."

"Do you know the location of the weapon's control center?" Captain Ferae asked.

"Not at this time. Their transmissions are shielded and the encryption is very strong. We will need time," replied Captain Amniota.

Seemingly unfazed Admiral Rubaak replied, "Unfortunate. It is unlikely the Terrans will grant us further time. Is it possible to deflect their weapon with an alternative screen transition?"

"Reconfiguring our screen pattern structures is not feasible given the complexity of the Terran beams, sir."

"Understood. Proceed with your work," Admiral Rubaak instructed. "We must ensure our screens are fully operational. As soon as the repairs are complete run through a situational exercise."

"Confirmed," General Amniota replies.

“Clearly a reassessment of our battle strategy is in order,” Admiral Rubaak proclaimed. “The Annex League did not come all this way merely to be turned back. We intend to achieve J'nus’ objective of crushing this seed of freethinkers.

Our only choice is to re-engage. Obviously, our dreadnoughts offer an attack profile of two large targets for the enemy to concentrate their fire. Multiple targets should decrease the tactical advantage of their weapon technology.

Once repairs are complete, our ships should be able to hyperspace jump to a defensive position behind Earth’s orbiting moon. From that vantage point, we can use the attack drones from the Blatta Cerastes for a direct assault on the source satellites of their weapon.

This new posture will also allow the utilization of our short-range transfer field. Because the transfer field requires line-of-sight, we will broadcast the field profile from the Shoghal Lupulella to a location adjacent to the moon, and in line with the planet. We will then dispatch our forces through the transfer field at maximum distance, a position three thousand miles from the planet and behind their weapon.

Captain Ferae, your crew will coordinate the transfer of eight hundred troop transports each carrying an invasion force of one thousand combat soldiers. Their task will be to land and secure specific strategic positions. We must locate and disable their weapon’s control and communication centers. Once the transports are through, we will send a squad of drone fighters to target the satellites from below their orbits.”

Without warning, a light pattern plays across the room and a twelve-foot tall hologram of J'nus materializes before Admiral Rubaak. “I will speak directly to our companions,” the image demands.

Admiral Rubaak touched an icon on his screen and the holographic image of J'nus was transmitted throughout all Theta ships.

“You are connected, Divine One.”

The image spoke with a voice colder and more frightening than usual, “Faithful Theta, the time has arrived for our collective forces to achieve our destiny and complete the cleansing of this system. Every root and branch of this malignant tribe of heretics must be eliminated. You must be merciless with no compunction for the weak sensation of compassion for these infectious demons. Not an heir or offspring can be allowed to survive to further contaminate the civilizations of this galaxy. We must sweep the lands, find their sanctuaries and eradicate any wretch found until nothing remains of this scourge except the scorched bones of their rotting carcasses.”

At that moment, tens of thousands of voices could be heard as rousing chants of

“J'nus, J'nus, J'nus,” roared throughout the fleet.

The image of J'nus raises a hand in appreciation and smiles broadly as his image slowly fades.

Chapter 48 - Lighting The Torch...

The members of ESRA knew full well an invading alien force would likely be numerically superior to their own. Even so, they were determined that Earth was not going down easily. Broadcasting a message directly to the Planetary Defense Force and around the world, ESRA Provost Tanaka F. Ru needed to rally the planet.

“Sisters and brothers of Earth, I will not conceal the truth. We stand on the brink of devastation that none of us can escape. We’ve done nothing to bring about what’s upon us, but it’s here nonetheless. Our defenses have driven these alien heathens back for now, but they will return. Whoever they are their intentions are obvious. They are powerful and we are outnumbered. The choice before us is clear. Each of us must summon our inner strength, join together, and do everything in our power to turn away these predators. If we fail, there will be no tomorrow. Humanity’s very existence hangs in the balance. If we do not stop them today our world and the future of mankind will be lost forever. Each of us must not hesitate until these alien butchers are turned away or destroyed. If we fight together we can send them to the ashes of hell.”

ESRA security commanders projected an inevitable onslaught from multiple attack forces was strategically imminent. Their only option was to assemble the Planetary Defense Force’s small legion of Fågel VP-3 Interceptors from around the globe. Equipped with weapons developed by Cooper Wade Technologies, the interceptors were armed with dual high tech Gatling lasers, a burst fire precision-guided 120-mm Rail gun firing armor-piercing projectiles, and thirty precision-guided interceptor missiles. Even so, in combat, they were expecting to be out-gunned.

With their combined forces numbering just over ninety thousand, the Fågel interceptors launched and readied themselves. They formed a defensive boundary five thousand miles from Earth. Their mission, defend the vast volume of space between the HEL-YES satellites and the planet. Motivated by Provost Ru’s call to arms, they stood ready to take on anything that might make it past HEL-YES.

Meanwhile, the HEL-YES operators began the task of reprogramming the targeting system protocols. Fortunately, the experts at Cooper Wade Technologies had thoroughly trained the HEL-YES operating technicians to be prepared for any possibility. They quickly balanced their astronavigation positioning signals and celestial phase coordinates from the warships hidden behind Earth’s Moon, to the potential for numerous incoming craft. They increased the yield energy levels to maximum, realigned the vibrational nodes and projector bands, and adjusted for distance and multiple fast-moving targets. Once the realignments were complete, the HEL-YES operators confidently waited for the order to begin.

Twenty-eight hours passed as the maintenance crews and restoration drones on the Theta warships made the needed repairs. Their work complete, they were now ready to execute their mission and follow through with J'nus' objective to annihilate these disillusioned creatures and their unholy beliefs. Moments later the order came to begin their attack.

Instantly space erupted into chaos as thousands of Theta drones rocketed from the battlecruiser Blatta Cerastes. Like swarming gnats, they dispersed out from around both sides of the Moon. The horde of drones slid into six unending tentacles. The long lines of drones headed directly toward each satellite of the HEL-YES. With bolts of leasers blazing they attacked in a frenzy.

“Multiple incoming objects detected,” shouted the lieutenant manning the tactical assessment display at the HEL-YES control center.

Two femtoseconds later the HEL-YES erupted with rapid repeating fire. Even traveling at the speed of light, the beams seemed to crawl, taking four to five milliseconds before reaching their targets.

