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BASED ON AN ORIGINAL OUTLINE BY J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI



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BABYLON™



DARK GENESIS
THE BIRTH OF THE
PSI CORPS



Dark Genesis
The Birth of the Psi Corps

by J. Gregory Keyes
Book 1 of Psi Corps

Psi Corps

01: Dark Genesis

02: Deadly Relations

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Prologue

Alice Kimbrell pushed back from the screen angrily. “Ridiculous!” she snapped, to no one.

It was a word she would repeat, often. A word that would haunt her when the killing began.

She went to the kitchen to make coffee, which she always needed midafternoon. She stopped, reaching for a cup. There sat Albert’s old mug, asking to be filled. Ridiculous. She should throw it away.

The coffee steaming, she stepped out to her balcony and tried to take a moment to contemplate the sea. But the paper’s title glowed in her mind, and all the coffee did was brighten the glare.

Investigations into Biochemical Sensory Transmission by Duffy and Philen, June 2115.

Ridiculous. She stared hard at the lavender sea, as if concentrating could make her appreciate it. “I love this view. It reminds me of Denmark,” Albert had once remarked. It had seemed a soulful thing to say at the time. As if Albert had more than the parody of a soul.

She wished she had an office. People who had offices could escape their homes.

She stalked back to her workstation and looked at the abstract again. It hadn’t changed.

A sample population of 1,000 volunteers was screened for metasensory abilities using standard set Zener cards, Black Box Randomizer, and blind curtain tests. Two individuals demonstrated consistently accurate results for each test, and ten demonstrated statistically improbable accuracy. HCI and Dao imaging demonstrated collateral brain cortex activity between senders and receivers in

accurate tests. The sample population was increased to 5,000 individuals. Two members of the larger sample conclusively demonstrated metasensory abilities, with thirteen sets of statistically improbable results. Cortex imaging was consistent with the findings of the preliminary study.

Okay, she thought. Prove it to me.

Unfortunately, they did. She read it again, summoning even more skepticism.

Of course, data could be faked, but as per usual, they had included a complete data set with verifying codes.

Most damning of all, there was the cover letter signed by Drs. Jacqueline Wilson and John Yazhi. The authors might be graduate students, but two of the most prestigious neuropsychologists at the Harvard School of Medicine backed them up. That was probably what got the paper past her screeners to start with.

Worse and worse. As editor of the New England Journal of Medicine, she could think of no good reason not to publish. Which was a shame, because then her career would join her personal life on the slag heap.

She reached for the phone. *By God, she would find a reason not to publish it.*

“It’s not a joke,” Dr. Yazhi said, swaying his long physique up from behind his desk to shake her hand.

“Dr. Yazhi, you must understand—”

“Look, it started out that way. Ms. Duffy and Mr. Philen were writing a paper for the New Drinkland Journal of Medicine. You know it? It’s a sort of hazing ritual. The first year students are required to write at least two hundred pages of garbage on some nontopic, but they have to research it, give it all the good form of a journal article. It’s a student competition to see who can treat the most absurd subject in the most clinical fashion, using the most jargon and academic doublespeak. It’s a bonus if they can make it recognizably similar to something that has actually been published.

“Philen and Duffy chose to research telepathy. They set up a study and—and, well, they began to get results. When they were sure they brought it to me, and I came on board as their adviser.”

“Yes, but Zener card readings—”

“Can be faked, yes. But we went on from there. In the end—you read the paper, I assume? In the end we did simultaneous pattern scans on the brains of the subjects, first with an HCI and then a Dao imager. The results were what you saw in your data sets. Spontaneous—and I might add, impossible—cortex pattern similarities at the moment of ‘transmission.’”

He paused, stroking his lean, dark face. “I’ve read your work, Dr. Kimbrell, and I think you’ve been a credit to the journal since you began editing it. I understand your reluctance, but I think the data behind this paper is quite solid. I’m certainly willing to say so.”

“It’s just that—” She paused, marshaling arguments. “All through the twentieth century they did these same tests, and nothing. Why?”

He shrugged. “Maybe when they got results they didn’t like, they ignored them—that was pretty common in the ninetens. They didn’t have HCIs then, just EEGs and the like, nothing that could holistically image microneural activity. That’s what convinced us, of course.” He pursed his lips. “Just ask yourself—if this paper were on any accepted subject, or even a marginal one, would you publish it? Is it well written? Is it evidenced? Is the data set verifiable? Are the experiments replicable?”

She met his eyes, wanting to challenge him further, finding she could not. She sighed. “Thank you, Doctor.”

“My pleasure.”

She put it off. Albert called and she hung up on him. Her father called, and she pretended not to be home.

Her stockbroker called, wanting to buy a thousand shares of something-or-other and she told him to buy Antarctica if he wanted, but to leave her alone.

She went to a salon, had her hair cut into a short, blond bob. She picked away at her own research, wrote letters to some colleagues, went running and swimming, lost three pounds. In the end she returned, saw the submissions piling up, and sighed.

She remembered how proud she had been—the youngest editor in chief of the oldest continuously published medical journal in history. Quite the coup. As she sat down at her workstation, she wondered if she would be able to get a teaching position somewhere, perhaps at a community college. In the Yukon maybe. At least it would be easier to dodge Albert there.

Senator Lee Crawford sighed as he strode into the sunlight and saw the reporter. Was that all he rated these days, a single reporter from a minor newspaper? It seemed so.

He put on his most genial smile.

“Senator Crawford,” the young woman began—in a rush, as if she feared he might brush past her—“I’m with the Union Discoverer —”

He shoved his hands into his pockets and cocked his head slightly. “Couldn’t find anyone more important to talk to, Ms. Hoijer?” He said it without accusation—just a gentle self-deprecation. He let a little drawl through. They liked that.

It got her. The Discoverer was far from the most prestigious reporting syndicate around, and she must have had her own share of snubs. And he had remembered her name from, what, three months ago. Her eyes softened a bit. She was a pretty thing, dark skin, green eyes, slim, perhaps thirty.

“I...” She paused and cleared her throat, and he revised her age downward to twenty-five. “Would you care to comment on the defeat of your latest bill?”

“Only that it’s a shame, a shortsighted shame,” he said, without heat. “In time, people’ll come to see that.” He relaxed his shoulders. “Tell me, what do you think?”

“Excuse me?”

“You asked what I think. What do you think?”

“Senator, that’s my job, asking you what you think.”

He shrugged. “And what’s mine? I represent people, Ms. Hoijer. Aren’t you a person?”

“But I am not American, Senator—I don’t vote for you.”

“Details. C’mon, what do you think? Phrase it as a question, if you must but tell me.”

“If you insist,” she said, “I have to say I agree with your

opponents. Our taxes have funded the DeepProbe project for twenty years, with no results. I don't see why we should fund yet another—and more expensive—search for extraterrestrial life.”

“Intelligence,” he corrected gently. “Life we have found, and yet at one point it was far from clear that we would. And you answer your own question. The DeepProbe project uses technology twenty years out of date. It's time to upgrade.”

“But why? The search for extraterrestrial intelligence began more than a hundred years ago. Don't you think that if there were anything to find, we would have found it by now?”

He chuckled his patented chuckle and nodded as if in agreement. “Do you know why the people at home voted for me? Do you know why I ran?”

“You ran on a Globalist platform. And you were the hero of Grissom colony—”

“There's that—that's how I got on the ticket, not why I ran, not why people voted for me. For almost two hundred years, change in science and technology has been the most important fact of life on this planet, and for two hundred years politicians have lagged so far behind the leading edge—well, it would be funny if it were a joke. People who don't understand the first law of motion make decisions regardin' the funding and disposition of space platforms. Doesn't that strike you as even faintly ridiculous? I ran because I think at least one politician should have some conception of more than how to schmooze.

“And to answer your question directly, no. With the technology available in the last hundred years, we couldn't even find one of our own space probes without knowing exactly where it is, much less intelligent life among a trillion trillion worlds.”

“Be that as it may, Senator, the polls would seem to indicate an erosion of your popular support. How do you respond to that?”

He shrugged. “My opponents are very good at politics—I've never denied that. But politics—as you must know, being a reporter—is a world unto itself, and unfortunately has little to do with the world we live on. It's too bad my opponents are more concerned with that than the welfare of our race. I trust the voters, Ms. Hoijer. They have common sense. Never tell me what the polls say.”

“You accuse your opponents of playing politics, and yet there are some who charge that your entire posture on extraterrestrial intelligence was a calculated response to the panic of '10. That you

latched onto a popular sentiment, which has now begun to flag.”

He chuckled again. “Well, I can hardly blame you for saying that—after all, who can trust a politician to be sincere about anything? But the people who voted for me know better. I’m dead serious. Look at history. Robert Goddard invented the liquid-fueled rocket in North America, and yet there was no funding for rocket research there until after Nazi V1s and V2s had shown their usefulness by blowin’ things up. Underfunding the near-Earth asteroid search nearly got us all dinosaured in 2011—it was a miracle that got us through that, pure and simple. The political machine registers nothin’ till it’s already too late.

“I’m still determined to change that, uphill battle though it may be. And, frankly, I hope to do it before it is too late. There’s more than enough hints that there’s somebody out there. They might be angels; they might be devils. Frankly, I think they’ll be most dangerous if they’re just folks like us. But this I know—we’ll be a lot better off all around if we notice them before they notice us.”

“Then you will continue to bring your bill before the Senate?”

“Damn right. And you can quote me on that.”

“Even without the support of your party?”

“Ms. Hoijer, I’m only doing what I promised. That might be a shock to my colleagues—it might even be a shock to my party—but it’s no shock to the voters. You’ll see that come the election. Now it’s been a real pleasure, and I thank you for your time, but I have an engagement across town.”

He found Tom Nguyen waiting for him in his office.

“The party has withdrawn their support,” Tom said, youthful face twitching with agitation.

Reaching for the bottle of oude jenever, Lee froze momentarily. Then he finished his motion. “Why, thanks, Tom, I’m doin’ fine. Nice day to you, too. How about a drink?”

“No, no, Lord, that would kill my stomach right now.”

“You haven’t built up an immunity,” Lee said, pouring the shot and resting a bit of the potent stuff on his tongue. “They really did it, huh?”

“Lee, you had to know it was coming. That bill was dead when you wrote it. Face it. The science thing got you elected, but people

have forgotten it now. In their eyes, Senator Tokash made you look foolish. U.S. voters don't like the U.S. to look foolish, and the party doesn't like its golden boy to look foolish."

"Pinheads. People are such idiots."

"That may well be, but they pay your salary. Lee, this is serious."

"No shit." He downed the shot. "Anything else?"

"I think we should discuss strategy. You were offered the chair of the Committee on Technology and Privacy—"

"It's just a bone they're throwin' me, Tom. A tired old bone. Pity won't get me any votes. I can just see Hirosho's campaign ads now. Me, on the do-nothing committee, with my head down and great big Zs comin' up. What happened? Last year we were on top of the world!"

"Well, that was last year. Forty is too young to be living in the past, Lee."

"Thirty-nine, damn your eyes." He leaned back in his chair and blew out, found a grin. "Just hang in there, Tom, and let me know if you have any ideas. We aren't licked yet. Now, go on, I want to look at my news."

"Ignoring it won't make it go away."

"I'm not ignoring it. Take the day off. Go see your kids."

Tom hesitated. "You're okay?" he asked.

"Watch it, Tom, you're lettin' that all-business face slip off again. You might learn something from me yet, and that'd be a shame. Sure you won't have that drink?"

Tom managed a little smile. "Maybe just one," he said.

He talked Tom into two, before it was over, and told a few jokes that even got him to laugh.

When the door was closed, he went to the window and looked out at the city of Geneva. The smile fell away, and he felt that old familiar hole opening under his feet. "You've bitten off more than you can chew, this time, haven't you, Lee?" He grunted. He could see his reflection against the glass. Close-cropped brown hair, fast going grey, the angular face that had been likened variously to Andrew Jackson, David Bowie, and Luis Espinosa. "Enough," he said, this time to the universe at large. "I'll beat you, you bastard."

He went to his desk, sat down, and tapped his terminal on.

"Index," he said. "Journal abstracts."

He began a slow scroll though the lists his computer had

assembled. Four new planets that might be Earth-like, some interesting speculations about the self-replicating goo beneath Europa's icy crust, a better fusion reactor, a new theory of language origins. All interesting, but useless.

But then, toward the end, he came to the New England Journal of Medicine. A headline caught his eye, so he scanned the story. He stopped, read it again. And again. He printed the whole article and read that, too.

"Nguyen, Tom," he said, keying the phone link on the terminal.

After a pause, the screen flickered and his aide appeared, leaning into his car. Behind him, the snowcapped Alps were etched against a very blue sky.

"Lee?"

"Sorry, Tom, I know I gave you the day off, but I need you on something right away. I've highlighted a journal article for you. I want to know who else in the Senate has read it, and I want to know who has it selected to read. Their aides, too."

"Lee, I'm not sure if the disclosure rule covers—"

"Then be discreet. But find out. I want to know in an hour. Just do it there and drop it back here. And Tom—I want on the Technology and Privacy Committee after all. Posthaste."

He returned to his terminal, looking for other things, smiling grimly as they accumulated. Forty-five minutes later, the transfax beeped for his attention, and he stopped to watch a list of names appear. There were only five, and it took just an instant to choose.

Lee found Senator Ledepa Koya standing outside of the Senate chamber, conferring with a handful of aides in rapid-fire Indonesian. When he noticed Lee, he waved them off and approached.

"Senator Crawford," Koya said.

"Ledepa. How are you today?"

"Very well, thanks. I'd like to congratulate you."

"On the failure of my bill?"

"No, no. And I really hope you understand my position in that matter. I, personally, think you are right, but what am I to do?"

"It's the name of the game, Ledepa. We all have to respond to our constituency. Now what can I do for you?"

“I understand you’ve just been appointed head of the Committee on Technology and Privacy.”

“News travels fast.”

“I have a particular interest in that committee. I would like to be on it.”

“It’s goin’ to be a yawner, Ledepa. I can’t think of any issue that hasn’t been addressed to death. It’s just nitpicking now.”

“Maybe not.”

“What do you mean?”

Koya lowered his voice. “Have you seen the New England Journal of Medicine?”

“As a matter of fact, I have. Some mumbo jumbo about telepathy.”

“I don’t think it’s mumbo jumbo. Some in my government have had suspicions about this for years. And the study looks very solid to those whose opinions I trust.”

“I’d like to see it replicated,” Lee replied, allowing curiosity to creep into his voice. “But I’m starting to see your interest in this. You think this will be a privacy and technology issue?”

“Yes, of course. Haven’t you gotten any letters?”

“Since yesterday? I haven’t had time to check.”

“I have received many. The news of this is already spreading.”

“Really? Surprising. A journal article.” But inwardly he smiled. He had spent all night anonymously bringing the article to the attention of various Indonesians. Companies with much to hide. Reactionary but popular religious leaders. Anyone from whom he thought he could elicit a panicked response.

He pretended to consider. “Okay, Ledepa, you’re on the committee. I need some opposition members anyway, and it seems like we’re of a mind about this—even if I’m a little slow on the uptake, today. The first order of business is to get copies—”

His pocket tel-phone burred. “Wups. If you’ll excuse me, Ledepa?”

He pulled the featherlight tel-phone from his jacket and thumbed the channel open, then said, “Lee Crawford here.”

He listened for a moment, nodded. “That sounds great. We’ll see you there.” He closed the link and turned to Koya. “Well, I’m a popular man today,” he said. “That was Ramira Alejandro’s assistant. She wants me and someone from my committee to come on her show to discuss the telepath article.” He shook his head.

“Let’s you and I meet for lunch, see if we can come to some agreement about what we’ll say.”

Koya nodded enthusiastically.

“It’s nonsense,” Crispin Dover said, “pure and simple. I find it unbelievable that Ms. Kimbrell published this tripe.” Dover looked, Lee thought, like a bulldog, but somehow his clipped, educated British enunciation worked against that to lend him a sort of credibility.

“And yet, our oldest legends speak of these powers,” commented Ramira Alejandro, a striking woman in late middle age, with classical Brahman features and a streak of pure silver through her otherwise midnight hair.

She radiated a quiet smugness born of knowing she had a guaranteed audience of upward of two billion people.

“Yes, well, our oldest legends also speak of magical beanstalks, talking bears, and the birth of various gods from the armpits of other gods, and I quite agree, it’s among such peers that these so-called extrasensory powers belong. In the past two centuries, the scientific method has been repeatedly brought to bear on the myth of telepathy—and shown it to be just that. A myth. I don’t think I go too far in suggesting that Ms. Kimbrell should consider editing another journal altogether.”

Kimbrell, a professional-looking woman with closely cropped blond hair, pursed her lips angrily.

“What about it, Dr. Ortiz?” Ramira asked. “We’ve heard what a neurochemist has to say about it, but what does psychology have to offer as an opinion on this matter?”

Ortiz clasped his seamed fingers together. At eighty, his skin rather resembled leather. Lee found himself a bit impressed, despite himself. Ortiz had been a prominent vid commentator since before he was born, a real celebrity.

“Well, Ms. Alejandro, I have read the paper, which I can’t tell for certain that our friend Dr. Dover has—”

Dover sputtered, “I read the abstract. That was quite enough. I ___”

Ramira silenced him with a small, cool smile. “You’ll have another say, Dr. Dover.”

“Nevertheless,” Ortiz went on, “I must to some extent agree with him. The methodology looks fine, and the results seem conclusive. And yet, how do we explain the lack of similar results in every prior study—some of which, I might add, used the same methodology? And so I must doubt these conclusions as some kind of statistical fluke, until we see them replicated.”

“What do you think, Mr. Philen? Will they be replicated?”