The Theta drones tried to evade the beams of HEL-YES but the beams hungrily followed each of the maneuvering ships like a pack of bloodhounds chasing a scent. When the beams arrived the quick repetition of the quasi-crystal shards diminished the protective level of their shields, not allowing them to recharge. The shards bored hole after hole into the protective screens of the drone fighters. Once their screens were down the shards easily pierced through the ship's hull and into its energy source. The whole process took a mere zeptosecond to complete.

Around the globe earthlings breathlessly watched high across the sky. On Earth's dark side, the Moon was in a Waxing Gibbous phase with a little more than 50% illuminated by the sun. Vibrant flashes appeared as hundreds of alien fighters exploded in flight. Like a display of fireworks, the lights streaked, twinkled, and seconds later simply disappeared. Only to be replaced with more flashes of light.

Without warning a point in space eight thousand miles from Earth's surface began to glow emerald green. Suddenly the window of a transfer field burst open. One nano-second later two ion cannon blasts roared threw the window, hitting nothing. Immediately following the ion cannon fire came a bright blue flash and two Theta Annex League transport ships suddenly appeared.

Seconds later another group of two ships appeared out of the transfer field. Then came another group, and another.

The moment the first group of ships materialized the Fågels of the PDF engaged their defensive measures. The space between Earth and the HEL-YES satellites

became alive with missiles, laser fire, and ion cannon blasts from the dogfighting spacecraft. On Earth, radiant red and orange flashes of light filled the sky as the spaceships engaged in heavy combat. The Fågel legionaries weaved and dodged as they picked their way through the ion cannon fire coming from the advancing transports. The surprise response by the PDF caught Theta transports off guard. The PDF attack was destroying most of the incoming ships. Even so, many of the Fågels and their human pilots were also demolished. Explosions and floating debris were everywhere. Predictably a few of the transports escaped the wrath of fire coming from the Fågels.

Piloting one of the Fågels engaging the transports, Lieutenant Commander Billie Jo Bhee, was fighting her way through the cannon fire. Dodging the red rainstorm of laser fire streaking past her canopy she veered sharply to the right then quickly rolled and turn hard left.

“We need to plug this rat hole before we’re overrun with these varmints.” LC Bhee reports back to the command center.

At PDF central command General Choi Albion’s voice was matter-of-fact. He replied, “Hold your position. Enemy attacking satellites like swarming mosquitos. HEL-YES holding them back. Will send additional Fågels from PDF 56 fleet.”

Her stomach tightened. Her usual fluttering butterflies changed to berserk chaos, “They’d better hurry. Our power pods are running low and these shit-heads are coming in fast, already lost three ships,” LC Bhee replies.

When any of the transports got through the veil of PDF fighters, Earth’s ground forces were immediately notified. Wherever the ships touched down bands of humans quickly assembled, ready and waiting. When the transports landed and began to unload their invading force, they were quickly engaged. Even though the Terrans were surprised at the humanoid appearance of the invaders, they were relentless and brutal as they dutifully fought the enemy occupiers. They mercilessly loosed every weapon they had, slaughtering as many as they could, taking prisoners of those few who survived. Hundreds of Theta invaders lie fallen, heartlessly razed by squads of Earth’s armed civilians.

* * * * *

When I entered the Sol system, Jupiter’s orbit was in line with my trajectory to Earth. I flash past it, zooming through its exosphere at three thousand miles from the surface. Moments later I was closing in on Earth. I slowed and felt the hair on the back of my neck stand tall. Stopping at twenty-thousand miles outside the Moon’s orbit, I had a full view of space around the Moon and the sight was so disturbing it made my blood stir.

From my vantage point, enhanced by the Craft’s sensors, I saw two Theta

dreadnoughts in stationary orbit on the opposite side of the Moon from Earth. The Craft's sensors also helped me grasp the scope of the Theta attack.

There were thousands of small ships pouring out from the warship on my right. Those drone fighters were freakishly attacking the HEL-YES satellites.

The HEL-YES seemed to be performing as designed, fighting off the attack pretty well, but that wasn't going to last forever.

At the same time, there were Theta troop transports leaving the main docking bay of the other dreadnought. Hundreds of armored Theta transport ships were lining up in attack formation near the main entrance to the transfer field. They maneuvered two-by-two into alignment. I'd seen these transfer fields before and knew they could only stay open for a nano-second for each discharge. So to be effective, the fleet of Theta ships had to stay in close formation. Once they arrived at their rendezvous point each ship would fire a blast from its ion cannons and then proceed through the field. It looked like they were being sent inside the orbit of the HEL-YES satellites, which wasn't good for the people of Earth.

I waited, letting my thoughts run through my options. While I waited, I had the Craft monitor PDF transmissions and locate the communication transmissions of the Theta.

Theta transmissions were nothing but operational chatter, no commands were being transmitted from any fleet admiralty.

Should I contact the PDF on Earth? That's probably not a good idea, I told myself. I don't need them asking questions.

Gradually a plan began to take shape. First, I'll take out the Theta drone fighter control center. That should slow their attack on the HEL-YES satellites. The transfer field replicator is my next target. Once I disable the transfer field it should be simple for the HEL-YES operators to target the waiting transports.

And where the hell is the Mule? The mere thought of him eats away at my stomach lining. This is his work, I'm sure of it. He'll be watching to make sure his plans are followed.

"It's time to get personal," I tell myself.

I command the Craft to locate the control room for the drone fighters. Instantly I get a mental projection of a diagram of the dreadnought on my right. With a quick thought, the vision zooms in and identifies the control room's exact location. It's on deck eight between the port-side hull and the departing portal of the fighters.

Initiating my hood, the Craft instantly sends my mind the schematic of the ship as

well as dialing coordinates for my bracelet. I'll aim for the corridor just outside the control room and two minutes into the future. Dialing the exact location inside the spaceship, I touch the green stone on my bracelet and instantly appear in the bowels of the ship.

I'm standing at the far end of a long arched cavern that looked as if it were a mile deep. Marching out of this cavern was a limitless column of identical android pilots all moving in perfect alignment and cadence. The androids looked small, no more than four feet tall, wearing tubular-shaped helmets with a glowing narrow slot where you'd expect to see eyes. Three rows of pulsating lights slowly swept back and forth across their abdomen. Wave after wave of these androids were marching out of the dark endless corridor. At the same time, a separate line of small ships with their cockpits open moved into mounting position. Hundreds of androids would stop in unison, turn right, then climb into their ships. The ships automatically sealed their hatch and a millisecond later emitted a high-pitch whine as they were propelled into outer space. It looked like a factory assembly line. The number of androids and ships seemed unlimited.