Philen, a pale, nervous fellow who couldn’t be more than twenty-four, raised his hands defensively. “Look, we didn’t expect these results. It started out as a lark, a joke really—”

“And yet you published it”

“Well—yes, because the hypothesis was supported. Look, I was there, I saw it. It was uncanny. I have the greatest respect for Dr. Ortiz, of course. Who wouldn’t? But this was no statistical fluke. There were people in our test groups who were telepaths. No doubt about that at all.”

There certainly wasn’t any doubt in his young, earnest, and distinctly untrained voice. In contrast, Dover suddenly sounded like what he was—a pompous ass. “Well, then, you would seem to have been duped by a stage magician. Why not have one of these subjects come on this show, under controlled conditions, so that we can see this ability demonstrated?”

“I—of course I can’t disclose their names,” Philen said.

“Of course,” Dover replied sarcastically.

Ramira turned her attention to the editor. “Ms. Kimbrell, you’ve borne the brunt of much criticism for publishing this article.”

Kimbrell frowned thoughtfully. “It’s right to be skeptical. It should be hard to prove something new—it should require rigor. I checked the facts and sources very carefully before publishing. Dr. Ortiz may be right—this may represent some impossible statistical fluke. But the research is not fraudulent, and it is not sloppy, as Dr. Dover implies. I am perfectly aware that I have staked my reputation on this, and I feel secure doing so.”

Funny, Lee thought, You don’t look secure.

“Well,” Ramira continued, turning toward the camera, “we also have with us Senator Lee B. Crawford of the United States, and Senator Ledepa Koya of the Indonesian Consortium. Senator Crawford is well known as the hero of Grissom, and as an advocate for good science in government—that was your campaign slogan, I

believe?”

“I’m guilty of that one,” Lee drawled. “My campaign manager wanted ‘no new taxes,’ but I overrode him.”

Ramira smiled. “Senator Crawford also comes to us with a degree in astrophysics. Senator Koya has a master’s degree in sociosemiotics. Both of these gentlemen serve on the Committee on Technology and Privacy. Tell me, gentlemen. Let us assume for a moment that this report is true—that there are among us those who can ‘read minds.’ What are the social-and political—implications of this? Senator Crawford?”

“I’m still digesting this a bit, Ramira. And although I’m now the head of the committee, Dr. Koya has seniority in the Senate. My daddy always told me to let my elders speak first anyhow.” He sent Koya a conspiratorial wink.

Ramira turned toward Koya. “Senator?”

Koya cleared his throat. “Well, obviously, if this study is valid, it reveals a serious situation. Our daily lives, our respective cultures, our political systems, our legal systems—all are intrinsically dependent on privacy to ensure their very existence. The Earth Alliance mandates rights of privacy at the level of the nation-state, and at the individual level. This has been worked out in great detail, over the years, particularly as technology has made intrusions into privacy potentially deeper and easier.

“I’m afraid if there are, in fact, telepaths, that we’re right back to square one. What technology can protect us against them? How can we detect them? How can we stop them? For that matter, how long have they been around? Imagine, each of you, the damage to your private lives if someone were to read your every thought, wish, notion. Now imagine governments and corporations hiring telepaths as spies. Or criminals who can easily stay one step ahead of the authorities. It could undermine the entire fabric of our global society. Yes, I think the Senate has many important questions to ask, if these findings are true.”

“Senator Crawford? Comment? Or are you still digesting?”

Lee scratched his chin. “Tryin’ to avoid heartburn. I think my colleague is being a bit alarmist. Ledepa, it almost sounds like you’re suggestin’ witch-hunts.” From the corner of his eye, he caught the flash of betrayal on Koya’s face.

“First of all,” he continued, “their special abilities aside, telepaths are just going to be people. Your schoolteacher, your boss,

your mother”—he smiled—“maybe even your senator. Just people like you and me. Not monsters. And they have the same rights and freedoms as everybody else. That said, they don’t have special rights either—like the right to poke around in our heads. Still, let’s all just take a deep breath. I intend to start hearings on this as early as next week, beginning with a select panel of scientists whom we will recruit to see if these results can be replicated. I would be honored if Dr. Dover and Dr. Ortiz would agree to be a part of that panel, and to act as advisers to this committee, along with Mr. Philen and his research associate, Ms. Duffy, who could not be with us today.”

Lee loosened his collar and sprawled his lanky frame on the couch. Tom Nguyen took a seat, and they both watched the vid-screen as it ran through channels, following the search menu.

“How did you know he would fall that way? Koya?” Tom asked.

“Simple. We all know Indonesia has a lot to hide after the transcom affair. Some don’t think they should be allowed membership in the Alliance, and it wouldn’t take much to get them out. So as a nation, they can’t like the idea of telepaths who might ferret out where the bodies are buried. But it’s more basic than that—I checked Koya out. He’s a believer.”

“Believer?”

“Yup. Ever read much anthropology? As late as the twenty-first century, people were still massacred over witchcraft scares. At one time or the other, belief in malicious sorcery existed among every people on Earth. There’ve been lots of studies of it—anthropological, psychological—but in the end, it all boils down to one thing. People don’t like to think bad things happen to them for no reason. Somebody has to be responsible. God. The devil. A witch. Hell, in my home state, Mississippi, there was still talk about juju and such in some places.

“I checked out Ledepa’s hometown—only ten years ago, somebody was arrested for beatin’ up a man he thought had hexed him. So I figured the belief is still hangin’ around there, and that Ledepa might have grown up with it. It’s hard for the intellect to entirely reject something it learned when it was young.” He poured

a tumbler of scotch. “That, and I played him. Made it seem I felt the same way, and would back him up all the way.”

He lifted his drink as the screen settled on a scene.

“It’s startin’,” Lee said. He turned up the sound.

“...shot in Jakarta today. The suspect claimed that the victim was a telepath who had cheated him at poker. Several unsubstantiated reports of similar attacks have surfaced in the last hour.”

The view switched. He recognized a street in Paris.

“...only hours after a vidcast on the new report in the New England Journal of Medicine. He claimed his lover was a telepath who drove him insane...”

And from a town in Mexico:

“...apparently in response to the alarmist reaction of Senator Ledepa Koya to a recent journal article alleging proof of extrasensory perception. No deaths are reported, though one man was critically wounded...”

The screen began splitting, then recording what it couldn’t show. The reports increased, ten, thirty-in less than an hour it was over a hundred.

“Oh, my God,” Tom whispered.

“Yep. Now people have a whole new thing to blame their problems on, something real, something tangible.”

“But you—”

“Me? Listen to the ’casts. It’s Koya that’s gettin’ the credit for this. This is going to get worse, and he’s gonna be the guy who started it. Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy, the little two-faced sumovabitch. One of Tokash’s toadies.” He smiled. “So Koya gets credit for starting the killings, and the worse stuff that’ll come later. Me—people will remember I was cautious, tried to talk sense. They’ll see me as the one to pick up the pieces, and the guy who’ll protect them from the big bad telepaths, all at the same time.”

“But Lee, those people are dying.”

“Tom, this was going to break, and they were going to die. That’s life. Hell, this is nothin’. These are the lunatics, the ones who were already closest to the edge. Most of these murders and what have you would have happened anyway, but under a variety of justifications. The real mess is coming if the results are replicated and even the skeptics give the whole thing the nod. When the sane people believe it, the implications will really sink in. It’s our job to

handle the damage, and we've got a jump on it. We can make it better. Now, are you gonna mope, or are we gonna get to work?'

Tom nodded, though his face was still troubled. "Work," he said.

Part I

Holocaust

Chapter One

Earth & Moon Today, 3 October 2115
A team at Johns Hopkins University Medical School today joined the ranks of those who confirm the findings of the Philen-Duffy study. Dr. Richard Stepp, chair of the Experimental Psychology Department, announced the conclusions today at a press conference. "I was as skeptical as anyone," Dr. Stepp told the audience, "but I really don't see any room for doubt now. Extrasensory perception is no longer a fantasy or a possibility—it is a fact."

The Miami Herald, English edition, 5
December 2115
Pope Pius XV disclosed today that a number of as-yet-unnamed priests have voluntarily come forward to be tested as telepaths. "It should be clear to us all," the Pope said at his address in Caracas, "that the sudden appearance of these people among us constitutes a miracle—the scientific community has no explanation for them. God has given us men and women who can see into our souls, and this is a blessing we must embrace. They are God's gifts to us, a reminder of His love, a way to true confession and salvation." His Holiness went on to decry

the violence and suspicion surrounding the discovery of telepaths, and called for the world to join in “peacefully embracing our new brethren.”

The snow wasn't pretty anymore, it was just cold. His pants were frozen and they chafed hard against his legs.

“It hurts, Mama. I want to stop.”

She squeezed his hand tighter. *Not yet*, she said, in their secret voice. *We have to finish our game.*

I don't want to finish it. I want to go home.

Things tumbled out of Mama, then, a whole lot of things he didn't understand. Some were shiny and made him want to cry, others just scared him. Gripping her hand, he felt tall and sick, an itchy wetness in his side, sharp pain when he took a breath.

It started snowing harder, so hard he could barely see the red cliffs all around them.

And he heard something else. Little voices that talked only of hunger and need, bigger ones that were angry and hard. Too far away to hear words, but he didn't like them.

Don't like what? his mother asked.

The men and the dogs. He sulked. *I don't like this game.*

A feeling from Mama, like when he woke up dreaming of falling. Her heart was beating hard, like someone was pounding on her chest

She stopped and hugged him to her. Her clothes were cold and stiff like his, but her cheek turned warm after only a second. Then she led him over to one of the cliffs.

“Let's climb up here,” she said aloud.

The rock was smooth and hard to climb, even though it wasn't very steep. In the steeper parts, Mama pushed him from behind and showed him the handholds.

Someone made those handholds a very long time ago, she told him. *Your great-great-many-greats-grandfather, maybe. Did you know that?*

Why? Were they playing hide-and-seek, too?

He thought she laughed inside, the laugh that didn't really mean she was happy or that she thought something was funny. *Yes, she said.*

Did they win?

No.

The last part was the steepest, but then they were inside the cave. It was pretty big, but not too high. Mama could only stand up in a few places. There was some kind of old house in the cave, made out of lots of flat rocks. Mama took him behind one of the walls and sat down there.

"Come here," she said, in sound words, very softly. Her lips had little spots of red on them.

He came up under her arm.

"Now we have to be very quiet," she said. "And when they come, you have to play your very best. You have to think about this cave being very empty—think about you and me just being rocks. Can you do that? Like when you play this with the other kids?"

Yes.

"Use sound words," she gasped. "And remember, only use your quiet words with me. No one else. Ever. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mama."

"Good."

They sat that way for a long time, and Mama fell asleep. Outside, he knew the men and dogs were getting closer. He felt them looking hard at the cave, but he did as he was told, and pretended that he and Mama were just rocks, just part of the old house. After a while, they went on.

He noticed Mama's voice was getting smaller. He held both her hands—that usually helped—but it just kept getting smaller. He shouted at her, in the quiet way, but nothing she said made much sense, and so he listened as hard as he could, harder, straining.

Goodbye. I love you, he finally heard.

And then something else, something like rushing water, not just a sound but something sucking all around him. Someone singing, and maybe a drum beating, like at the Shalako dances. And then it was like a hole under his feet, and he was falling, falling through a thunderstorm, lightning and black clouds all around him, down and down, and something seemed to tear out of his chest, and he heard his mother's voice, but not saying anything he understood, and then nothing, nothing.

Except he was still falling, and he saw himself from inside out, like a sock turned inside out, except it was everything he thought and felt and knew, and there was a Shalako there, shining brighter than the Sun, telling him something. And Mama was with the Shalako, and they were all going down, down into the dance hall of the dead, and he was getting cold, and he didn't care anymore.

Then Mama gave him something. The Shalako gave him something. And it hurt. He screamed and he pushed, like he was swimming, and he swam and beat and pulled at something. Or maybe he found handholds like his mother had shown him, but not rock, and he climbed, and then he was out of the cloud, out of the water, the thunder and lighting getting smaller behind him, and a different kind of darkness came, one that wasn't as scary.

He woke up in his mother's arms. She was holding him tight, and he couldn't make her let go. He finally had to wriggle away, and she kept her arms there, like he was still in them. He wanted to cry, but there was nothing to cry. He had left his tears back in the storm, with his mother.

Slowly Marvin raised his head and spit out a tooth. Liang—that giant son of a bitch—reached down for another piece of him. The most horrible thing was, he could feel nothing from Liang—not anger, not fear, nothing.

Liang was stone cold.

Not so the others. Even from across the room he could sense their disgust.

“Liang, man, what'd I do?”

Liang shrugged. “The boss knows, man. He knows what you are. He's been watchin' you at the poker tables.”

“So I'm good at poker. What's the beef?”

Liang smiled indulgently, picked him up, and hit him again.

“Yer one a them mind readers, ain'tcha?”

“What the hell are you—” This time he felt ribs crack.

“Ain'tcha?” Liang repeated, pulling a pistol.

“Okay, okay, yeah. Maybe a little bit.”

“Good enough to cheat at poker. Good enough to cheat the boss.”

“Yeah.”

“And what happens to them that cheats the boss?”

“Oh, God, Liang, come on—”

Liang pumped a round into the chamber and placed the cold muzzle of the weapon under Marvin’s chin.

“C’mon, man—”

He waited.

Liang tousled his hair. “Here’s the deal, Marvin. The boss is a good Catholic, so yer gonna live, if that’s what you want. But you’re his bitch from now on, deng? We’re gonna fit you out with a sponder, and yer gonna work for him.”

“Yeah, yeah, I can do that. Help him out. Find feds—anything. Just don’t kill me, man.”

Liang smiled toothily. “Well, I’ll tell the boss we have an agreement, then. But Marvin—”

“Yeah?”

“I ain’t a good Catholic. You shine the boss, and you’ll wish I’d shot you.”

They threw her in a pit, and she landed on a bed of corpses. She couldn’t even see the ground.

Others fell all around her. Up above, she heard the trilling of birds, the chug of a bulldozer. It began to rain.

“Marta?”

“Boselee!” They found each other and clung together, as if the familiar touch and smell of each other could take them away somewhere else, somewhere safe.

Don’t look, don’t look, he told her, told her in words that sank through her skin and bones, soaked in like the monsoon rain.

But some were shouting angrily, now, and she did look. Joe, the old man, fixed each soldier with his gaze.

“Your heart will rot in you!” he shouted. “We will live on, but you will rot. Repent of this. These people have done nothing.”

A man with reddish hair and a lieutenant’s uniform peered into the pit and frowned. He pulled an evil-looking pistol and shot Joe in the head. The old man gurgled and pitched back. “You are all cursed by the devil,” the lieutenant replied. “I merely send you home to hell.”

He motioned to the soldiers, and the rain changed to hail.

The Night, the Wind, the Sorcerer, our Lord.

Blood's thoughts drifted in the halls of the temple and brought them all running. She had brief fragments of herself from each of them—her hair was black in each, her eyes almond. But her height varied—Smoke looked down on her, Mercy was almost level. Herself in a kaleidoscope, refracted by love, jealousy, lust, fear.

"They're here." She spoke aloud for Mercy's benefit. Mercy wasn't strong enough to follow their conversations unless their hands were touching.

"How far?" Teal asked, fingering his milk-white beard.

"On the bridge, six miles up where we put the alarm. Looks like a couple of truckloads. Heavily armed."

Images of men with guns, of men with comically thick limbs dragging the ground. That last had to be from Monkey.

"Monkey, can you try to be serious?" Blood sighed. "At best, these men are coming to kill us. At worst—"

"They'll have to cut through our loving followers, first," Monkey said, grinning his narrow grin, tossing his long copper hair nonchalantly over his shoulder.

Blood returned a crooked smile.

"How could this happen?" Teal murmured. "Why do they want to kill us?"

Monkey hooted at that, sounding not unlike his chosen namesake. "They've wanted to kill us ever since we got here. You don't plop a bunch of mindless zombies and a Mayan temple out in the middle of bumpkinland without creatin' a few hard feelings."

"We shouldn't have used our powers so freely," Teal complained. "We shouldn't—"

"Come on. How could we have known science was going to all of a sudden discover us? Hell, we thought we were the only ones. We ran across one another in the space of two years, and then nothing, no matter how we looked. Up until now, the believers thought we got our powers from the ancestors and everybody else assumed we were frauds. Fair enough, and it got us some good times. Now the rules have changed, and our kind are takin' it in the butt. The sooner we learn to live with that, the better."

Smoke, who had been customarily silent, unknotted his massive jaw long enough to say, "We go."

"Yeah, big fellah, we go. Do you think the followers need to be

pumped up a little bit more, Blood?”

She nodded. “Sound the drums. It’s show time.”

Her pain spattered out into the congregation like her blood onto the paper, as the others picked it up and threw it out as far as they could. She pulled the string of thorns through her tongue, grateful that it was the last time. It was fine being the dark goddess, waited on hand and foot, sucking the last dime out of the fools in their congregation, watching their herd of normals grow, but maybe it wasn’t worth this. Of course, it was moot now.

She felt a little dizzy as Monkey lit the paper and started his speech. She looked out over the glazed eyes of two hundred people and wanted to laugh at them. Pitiful sheep.

“The time has come, the Katun-ending draws nigh, the cycle begins again,” he intoned. “The maggots of the world are coming to eat its meat. As they came to the prairies to slay the buffalo, as they came to the Amazon to strip our mother bare, now they come here. But though the wheel of time turns, it is yet never the same. It can be changed. The buffalo can come back. The redwoods can return. The Amazon can be green as once it was. The ancestors are watching, who fought and died for you. You can see their eyes, in the night sky. Will you shame them, when the enemy comes? Will you do less for them?”

The sound of the crowd was inarticulate, but all of their minds screamed *No*.

“We go inside to gird ourselves. We will emerge at the last, when you have proven yourselves.”

You okay, Blood?

Dizzy. I’m okay.

It was Monkey, naturally, who had insisted on the escape tunnel. Once again he was proved right.

Well, you got your wish, Monkey told her, as they moved down the tunnel. *For a while, anyway. The Man Who Would Be King was always your favorite book.*

Uh-huh. I’m just remembering how that ended.

Not this time, Monkey promised.

After ten or fifteen minutes they came up in the deep Alaskan woods, cautiously. In the distance, Blood heard the familiar tearing sound of automatic gunfire, something she hadn’t heard since they had been mercenaries in Kamchatka. She found she almost welcomed it. It was a somehow honest sound.

Mercy was pale, though. She had not been one of them, back then, and probably had never heard gunfire.

She took Mercy's hand. *Don't worry*, she told her. *We'll be okay. But we have to run silent now.*

Mercy nodded, and took hold of Smoke's hand. Blood raised her pistol, checked to make certain it was loaded.

She knew the men were ahead, waiting for them, and when she could see them through the trees, she tasted them. The bloodletting sometimes made her like this, as if she were evaporating, thin but large, a mist hearing and feeling all within her. Spreading over them she felt their angry, stupid, piggy little minds. That one was mean because he had nothing else to be; that one wasn't mean but did what he was told.

She suddenly felt a cold, hard anger. *Normals*. She had watched the news reports, those smug bastards on the news shows, the yapping pundits. Look what they had done. People were dying all over the world because normals were stupid and afraid.

She would give them something to be afraid of.

The anger gave her strength, so when she stepped into the clearing, they saw more than a slightly built woman. They were standing around a Cortez four-wheel drive, drinking beer. Three of them. As if they were hunting deer.

Their faces changed as they saw her, Kali, Gabriel, the skull and the sickle, the wings of the stooping hawk.

They fumbled at their rifles as she calmly shot each of them in the head, delighting in feeling their dirty little minds wink out, vanish down the rabbit hole. Only the last one managed to fire, but he missed and she spattered him against the truck.

Then it all sucked back in, blew the fire out, and she was hollow, without even enough muscle or tendon in her legs to stand. But she felt the ground shake as she collapsed to it.

"Nice shootin'," Monkey allowed.

"What was the explosion?" Mercy asked.

"That would be our temple," Monkey said. "Sixty kilos of plastique."

"Oh, my God," Mercy said. "Our followers..." She started to cry, and for once she was strong, her tears washing over them all.

"Not anymore," Monkey said, putting his arm under Blood's and lifting her up. "That game's over. It's time to move on."

Chapter Two

Lee cheered along with everyone else when the actinic glare of a small, new star appeared above the Lunar horizon.

The probe had actually been launched half an hour before, of course, from the ugly snout of the mass driver he could barely see poking up from the Von Braun Shipyard a kilometer away. While cost-efficient, a mass-driver launch offered no sound and fury, no glare of rockets. By long tradition, it was the first flash of the engines that signaled a successful launch.

Still clapping and grinning, he turned to face the reporters.

“I’d just like to say how gratified I am to be here,” he began, as the ruckus calmed to a general murmur. “I feel greatly privileged and enormously excited. There were those who said that this moment would never come—that the curiosity that carried humanity from continent to continent and from world to world had begun to dwindle. Here is proof that they were wrong.”

Hands shot up everywhere as he paused. “Well,” he said, “I had a longer speech planned, but you folks seem pretty eager.” He selected Robert Tanaka, one of the front row of reporters. “Bob? What can I do for you?”

“I’d just like to know how it feels, Senator, to be vindicated. And what do you think the aliens will be like?”

“Well, Bob, in keeping with the dignity being a senator of the Earth Alliance carries—ah, hell, it feels damn good.”

He waited for the chuckles to float around. “But let’s keep this all in perspective. Our experience with tachyon emissions is mighty limited, and for all we know that signal the DeepProbe detected could have come from a natural source. But still, this is what I—and many others—have wanted for a long time. The DeepProbe network was put in place four years after tachyons were proven to exist. The Heimdal probe will upgrade the system at a bargain price, and I think one day—maybe sooner than you think—she’ll answer your second question.”

“Thank you, Senator.”

“Very welcome. What about you—Ms. Bochs, isn’t it?”

“Yes sir, with Izvestia International. I was wondering how you respond to Senator Tokash’s recent statement that you have mishandled the telepath problem.”

He felt the smile freeze on his face. “Well, I was hoping we could chat a bit more about the hope and future of humanity before we retreated back to the Neanderthal cave of politics. But if we have to go there, let’s carry at least some of what we’ve seen today with us—some hope and faith in ourselves as a race. Senator Tokash has his own point of view, to be sure. He and I have differed about many things—the Heimdal project itself, for instance, which many of you may remember he opposed not long ago. As for the telepath ‘problem’—we’re dealing with the issue as sensitively as we can.”

“Some charge that you would make telepaths second-class citizens.”

“Yes, on the one hand—and on the other I’m criticized for not rounding them all up and throwing them into death camps. It’s easy to make sweeping and extreme statements. It’s harder to deal with complex reality. The truth is that we have to regulate telepaths, and at the same time we must respect their rights as citizens. I wish we could have avoided the regrettable incidents of the past few months, and I pray we’ve seen the end of them.”

“Senator, regarding your proposal for a specific committee on telepaths—”

“Yes. The Privacy and Technology Committee was a good stopgap, but telepathy is not technology. This is a special problem that needs special attention. I’ve proposed a Committee on Metasensory Regulation.”

“Can you respond to the rumors that Senator Tokash has been appointed head of that committee instead of you?”

Lee was proud of himself—he kept his smile in place. “I’m sure that the president will appoint whoever she feels will do the best job. If that’s Tokash, then I trust her judgment.”

Alone, he wasn’t so cool, as the shards of an empty decanter settled to the floor of his room with the patience of snowflakes. Breaking things on the Moon lacked a certain satisfaction, but the moment of

rupture, when even the smallest fragments ballooned outward like a dust cloud, made up for the lack of calamity. He had to retreat into the small washroom until the air filters took care of the danger the fragments posed to his lungs.

It had been too long since he had been off planet, way too long. His instincts were betraying him like those of a rookie.

When he reemerged and finished cleaning up the room, he felt calmer. He checked his messages and found among them a discouraging note from Tom Nguyen. Tokash would almost certainly get the committee.

That wasn't right—it was his hearings that had begun it all, his voice the world had clung to. Now Tokash wanted to take that away from him.

But what could he do?

Nothing, not on the Moon, and he was stuck here for several more days, at least. By the time he returned to Earth, the decision would be made.

He put on his weights and began calisthenics, working his muscles savagely. Whether people knew it or not, they responded better to a man who looked capable than one who did not. Sweat was just beginning to collect in improbably large droplets when the room link warbled.

“Sound only,” he told it. “Yes? Senator Lee Crawford here.”

There was a small pause, and then, “Senator Crawford? This is Alice Kimbrell.”

“Dr. Kimbrell, how nice to hear from you. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I'd like to talk to you, as soon as is convenient.”

That raised his brows. No three-second delay—Alice Kimbrell was on the Moon.

“What does this regard?”

“Something very important.”

“Very well. How about the Ix Chel, in one hour?”

“I would prefer somewhere less public.”

“Indulge me, if you don't mind. It's almost lunchtime anyway.”

The Ix Chel was, like everything on the Moon, small, but made up for that in elegance. Dug into a hillside, it featured a thick dome

that filtered gentle blue Earthlight into the room. The light was picked up by the water rushing from behind one curved wall. Water on the Moon was a precious thing, mined from brittle, powdery seas—the corpses of long-dead comets. The colony had tons of it, but to see more than a cupful at a time was rare. To be all but surrounded by it was a miracle, and he silently toasted the owner's enterprise in having the restaurant butted up against one of the nodes of the colony's cooling/water-processing torus.

The place was packed to capacity when Alice Kimbrell walked in, but she had no trouble spotting him when he stood. He admired her as she approached. He liked something about her eyes, and the crisp wear of her modest grey suit, almost like a uniform.

"Dr. Kimbrell," he said, extending his hand. She took it, stiffly.

"Senator."

"Please, have a seat." Once she had done so, he flashed her a smile. "Quite a coincidence, both of us bein' on the Moon right now. Did you come to see Heimdal launched? I could've gotten you front-row seats."

"I came to see you."

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm flattered. That's an expensive jaunt for a private citizen."

She acknowledged that with a curt nod. "I heard you were here."

"I'll be in Geneva in six days. Or you could have called me."

"It's too important to wait—or to trust to the comlinks."

"Really?"

"Yes. And I still wish we had gone somewhere more—private."

He broadened his smile. "My papa used to say you ought not to bend to tie your shoe in the neighbor's pumpkin patch."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, a pumpkin is a sort of big—"

"I know what a pumpkin is. I mean, what are you implying?"

He idly tapped one of his chopsticks. "How many reporters do you see right now?"

She looked around. "None."

"There are two, at least. If I'm to meet with the woman who turned the world upside down, I want to do it where everyone can see. If you came to my room, they might wonder what secret we were exchangin'. Worse, they might think we were joining the Ex-sex club. You want to see that in the papers?"

The waitress, a small, white-haired woman with a heavy Austrian accent, chose that moment to arrive.

“Drink with dinner?”

“Scotch. Laphroig,” Alice said.

“Make mine an Evan Williams.”

Alice raised an eyebrow.

“They keep a bottle just for me. I am the hero of this colony, you know.”

“Yes, but—correct me if I’m wrong—isn’t Evan Williams fairly cheap, awful stuff?”

“Cheap, yes, awful, yes. But it’s the oldest distillery in North America, which has to count for somethin’. More to the point—it reminds me of where I’m from and who I am. Now Laphraoig, that’s good, expensive stuff.”

“It reminds me of who I am,” Alice replied.

The drinks arrived. “Here’s to knowin’ where you’re from,” Lee said, and they clinked glasses, and both took a drink.

“Healthy stuff,” he observed. “It’ll grow moss on Lunar soil.” He cocked his head quizzically. “So what are we here to talk about, Doctor?”

“Can they hear us? The reporters?”

He shrugged. “It’s against the law to eavesdrop. I ought to know, I’m on the Technology and Privacy Committee.” He leaned forward. “You must feel very pleased. The last of your critics have pretty much shut up, haven’t they? Now that so many studies have replicated the findings you published.”

She stared at him. “Vindicated? How can I feel vindicated by the deaths of more than ten thousand people? The massacre Wednesday in Shanxi? The bombing in Utah? The rioting in Chicago—the spacings in Armstrong?”

“All right,” he soothed. “I get your point. Dr. Kimbrell, as you must know, every new discovery has its price. These findings would have been published, with or without you.”

“I realize that, Senator. But the very simple fact is that it was me.” Her sipping escalated to a moderate gulp.

“And you were dragged through the heap for it. And now that that’s done, you’re draggin’ yourself through the heap.”

“No. Just taking responsibility.”

“Which brings you to me? Because I can’t imagine that you flew all the way to the Moon to take advantage of my credentials as

a psychotherapist.”

That got a small smile from her. “No. I came to see you because I want to be involved. Involved in the solution.”

“And you think I’m the solution? That’s very flattering, Doctor. But you didn’t think so when I initially invited you to advise me. What’s changed?”

“I’ve followed the hearings closely, as you might expect.”

“Get you another scotch?”

She hesitated a moment, staring blankly at her empty tumbler. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry, you were saying?”

“I think you have conducted the hearings in as sane a manner as possible, but they’ve made things worse.”

He frowned. “Surely you see that they’re necessary, Dr. Kimbrell? It’s unfortunate, but telepathy is too powerful a tool—and a weapon—not to be regulated. What do you think the killings are all about? People are afraid, afraid that the person next to them might be reading their minds.”

“They’re jealous.”

“That, too. Human society is structured around secrets, around limited disclosure. Success has always meant being able to navigate in that world, guess the unspoken, erect a facade. And now we find that there are people who have the inborn ability to simply cut through all that. Would you like to play poker with a telepath? Or trade stocks against someone who could secure inside information simply by being in the room with the right person? It’s not so much a matter of specifically regulating telepaths as it is of making certain that existing laws regarding privacy and disclosure aren’t violated by them.”

“And yet you are specifically regulating telepaths—telepaths can’t be lawyers, or stockbrokers, or Olympic fencers—”

“Plenty of precedent for that. Specific exclusions were spelled out for the use of the radar tap, too, when it was invented.”

“These are people, not listening devices.”

“They are both, I’m afraid, which makes regulation all the more necessary. People won’t stop killing telepaths—and people they suspect of being telepaths—until they stop feeling threatened by them. That won’t happen without regulation.”

She nodded. “I know. But you agree, as matters stand, that the hearings are only making things worse—you daily present potential

abuses that most people haven't even thought of. The fact that you regulate these abuses is meaningless—"

"—because we still have no way of knowing who the telepaths are. Exactly. And so we worry people more and more without giving them any tangible hope. But what else is there to do?"

She was silent for a moment, taking a significant drink of her new scotch.

He leaned forward and said, very softly, "You know what we can do, don't you?"

She stared hard at the table. "I'm going to lose my job," she said very simply. "I'll never work in academia again if I do this. I need some guarantees."

"You'll have them. You want a job, you've got it. Money."

She suddenly seemed very young, very vulnerable. "I have money, Senator—how do you think I got to the Moon? That's not my concern. I want to know that this will be handled right. I don't want to place another loaded gun in the wrong hands. I..."

"You came to me because you thought I would do the right thing."

She nodded. "A paper just came across my desk. It involves gene sequencing—"

"The telepathy gene?"

"It's not so simple as that. No one has found any gene that seems to control for telepathy. It appears to be like intelligence, an emergent property found in many different genes. But the author of this paper did find a marker."

"Really? What do you mean?"

"Most of us are now postulating that telepathic ability is either a recent mutation or the result of an isolated one that has only recently entered the global gene pool. For instance, one of the Highland New Guinea groups may have had telepaths for a thousand years, but since they were isolated from the rest of the world until relatively recently, the genes didn't get around."

"I follow you. That would explain a lot."

"Yes, it would. Unfortunately, as it turns out, it isn't true. The mitochondrial DNA of fifty demonstrated telepaths was analyzed and correlated with their family histories and other genetic tests of relatedness. As I'm sure you know, mitochondrial DNA is passed only through the mother's line—it isn't affected by the father's at all, but only by very gradual random mutation—the rate of which is

known. A brother and sister have virtually identical MDNA, cousins slightly divergent sequences, and so on. Initially, there were some problems with mutation rates, but that was all corrected for by the Vasquer calibration—”

“Yes, I’m aware of all of this. So this analysis did not indicate that these telepaths have a common heritage?”

“On the contrary. More than half of them had MDNA that were near perfect matches. Too perfect. Other genetic data—and records—indicate that the individuals have no ancestors in common in recorded history.”

He shrugged. “Good records on most of humanity weren’t available until a hundred years ago. I don’t see the point.”

“The point is, this mutation they all share seems to be less than a hundred years old.”

He stared at her for perhaps ten heartbeats as that sank in. “Holy shit,” he said. He looked around. “Okay, you were right, I was wrong. Press be damned, let’s get out of here.”

“I thought you said the reporters aren’t listening?”

“I doubt they are. I doubt anyone is—I come to this place because they keep a randomly modulated interference wave going that jams most peepers. But there is an old art called ‘lip-reading’—come on. We’ll finish this in my room, which I know is safe.”

The train arrived with a faint vibration, but no sound—the tube it traveled in was at the Moon’s surface pressure. As the car doors kissed their gaskets against the entry ports, Lee gave one of the private cars his personal code that let them in. Once they were inside, he confirmed it for billing via a retinal scan.

“That’s better,” he said, as the train glided into motion. “Now. Who else knows this?”

“I’m not sure. The authors of the paper, of course, and anyone they’ve told. I haven’t told anyone else. I gather from your reaction you understand the implications.”

“Yep. Our telepath friends were engineered. The question now is—by whom? The old United States? That’s where most of them have turned up.”

“Only because that’s where the original testing was done. We’ve got a good worldwide distribution, now.”

“That might be meaningless—they might form some elaborate spy network, or something. Or it could be corporate. Or—frick.” He felt the hairs on the back of his neck pricking up. “I need time to think about this.”

“Where are we going?”

“Hmm? My room is near Malibu Station. Maybe ten minutes from here.”

“I would have thought things would be closer together.”

“Never been to the Moon before? Grissom is a mining colony, so buildings tend to sprawl a bit, mostly along this line, toward the water mines at Malibu. Ever since the depressurization of the old dome, nobody wants to be in the basket with all of the rest of the eggs.”

“I should think you would be particularly wary,” she said.

He shook his head in grim agreement. “I’ve seen enough people die of explosive decompression in one lifetime, thank you. And been too close, myself.”

“Is that why you left the colony?”

“That’s part of it,” he said

“Your wife died in the accident.”

“No offense, Dr. Kimbrell, but this is a little personal for me.”

“None taken. And I’m sorry.”

They continued in silence for a moment.

“I’m glad you brought this to me,” he said at last, reaching to grip her hand. “You did the right thing.”

“I hope so.” She did not move his hand.

The train sighed to a stop, and unexpectedly, their door slid open.

“Excuse me,” Lee told the man who stood framed in the entry. “This is a private car, and as you can see—”

Then it hit him. The door shouldn’t even have opened. He was bolting up from his seat when the man stepped quickly in, a nine-millimeter pistol trained on his heart

“Sit back down, Senator,” the man said, softly.

Chapter Three

“Don’t point that at me, son,” Lee said. “In fact, don’t point it at anything. Do you understand what will happen if you rupture the coach wall?”