I silently make my way just outside the control room. Once close enough I sneak a peek through one of the glass windows. Inside there were two Theta beings vigilantly attending their console chores. They rhythmically operated the mechanism that primed the ships just before they were sent into space. In the center of the room was a large oval-shaped screen monitoring the status of the outside portal as it opened and closed.

In a mad charge, I burst through the doorway. My move was so fast it startled the two Theta operators. They froze. From my left hand, I swiftly fired an energy beam threw the head of the operator on the left, the other operator yelled in horror and stumbled backward just before I fired another beam. The sound of the second body hitting the floor was followed by silence. Next, I touched the red stone of my bracelet, and instantly returned to my Craft.

That should give me enough time, I thought to myself. On my command, the Craft stealthily sneaks into position one hundred feet above the ship's protective screens. Once in position, I begin firing a continuous three-foot-wide beam of energy toward the location of the control room on deck eight.

In an instant, a horde of 50 fighters changed direction, spread out and begin attacking me. Without stopping my beam assault on the dreadnought's screens, I return fire. The defensive screens of my Craft easily held back the strikes from the blitzing android fighters. The tracking system of the Craft guided my energy beams directly threw their screens and into their power source. One by one I methodically exterminate them all.

By now my energy beam had caused the protective screen of the dreadnought to glow a dull green, suddenly it cracked and shattered. My beam continues threw

the hull and several levels of the ship, until hitting its target. A nanosecond later I sped away.

Exactly two minutes after my time jump there was a brilliant fiery explosion. The blast blows a gaping hole into the side of the Theta ship causing it to lose power. It slowly twists and pitches to one side. Metal debris, drone parts, and frozen corpses floated in all directions. Without the ability to maneuver, the ship was dead in space.

The transfer field was next. Immediately I command the Craft to jam the frequency of the transfer field's communications. Quickly streaking to the other dreadnought the Craft's sensors found the holo-port machine on level two in the stern of the ship. The defensive screen was open just enough to project a relay of the transfer field beam through the unprotected port into space.

* * * * *

Admiral Rubaak and Captain Ferae were seated on the bridge on level 12 aboard the Theta dreadnought Shoghal Lupulella.

"Captain, the Blatta Cerastes has sustained an explosion. Drone launch bay failure, the attack has ceased," reported one of the monitoring officers in the bridge command center.

"Do we know what caused the explosion?" asked Captain Ferae.

"No sir, contact with the Blatta Cerastes has been disrupted. Wait, I have them now sir," reports the communications officer.

"Situation report Captain Amniota," Admiral Rubaak demands.

"We have been attacked by an unknown hostile force. We have sustained heavy damage. Screens and propulsion systems have been lost," Amniota responds.

"What do you mean an unknown force? What was it?"

"I don't know sir," Amniota replies. "It's unlike anything we've encountered. A squadron of drone fighters was dispatched to destroy the enemy but they were almost instantly eliminated. The attack breached our screens. Their weapon damaged twelve levels, including the drone command center, and caused the explosion. The detonation has disabled operational control of the Mesonium drive."

"Can you track this enemy with your BMD assessment monitors?"

“No sir, first it’s there, then it’s gone and reappears somewhere else. Maybe it’s some strange device from these evil Earthlings. They possess unexpected weapons.”

“Not likely. Reports from our agents indicated they are technically infantile.”

Onboard the Shoghal Lupulella one of the scanner officers suddenly reported, “GWP sensor pulses have identified a gradational wavelength anomaly. Possible enemy vessel.”

“Track and fire all cannons,” commanded Captain Ferae.

* * * * *

Suddenly there was a salvo of incoming fire from the dreadnought’s ion cannons headed my way. I banked the Craft left, then right, then left again to avoid the barrage of incoming fire and close in on the ship. Racing low along its hull until I was above the open port, I command the Craft into a steep dive. As I speed past the open port I fire a bus-size energy beam through the transfer field access portal. When my beam breached the port it struck with the kinetic force of a meteor. There was a brilliant initial eruption that triggered four secondary explosions. Only a small number of troop transport had made it threw before I destroyed the transfer field generator.

* * * * *

“Sir, we’ve lost the enemy vessel,” shouts the bridge battle-monitoring technician.

An instant later there was a cracking sound. The entire Shoghal Lupulella vibrated and lurched to one side.

“What was that,” Captain Ferae yelled.

“Sir, a high-energy detonation in the transfer field relay bay has caused our stern fields to go down.”

“Stabilize the ship. Initiate screen stabilizer protocols. Damage report” commanded Captain Ferae.

“Sir, the field relay bay and stern levels 1 through 6 have been damaged and are non-active. Atmospheric leakage in sections 9B through 9E, multiple dead and injured. Repair and medical teams have been dispatched. Forward screens have returned to level 8 and are stable. Lower stern quadrant screens are still down. Midship defensive screens operating at level 4.”

A quick glance at the fleet data display shows that over two-thirds of his fleet was either disabled or destroyed. “Calibrate slipstream coordinates for Theta. Brace for hyperspace travel,” Admiral Rubaak orders.

“Sir, the transports?” Captain Ferae questioned.

“We don’t know what this weapon is and are unable to track it. If we take the time to retrieve the transports we may end up being completely destroyed. Contact the Blatta Cerastes and inform them. Tell those transport captains to tighten formation.”

“But sir.”

“Follow your orders captain,” Admiral Rubaak commands.

“Yes sir.”

There was a solemn silence on the bridge as the Shoghal Lupulella slowly turned. Flanked by sixty-one transports, the fleeing remnants of the Theta armada began to accelerate. A dull green energy band develops near the front end of the dreadnought and the formation of ships jumps into hyperspace.

* * * * *

After my flyby assault, the Crafts sensors indicated the warship’s defensive shield grid had been severely damaged. I had the Craft come around, stopping a few miles from the ship, I watched as its screens glowed a bright red, flickered to yellow, and its protective cocoon failed. Even so, a moment later portions of the dreadnought’s shields reactivated.