The young man nodded solemnly. He had a softly rounded face and a thin mustache, very black hair. A faint accent—Eastern European? “Yes,” he said, “the train will stop and emergency membranes will close the tube so they can pump air in. That will make things tricky for me, but I can deal with it. Did you expect I thought the car would explode, or something?”

“What do you want with me, son?”

“It’s not really important that you know that, Senator, only that you do what I say. Right now, we’re going to change our destination, but you have to do it. If you don’t, I will shoot Dr. Kimbrell, and if you still refuse, I will shoot you, too.”

“Why can’t you do it yourself? You faked my personal code, so —” Then he understood. He leaned up to the retinal scanner. “Fine. Train, personal code Crawford—”

“Stop,” the man snapped, stepping quickly to Lee and placing the muzzle of the weapon against his head.

“Don’t do that.”

“I was doing what you said.”

“No you weren’t, you were going to order an emergency stop. If you do that, I’ll shoot you.”

“You’re going to kill us anyway!” Lee retorted. “That’s why you want me to make the destination change, so it’ll go on record.” He paused a moment, and then said, “Why me, son? I’m only trying to help your kind.”

The man smiled indulgently. “Yes, of course you are. Change the destination.”

“To where?”

“Not far different. Malibu Station. And now that you know what I am, you know not to try and trick me.”

Lee changed the destination, and eyed the man speculatively.

“What’s it like?” he asked. “Can you hear all of my thoughts? Can you feel my emotions? How will it feel to you when you kill us?”

The young man’s face changed, then, quite without his consent.

“Shut up,” he demanded.

“You see, you do intend to kill us, but you want to make it look like an accident, am I right? So you aren’t a terrorist.”

“He was in the restaurant,” Alice said. “Across the room.”

Lee nodded. “He’s been following me for months. I thought he was a reporter.”

“So you ‘overheard’ us,” Alice said. “You know about the genetic marker.”

“Yes.”

“Then surely you know this information can’t be suppressed for long.”

“Oh, but it can, Dr. Kimbrell. The people I work for can do it, and they will. I already know from you who the authors were. They will be dealt with, and the paper will quietly vanish.”

“Nonsense. Even if you succeed, someone else will come up with the same results any day now.”

“Yes,” Lee said, nodding thoughtfully, “And I think I know who. Am I right?”

“Sorry, Senator. Go fish.”

“Sure, son. Sure I’m wrong. You can read my mind, so you know how much you’ve convinced me.”

“I know you’re bluffing.” But his face was pinched in irritation. He sat back against the wall, the gun quite level. “I know you still hope to escape by upsetting me. But here we are.”

The doors slid open. “Get out.”

Lee looked around hopefully as they exited the car, but the man and woman waiting for them did not look like ice miners—they looked like Vikings. Lee mentally dubbed them Hans and Greta.

Their captor—one of the newcomers called him Piotr—spoke to the two in a language Lee did not know, then motioned them down the corridor toward one of the industrial-sized air locks.

“You’re gonna space us?” Lee asked. “Heck, that won’t look suspicious at all, will it? ‘Senator and noted doctor take stroll on Moon without pressure suits.’ That’ll make a plausible headline. Grissom is a small place. We’ll be missed fast, and you’ll be found fast.”

“Give me a little credit,” Piotr said. “That’s why the two of you are going hiking. Regrettable accident, of course, but then you were never known for your caution, Senator. And the record will say you reserved both of these early this morning.” He motioned at the two bright yellow sport-hiking pressure suits Hans was pulling from a nearby locker.

“If you would now be so kind as to put them on...”

Lee pursed his lips angrily, and then began unbuttoning his shirt. Blushing, Alice did the same. When she was down to her underwear, Hans gave an appreciative whistle.

She slapped him, hard. He never saw it coming, but only reddened and frowned. Lee tensed, but Piotr’s gun never wavered from him.

“Enough,” Piotr said, quietly.

Grumbling, Hans began donning his own suit—heavy mining armor, much heavier than their lightweight climbing suits. As Alice Kimbrell put on her helmet, she shot Lee a small triumphant smile. He smiled back, to let her know he understood.

“Put on your helmet, Senator,” Piotr said.

“What’s the matter?” Lee asked. “Aren’t you comin’ along? Can’t stomach ‘hearing’ us die? Or will you hear it anyway?” He stepped toward the gun muzzle. “Look at me, boy. Look me in the eye.”

Piotr had some difficulty doing that. “You tell me why I have to die, why Dr. Kimbrell has to die. We deserve that. And while you’re at it, why don’t you tell us what lab you were made in? Who created you? Just to satisfy my curiosity.”

The young man’s dark eyes flashed with some anger, then. “I was born of man and woman just like you, Senator. I have no more idea why I can do this than you do, nor did I ask for it. And as for the rest—I don’t feel compelled to explain anything to you. Good day.” And then, to Hans, “We’ll wait for you here.”

The big man nodded, and once they were suited and pressurized, motioned them into the lock.

They cycled through it into a bowlful of night. The sky was ink sprinkled with powdered sugar, and the sickle Earth stuck up in the south like a blue horn. But of the Sun, there was no sign, nor would there ever be, day or night. Over a billion years, a lot of water had fallen on the Moon, ephemeral oceans of ice, but it only stayed where the Sun never came to lick it up.

It was here, beneath his feet, the stuff of life—water, oxygen, hydrogen for fusion engines. A thin powder in the regolith at the Moon's north pole.

Hans flipped on his lamp and gestured toward the crater rim, maybe a mile away, visible thanks to light generated by Grissom colony.

And they trudged in silence. The links had been disabled, of course. Hans stayed behind them, armed.

And so the Earth pulled across the near horizon like God's own plow, and after a while they began to climb, higher and higher. They would, Lee supposed, have a fall of some sort.

The rim was nearly sheer toward the top—perhaps having shattered in some geologically recent moonquake.

A trail had been worked up a talus slope, though, and they went up that.

Hans' light shone occasionally through Alice's helmet and Lee saw her face. Not frightened, but determined, and he felt a hard knot of admiration form.

They reached the ridge of the crater, which rose and fell in an irregular line around the mines. South, the jagged silhouettes of mountains rose, as if cut from the star field by a deranged god with a razor. North, more shadowed ranges, except that the summit of a single, high peak blazed in the light of the unseen Sun, giving the eerie impression of an island in low orbit. On the Moon, the line between light and dark was never blurred. Where would Hans do it? Would he shatter their faceplates with something first, or simply march them up the ridge until the drop was enough to kill them?

He looked down at a straight drop of perhaps two hundred feet.

Don't think about it.

He didn't. He jumped.

On the way down he worked on the math. On Earth, one fell about thirty-two feet per second squared.

Multiply that by mass, and that told you how much force you hit the ground with. He was falling with maybe a sixth that acceleration, so it was as if he had jumped only fifty feet. With the recreational suit he probably massed two hundred pounds. He weighed less here, but the mass was all still there...

He hit, flexed his legs, and rolled, just like a parachute drop. It felt just like a parachute drop, too, except with a skeleton almost twenty years older than when he had last done that. His helmet

cracked against a rock, sounding a sharp note in his ear—as if someone had thumped a champagne glass.

But it did not break.

A light fell from above, hit the ground, bounced, creating a crazy cone in the dust his fall had kicked up, now this long, now that long, and finally it stopped, spotlighting a boulder as if it were some piece of found art or geological specimen.

Cursing, he went for it.

And got it. Holding it well out to one side, he turned it around, sweeping it over the ground. Light didn't bleed on the Moon, of course, so he could see only just where the spotlight shone. He broadened the beam.

There was Alice, slowly standing up, looking unsure. There was Hans, crumpled on the ground, one leg obviously sporting several more joints than it had had when last Lee saw him.

Something in Hans' hand made a little red spark, and Alice sprawled comically backward. Then the hand sparked at him.

Hans was maybe ten feet away. Lee turned off the light, waited for the next silent spark of gunfire and leapt.

The fall and the broken leg had made Hans as weak as a kitten. Lee got the gun away and shot him.

Dumb bastard. In his mining suit, he probably massed four hundred pounds, and he had jumped after Lee.

People always thought they were supermen in low-g.

Alice was thrashing, trying to get a patch over the hole in her suit. Hans had hit her in the arm. As Lee approached, her movements grew more feeble. In the light, he could see her face clearly—she couldn't see his at all. She might not even know it was him.

He considered. Her nose was starting to bleed. She looked desperate, angry, young.

And she knew something she shouldn't know. He hesitated an instant longer, as her eyes rolled back.

Sighing, he bent, finished patching her suit, and then went to Hans to get his air supply. To his surprise, he found that Hans was still alive, big finger jammed into the bullet wound, blood frozen around it like a gasket. He looked up wildly at the light, lips moving, either cursing or begging.

Lee detached the cylinders and opened the suit to space. He turned away rather than watch the rather messy thing that

happened to Hans then.

After that, he moved as if in a dream—just like before, when the dome cracked.

He walked until he found one of the big mining tractors, drove it to the pod where he thought Piotr and Greta were, and using the vehicle's plasma torch, blew a hole in the pod's side. A gale came rushing out, and when it had slowed enough, he went in, found Greta struggling toward a pressure suit, and shot her.

Piotr was bleeding from his eyes and mouth, but Lee dragged him into the air lock and pressurized it. The telepath sat, blinking away sanguine tears, shivering uncontrollably.

"Now," Lee said, using the suit PA. "You and I are gonna have a little chat. If you give me an answer I don't like, the air lock door goes open. Capische?"

The telepath nodded, and they spoke. After a time, Lee got an answer he didn't like.

"Thank you for saving my life," Alice Kimbrell said. Her face was bruised from shattered capillaries, but she managed a weak smile.

"Joint effort," he said. "Once you proved to me that the big fellow wasn't a telepath—or at most was a very weak one—I knew we had a shot. And you picked up on what I was doin' fast enough to jump, too."

"I figured if I didn't, he would kill me first and then go after you, maybe in a smarter way."

"Probably right." He pulled the flowers from behind his back and set them next to her bed. Her eyes widened.

"I'm not even going to try to guess what flowers cost you on the Moon."

"Not nearly enough. I wonder if you can tell me something, though."

"Of course."

"I still don't know why you came to me. Why didn't you go to Senator Tokash, or someone else?"

Her eyes drooped closed. "I suppose I ought to confess. When I was a little girl, I had a terrible crush on you. The hero of the Grissom colony. I suppose part of me still needed that hero. You didn't disappoint."

“That’s the nicest thing anyone’s said to me in a long while.” He paused. “Much as I hate to cash in on hero worship, Dr. Kimbrell, I’d like to see you again. Without the thugs and the secrets and so forth.”

“I think that can be arranged,” she replied, eyes steady on him.

Back in his room, Lee opened the link and entered a number. After a few moments, an angry-looking Senator Vladimir Tokash appeared. His thin hair was mussed, and he seemed to be wearing a dressing robe.

“Crawford?” he said. “What possesses you to call me at this hour?”

Lee smiled. “That’s no way to talk to your best friend, Vlad.”

The senator’s eyes nearly bulged out of his head. “What on earth are you talking about? If it’s about the committee—”

“Oh, rest assured, Vlad—it is about the committee. It’s about how you’re gonna withdraw from it. You see, I just had a little talk with a friend of yours—a soul mate, you might say—and he told me quite a lot about you.”

“I don’t have the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

“Do you have your signal scrambled at your end, Vlad? Because I’ve got some big news.”

Tokash nodded.

“Good. You see, I’ve got a way to detect telepaths. Turns out there’s a genetic marker. Now things get interesting, don’t they? I’m going to announce it tomorrow. So there’re two ways we can play this, and both involve the Senate being the first ones to get tested. But how the tests get reported—that can make a difference.”

Tokash pursed his lips. “I see.”

“With me or against me, Vlad? You’ve tried playing against me, and three people are dead as a result. We can be buddies, you and I. How many of our colleagues are telepaths, do you think? Politics probably draw them—after all, half of politics is knowing what the other guy is thinkin’. Now, I personally believe it would be good to have a telepath point of view in the Senate—one and only one—but I’m afraid the voters won’t see it that way. Still, what the voters don’t know won’t hurt ’em, will it? So. With me or against me, Vlad?”

Tokash put his head in his hands, and then looked back up, tiredly. “With you, Senator Crawford.”

“Call me Lee. First thing in the morning, I want a list of every telepath you know, most especially those in your employ. They work for me now.”

“Very well.”

“Another thing, just in case you’re still thinking about some sort of stunt. You realize that you are the product of genetic engineering?”

“What?”

“The genetic analysis makes it pretty obvious. I think it’s best that that news not be made public, don’t you?”

“Good God, yes.”

“See? We think alike. Together, I think we can keep this little fact from getting out—that we can identify telepaths is one thing. How we do it is best kept a question of global security, one best controlled by the Committee on Metasensory Regulation. So while you won’t be head, I’d of course like to have you as my right-hand man.” He grinned. “Right where I can see you, that is.

“And get some rest, Vlad—you look like hell.”

Chapter Four

Publishers Weekly, 6 February 2117
In Senate hearings today, a spokesperson for Random House, Inc., alleged that telepathic literary agents may have done “incalculable damage” to the publishing industry as a whole, urging immediate genetic testing of all licensed and aspiring agents, with stiff penalties for offenders. Overseeing the Committee on Metasensory Regulation, Senator Lee Crawford said, “The implications are clear, and we appreciate the thoughtful testimony from all involved. This matter must be handled with intelligence and sensitivity, but hopefully not until we’re done negotiating the advance for my biography.” The senator later explained that this last was “just a joke.”

The Boston Globe, 21 May 2117
Triana Neesom of Perth, Australia, today filed suit against her dentist, Graham McKay, D.D.S., for invasion of privacy. McKay—recently identified as a telepath—indignantly denied the allegation that he had “picked Neesom’s bloody brains” while the plaintiff was under general anesthesia for root canal surgery.

Weekly World News, 15 June 2117

THEY WEREN'T ALONE IN BED!

Ladies, take warning! A young woman from Manchester, U.K. (at her request we withhold her name), recently experienced what might be the worst first date in history—at the hands—and we do mean “hands”—of telepaths.

A model student and virgin, Georgia (not her real name) celebrated her twenty-first birthday with some friends at a local nightclub. Noticing that she had drawn the attention of a handsome young man, her girlfriends urged her to break her long bedroom fast. Encouraged by strong drink, the young woman relented to peer pressure and at the end of the night found herself in the young man's apartment. All seemed to be going well, when—at that tenderest of moments—she heard lascivious groans, moans, and even applause from the next room. On peeking through the bedroom door, she discovered five men and women, whose applause doubled when they saw her. To her horror, she realized that they—and the young man she had been with—were all telepaths, and had all taken part in her sexual initiation, seeing and feeling all in intimate, graphic detail.

She had been the victim of a telepathic gang rape!

Lee sat back in the uncomfortable chair and watched the monitor. DiPeso was just starting his monologue, draped across an antique couch and twirling a martini glass.

“...so he says, how does a telepath feed a dog? And I said, pretty well, if you grind him up fine enough.”

He sipped his martini languidly as the crowd howled. There were a few boos, but they were of the “what a bad joke” variety.

“Oh, come on,” DiPeso said, rolling his eyes at the audience.

“My ex-wife was a telepath—when I wanted sex she gave me the headache.

“Anyway, we have a great big show for you tonight. We’ve got Anna Keck, here to talk about her most recent movie, *Arkansas Traveler*. Kuan Ping is going to play you his hit song ‘Zoomorphia,’ and basketball great Joel Transom will tell us all about slam dunks and sex—or is that redundant?—on the Moon.

“But first, we’ll have a word with Senator Lee Crawford, hero of the Grissom colony and head of the Committee on Metasensory Regulation.” He paused and lifted his martini again, cocking his head thoughtfully. “You know, it’s been said that the senator never met a censoring he didn’t like—but we’ll ask him about that in just a minute, after a few words from your local—”

“Senator, you’re on in three,” a sprightly young woman in a bellhop uniform informed him.

“So I am,” Lee said, straightening his collar.

The chairs onstage were uncomfortable, too, and Lee had to repress an urge to reach over and tweak DiPeso’s ample nose—or better yet, punch it. Despite all that, he grinned and extended his hand.

“Well, Senator. You’ve been quite the man in the news lately. Let me start with the question that surely is preying on all of our minds. Considering that you and your committee control the fates of hundreds of people—and knowing how careful you boys in Geneva are about abusing your power—well, what is sex like with a telepath?”

“Well,” Lee drawled, “I can’t comment on that personally, but my experts tell me it would be a lot like being interviewed by you.”

“How’s that, Senator—a sort of cosmic experience?”

“Not exactly. More like doing all of the work while the other person has twice the fun.”

“Ho—well, there’s an image!” DiPeso said. “And not a pleasant one for our audience, either. Now, seriously. How is this Metasensory thing going?”

“Pretty well, now that we can identify telepaths—”

“Not all of them, though.”

“No, but up to about seventy percent of them can be identified through a brief medical exam. This is a substantial number—and a high percentage of others come forth voluntarily.”

DiPeso put on his “serious face.”

“Well, that’s pretty good, isn’t it? But are you saying that you can’t protect us from that other thirty percent?”

Lee rubbed his hands together. “Actually, if you don’t mind, I’d like you to meet a few of these people I’m ‘protecting’ you from.”

DiPeso’s face showed a hint of dismay before he managed to cover it with an “oh, really?” expression.

“Well, I’m sure that if they’re with you, I’ve nothing to worry about. Bring ’em out. But folks, repeat after me—” He then began rubbing his temples and murmuring, “Think clean thoughts—think clean thoughts—no thoughts about Anna Keck—”

The audience was laughing, booing, and rubbing its collective temples as the five telepaths came out. But a hush settled when they saw the first two.