Just as I was ready to resume my attack the dreadnought began to move away from its orbiting position. Several transports fired their thrusters and quickly rushed toward the dreadnought. Moving slowly at first the newly formed fleet rapidly began to pick up speed. Suddenly the space around the group flickered a dull green and the ships jumped into hyperspace. Disappearing into the stars. In their wake was a spiraling vortex of gray-blue vapor following their path into the vastness of deep space.

Hundreds of transports filled with battle-ready troops were left floating close to the Moon. Transport captains were stunned. Vulnerable and without the ability to return to Theta, they had nowhere to go and no hope of survival. Their only vision of the future was an unpleasant doom by the devastating weapons of these Terrain fiends.

It didn’t take long for the HEL-YES to completely devour the remaining fighters. Once the last red dot on the HEL-YES attack display disappeared the HEL-YES technicians reconfigured its attack protocol and fired its first devastating volley at the stranded transports. An instant later ten transports immediately exploded. The remaining Fågel interceptors had reorganized into battle formation ready to wreak havoc and demolish the invaders.

Humans can be ruthless when necessary, but the majority of the time they can be reasonable and compassionate. This was one of those times. After ESRA assessed the situation, they sent the stand-down order to HEL-YES and the Fågel interceptors.

My Craft was monitoring their communications so I heard the order and thought, how stupid can the elites of ESRA be? These Theta are not friends of humanity. They may appear human but they have real human blood on their hands. Earth should annihilate these heathens while it can.

But that was not to be. ESRA transmitted a signal to the remaining Theta transports giving them a final ultimatum.

“This is ESRA, the governing body of Earth. Our forces are prepared to end this conflict here and now. You have two options, surrender or die. You have three minutes to decide.”

My Craft was also monitoring the Theta communications. I listened intently as the transport captains and the commander of the surviving dreadnought engaged in a feverish discussion of their chances for survival. Some wanted to fight to the death, including Captain Amniota of the dreadnought Blatta Cerastes.

His ship was damaged and unable to move, but, he concluded, it still had weapons and he wanted to continue the fight. The majority of the transport captains knew this battle with Earth was more than they had bargained for. Earth’s weapons were fierce, much stronger, and more deadly than they had anticipated. Most of them realized they had lost this battle and had been abandoned by J’nus. They were teetering on the edge of oblivion and wanted to live.

After a tense two-and-a-half minutes of heated dialogue, sanity finally triumphed. The transport captains agreed to ESRA’s demand and dropped their shields. Captain Amniota reluctantly dropped his shields and gave the order to stand down.

Slowly the remaining transports came together to form a long convoy. Flanked on either side by Fågel interceptors as escorts, they began their final journey to a secure landing location on Earth. Other interceptors gathered around the Blatta Cerastes. ESRA had dispatched a two-hundred-member combat team to the dreadnought. The team boarded and took command.

Enough of this foolishness, I tell myself. Luckily Earth has avoided a devastating, species-ending assault. Yes, millions were killed in the process, but humanity on Earth had survived. Still, I have a feeling this is not going to end well for Earth’s most advanced species. The manifest destiny of its path has been interrupted. Changed toward an unknown objective.

The remainder of the invading fleet had withdrawn, probably escaping back to Theta, as I should. I must get back to Vienna and find Sanduval Mule.

Chapter 49 - Bad Seed Blues...

Out of nothing the Shoghal Lupulella suddenly appears from the slipstream of hyperspace. With its nose glowing bright red, it arrived seven thousand twenty-nine miles from the surface of Theta. Huddling close within the dreadnought's stream wave, one by one the remaining troop transports also materialized.

Upon their arrival, the remnants of the Annex League tried communicating with the Theta Protection Force but were unable to make contact. They attempted to dock with the orbiting space station but communication was down.

Naturally suspicious, Admiral Rubaak acted immediately. He sent one transport to the Nanrik spaceport and another to the spaceport at Carthium to scout the areas and report back. At the same time, he put the balance of his diminished fleet on alert. He also gave the command for a full inventory of supplies. For the next few minutes, it was quiet within the fleet as the crew completed their inventory tasks.

"Sir, the inventory is complete and ready for inspection," said Captain Ferae.

Admiral Rubaak studied the digital notepad, slowly scanning the report in search of good news. Their current food supply was lower than he hoped. There was only enough to sustain his force for sixty cycles at current rations. The fleet's munitions were at fifty-three percent capacity. The air regenerating equipment was working full-time and would soon require the normal rotational shutdown for maintenance. That would temporarily strain his crew and the remainder of his fleet.

When the scout transport approached Nanrik it immediately came under attack. The pilot transmitted their situation back to the Shoghal Lupulella and asked for reinforcements. They were instructed to return.

At the same time, the transport dispatched to Carthium discovered it too had been overrun. They too were ordered to return.

Admiral Rubaak's ruddy face frowned as he realized his obvious dilemma. The Mogrif pagans had revolted, shattered the Protection Force, and taken control of both spaceports and the planet.

Surprised but not shaken, Admiral Rubaak promptly went on the offense. Splitting his forces into two battalions, each comprised of twenty-five troop transports, with each transport carrying one thousand soldiers, he dispatched them to the spaceports. In his judgment, twenty-five thousand of his best fighters should be enough to reclaim both of the terminals.

As the Annex League squadron approached Nanrik they encountered heavy defensive fire. The Mogrif were using the spaceport's own defensive weapon systems against them. Their devastating barrage destroyed many of the transport vessels that came within range.

Of the twenty-five transports attempting to reclaim Nanrik, ten were pummeled and destroyed as they approached. The eight that were fortunate enough not to be struck and able to land and deploy their troops were immediately set upon by Mogrif fighters.

Swarms of Mogrif flying warriors fought their way through laser fire and violently shredded the Annex League's offensive line. A few Mogrif warriors were downed but the Annex League troops were overwhelmed. Their wounded were left begging for their lives, praying for salvation by J'nus.

Those eight transports now sat in the fields just outside the Nanrik port damaged and empty. The space around them was covered with dead and bloodied bodies. The other seven transports were heavily damaged and had to retreat. Reassembling near the dreadnought Shoghal Lupulella, awaiting further orders.

At Carthium the intense fighting between the Annex League and the Mogrif warriors had taken its toll on both forces. Hundreds of Mogrif were killed but the twenty-five Annex League ships and their cargo of troops had all been annihilated.

On the bridge of the Shoghal Lupulella, Admiral Rubaak gave the order to contact the central transmitting station for the Walkers.

"Try to make contact with these pagan marauders," ordered Captain Ferae.

"I've tried sir. There is no response to our attempts," the communications officer replied.

A moment later the communications officer declared, "I have them, sir. A transmission line is open."

"This is Admiral Rubaak, commander of the Theta Annex League. I wish to speak to those of authority."

There was no response. Admiral Rubaak repeated his message several times before a reply finally came.

The voice he heard was deep, firm, and direct, "I am Thrufi, Sachem of the Synod Mogrif. If you want to waste time sending us more of your troops to kill, we will happily oblige."

“This is *our* world,” Admiral Rubaak nearly yelled.

Silence flooded the air.

Adjusting his tone Admiral Rubaak softened his voice and spoke again, “We have not returned to fight with you. We have lived together for many cycles. If you allow us to assemble on the surface without further assault, we can have a conversation and possibly come to a mutual agreement.”

There was no immediate reply. Tense moments of silence passed before Thrufi finally responded, “There will be no talk of compromise. If you wish to be a reliable partner in Theta’s future, you are welcome, for your life belongs to you and you alone. J’nus should not be directing your every move. However, if your priority is to continue the separation of your collectivist cult of J’nus followers from the family of individuals who make up the Mogrif, there can be no further discussion.”

“We too are Mogrif,” Admiral Rubaak persisted in a calm but emphatic voice. Then his tone dropped a little, got deeper, more personal, “It was you who isolated us. It is you winged Mogrif who segregated your own descendants from their rightful place in the federation of Mogrif clans.”

“As expected, you are young and naive. Your knowledge of Theta’s history and the Mogrif is deficient. You have been instructed with imaginary, untrue concepts. Have you forgotten that Walkers have been active participants in our governing body for many cycles? Your J’nus has done you wrong.”

“That is not for you to decide,” Admiral Rubaak snapped.

“I see there remains within you the Mogrif trait of a free spirit,” Thrufi observed.

“We are Mogrif who make up this legion. Every one of us freely believes in and freely follows J’nus,” Admiral Rubaak pompously commended.

“I commend you and your legion’s commitment to embracing mind control. Mogrif yes, but you are not free. You abandoned your freedom when you subjugated yourself to the deceptive beliefs of J’nus. You deserted your personal identity for the collectivist ideology of J’nus. His ideas are persuasive but perverted. He insists you damn your essence of self-liberty with unquestioned compliance to groupthink through connectivity. His creed brings nothing but slavery and death to true Mogrif. Conformity of thought is not the Mogrif way.”

“Yet you are demanding we conform to your ways,” Admiral Rubaak replied.

“Our tradition for free-thinking individuals was acceptable for thousands of cycles before J’nus twisted your thoughts,” Thrufi declared.

Staring out the viewport of the Shoghal Lupulella at the planet below, Admiral Rubaak's mind raced through the kaleidoscope of recent events. As he did he could feel despair growing inside as the painful reality of his situation slowly dawned on him.

The Annex League was unexpectedly overpowered by the advanced technology of the Earthers. In the process, he lost two dreadnoughts and hundreds of thousands of Annex League fighters. His only option was to retreat to his home planet or be completely destroyed. But Theta was not as he left it. An insurrection of legacy Mogrif pagans had taken control of his ports. The forces he sent to reclaim them had been overwhelmed by their own defensive weapons, now wielded by the pagans. His army was being vanquished from their own planet. Worse yet, it appears J'nus has abandoned his faithful disciples. He was boxed in with limited choices and in no position to make any demands of these heathens. But he was also not ready to give up.

Captain Ferae had proposed regaining control of the planet by concentrating his fighter squadrons to attack and take back one of the spaceports. Using it as a base of operations he could then launch further assaults. But that tactic would leave many of his own troops dead, weakening his army even further. Of course, that didn't matter if he could gain the advantage by occupying one of the spaceports.

He could also follow Captain Ferae's other suggestion and use his main weapon on these pagans. But using it would mean damaging the spaceports beyond any reasonable repair and would remove our ability to harvest vital resources.

Admiral Rubaak continued, "The time of relic Mogrif controlling Theta has passed. Your trivial revolution will not determine the future of Theta. J'nus has given us the power to destroy you," he threatened.

Thrufi replied immediately. "I will be crystal clear so there will be no misunderstanding. You and your tribe of ... J'nus drones will not live on Theta unless you disavow J'nus. When you do so, we will welcome each of you as an individual Mogrif. If you do not, whatever the cost may be, we will ride out this fight to its end. We will leave all of Theta in flames before we submit to the suicidal tyranny preached by J'nus. Make your choice or we will end you right now. Unless you disarm and proceed in peace we will eliminate you all."

Continuing to gaze out the large observation port, Admiral Rubaak took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Matching wits with this Thrufi Mogrif is becoming tedious, he thought. But this is not the time to wallow in weakness.

Shifting his attention back to Thrufi, Admiral Rubaak simply replied, "Your meaning is clear."

Yet he knew he still had options. He could use his main Nyhilator Beam weapon

on Carthium while the rest of his troops' assault and gain control of Nanrik. Once successful he could use the resources at Nanrik to resupply his fleet. From there he could take the fight to these pagan Mogrif. He could also wait, but not for long. The cold hard truth is, waiting it out wasn't a realistic option.

Tactical officer Binotius Vallie tapped at his console, "Sir, all decks report spooled and ready positions, sir."

"Very well. Stand on alert," replied Captain Ferae.

Admiral Rubaak continued his appraisal. Where can they get more resources, he asked himself. Could they conceal a landing party? Could he contact loyal Walkers and use them to persuade the remaining Walkers to take up arms?

Standing, facing the huge view-screen displaying planet Theta, Captain Ferae appeared deep in thought. Finally, his eyes widened, he turned to the Admiral and spoke up, "These legacy Mogrif," he said with obvious disdain, "they are Flyers are they not? They have been living in the mountains, now they have taken over our cities. Why did they come now? Where did they plan this rebellion? Where is their home?"

Admiral Rubaak thought for a moment. Tightly gripping the arms of his seat he answered, "I recall a Protection Force team being dispatched to an area at the base of the Noreia Yar," nodding thoughtfully. In a growling voice, he ordered, "Initiate heat signature scans of the Noreia Yar mountains. Find their quarters."