DiPeso was the first to recover. “Anna, sweetie, you’re jumping the gun a little. Your segment is—”

“It’s right now, dear,” Anna replied. In early middle age, Anna Keck still had the same grace and quiet sensuality that had made her, first, the world’s sweetheart, and then, one of its most respected actresses. “I’ve been on your show—what is it, thirty times now—and never really had anything important to say. Now I do.”

For perhaps the first time in front of an audience, DiPeso was clearly flabbergasted. He actually stuttered.

“Are—are you saying—”

Lee stood up and let her have his seat. Anna took it, swept back her luxuriant black hair, and gave DiPeso a little kiss on the cheek. “Just keep thinking those clean thoughts, dear.”

“Good Lord o’mighty!” DiPeso said, recovering. “It’s a miracle you haven’t slapped me thirty times by now. You’ve been—this whole time?”

She shrugged and smiled at the audience. “I didn’t know until I took the new screening test. I always knew I was good at understanding people—at knowing how they felt—but I’ve never heard words or anything. Most telepaths can’t, really—it’s a false stereotype. I can’t read your mind, Alex.”

“Well, thank Buddha for small favors. Whew. ’Cause I’m sure there must be some sort of law. Well, this is—”

“This isn’t about me,” Anna interrupted. “We still have a segment for that, right? Because I do want to talk about Arkansas Traveler. But first I’d like to let the senator introduce everyone

else.”

“Well, by all means—but I think I know this young man,” he said, gesturing at the twenty-something fellow with the Apollonian profile. “Aren’t you that fireman...?”

Lee clapped the young man on the shoulder. “This is Guy Guillory. Most of your viewers will remember him as the young man who saved thirty people in the San Francisco earthquake last year. Guy came to us voluntarily when—well, I’ll get to that in a moment. Guy’s telepathic ability enabled him to find those trapped on the collapsed sixth floor of Trombles. I might add that Guy is just now able to walk again—his body was covered with third-degree burns on his fifth trip in, two trips after the building caught fire.”

Guy nodded nervously. Lee patted him on the back and moved down the line to a slight blonde with a pleasant, but not beautiful, face—the girl next door, the kid sister. “This is Clara Suarez. She used to be a stock trader until she voluntarily quit when she learned she had metasensory powers. She now uses her abilities for the International Trade Commission to find less honest telepaths still trading.”

He moved to a boy of perhaps thirteen with flaming red hair. “Stephen Campbell. Stephen didn’t know he was a telepath either, just that he had a lot of luck hitting what the pitcher threw. Steve was beaten within an inch of his life and left to die on the street in Edinburgh. And this—come here, sweetheart.”

He held out his arms, and the last of the five ran into his arms, to the awwwing of the crowd. “This is Constance. Constance is five, and last year she watched her whole family slaughtered execution style. She herself was shot, hacked with a machete, and left for dead. We found her under the corpse of her mother.”

Constance looked around the room. She was a living doll with huge, dark-bright eyes and brown hair done up in a little bob. She whispered something in Lee’s ear, and he laughed. “She wants to know if she can sit by you, Alex.”

“I—yes, of course. I never turn a lady down.”

Anna gave the little girl a hug as she came by. Then Constance hopped up into the seat and looked at Alex DiPeso with those huge eyes. There were some gasps from the audience, for on her left profile, a fading white scar started in her hairline, passed through her ear, and vanished at the neckline of her dress.

“Hello, Constance,” DiPeso said. “What do you think of Los Angeles?”

She just looked at him and smiled, a bit sadly. “You’re a nice man,” she said. “I can tell you’re a nice man. How come you say such mean things?”

DiPeso worked his jaw, and a profound silence stretched in the studio. Finally, finally, he reached over and took her hand, and his voice seemed caught in his throat as he said, “I don’t know, honey. I can’t explain it, can I?”

And upward of six billion viewers saw a teardrop glitter at the corner of his eye before the cut to commercial.

“Okay, we’re back, and we’re still talking to Senator Lee Crawford of the Committee on Metasensory Regulation. Frankly, I planned to have moved him off by now and brought someone entertaining on, but during the break he told me he had something important to tell us. So I think I’ll just shut up for a moment and see what it is.”

Lee nodded. “Thank you, Alex. I first want to thank you and your audience for giving me the chance to show you these special young people. Look, the face of the unknown is the face of a monster, and for most people telepathy is unknown. It’s frightening. In our hearts, I think we all know that that doesn’t excuse some of the things that have happened—certainly not the way people like Constance and Stephen have been treated. So I wanted to show you the face of the unknown, so you can see that there is no monster, no alien, just us.

“Now, my committee has gotten a lot of criticism from both ends of the spectrum. I’ve been criticized for taking away the rights of telepaths—an untrue accusation—and for not being ‘hard enough’ on them, which I’m happy to say is true. They don’t deserve punishment simply for being born different. But they are different, aren’t they—if not in most ways, then in this one special way.”

He clasped his hands. “I’m being long-winded, so I’ll try to get to the point, because I know you all want to hear more from Anna and the other guests Alex has lined up tonight. The point is this: over the past year or so, I’ve had contact with a lot of telepaths, and one thing I know is that most of them have a strong desire to serve, to use their powers not for the good of themselves, not for the good of a single nation, but for the good of all humanity.

“To that end, I would like to announce that the president has given me the go-ahead to form a new government organization, made up of telepaths like Anna, Guy, Stephen, Clara, and Constance. We’re all agreed that this is the best, most sensitive way to handle both the needs of telepaths and of the world at large. What people are really afraid of is not telepaths, I’m convinced, but the fear of not knowing who is a telepath. Most of us don’t mind being naked, so to speak, but we don’t want just anyone seeing us naked without our consent. The MRA—Metasensory Regulation Authority—will prevent that. We can identify seventy percent of all telepaths medically, but I think most people who know that they are telepaths will come to the MRA of their own free will, where they can be useful without fear of persecution.”

“But what about those who don’t want to join?”

“Well, naturally there will be some who want to continue with their normal lives. I’m happy to announce that Halotech has developed a new drug that shows great promise in inhibiting psionic abilities. It’s still in the testing stage, but it looks good and, once approved, will be offered as an option for telepaths who want to preserve a normal lifestyle. Beyond that—well, there are criminals in every demographic. Just as in any group of people you choose to look at, there will be some minor fraction who simply have no social conscience, who will always take the easy way out. This is not a trait of telepaths, my friends—it is a trait common to humanity.

“However, as you might imagine, telepaths present special problems in incarceration. Because of this, we’ve proposed a set of separate rehabilitation facilities specially designed for the needs of telepaths, which will be overseen by MRA—which will, of course, all be overseen in turn by the Earth Alliance Senate. In short, it’s high time that people step back and see what’s being done.

“The Earth Alliance is the first true world government, and in just over thirty years look what we’ve accomplished. We have thriving colonies on the Moon, plans to move on to Mars, and we’ve detected what might be the first real murmurings of an alien civilization. All it took for those things was a little faith, a lot of ingenuity, and sweat.

“It’s the same with the so-called telepath problem. In a hundred years, people will look back at this as the beginning of something wonderful.” He spread his hands. “Of course, this is all pending

Senate approval, so if you like what you hear today, I urge you to message your senator.”

DiPeso nodded as if in agreement and then did his famous double take. “Well, that’s about as serious as my contract allows this show to get. I’d like to thank you, Senator, as I’m now marked for death by all of the news shows. I don’t suppose you could spare a few of your, er, ‘regulators’—to keep me safe?”

Lee shook his head dolefully. “I don’t know—the Senate would likely deem that a misallocation of personnel—but I promise to look into it if you’ll promise to invite me back sometime.”

“Senator—that’s an abacus. You can count on it.”

“You have nice hands,” he told Alice that evening in the Delacorte lounge. Onstage, the band was playing some oh-twenties revival piece, haunting and brisk all at once. Servers drifted by, ghostly in the pale veils and long dresses so popular along the Pacific Rim.

She dimpled, but skeptically. “You make weak spots in me where I had none,” she said.

“Hmm. Tell me where they are so I can poke at ’em.”

“You do a good enough job of that already. I sometimes wonder if you aren’t a telepath.”

“Not me, darlin’. You saw me get tested.”

“Uh-huh. You did a good job on the DiPeso show, too. The man’s never shown an honest feeling aside from disdain in twenty years, and you made him weep. That’s bound to go down in the history books.” She laid her hand on top of the one caressing hers. “Why did you break the news about the MRA on his show, though? Why not one of the news shows?”

“How many news shows do you know that have a viewership of six billion? Live. Twice that saved. When word gets around, everybody in the solar system will have seen it by tomorrow.” He stopped. “God, I love sayin’ that. The solar system. Ours is the first generation in history to really be able to say that”

“I don’t know if I would go so far as to say we’re in the same generation,” she said, doubtfully.

“Am I an old man robbin’ the cradle, Alice? Is that what you think of me?”

She looked surprised. “I must be naive. I didn’t realize you

were trying to steal anything.”

He shrugged. “You are naive, then. I’d like to take you for everything you’ve got”

“Really.”

“Really.”

She avoided his eyes. “I can’t be her, you know.”

“You don’t even look like her. When have I ever made you feel that way?”

“Never—never on purpose. But there’s something—even when we’re close, there’s distance, Lee.”

“Anything we can’t build a bridge over?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, why don’t we get married and give it a go?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

She looked back up at him, as if he were one of those ancient inkblot things she kept as objets d’art in her office.

“Okay,” she said, softly. “If you love me, okay.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, Lee.” She took a sip of her drink, still looking a bit troubled. Then she smiled. “But what kind of honeymoon can compare to our first date?”

“Darlin’, I’ll do my best.”

He left Los Angeles feeling good, but that sensation vanished on the red-eye back to Geneva, as the reactions started pouring in. All the usual stuff about his grandstanding—they all wished they could grandstand as well as he. That was trivial. But some of the responses to the MRA were troubling. Not unexpected, but troubling.

It was morning when he arrived in Geneva, and he went straight to work—best way to deal with jet lag.

Tom Nguyen was waiting for him.

“I thought you’d be in today.”

“Yep. What’s up?”

“The party called again.”

“Screw ’em. What else is up?”

“I have a feeling you know.”

Lee yawned, poured himself a cup of coffee, and rubbed the grit out of his eyes. “Yeah, but my brain’s a little run-down. I imagine you’ve been on this with your usual efficiency. The vote?”

“Ten percent better than expected, our sources say.”

“See? I told you I should go on DiPeso.”

Tom nodded reluctantly. “It could have gone bad, though—well, it didn’t. The tear made the top of the news everywhere.”

Lee sipped his coffee. “Constance, God bless ’er. It’s her gift. Not that she really needs it—she’s so adorable and pathetic all at once anyway—but our tests put her at P12, powerful enough to nudge a tear out of anyone, if need be.”

Tom shook his head. “What did you tell her?”

“I told her to make ’im cry, and damned if she didn’t. Hell, I got misty-eyed, too—I guess I was within the field of affect or whatever.”

“This is really dangerous, Lee. If anyone suspects—”

“They won’t suspect because they don’t want to. The real bigots will say it, of course, and thereby set themselves apart. See, opinion wasn’t really polarized, not most places. People were ambivalent about telepaths, now they aren’t. They feel ashamed of themselves. They want to help. And best of all, they can help and keep the mind readers away from them all at the same time. They call their senators. The vote will go our way.”

“The nonmember nations want your head. They say they won’t give up their telepaths.”

“We’ll see about that—it’s a human rights issue. What about the members?”

“Everybody wants to make their own policy. The Russian Consortium and Amazonia are being real pains. Both are going to vote against you—maybe China, too. You’ll squeak by with a majority, but the MRA is on shaky ground. We can’t afford to make a mistake here.”

Lee studied his aide for a moment. “Tom, you gettin’ any sleep at all?”

Tom blinked. “Not much.”

“Take care of yourself. I need you.” He took another sip of his coffee. “Any movement on the other front?”

“Vacuum. There were some experiments by various militaries trying to develop exploitable psionic powers in the twentieth, but none of them went anywhere. For the last hundred years, nothing.”

“Damn it, somebody did it. If not a country, then a corporation. There has to be some evidence other than the telepaths themselves. Tokash’s telepaths haven’t come up with anything?”

“Nothing. Every telepath they’ve scanned had a normal enough childhood, their powers aside, and no connections other than what one would normally suspect. If they are part of some larger conspiracy, it’s very well hidden.”

“We’re missing something.”

“No doubt.”

“This is important, Tom. I want to ride the tiger, not discover ten years down the road that I have my head in its mouth.”

“You and me both, Senator.”

Chapter Five

Blood watched the DiPeso show with growing interest. A dry Arizona breeze blew in through the open door, and carried with it the throaty croak of a raven.

“I wonder if Crawford is one of us?” Teal murmured. “He seems too smart to be a normal.”

“Normals aren’t stupid,” Blood said.

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

“And we aren’t all that smart. I had a bad moment back there in Alaska. Don’t remind me of it. Arrogance will get us killed.”

Mercy shifted uncomfortably on the couch, curling up like a cat. “How can we hide, now that they have the test?”

Blood looked frankly at her. “The question is—do we really want to hide?”

Teal tilted his chair back against the wall. “What do you mean?”

Blood shrugged indifferently. *Where’s Monkey, anyway?*

You know Monkey. Send him out for groceries, and he ends up with every cop in town on his tail, (pause) Why are you blocking? Aren’t we family?

*We are. I just don’t know what I’m thinking, yet. I want to get it straight in my head before—*Someone was at the door. Monkey and someone else, someone locked and blocked tighter than anyone Blood had ever touched. She eased her hand onto the pistol in her jacket pocket.

Monkey poked his head through the door. *Howdy and salutations.*

Talk, Monkey. Mercy—

Right. Like you and Smoke weren’t going on when I got here.

He cleared his throat. “Look, folks, I’ve got someone with me. Come on, little fella—”

A boy of perhaps six looked uncertainly through the door. The dark tone of his skin and shape of his face suggested Hispanic or Amerind blood—not unusual in Flagstaff—but his brown hair was

touched with golden highlights.

“Monkey, what are you doing?”

“Hey, Blood, he’s one of us. And strong, too. Feel that block?”

“I feel it. Since when did you start picking up strays?”

“Since when did we stop?” Monkey growled, uncharacteristically indignant. “He was just wandering the street with an old Indian woman, real low level, but on the wind, all right. I tried to get her to come, too, but she just pushed the boy off on me. I scanned her, but she got pissed off, and I didn’t learn much. I think she found the boy in the desert a few months ago.”

“You want us to take care of a kid?”

“For G-God’s sake,” Mercy stuttered, unfolding herself from the couch. “Are you going to talk about him like he isn’t here? Come here, son.”

The boy hesitated for an instant, and then came forward and let Mercy gather him up.

“I’ll get him something to eat,” Teal said. *Jeez, Blood, c’mon. It’s not like he’s a normal kid. He’s one of us.*

Didn’t we make a vow that we would take anyone in we found, make them part of the family?

Damn straight, Monkey said. *Look, Mercy is already playing mama—*

The boy jerked, stared at Monkey with wide eyes.

Hello, that got something—

Mercy frowned up at them. “I don’t appreciate being left out.”

“Sorry,” Monkey said. “But the boy responded to our wind-talk just now.”

“Be careful with him,” Mercy said, stroking his head, touching his face. “He doesn’t want to let us in, yet. Just give him some time.”

Blood sighed and reached forward to tousle the boy’s head.

“Welcome to the family, kid.”

She felt Monkey coming before she saw him, but she kept her eyes on the dark disk of the new moon.

The Night, the Wind, the Sorcerer, he said, as he eased up behind her.

Leave me alone.

“Are you still mad about the kid?”

“I’m not mad, O’Hannlon—I’m worried.”

“Don’t use my mundane name. I never want to hear it again.”

“We aren’t kids anymore, Monkey. It’s time to grow up. I’m not the Blood Woman any more than you’re really Sun Wu Kong. We’re just Desa Alexander and Jack O’Hannlon, just like when we met.”

“No. Not like when we met. We’ve made each other better. We’ve walked the wild paths and come through alive and kicking. You’re lettin’ the mundane world screw with you. We’re above it. We’re the future, Blood.”

“I don’t know if I see a future.”

She felt his breath on her neck then. *Don’t fool yourself, Blood. You’re a tiger, not a herd beast. You’re cobra. Blackhearted.*

She felt his desire like it was her own, a delight as dark and strange as her first taste of licorice. His nails trailed down her face, across the thin fabric of her shirt, her belly.

This is what I’m talking about, she managed. We know how bad we are together—

This is bad? He did something new with his hand.

(!!)No!

You think too much.

She whirled on him then, suddenly angry, almost hating him. But then she saw his eyes, and she knotted her fists in his copper hair, bit his lip, and for a time did not think at all.

Three months passed. Everyone got crummy normal jobs, Blood’s crummier than most, waiting tables in a bar. Something of a comedown for the dark goddess. But telepath testing was working its way through the ranks of business and government jobs first—she figured it would be a while before they got around to waitresses.

Somebody noticed the kid, and a social worker came by. They told him he was Blood’s sister’s son, which seemed to satisfy, but they had to put him in school.

He seemed to improve a little, after that, though he was in special classes.

Mercy made her announcement at the dinner table. It was clear that something was bothering her. Her shields were up—they were

as thin as paper, of course, and Blood could have poked through them anytime she wanted, but the family respected privacy. If Mercy wanted to shield, they let her.

But then she told them. “They tested me today.”

Blood froze with the spoon halfway to her mouth, as the table became a sudden whirlwind of silent panic.

The boy, whom they had taken to calling James, cringed.

“You let them test you?” Blood said, slowly.

“It was a surprise. They just came through the office and took some tissue.”

“And?”

“And I’m a teep.”

“Big surprise. Well, we’ve been here long enough. Time to—”

“No.” Mercy’s voice was as firm as Blood had ever heard it. The mind behind it was firm, too. “No, I can’t keep moving like this. I’m not like the rest of you. I...” She stumbled off, and Blood caught some vague images—herself as the dark goddess, the mindscream of a hundred people dying when Monkey’s bomb went off. “I like my job.”

“You like being a secretary?”

“It’s honest.”

“But they’ll never let you keep it, not now that they know. Christ, I knew this was going to happen.”

“I’ll take the injection,” Mercy said, softly. “They said I could keep working there if I took the injection.”

Smoke frowned. “Can’t let them still your wind.”

“Yes, I can. It doesn’t matter. I’m not strong enough for it to matter anyway. What little use I get from my talent has only made me unhappy. Even with you guys. It’s best.”

They argued more, but Mercy was firm.

Mercy came back the next day like a dead woman. When Blood tried to touch her mind, she had to run for the toilet, and there she vomited for half an hour. Mercy curled on the couch, her normally lively eyes blank.

She watched the vid with only sluggish interest. Tentatively, Blood scanned her again. She was reminded of Novocain, and also of heroin. It was as if Mercy only remembered being alive.

She locked Mercy in her room the next day, called her boss, and told him that the injection had made her sick. That would put them off for a day, maybe, but then they would come hunting for her. And when they came for her, they would find them all. But no one would do this to one of hers, ever again.

“I’m going to the school to get James,” she told Teal and Smoke. “When Monkey gets back, don’t let him wander. We leave tonight.”

Outside, the thin air was fragile with autumn, Arizona’s San Francisco Peaks challenging the clear, dark sky with their sun-dazzled starkness, and she struggled to see beauty, slow her breathing, still the desire to find Mercy’s boss, rip open his mind, find out who had injected her friend. Mercy, the one who painted pictures, who wrote poetry, whose mind opened like a flower to beauty. Blood was their heart, sometimes fist; Teal, their intellect; Monkey, their passion and lunacy; Smoke, their quiet strength—but Mercy, Mercy was their soul. Now she was embalmed alive.

She should kill them. They knew what they were doing. If the drug had lasting effects, she would. She swore she would.

The secretary smiled briskly when Blood got to the office.

“Hello, I’m Ms. Nogales,” she said. “I’ve come for my nephew, James. We’ve had a family emergency.”

The secretary aimed her sharp nose at Blood. “Which grade is he in?” she asked, pleasantly.

“First. In the special class.”

“Oh yes—I think they’re being tested now.”

“Tested?”

“Telepath screening.”

Blood blinked. “Without my permission?”

“It’s the law, Ms. Nogales. It’s a painless procedure.”

“Where?”

“The lunchroom. But you can’t—”

Blood left her explaining what she couldn’t do. She knew where the lunchroom was.

They were all lined up, as if for inoculations. Two competent-looking women in white coats were doing something to their arms with a steel cylinder, then inserting the cylinder into a black box. Blood scanned the line frantically, looking for James.

She finally found him on the other side, absently munching on a cookie. Milk and cookies for the good little children at the other

end of the line.

She hurried over to him.

“Ms. Nogales?”

She turned to see Mr. Craig, James’ teacher.

“What’s going on here?” she demanded.

“Compulsory testing. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“James is delicate,” she said heatedly.

“He did fine. Didn’t you James? And you’ll be happy to know, Ms. Nogales—he came up perfectly normal.”

She touched Craig lightly. It was the truth.

“Well, thank God,” she said.

“Most kids are normal. Only one in ten thousand tests out as a telepath. I doubt we’ll even find one here today.”

She nodded. “Well, I’m relieved. I came by to pick James up.”

“Oh?” Suspicion leaked out under his words.

“Yes. His grandfather, I’m afraid.”

“I’m terribly sorry to hear that. How long will he be out?”

“Only a few days, I hope. We have to go to Houston.”

“Well, we’ll miss you, James,” he said to the boy.

James kept nibbling on the cookie. When she took his hand, Blood tasted the chocolate chips.

“Come on, James, we have to take a little trip.”

Outside, in the car, she managed to relax a little. *Thirty percent*, she thought. *Thirty percent will get through.*

You’re a lucky boy, James.

But that was probably as much luck as her little family could count on. It was time for them to make their own luck.

Chapter Six

“Ah, Senator Menshikov,” Lee said. “So good of you to join me.”

Out on the grounds, the party had quieted, though perhaps twenty people still played croquet as the fireflies trembled up from the grass. Lee sipped his bourbon and leaned over to kiss Alice on the cheek. “Alice, would you mind seeing how everyone else is doing?”

His wife disengaged herself from him and rose a little unsteadily to her feet. She had had a bit too much to drink, something that was beginning to worry him.

Menshikov waited silently, until she was gone. “Quite a place you have here,” he commented, taking a seat in one of the large rocking chairs.

Lee gestured at the house and grounds with his bourbon. “Not my ancestral home,” he remarked. “I grew up in one of the block tenements that used to stand just over that hill, on the outskirts of Natchez. My friends and I used to sneak over to admire this place, just to spend a few minutes in the gardens before the gardeners chased us out.” He smiled at the recollection. “It was a big house, and I suppose we got big dreams from it. Antebellum revival, you know, built in 2064. Sturdy stuff.”

“No slaves, I notice.”

“Now, Senator, no need to be nasty. I don’t provoke you with asides about human rights issues in your own past—and I believe the Russian Consortium boasts a few. We take the good from the past, you and I, and we leave the rest to rot. We aren’t romantics, are we?”

Menshikov grinned sardonically. “I assumed you brought me—and the rest of your guests—to talk about the present?”

Lee shook his head. “The future. I’ll be frank—I’d like to know why you’re blocking me on the military issue.”

“I don’t believe telepaths have any legitimate function in the military.”

Now it was Lee’s turn to show a wolf’s grin. “You mean in the

Earth Alliance military, don't you? Because you have them in your own."

Menshikov leaned into the chair, his eyes widening slightly as it rocked back, but otherwise keeping his composure. "I deny that categorically. I hope you didn't invite me to your house to insult me."

"Quite the opposite. I'm tryin' to schmooze you. Can I get you another drink? Vodka. You're a traditional guy—you can't turn down a drink."

"No, I suppose I can't."

Lee signed for a servant, who already had the drink poured.

"To understanding," he toasted, and they drank.

The girl brought two more.

"Senator." Menshikov chuckled. "I seriously hope you don't intend to try to drink me under the table. Russians have evolved a higher capacity for drink through the simple process of natural selection."

"Senator," Lee replied, "You're talking to the end product of four hundred years of hybrid vigor when it comes to that. I'm descended from a long line of drunks from thirteen different countries. Prosit."

They drank again, and Menshikov cocked his eye. "Aren't you satisfied? You've placed your MRA people in the business sector, in the judiciary system—now you want EarthForce to have them?"

"We need them to maintain stability, and you know it. Every Earth Alliance nation-state keeps its own stable of telepaths, despite the resolution against it. I know it and you know it, so let's not play that game—not here, not now, with no reporters around, just me and you. That's fine. But we can't go too far that way. If we aren't going to devolve into some twentieth-century nightmare—if EarthForce is to play its role as the peacekeeper and enforcer of the solar system—EarthForce needs telepaths."

More vodka appeared. Menshikov took the small crystal glass and held it between thumb and forefinger, staring speculatively at the cold, clear liquid. "You know," he said, "it isn't so much that I disagree with you. The problem, you see, is that anything we give to the MRA we also give to you, Senator. You have become entirely too powerful in entirely too short of a time, and to be frank, I do not like you. The fools in the Senate have given you telepathy—the only ones in the world legitimized to use their powers. Then they

allowed you to place these people among the most powerful corporations on Earth, and to involve them in the process of the judiciary—”

“No one objected to that. Business begged for them, to monitor transactions, all on the up-and-up. The judicial system needed them, too, to help victims identify criminals. Bottom line was, I was asked to justify the existence of the MRA in monetary terms—by you among others, if I remember correctly.”

Menshikov nodded sadly. “It was a mistake, I see that now. I won’t compound my mistake by giving you the military, too.”

“Don’t you think you are being the least bit paranoid, Senator?”

“Hah. Russians have also been bred for paranoia. First, everyone in the world invaded us. The Mongols. Napoleon. Hitler. Then we put our trust in Stalin, in Khrushchev, in Yeltsin, in Kolishnikov. We reluctantly trusted the West once again to help us rebuild after the civil war, and found ourselves an economic colony for twenty years. So yes, I am paranoid, and history has taught me that I am right to be—that I would be a fool not to be. And I do not trust you, Senator Crawford. You are entirely too glib and entirely too strong. And I do not find that I want any more of your vodka.” He set the glass down.

“Wait a moment, if you please, Senator.”

“For what?”

“I didn’t want to do this.”

“What, for God’s sake?”

“A girl named Lena. A pregnancy. A threat to go to your wife and the papers. A lonely corpse in a block of concrete in the ooze at the bottom of Lake Baikal. I know where she is.”

Menshikov stared at him.

“You see, I don’t like you either, Senator. I don’t like old men who play with thirteen-year-old girls. I don’t like men who have their playmates killed because they become inconvenient. Call me old-fashioned, but I just don’t like it. I ought to throw you to the wolves, because it’s what you deserve.”

“You can’t prove it. Damn you and your telepaths, anyway. But their testimony isn’t admissible in court.”

“It doesn’t have to be. I have the body. You were thoughtful enough to preserve that body in concrete, so I have a dead child, and inside that dead child another with your DNA. I have the sworn

testimony of your goons, who weren't quite as up on telepath court procedure as you. Even if you somehow beat the courts, you're finished, Menshikov."

"Unless I do what you say."

"Yes."

"And you do not think you have too much power."

"Don't you talk to me about power, you bastard. I don't use my power to rape little girls and have them murdered."

"Yet despite your outrage, you are willing to let me get away with it to further your own position."

Lee just smiled bitterly and tilted his head.

Menshikov shook his head and then laughed. "You have beaten me. I concede." He lifted the vodka.

"Salute!" And they drank again. "And now I go to my bed."

"Tell your wife I said hello."

Menshikov shuffled off into the darkness, and Lee set his empty glass down and breathed in the night air, syrupy with honeysuckle, fresh-cut grass, mimosa blossoms. He looked back out toward where he was born, remembering the tiny cubicles, the missed meals. Who would have thought that a boy who lived in that place would ever own this one, would ever gather the reins of heaven into his very hands?

But it was all falling into place.

"But you don't have everything you need."

He looked up. The vodka was just starting to flatten the world. The speaker was an attractive, dusky woman perhaps thirty years old, with almond eyes and hair that gleamed like obsidian. With her was a pale, long-jointed man; a giant with almost black skin; a nervous-looking brunette; and a small redhead with a sarcastic smirk that seemed a permanent part of his face.

"Who are you? How did you get past my guards?"

The woman laughed without humor. "We are the Night, the Wind, the Sorcerer."

"Telepaths."

"Indeed."

"Did you come here to kill me? Did Tokash send you?"

Now the smirking man laughed.

"No," the woman said. "We could, but what would be the point? No, we rather like what we've seen of you, Senator Crawford. Your exchange with the Russian senator just now. We

liked that.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Blood, and this is my kith. My family.”

“And you say you have something I need?”

She nodded. “We’ve been around and about. We’ve been to Geneva, where you keep your little stable of telepaths. Did you know that the best of us have escaped you? The strongest. We can end that, because we’re the best there is. You want your MRA to have the best and the brightest; it starts with us.”

Lee wished he hadn’t had so much to drink, now. He had thought his night over. “Why? Why come to me?”

“I want my family to have a home. We’re tired of hiding. We want the same thing you want, Senator—a little power, a little control.”

“How do I know that?”

“You just have to trust me, I suppose.”

“Well,” said Lee, tapping his fingers to the rhythm of the whippoorwills that had just begun to sing. “Well. Welcome, then.”

“That went well,” Teal said, as they made their way back to where they had parked the car.

“Yes, it did,” Blood said. But she noticed that Monkey had his blocks up. “Monkey? Do you have something to say?”

“Yes. Yes I do.” He took a deep breath. “I’m not going.” Surprise all around, exploding like firecrackers.

Anger. “We all agreed—”

“No, you all agreed.”

“We’re a family, Monkey. We make decisions together.”

“Maybe it’s time I was orphaned then. I’m not going.”

“What’s the alternative?” Teal snapped. “Hiding for the rest of our lives? Becoming military slaves like our brothers in the Consortium?”

“I picked up that last from Menshikov, too,” Blood admitted. “Another reason to join the MRA. We can not only reveal things like that, but be in a position to do something about it.”

“Crawford doesn’t give a good damn about us, you all saw that. He wants to use us just like everyone else,” Monkey said.

“Not like everyone else. He doesn’t want to kill us, as many do.

And we can use him.”

Monkey set his mouth stubbornly. “No machine was ever fixed from the inside. Don’t make that mistake, Blood. We belong out here, with our brothers and sisters. Normals can’t be allowed to tell teeps what to do. We can’t put our lives in the hands of mundanes.”

“Exactly. The MRA has to be a teep organization. It has to be ours. Who better to do that than us?”

“It shouldn’t exist at all,” Monkey said. “We can organize, build an army. People are going underground, going to the countries where they think we’re holy. We can—”

“Monkey dreams,” Blood said. “Don’t confuse yourself with your namesake. You taunted me about The Man Who Would Be King, and you were right. But you want to be Sun Wu Kong, build up an army of monkeys, challenge the emperor of heaven, have your name stricken from the book of death.” *We are too much alike, you and I. We are both too much like spoiled children. This is the real way, the realistic way. The Man Who Would Be King and Sun Wu Kong the Monkey King both ended badly. It’s a stupid dream. All that matters now is the family. Grow up.*

Better to serve in heaven than to reign in hell, eh Blood? I remember when you were better than that. I’m not going.

“I’m not going,” was all he repeated aloud, to the rest. “Who is coming with me?”

No response.

“Mercy?”

“I can’t. If they catch me, if they make me take an injection again—” She broke off. “I can’t.”

Monkey nodded, bitterly. “I’m taking the kid,” he said. “I won’t let you drag him off to some fascist training camp.”

“Since when do you care about the kid? Or about these ‘brothers’ you keep talking about us having?”

Monkey lifted his chin, and for once he did not smile. “Maybe you’re wrong about me, Blood. Maybe I have grown up, just not the way you have. But I’m taking the kid. He doesn’t even test as a teep. I won’t let you give him up.”

“Monkey—” Mercy began, but she never finished. Something inside her shut her up.

“Go then,” Blood said, softly. “Go.”

And Monkey went. That very night.

Good luck, she sent, after he was gone, on their own private

wind. *I love you.*

But there was no reply, She knew there would not be.

Part II

The Kith

Chapter One

He awoke choking off a scream, heart stumbling in his chest. The inchoate terror of his dream clung to him like a shroud, blinding him to where he was. The seat, the window, dim pools of light marching away from him. Where?

“Dad? Are you okay?”

The shroud tore, and he peered through to see his son, a boy with twelve years, his mother’s blond hair, his own pointed chin. Beyond the boy he now recognized the darkened interior of a train, reading lamps, other passengers.

“It’s okay, Len,” he murmured. “Just a bit of a bad dream. Where are we?”

“I think we’re coming up to Prague soon.”

“We change trains there. I’m glad I woke up.” He rubbed his eyes and patted Len on the cheek. The boy looked tired and worried. “We’ll be okay. Is your mom awake?”

“Yah. She went back to the washroom,” he said. *Dad, will we get to stay this time?*

“Don’t do that, son. Especially don’t do that when we’re coming up to a station. Not until we get to India.”

“Will we get to stay in India?”

“Yes. We’ll have work permits there, and an apartment. You can go to school and make friends.” He nodded at the booklet in Len’s lap. “You’ve been checking it out?”

“Yah.” He didn’t sound very excited.

“Tell me something about it, then.”

“Well—Calcutta is the third largest city in the world. And it has the tallest building, even though it was built fifty years ago...” He stumbled off. (*confusion, sadness, anger*) Didier leaned over and kissed his son on the head, wrapped him in a hug. “It’ll be all right this time. They can’t come for us there.”

They rode in silence for a time, and Didier tried to remember the dream that had awakened him. Their old house in Antwerp, the house where he had grown up, collapsing. A dark woman he did

not know, standing in the doorway, telling him something...

There.

It was faint, a whisper, but its triumph was undiminished by distance.

“Oh, no,” he murmured.

His son looked at him again, questioning.

(*block*) He couldn't let him know. “I need to go do something,” he said. “I need you to be the man for a little while. Can you do that?”

“Where are you going?”

“Just up a few cars. You may have to change trains without me. It's okay—just tell your mother I'll find you on the train. Don't mindspeak. We're almost there, son.”

“Okay, Dad.” But the boy was probing at his block.

“Don't do that. It isn't polite. Stay quiet.”

“Okay, Dad.”

“I love you.” He kissed him again and stood up, his belly feeling like a pit.

As soon as he was out of the car, he let his block drop, opened his mind wide. Len wasn't strong enough to hear him this far away.

I'm alone. I'm scared. I'm in trouble. He kept that going in his mind, his very real panic sharpening it.

Alone. That was the important part.

Someone was still touching him—very carefully, but he could feel it. He had an image of a skull, laughing, of a cat approaching.

He went through the next car, wondering what time it was, missing his timepiece. It had been an heirloom, Japanese, more than a hundred years old. He'd sold it to buy their tickets. He looked at the info-strips, but they were busy advertising low, low rates to the Russian Consortium. But it must be well past midnight.

He moved on through the eerily silent train, until at last a soft bell tone sounded and the train said, “Prague. Praha.”