Chapter 50 - What kind'a fool...

Returning to Theta I broke out of starspeed, reflexively slowed my Craft, and floated fifteen thousand miles from the planet's surface. Had the ships of the Annex League been scanning open space they might have detected my arrival. Although it's not likely because their technology wasn't advanced enough. Besides, their attention was elsewhere.

Floating stationary, I watched the surface of Theta slowly rotate. Much like Earth, it was a beautiful blue-green planet. Several moments went by before I turn my attention to a more expansive view of the surrounding space. At the same time, the Craft's sensors were scanning the full spectrum of likely lightwave frequencies and data bandwidths. I was searching for any evidence of the Mule.

That's when I see it, just over Theta's western horizon. Something that is there, but not there. A barely discernable dark starless shape lurking against the vast starscape of space.

"Is that you Mule?" I think to myself.

Instantly a spike of psychic pain began gnawing itself through my head as if the sharp nails of a hawk's claws had reached inside my skull, stroked my brain, and caressed the back of my eyeballs.

"Is that you Manoid?" The Mule snarled back.

The Mule's mind connection caught me off guard. Worse yet, was the unexpected tremor of psychogenic anguish exposed by the sudden connection. The unyielding head pain was nearly unbearable.

Letting my breath out slowly, I groaned aloud, "I knew you were here," the head pain gradually lifting.

The head pain gradually lifted just as I focus my attention on the starless spot and the bullet-shaped cruiser suddenly disappears. In its place was a star-studded background. As quick as thought the Craft responds with its sensors scanning deep into space. It found the wave created by the Mule's hypersonic slipstream but was unable to trace it through the vast nothingness of space.

"Run you coward," I say out loud. I must find and finish off Sanduval Mule or this cat-and-mouse game he's playing will go on for ever.

Wait! That's not like him. Not like him at all. The Mule doesn't typically turn away from a challenge especially when he thinks he has an advantage. Maybe he

wasn't running. Maybe he was arriving. Maybe his spaceship has delivered him and then left. Maybe he's on the surface right now. I wouldn't put it past him.

That's a lot of maybes. Maybe its time to again gather my lone wit. It's obvious the Mule was behind the disruption of the social structure of Theta, which then changed the sequential course of human society on Earth. He has changed the physical laws governing their existence. His actions will redirect the societies of both worlds into a future only he can predict. It's also obvious that the Mule's scope is chronologically vast. So vast the U.O.H. may be unable to make necessary and timely modifications. Exactly what is the endgame of the Mule's plan? He's arranged all this BS, so where did he go to observe and gloat?

Wait a minute, he has a bracelet and ring. And each set emits a unique frequency wave. I once found Vienna using her time jewelry's unique energy signature. Although I've tried to find him this way before without success, maybe being nearer the source will help locate him this time. It's worth a try. I ordered the Craft to scan all known frequency waves of bracelet and ring sets.

My Craft found nothing from the scans. Maybe he really isn't here.

Anyway, the Mule has maneuvered the societies of Earth and Theta according to his algorithms. Like it or not, both worlds are now connected, their futures intertwined. Why now and for what reason? It's obvious now that Earth was the main target with Theta being a secondary tool. Then why would he return to Theta?

Studying his writings has given me a small insight into his pneuma. But that knowledge still isn't narrow enough to answer my questions. And with his abilities, the Mule could be anyone and anywhere. If he is here and I can't locate his bracelet and ring frequency it will make finding him much more difficult.

Just then the Craft's input redirected my attention to an Annex League shuttle transport, accompanied by a squadron of fighters, which had exited from the underbelly of the dreadnought and was stealthily prowling their way toward the surface. Their direction wasn't toward either spaceport, so I concluded they must be a covert strike team on a secret ground mission.

The majority of Thrufi's Army is at the space terminals defending their planet. If this Annex League squadron discovers the Synod Mogrif's mountain headquarters it will put Vienna and many Mogrif beings in danger. The feeling of anger stirred deep inside me.

Threats from the U.O.H. or not, if Vienna is in danger, I must intervene.

I command the Craft to pinpoint Vienna's location using her bracelet's energy frequency, wherever she is. At this orbital distance from Theta, as well as the

curvature of the planet, it wasn't possible to survey all areas of the planet at the same time. I gave the thought and the Craft made one quick revolution of the planet and found her. She is safe so far. She's at a large-scale building northeast of the city of Klynash.

In the meantime, I have the Craft establish a secure communication link to Thrufi's forces. After several moments of convincing them who I was, I was finally connected: "Thrufi, this is CW," I said in a composed voice. "I have identified an Amex League troop transport, accompanied by four gunships on their way in the direction of your mountain home. I will intercept."

"Indeed," Thrufi calmly replied, "Thank you CW, Jokul and his team are being deployed to intervene."

Noreia Yar

Remaining in stealth mode, I continue to observe from a distance while monitoring communications between the strike team and the dreadnought. I didn't want to get involved unless I absolutely had to. There was a curious echo effect in their communications as they combed the mountain region looking for the Synod Mogrif command post.

Then came the expected. Their search had identified a shrouded cave entrance at the base of a tall bedrock formation. When they notified Admiral Rubaak he gave the order for them to begin their assault.

Three of the gunships positioned themselves directly overhead while the fourth swung wide so their weapons could cover a larger land area. When the troop transport neared the surface its powerful exhaust blasted the ground, causing clouds of dust. Once it touched down the debarking ramp dropped and a strike team of several hundred Annex League troopers in their deep-purple exoskeletal battle suits pour out. On command, the troopers gathered into assault position and in unison began advancing toward the mouth of the newly discovered cave opening. All the while the gunships hovered protectively.

>>Inside the mountain bunker a battalion of Mogrif warriors had been placed on full alert for an impending assault. Suddenly a tremendous blast opens up a hole in the south end of the main passageway of the mountain fortress. The next moment a score of fearsome-looking Annex League troopers make their way into the smoke-filled corridor. The leading troopers in the strike team advanced so quickly the chilling sound of the blast was still echoing through the tunnels as they moved forward.