He moved to the door. He could feel the triumph arriving like a storm, but from what direction he did not know. Maybe—maybe it was another refugee. Or a thief. He suppressed hysterical laughter—at himself, that he would be relieved if it was a thief, or a simple murderer. What a world. What a world.

The doors hissed open, and he stepped out onto the platform. The scents of city came to him on a chill wind, coppery and stale.

He walked quickly, until he could almost feel the breath on his

neck, and then he began to run.

Got him! There!

Three other minds exploded into motion, somewhere near, and he almost screamed. They were everywhere—they were nowhere. He ran faster. He was in good shape—he was a runner, a Hash House Harrier.

A runner. It had been okay at first—the test hadn't revealed him, as a boy. Then he had met Mary. Mary had never been tested. Her father, a biochemist, had somehow faked the results. But he was gone now, and everyone knew the Mark came through the mother, and Len must have it. They had managed to avoid the test for twelve years, moving, running. And he had heard from a man that he should go to India, where they liked teeps, where they would look the other way.

He leapt down onto the tracks. One of the voices was fading. He was outdistancing them! Maybe he could find a Catholic church, get sanctuary. Did Prague have many Catholic churches? He could find one.

He ran hard up the tracks, and now there was a uniformed guard shouting at him, a normal, who thought his only crime was trying to get out of paying for something.

But no, his crime was deeper than that. His crime was existing.

He emerged from the station beneath a coffee sky with a hint of cream stirred into the east. Nearly morning.

The tracks were sunken three meters below ground level, but a maintenance ladder climbed up one side.

Once in the city he could disappear into a million minds, erase himself.

Alone. Lost. In trouble. Help!

Mary knew what to do from here on out. He just had to lead them off, keep them away from Mary and Len.

(block) Cursing himself. Had that slipped into his frontvoice?

“Stop!” the normal shouted.

But he was up, onto a nearly empty street.

And there she was, the woman from his dream, jet-and-argent hair bound in a tight queue, oriental eyes tightening with satisfaction. She wore black.

No more running. I'm here to help you.

He turned and ran the other way, just in time for him to see the flash of the guard's neural collapser. It struck him in the chest.

His limbs jerked, but he managed a few more steps back toward the retaining wall around the tracks.

Flash, as the baton struck him again. Slow motion, as his legs folded, as the tracks rushed up, as something quietly snapped in his neck and momentum turned him over. He couldn't move his head, but he could see the guard, looking down at him. He saw the angel of death join the normal.

"I got him for you," the guard said, in English, as they began to fade.

He felt her hatred. *Normals*. It was like a dagger.

An instant later—he didn't see what she did—the guard joined him on the tracks, his surprise fading into oblivion.

He tried to move again. He couldn't tell if he was breathing.

Woman: (*hint of sadness*) *Why did you run?*

He tried to stay focused. Was she really sending to him? How could she ask that?

(*resignation, defiance, brandy and ice*) *Because I want my life.*

Woman: *You can't have it, not around normals. You know that. They hate us, fear us. You can only be safe with us.*

(*outrage*) *I've seen the camps.*

Woman: (*exasperation, disdain*) *The camps are for fools. She appeared, kneeling next to him. Another voice piped in, slender as a reed.*

Reed voice: *Will he make it?*

Woman: *I don't know. His neck is broken. Ambulance coming?*

Reed voice: *Of course. Did he take out the normal?*

Woman: *image: The normal shooting Didier, woman striking the guard hard in the throat, the guard feeling his larynx crushed, surprise, sucking for air, the sort of !Pop! as his skull shattered against the concrete.*

Reed voice: *You'll go too far one day, Blood. You can't just kill normals.*

Woman: *He deserved it. Look what he did to our brother.*

A third voice, carrying the raw tones of youth. For this one he caught a name—Daria. *But the teep was running from us. The guard was helping us. Wouldn't we have killed the teep if we had to?*

Woman: *This is your first hunt, but from now on you must know. Teeps are ours. If they have to be killed, we kill them. They are ours. But no matter what—no matter what they've done, they don't deserve to be dirtied by a normal. Ever. Normals are the enemies, Daria, the real*

enemies. *Teeps are our kith, our family, even if they deny us. Never forget that.*

Daria: *The kith is mother. The kith is father.*

Woman: *Those aren't just words, you see.*

Daria: *I do see.*

The woman knelt where he could see her. She touched his face so only he could hear. *I don't think you will live. I'm sorry. Is there anything you want me to tell your wife and boy?*

Please, no. Let them alone. You've killed me, let them alone.

That's not how it's going to be. But I'll take good care of them.

He felt like he was shivering, rattling apart, as if a train were arriving inside of him. *I love them. Will you tell them that?*

Of course. Their names?

Mary—He stopped. *You didn't know about them, did you?*

I wasn't sure. I see them now, on the train to India. Nice-looking boy. And now for another thing or two...

He would have wept, but he didn't have time. Death swallowed his tears along with the rest of him.

Blood shuddered as the world reasserted itself. She had followed him only to the threshold, and as far as she was concerned, that was too far. The sense of dislocation, the vague shadow of nightmare, would be with her for days.

She looked down at the still face. *A P9, maybe P10. What a pity. We could have used him. Did the rest of you get it? The face of the man who helped him get his passports?*

Yes, Teal answered. *But there was an afterimage behind him—somebody our friend here never saw, but that he picked up from his benefactor.*

Blood nodded grimly. *Exactly. Did you recognize him?*

Teal hesitated. *It might not be...*

Blood snorted, and said it out loud. "Bullshit. It was Monkey. I knew we would pick his trail up one of these days."

Teal reached to touch her, ignoring the bewilderment of the rookie beside them. *Well? What do we do?*

Blood shot him a weary glance. *What else? Catch him, of course.*

Chapter Two

“Understand me, Senator. It’s not just murder I’m investigating. It’s the machine behind the murder. In short, Senator Crawford, I’m investigating the Metasensory Regulation Authority itself.”

Lee shook his head as if at a child. “You’ve got all that backward, don’t you, Senator?”

An ambiguous grin quirked Philip Lai’s handsome, ascetic face. He folded his long fingers into the loose pockets of his grey suit. “I don’t believe I follow you, Senator.”

“Son, don’t play games with me. I was in this business when you were still learning to count on your fingers. What I mean is, certain senators like yourself—most of them in the opposition party—have been hankering for a piece of me. Now they use a murder that they have absolutely no evidence for to try to hang the MRA out to dry. You see what I mean, son? You’ve not only already decided that the murder was committed, you’ve decided that it was committed by a member of the Authority, and that in turn the MRA is to blame, and thus me. But you’ve got not a single link in the chain of causality. So what that really means is that you want me—for purely political reasons—and you’re willing to climb up the crummiest, shakiest ladder in the solar system to get to me. How’m I doin’?”

“I have not decided anything,” Lai stated. “The president appointed me to this investigation. If you don’t approve of that, I suggest you take it up with him. You are familiar with the president, aren’t you? Contrary to what you might believe, he is not your subordinate.”

Crawford actually laughed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. How could I suspect underhanded political motivations from a man who makes a comment like that? Or from a president I actively campaigned against?”

Lai’s hands emerged from his pockets again and spidered out on Lee’s desk. He leaned forward. “I will be clear, Senator. I don’t like you, and I don’t like the MRA, I don’t like Teeptown, and I

especially don't like your telepath goon squads. I think you've consistently abused your position, and I think you've grossly misused the talents of the telepaths you keep incarcerated. Now, my feelings on these matters are one thing. They are my opinion, and that is neither here nor there. Except, Senator, that I can prove what I say."

"Son, you can certainly try."

Kevin Vacit heard the shouting quite clearly as he approached the door marked Senator Lee Crawford. He paused. The secretary had said to go straight up and knock, that he was expected. But walking in on an altercation didn't seem the best way to meet his new boss.

Then again, ignoring instructions might be worse. He rapped. The shouting broke off.

"Come in!"

Kevin opened the door.

"Who the hell are you?"

Kevin recognized him, of course. He had grown up seeing Lee Crawford's face on the vids and in newspapers. It was a sort of shock to see him in person. He had expected Crawford to be bigger somehow, more godlike. In an intangible way, he was. There was an almost palpable sense of power that lay behind that seamed, angular face, that did not come across on a screen or in any photograph.

"Sir—Senator—I'm Kevin Vacit."

"My replacement," said the other man. Kevin recognized him, too—Tom Nguyen, who had interviewed him.

"Damn it, Tom, I don't need your replacement. I need you. You've been with me for almost twenty years."

"I'm sorry, Lee. It's what I feel I have to do."

The senator blinked, and his face relaxed. It was as if he had just realized his anger was showing and chose not to show it any longer. He sighed. "Very well, Tom. I guess I'm not going to talk you out of it. I'll miss you, though."

"I just think, under the circumstances—"

"Tom, I told you I don't hold any grudges."

"It's not you I'm worried about. It's me I can't live with." He seemed to remember Kevin was in the room.

“Sorry, Kevin. Kevin Vacit, meet Senator Lee Crawford.”

Lee Crawford smiled, the avuncular hound’s grin from a thousand images. “Good to see you, son. Hear good things about you. Have a seat, won’t you?” He turned back to Tom Nguyen. “You will stay long enough to fill him in?”

“Of course. Two weeks, and then as needed.”

“Good. Well, let’s see here, Mr. Vacit—may I call you Kevin?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Then you must call me Lee. In private. Outside of the office you should call me Senator for a while.”

“I understand S—Lee.”

“Good. So, Kevin. Bachelor of science in neurophysics from ASU, master’s in the same from Harvard—and a degree in law. First in your class. Worked with the Houston special attorney for metasensory evidence—ah, Ernesto Perez, a good man.” He looked up. “Son, how old are you?”

“I’ll be twenty-four next month.”

Lee smiled. “You’ll stop countin’ that way someday, son, I promise you. But damn impressive, to be where you are at your age. Precocious, even.” He stood up. “Drink?”

“No, thank you.”

Lee snorted. “Figures Tom would replace himself with another straight arrow.” He went to a small cabinet and withdrew an earthenware bottle, poured an amber fluid into a small crystal flute.

“So you oversaw telepaths in the courtroom.”

“I did.”

“Well, tell me this. Some of my colleagues have been pushing to broaden the admissibility of teep testimony. What’s your opinion?”

“My opinion is that things are best as they stand.”

Lee nodded. “Well, at least you have an opinion. Now explain it”

“Spectral evidence.”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me, son.”

“In the late seventeenth century, in North America, in Salem, Massachusetts, a number of people were tried and many hung for witchcraft. The court admitted testimony of spectral evidence—allegations that the accused had appeared in ghostly form to those they afflicted. One of the men involved—Cotton Mather—argued persuasively against the admissibility of such evidence. After all,

the testimony wasn't verifiable—the witnesses could lie for any number of reasons, accusing innocent people. Despite Mather's objections, the testimony was admitted, and twenty-one people were executed. Later, there was a backlash, a big one. I think telepath testimony is comparable. It's good for establishing the possibility of guilt, but shouldn't be admitted without corroborating physical or overwhelming circumstantial evidence."

Lee cocked his head. "They teach you that in law school?"

"No. I'm something of a history buff."

"Write that up for me. It'll sound good on the floor. Can you think of other historical precedents?"

"Yes. In Nigeria, in 2002—"

"Just write it up." He held out his hand. "Good to see someone earning their pay on the first day. Now, why don't you have a talk with Tom? He can fill you in on the nastier aspects of working with me." He turned back to his vid, but called again before Kevin could get out the door. "Have you been screened?"

"Yes, S—ah, Lee. It should be in my vitae."

"We'll want to screen you again, in-house. Good to have you on board, Kevin."

"Good to be here, Lee."

Tom Nguyen stood as the third member of their party approached, a lean fellow the color of black coffee.

"Kevin Vacit, may I introduce Akimba Ironheart."

"Mr. Ironheart," Kevin said, taking the black-gloved hand.

"I hope you don't mind, but it's SOP to have a teep along for these sorts of things. To be candid, assisting Lee is an extremely sensitive position. Even the vice president doesn't have higher clearance."

"I understand completely. And I'm aware of Mr. Ironheart's reputation—you worked on the Knorozov trial, didn't you?"

Ironheart seemed pleased. "I did."

"That was good work."

"Thank you."

Tom drummed his fingers. "Another reason for Mr. Ironheart's joining us has to do with security above and beyond you. Some of the things I'm going to tell you can't be overheard, and there are a lot of people who would like to overhear, teep and normal alike."

Kevin nodded.

"The first thing I want to stress is that this job carries some

risk. While it's not well known, there have been four attempts on the senator's life in the past fifteen years. None succeeded, and in each case after the first, teeps were able to identify the assassin before his attempt."

"I haven't heard about these."

"You wouldn't have. Cards on the table, Kevin—you've signed a disclosure document. That's to be taken seriously, and from here on out it comes into play. But I ask you again, for the record—do you swear to keep the things I tell you confidential?"

"I do."

He felt a sort of tickle among his thoughts, a faint alien presence. Ironheart nodded. "He's telling the truth."

Tom smiled thinly.

"Good. Let's go have a look at Teeptown, then."

Kevin took in the broad avenue, the carefully sculpted landscape. In the middle distance he could see a mass of scaffolding and lifters busily at work, and beyond that the sharp peaks of the Alps.

"Is that EarthDome?" he asked, pointing toward the distant construction.

Tom nodded. "It will be. What else could it be? It should be a wonder when it's done." For a moment, a brief regret seemed to flash across his face, then he turned in a slow circle.

"This is the metasensory compound."

"It looks more like a village."

"It is, Mr. Vacit. Some call it Teeptown, as a matter of fact. That's the square, there—bars, restaurants, a few shops. Those larger buildings on the hill there are the dormitories for the children and singles. Married housing is down that way."

"I thought it would be more like a military base."

"We try to minimize that feel. Teeps are not ordinary enlistees, as I'm sure you know. Most come from civilian backgrounds, and though they find themselves more comfortable here, with other teeps, than they did out in the 'mundane' world, we want them to have some of the comforts of the lives they've left behind. If you know the military, you know the people on military bases are always trying to get off base. Most teeps would rather stay here, though, where they are safe. But given that factor of isolation, we try to make life as—you'll excuse me, Akimba—'normal' as possible."

Kevin nodded as they walked along. The buildings were mostly new and fresh, unpretentious ceramic brick, a hue removed from natural earth tones, topped with high, pitched roofs. More than anything, the complex resembled some of the self-towns that had sprung up in rural areas over the last few decades—homages to an earlier time. Simulated small towns, as it were.

He saw a lot of children, fewer adults, the occasional uniformed cop or functionary.

“Metasensory has four legs, as it were. First and foremost, its function is education. Teeps are taught how to use their powers and how to control them. The younger we get them, the better.”

“What about the parents of the children?”

“It’s something of a boarding school. The parents can visit, the kids can go home on holidays—if they’re deemed able to control their powers. It’s not perfect, but it works. Eventually, most kids end up feeling more at home here than with their parents—I suppose that’s inevitable. Of course, most kids who are teeps have at least one parent who is also a teep, so we have whole families here, too. Many of the children were born here. In fact, we’ll be having our first secondary school graduating class in just three years. An exciting day.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Education goes beyond teep abilities, of course. All of the usual courses are offered, but we try to steer people toward careers for which they are best suited. Here, for instance, we have the school of law enforcement, and there the verbal arts college. And, of course we have a military prep academy.

“The Authority no longer draws on government funds—that makes it one of the most popular programs with taxpayers. We hire teeps out to private business, where they monitor deals—on a mutual-consent basis, of course; to the courts, which I know you are familiar with; and to EarthForce, where they mostly serve in Alliance security.”

“And Senator Crawford oversees all of this.”

“It was his dream—one of them, anyway. Lee has many dreams. Yes. Very little happens here without his knowing about it—which means you have to be up on it all. And so now you understand the precautions we are lavishing on you.”

“I hope I’m found worthy. It’s exciting.”

“Some of our detractors don’t think so,” Tom said.

“I’ve heard some complain that the senator has too much influence.”

Tom smiled sardonically. “I don’t doubt he is the most powerful man on the planet. I think you’re bright enough that I don’t have to explain why.”

“If—may I ask you something candid, Mr. Nguyen?”

“You can certainly ask.”

“You’ve been his aide for a long time—since the beginning. Why are you—”

“It’s personal. Very personal. I’ll just say that I think Lee deserves a better aide than I.” Tom looked down, seeming embarrassed. “He needs someone, Kevin. Someone he can trust. Someone who will always tell him the truth when he needs to hear it. Somewhere along the line, that stopped being me. If you can’t do it, get out now. At this point, you haven’t seen too much, you don’t know too much. You can go your own way.”

“Does that mean you can’t?”

“My options are somewhat more limited, for reasons of security. Yours will be, too, if you stay long and then decide to quit. But if you want to be near the throne, there are prices to pay. I’ve been at the center of the world since back when it spun in a different direction. I can’t stay here any longer, but I don’t regret a moment of it.”

Kevin nodded. “As long as we’re being honest, can I ask another question?”

“Shoot.”

“The stunfence. The concertina wire.”

“Ah. You noticed that. Ostensibly, it’s for the protection of the teeps. In reality, too—we’ve had many threats and a few isolated attacks on the complex. The local normals don’t much like the teeps. But as with any boarding school, we also have our share of would-be runaways.” He paused. “It’s not a perfect world, and this isn’t the perfect solution.”

“I wasn’t criticizing, just asking. If I’m to do this job, I need all the information.”

“Just keep an open mind. And don’t be fooled by Lee’s country-boy act. He’s a very sharp old fox, and he just keeps getting sharper.” He swept his arms wide. “This is all yours now, Mr. Vacit, and welcome to it.”