After the initial flash, the inside of the passageway went pitch black, but the Synod guards were ready. Instantly the entire passageway became ablaze with

laser fire. Deadly bolts ricochet in wild random patterns creating numerous small explosions as they struck the cave walls. Annex League troopers and Synod warriors alike scatter and duck into shallow side corridors, niches, and behind storage containers. Laser bolts barked in rapid fire hitting several Synod soldiers. They scream and stagger in pain as they fight through the ongoing battle. They perished like suicidal sentry bees defending the hive.

Meanwhile, hundreds of Annex League troopers were felled holding the stumps of seared-off arms and scorched faces. The grotesque smell of burned flesh quickly filled the cavern. They were being slaughtered by the deadly accuracy of the plasma blasts from the Synod warriors.

>>At the same time, Jokul and his team arrive near the base of the mountains. With swift vengeance, they promptly began their assault, immediately engaging the enemy. Four teams of six warriors each were sent to maneuver themselves high above the hovering gunships and position themselves for a swarm attack.

Circling above the gunships the warrior swarm swooped down from multiple directions with lasers firing. But their laser blasts merely bounced off the gunship's energy-deflecting shields. Two warriors pulled out of the swarm from opposite directions. Swerving and dodging the incoming fire they began flying a crisscrossing pattern. The warriors followed this pattern until one attacker fell behind the other forming a straight line headed directly at the gunship. As they closed in on the gunship, in a tightly coordinated maneuver, one of the flying warriors pulled up while at the same moment the other dove, then quickly fly over and under the gunship. As they pass they silently anchor two magnetic incendiary devices. The devices automatically connect to each other with an explosive cord. Moments later the explosion completely destroys the gunship.

Responding fire from the other gunships had taken down several soaring Synod warriors but they kept up the onslaught. Seconds pass before the next gunship is also reduced to rubble. The remaining two gunships fought hard trying to hold their own as best they could, but they are overwhelmed by the speed and determination of the Synod warriors and were ultimately demolished.

Simultaneously another two teams of warriors, including Jokul himself, were attacking the ground troops. Flying in at ten feet off the ground with lasers blasting and swords at the ready, they twist and weave through the forest of tall trees at top speed. Zooming undaunted into the fray they shot, stabbed, and behead as many Annex League troopers as they could. The faint cries for mercy from the dying troopers were ignored.

>>Inside the fortress's main corridor the massacre had slowed. The only source of light within the passageway was the random firing of a laser blaster and the eerie purple glow of the beacon at the far end of the shaft. The blackness wrapped itself around each of the warring fighters. Dark narrow side tunnels branching off the

main hallway would occasionally go ablaze with the echo of tormented fury from rampaging hand-to-hand combat.

The whole battle lasted a relatively short while, but the results were devastating for the Annex League. They lost fighters and gunships. While not as ruinous, the Mogrif lost many of its best, most experienced, and battle-tested warriors.

Jokul and his team had fought their way to the cave entrance, stood their ground, and ended the assault. Now breathless, the warriors gazed out amid the reeking death of the broken and twisted bodies of their Annex League foes. As Jokul walked among the broken and mutilated bodies the sound of bones crunched under his footsteps.

When he found a survivor he grabbed the wounded Annex League officer by the neck and squeezes. The officer moaned and pleaded for mercy. He struggled in vain when Jokul lifts him off his feet by his throat, "have you placed explosives?" Jokul calmly quizzed.

For a moment the officer refuses to speak but eventually cries out as Jokul begins to tighten the grip on his throat. "three... devices,... carried,, by Master Chief Ziad." A moment later there was a gruesome gurgling noise then the sound of a snap and the officer goes limp. Jokul tosses the dead body against a stack of remains and turns to his warriors. "Search the entire command post. Find this Ziad Chief, locate any explosives, question and destroy any Annex League soldier."

The Mogrif troops quickly scurried in all directions, into the adjoining hallways, and throughout the mountain caverns.

>> Being true to my word to the U.O.H., I had held back from taking more direct action, deciding to observe for a while longer instead. If I get more involved, whatever I do is going to cause structural and social interaction that more than likely will make detectable changes to Theta's future. Best to stay out of it if possible and concentrate on Earth's situation.

I immediately dove for Vienna's location, north of Klynash. Flying at 100 feet above the surface I came in along the river, making a rooster-tail of water behind me. When I got to shore, I gained altitude and flew parallel to the top of the forest. In the distance, I could see the sheer cliffs of the Noreia Yar rising straight up from the trees flowing along the valley floor. The snow-capped mountains of Noreia Yar shimmered in the morning sunlight, giving off a blue-white hue.

I send a thought to Vienna "*V, I am close, I think.*"

Vienna immediately replied, "*I was wondering if you knew where I was.*"

"I got ya. Is the antidote useable?"

“It is ready and in containers. I hope they fit.”

“How does it work?”

“It kills the non-primary gene cells and uses a mutated spiderweb collapse routine to spread within the host.”

“Of course.” I sent trying to be cynically humorous. *“Anyway, I’m here,”* I replied, as I floated over the building, *“where are these containers?”*

“Near the field about half a mile to the west of the tower. Be careful.”

The Craft slowly turned to the west, I thought to Vienna, *“Be right back,”* and headed for the tanks.

I was there in no time. Waiting for me were 20 oblong storage containers that looked to hold nearly 5000 gallons each. I did not want the Theta workers to see my Craft change its shape, so I shot straight up ten thousand miles and adjusted the Craft’s contour to resemble a space salvage junker. When I returned the Theta stevedores and their dronebots went to work loading the tanks. It took a few minutes but they were able to pack them all into the extended Craft.

When the heavy door of the Craft slammed shut, CW sent a thought to Vienna, *“I’ve got the tanks. coming back, be ready.”*

“Great, they all fit?” Vienna asked, surprised

“Yes.”

Vienna smiled, isn’t that like CW? Always to the point,

“As soon as I pick you up we’re headed back to Earth,” I sent.

Vienna asked: *“We will have to atomize the antidote fluid droplets and then spray it into the lower atmosphere. It’s the only way the dispersion will be complete. Can your Craft do that? Those affected won’t need to inhale much of the antidote for it to have the desired effect.”*

“Not a problem. Be ready to go.”

“OK. I’ll let Jamzillia and the others know.” Vienna replied.

After arriving at the facility, I landed my craft several yards from the front of the research building and made my way to the nearest entrance.

I step out of the Craft and walk the short distance to the entrance. Just as I arrive the door slides open. I enter and walk down a dimly lit corridor to a room lined with wall-to-wall instrumentation. Jamzillia, her team, and Vienna are all sitting around pop up holographic data panels. Jamsillia runs a hand over one of the panels and it switches views to a different data stream.

I walk over to Vienna and give her a quick hug, “Are we ready to go?”

Jamzillia smiles and says, “Hello CW, did you find that crater?”

“I’ve checked it out and there is nothing there.”

Vienna’s head turned quizzically at CW. She starts to say something, then thinks better of it. “Jamzillia and I are working on an AI algorithm for their devices that will wean the Walkers from J’nus control.”

“I should have known there would be an app for that...” CW says with a grin. “Say, we better get going.”

Vienna agrees, says goodbye to Jamzillia and her team and they head out to the Craft. On their way, they look to the east where dark clouds, vicious winds, arcs of lightning, and thunder roll and rumble from the clouds in the distance.

“Weather is getting bad. We better go now,” says CW.

Once seated, the Craft raises to one thousand feet, turns north, and begins to accelerate. The research buildings gradually fell behind until they were lost in the haze of distance. Quickly climbing to fifty thousand miles, I float for a moment as we take in Theta’s blue-white beauty.

Vienna says, “Theta certainly is a beautiful planet,”

“Yes, it is,” I agreed, “just like Earth.”

“What crater was Jamzillia talking about? When did you go there,” Vienna asked.

CW turned to Vienna, his blue eyes wrinkled in the corners, as his face gradually turned into a mischievous grin. “That’s a story for another time...”

Like a sliver comet, the teardrop-shaped Craft accelerates to star-speed and streaks through the blackness of space toward Earth.

Chapter 51 - Transmutation...

The Milvago entered the orbiting planet cluster of Tau Rusconii Prime. Within seconds the black torpedo-shaped cruiser slipped into orbit above Dhakitu, the planet furthest from the bright yellow star at this system's center.

The two mineral-rich moons of Dhakitu orbited on a 180° axis. Their geological composition, rotation, and the gravitational field of their orbital position blocked any outside cerebral connections.

Sanduval Mule settled back in his Bos-bos leather chair and smiled, showing his gray jagged teeth. The logic of his unshakable algorithmic calculations has once again proven undeniable, he thought. His strategy is working perfectly. The free-spirited human had intervened at the precise timeline this Beta Test of his HumanCode algorithm had predicted. Theta's invasion was halted at the right moment and the repopulation of Earth is now well underway. The evolutionary outcome can no longer be altered or stopped.

Evolving technology can be fast-moving while biological evolution creeps along at its own pace. By using the technology of his personally redesigned 2CRISPR-Cas11 gene-drive technology for genome manipulation, the speed of evolution can be amplified and guided. Guided in such a way necessary for the seat of all existence to bear the fruit of his plan.

The population of virile male humanoids on Earth has been sufficiently reduced. From this point on, the majority of the young captured Theta males will survive. Over time the Theta will mate with female humanoids. With a life span three times longer than humanoids, they will plant their seed many times within the human female hosts, and the inbreeding will continue from that point forward. The offspring of the inbreeding produce individuals who would produce offspring further mutated in many useful ways.

The characteristic of an individual of the humanoid species to produce unpredictable responses to specific stimuli has always led to unintended consequences, which were nearly impossible to anticipate. With his new HumanCode algorithmic modular architecture the necessary changes, proven to be 99.7% accurate, will end that impediment. Soon the curtain of irrational behavior spawned by the free spirit of organic humans will be torn away. Brought into equilibrium by the more predictable traits from the genome of the mutated Theta. The inherent characteristic of non-conformity within the human individual will morph into the joint identity of group consciousness. Human nature will be forever enlightened.

Sanduval smiled, the human species will soon fall to their collective knees before

the blissful monolith of the Mule's amalgam.

Obviously, the surveillance technology of the U.O.H. will observe the transition. That can't be averted. With his insight into the U.O.H., he knew the alteration would be perceived by the U.O.H. as an abnormal adaptation initiated by the unnecessary intervention of their own human agents.

The reconstruction is beyond form, beyond the shallow imagination of the coterie of fools running the U.O.H.. Within their feeble algorithms, the cultural transformation will appear to develop naturally. Yet in a mere three hundred fifty-six Earth cycles, 6 generations, the stage will be set for ascension to utopia.

As predicted, he can never fail. He who never fails always succeeds, and he who always succeeds is all-powerful. Time is on his side. He is in total control, and that's the way he likes it.

This is only the end of HOROLOGE -Volume 2-Ipsissima Verba
The story continues

EPILOGUE

A look into your reading future:

HOROLOGE Volume 3 - Space, Time, Chocolate

The past is the womb of the present and the present is the history of the future.

Within the historical cognition of human knowledge, there are competing scientific contradictions explaining the movement of the universe, that have perplexed human intellect for centuries. Contradictions that defy current understanding of natural law, and have the potential to disrupt the fabric of Space and Time.

The obscure principles of these contradictions conflict with the temporal continuum of human senses. Few within the human species can fully understand and appreciate the intricately interwoven tapestry of Space and Time.

Chocolate is also a great contradiction that defies the human senses. Very few trained Chocolatiers can identify the various savory richness of tastes within Chocolate's flavor hue. The tempering texture, sheen, alchemy of specific cacao bean variants, and the undertones and aromas of various percentages used in each formula, suggest untold combinations of flavorful delight.

The same is true of endless Space and the Timeless evolutionary possibilities of various life forms within the Galaxy.

The Universe, is very much, like Chocolate.

CW's Jyotti suit immobilized him in mid-stride as if Medusa herself had gazed upon him. The hood instantly deployed covering his face and neck. The heads-up display indicated biological danger. The suit had surrounded CW in a thin membrane as a nano filter that blocked contact on a molecule level.

"Gotta love this Jyotti suit," I thought.

A biological microbial enzyme just as dangerous as any intelligent alien invader, was threatening Earth's humanity. He was there to stop it.

When CW noticed Vienna, a smile came to his face.



Ipsissima verba

An ancient Latin phrase meaning "the very words"

In religious terms it refers to the sacred words spoken by a deity.

In legal terms it refers to material quoted from an established authority.

In political terms it refers to the populist claims of demagogues.

In human terms it refers to your spoken promise.