Kevin was left wondering if Tom Nguyen meant Teeptown—or

the world.

Chapter Three

Lee and Kevin found Blood sitting on a bench near the playground. Shrieking children swung, climbed, bounced, and ran through its brightly colored labyrinth.

“Mornin’, Desa,” Lee called, as they approached.

“Good morning, Senator. What can I do for you?”

“We need to have a talk, I think.”

She nodded, focusing her dark eyes on Kevin expectantly. Lee took the hint.

“Kevin Vacit, this is Desa Alexander, chief field operative for the Metasensory Regulation Authority.”

“We’ve met,” Kevin said, stepping forward.

“You seem familiar.” It sounded like a challenge.

“You were in Houston last year, on the Richter case.”

“Yes, of course. That was a bad one.”

Lee cleared his throat, and changed the subject. “The hearings start tomorrow. I think we need a game plan. What have we got on this guy?”

Desa turned her gaze back to the playground. “Nothing,” she said. “Lai is so clean you can eat off of him.”

“No one can be that clean.”

“Yes, well, the problem is we can’t deep scan him. He has teeps with him.”

“That should make it even easier—”

“They aren’t ours, Senator.”

Lee’s face went a little stony. “Ah,” he said.

“Yes. But even without them, he would feel a deep scan. I’m no politician, but I think that would be a bad move just now, since involuntary scans are unlawful.”

“Family? Friends?”

“Nothing we can use. This guy is one hundred percent career, Lee. Reminds me of someone else I know.”

She waved a diffident finger at Lee, then brought it thoughtfully to her chin. “There are, of course, more extreme

solutions.”

Lee shook his head. “No. Too high profile. If Lai turned up his toes or went missing—in the public mind, it would only prove that he was onto something. Anyway, Lai is only the tip of the iceberg; I’ve got a sizable minority in the Senate against me, and making Lai go away won’t make the problem go away. So we have to cover ourselves, then. That might be harder.” He paused. “He says he has proof that you killed that railroad cop in Prague. Is that possible?”

Desa looked up with a faint smile on her lips. “Are you asking me if I’m guilty, Senator?”

“Hell, no. I don’t care, and I certainly don’t want to know. If they have teeps, that’s the last thing I want picked out of my head. I just want to know if it’s possible that they have some evidence against you.”

She shrugged. “Anything is possible. But I very much doubt it.”

Lee made a sour face. “It may be a bluff, a ploy to try to get us to do something stupid. Is everything else covered?”

She crossed her arms. “If you mean do we look legal, yes.”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it.” He turned to Kevin. “Do you know what I mean?”

Kevin casually pushed his hands into his pockets. “The way I see it,” he began, “is that for the past fifteen years everyone has pretty much looked the other way. People wanted teeps regulated, and that’s what they got. But times have changed—teeps have been a legitimate part of business and the courts for more than ten years. They have their sympathizers, now. And to be frank, Ms. Alexander, your people haven’t always used as much restraint as they might have.”

“Damn straight, son,” Lee grumbled.

“Listen,” Desa said, her voice flat and dangerous. “For fifteen years now, Senator, my people and I have been saving your ass. If people start to wonder why Menshikov went silent and quietly retired, why Karl Dressier had a nervous breakdown, why Muhammad Ifriqiya dropped mysteriously off the face of the Earth—you’re going to blame that on my lack of restraint? Don’t ever doubt we’re married in this. Ever.” She stabbed her gaze at Kevin. “And you, little boy. I know you want to make a real big impression on your boss, here, but don’t think to do it at my expense. If the senator hasn’t made this clear, let me spell it out for you. Teeps made Lee, Lee didn’t make teeps. He knows that, I know that, and if

you want to stay in this business, you better know that, too.”

Kevin cocked his head and met her ferocious eyes.

“Ms. Alexander, I say what I see. Sometimes I don’t see everything. All I’m saying is that times are changing. We’ve already established that all our fates are linked. Mistakes have been made. It’s my job to help you fix them. If either you or the senator have a problem with that, maybe I need a new job.”

He looked significantly at both of them.

Desa turned her gaze thoughtfully toward Lee. “He has some guts, doesn’t he? He might do.”

“Yep.” Lee sighed, joining her on the bench. “Maybe we needed some new blood.” He was silent for a moment, then nodded at the playground. “Brenna out there?”

“Yes, watching the younger kids.”

“You must be proud. I hear she tested P10.”

“Which one is she?” Kevin asked.

“That one,” Desa said, pointing. “The one with the reddish-brown hair. It’s her birthday. Fifteen.”

“The future,” Lee said. “Makes me feel old.”

Desa grunted, still watching her daughter. “You are old, Senator.”

The din in the Senate chamber diminished to a hush as Lai cleared his throat.

“We’ll come to order,” he said. He waited another moment, then directed his gaze toward where Blood sat, all business in her neat, brown uniform.

“State your name, please?”

“Desa Alexander.”

Lai nodded. “Also known as Blood?”

“That’s my nickname, yes.”

“Could you explain that, please?”

“It’s personal, Senator, and I don’t see how it has any bearing on these hearings.”

Lai shrugged. “Just curious. It seems apt somehow.”

Blood smiled.

Lai shuffled through a few sheets of paper. “Might it have anything to do with a religious cult known as the Katun Prophecy?”

Blood felt her eyes widen, and at the same moment, she felt a familiar tickle at the edge of her senses. Then she snapped up her guards, mental and facial. “I don’t know what you mean by that.”

“Ms. Alexander—Blood—weren’t you the leader of a religious cult known as the Katun Prophecy?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

Lai nodded, as if reluctant. “Perhaps my information is wrong, then. Ms. Alexander, can you tell us what you do?”

“I work for the MRA. I enforce the EA laws regarding telepaths.”

“Do you? Do you do anything else?”

“I raise my daughter. I’m active socially. Is that what you mean?”

“Not exactly, but we’ll get back to that. You say you enforce Earth Alliance laws. And yet I have three affidavits that claim you enforced these laws in non-Alliance countries. Again, I must confess that I’m very confused. How can Earth Alliance laws be enforced outside of the jurisdiction of the Earth Alliance?”

“They were criminals, Senator. I extradited them. It’s a matter of record.”

“Indeed it is. But the funny thing is that when I checked those records I found the extradition process occurred after you apprehended said criminals.”

Blood shrugged. “I don’t recall any such instance, but I wouldn’t be surprised if that were the case. In many situations, the criminal is taken in the process of crossing borders, so jurisdiction becomes messy.”

“I see. And so you consider, for instance, breaking into a private residence in Christchurch, New Zealand—a country with which the Alliance doesn’t even have an extradition treaty—and abducting four people to be only a little ‘messy?’”

This time, Blood managed to repress her shock entirely. “Senator, I have never done such a thing. None of my agents has ever done such a thing. Because I have not done these things, I know for certain that you have no evidence that I did—so why are you saying this?”

Lai took a sip of water. The floor was entirely still.

“Ms. Alexander, I never speak to things I cannot prove. I will demonstrate that you have, in fact, seized telepaths in decidedly unlawful ways. I will also prove that you willfully and maliciously

have murdered civilians over whom you have no jurisdiction whatsoever. Furthermore, I will show that the anecdotal evidence of your own actions fits a larger pattern. One that represents an extraordinary abuse of power by your organization.”

A single pair of hands clapping filled the silence that framed his pronouncement. Blood turned along with everyone else to see Lee Crawford, applauding.

“Well, that’s entertainment, isn’t it, folks?” he said. “It certainly is. High drama. But you know, I’m one of those fellahs you hate to sit by during a movie. The one who’ll poke you every five minutes and say ‘Now what just happened there?’ and ‘Who is he?’ Because I like things to be kept real simple. So do you mind if I ask Ms. Alexander a few questions?”

“Senator—”

“Exactly. This is a Senate hearing, and I am a senator, or at least you seem to think so.”

A few chuckles broke the stillness then, and Lai nodded reluctantly.

Lee clasped his hands in front of him. “Ms. Alexander, as an officer of the Metasensory Regulation Authority, perhaps you’re aware of the history of your organization, more aware than someone outside of it. Did you study its charter?”

“Yes, Senator—it was required reading.”

“And who created the MRA?”

“The Earth Alliance, Senator.”

“More specifically.”

“The Senate.”

“You mean this Senate?”

“Yes, Senator.”

“Hmm. My, my. And who oversees it?”

“The Senate.”

“This Senate? You don’t say? This whole time?”

“Yes, Senator.”

“Why do you expect that all of a sudden this Senate pretends it has no idea what your organization does?”

Blood shrugged. “You’ve got me, Senator.”

“Well, we’re together on that. Let’s talk about you, Ms. Alexander. You’ve been doing this job for a while?”

“Fifteen years.”

“And in that time, you’ve often been accused of the sorts of

things Senator Lai is talking about?”

“Senator, it’s a matter of record that I have not.”

“But you haven’t been praised for your performance either, have you—oh, wait, Ms. Alexander! Are those medals I see on your uniform?”

“Yes, Senator. The Gold Shield and the Crossed Arrow.”

“I seem to remember those are awarded for outstanding service to the Earth Alliance and for bravery, integrity, and honor.”

“Yes, Senator.”

“Who awarded those medals to you, Ms. Alexander?”

“The Senate, sir.”

“What? This Senate?”

“Yes, Senator.”

Lee nodded and looked over at Lai. “Senator Lai is sort of a young fellow. Do you think all of this happened before his time?”

“I like to think I’m not all that old, Senator,” Blood replied, smiling faintly.

“Well, you don’t look it—and neither do I, for that matter.” That drew a few chuckles, too. “Ms. Alexander, are you familiar with Senate hearings?”

“Yes.”

“Are you aware that when charges are made, they are usually accompanied by evidence at the moment of the charge?”

“Yes, Senator, I’ve always been of the understanding that that’s the usual procedure.”

“How do you feel when you see an exception to that rule?”

“I think it’s a bluff—grandstanding. I think the accuser is trying to get the media to pick up his unsubstantiated assertions—to create a perception of guilt in lieu of real evidence.”

Lee nodded gravely. “That’s how I’ve always felt. Senator Lai, how do you stand on the matter?”

Lai pursed his lips, and then flashed his enigmatic grin. “I’m just setting things up, Senator. Just making certain the issues are all clear. I thank you for clarifying them.” He continued, addressing everyone in the room. “As I will show over the next several days, it is indeed the Senate that has made the pertinent mistakes here. It is the Senate that must correct them. In the next few days...”

Blood lost him, then, because she felt the touch again, and this time she recognized it. She swept her gaze around the audience, around, until...

He had dyed his hair brown, and surgery had changed his features more than age, but when she saw his eyes, she knew him. Even through her blocks she heard his soundless laughter.

Monkey. It is you. How have you been?

Hao. And you?

What are you up to Monkey? What do you have to do with this?

Everything, I'm afraid. End of the line, Blood. You took the wrong track. I'll give you one more chance to get off of it. I can help you disappear. But this is the end of it.

“Ms. Alexander?” Kevin repeated for the third time.

She finally looked up, gathering her thoughts, focusing on the myriad bright slices of sail and pennant that shifted out over the blue-silver surface of Lake Geneva.

“The senator asked me to speak with you,” he repeated.

“Where is he?”

“He wanted to be here, but I insisted he stay out of it. He doesn't need to know the answers to the questions I'm going to ask you.”

“Ah. Plausible deniability.”

“Something like that.”

“Maybe you don't want to know either, little boy.”

“It is, of course, my job. So I'll take my chances. Let me start with the New Zealand thing—”

“He's bluffing,” she said, sharply. “That was clean, I know it.”

“Couldn't you be wrong?”

“No. It was clean.”

“Then how does he know about it?”

She shrugged. “He has teeps with him. They could have picked the story from several minds.”

“So it wasn't all that clean.”

She quirked her mouth. “You're a lawyer, right? Didn't I hear that you've handled cases using teeps? Then you know that kind of evidence is completely inadmissible without corroborating data. And I'm telling you, there is none.” She pressed her fists together. “Same with everything else he says. He has a teep working with him, a P12—”

“How do you know that?”

“What?”

“That he’s a P12?”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s a guess, based on what he can do. Do you want to hear this?”

“Sorry.”

“He can know some of these things, but he can’t prove any of it. I’m sure.”

Kevin ticked his finger on the marble balustrade. “Then he can’t—” He paused to think about it. “He isn’t doing what we think he is, then. The hearings aren’t the point. What is he up to?”

Blood leaned back. “I don’t know.” She looked more intently at him. “You have a strange mind, you know that? Mechanical, almost. Too—something. Almost doesn’t feel real.”

“That’s rather impolite, don’t you think?”

“I can’t help it. A normal couldn’t understand. This close, I can no more avoid seeing the shape of your mind than the shape of your nose. Does that bother you?”

“No. What I meant was—well, you wouldn’t tell me I had a big nose or ugly eyes, would you? And yet you tell me I have an unattractive mind.”

“I didn’t say I find it unattractive. What do you think you would see if you could see my mind?”

He considered. “Wild horses. Knives. A whirlwind. I don’t know. You certainly don’t look like someone who ought to be wearing a uniform.”

She shrugged. “I have something I have to do. It happens to coincide with what the senator is doing. I have to wear this uniform for it all to work.” She reached for his face with her gloved hand. He flinched away, just slightly, and she sighed and lowered it. “So, what do we have? Hearings that must be a cover for something else. Something his teeps are doing?”

“Maybe. Listen, can you see the ‘shape’ of Lai’s mind?”

“Yes.”

“Do you sense any deception coming from him?”

Blood shook her head. “No. But that might be a screen put up by one of his teeps. I don’t think so, though—I don’t think even a P12 could do that to me. But I suppose it’s possible.”

“I’m not a teep, but I’m pretty good at reading people, and I don’t think he’s bluffing either. Which probably means someone else is using him. Which means... what does it mean?”

“I don’t know,” Blood said. “But I’m going to find out.”

Kevin had never met Alice Kimbrell-Crawford before, but he recognized her immediately, despite her disheveled hair, the streaks in her no-streak makeup, her red eyes. Leaving Lee’s office, she passed him in the corridor, obviously in a hurry.

He knocked on the door she had just closed. “Lee?”

“Get out.”

“Lee, it’s Kevin Vacit. It’s important.”

“I said get out.”

Instead he stepped in, and closed the door. The lights were set to minimum, and Lee Crawford was just a shadow behind his huge desk.

“Whaddyou want?”

“Lee—the hearing?”

“Th’hell withit.”

“Lee, have you been drinking?”

The senator rose unsteadily, lifting a bottle of bourbon from behind the desk as he did so.

“Drinkin’? No. I’ve been changin’ my blood for something better.” He lifted the bottle and threw back another few swallows, stumbled over to the leather sofa, and wobbled down onto it. “Damn legs, don’t work worth a damn anymore. Time was—time was—” He coughed. “You get old. Things stop working. People die. People leave—” He looked up at Kevin, a spark of anger in his eye. “What do you think of me now, eh? The great Crawford? The Moon hero, the teep savior—”

“I think you’re drunk. That’s about the size of it.”

Lee wagged a finger at him. “I know about you. I looked into you. Zuni Indian—”

“No, only part—”

“Everyone’s part somethin’ these days. Part this, part that. ’S a good thing. People think they’re pure they start killin’ each other. I didn’ mean nothin’—except you were like me. Grew up dirt-poor. Made somethin’ of yourself. Pulled somethin’ out of that bastard, the universe, that he never ever intended you to have. Am I right?”

Kevin was silent for a moment. “Something like that.”

“Yeah. I can sense it. I can feel it. That’s why you’re still here.

Tom didn't have that—little rich kid. But I liked him, anyhow. Can you believe that? I loved him, even after him and Alice—” He choked off a hoarse laugh and then took another drink. “I'll miss him more than her.”

“Maybe that's why she did it.”

Lee rose jerkily to his feet and stalked over to Kevin, stood there swaying in front of him. “You little shit,” he whispered. “You little—” He swayed another second or two. “Shit. How dare you be right?”

“Why did you marry her?”

“Liked her. Part of the game. Good wife for a hero, all's well that ends well. Loved my first wife, look how that turned out. Thought it might go better this way. But damn—I think, in the end, I loved Alice, too. Funny how that kinda thing sneaks up on you.” He stumbled back to the couch, then turned his dimming eyes up to Kevin.

“Thumb that switch, will ya? That 'un by the desk.”

Kevin found the small plate and pressed it. Above, the ceiling became space and stars.

“Where are they, you think?” Crawford wondered. “I know they're there. When I was a little boy, I used to shine my flashlight at this star or that, thinkin' one day they'd see my message. All this other stuff—teeps, the Mars colony, everything—it's all just markin' time. The real thing is out there, the aliens that'll finally make us Human.” He looked at Kevin. “You know what I mean?”

“I think so, Senator.”

“It's the only thing I really dream about. I'm gonna be around when it happens. I'm gonna be there. The bastard can't stop me. Before I die, I'll see them, face-to-face.” He took another swallow, sputtered on it.

“We'll show him, won't we, Kevin? Show that bastard. I did pretty good today, didn't I? Made Lai look pretty silly. I've still got some left”

“Yes, sir.”

“You're a good kid, Kevin. If I'd ever had a son—”

“Let me put this up, Lee.” The bourbon bottle had dropped from Crawford's hands. What little remained in it was leaking onto the polished slate floor.

“Show 'im,” Crawford mumbled, throwing his arm over his face. He might have been weeping.

Kevin put the bottle up, then returned to where Crawford had begun to snore. He turned him on his belly, in case he should become sick, and sat there beside him for a moment, the legend that stank of rotted corn and charcoal filtering.

“Don’t worry, Senator,” he said. “We’ll show him. You just rest.”

Chapter Four

Blood glanced around the Senate chamber. *Where are you, Monkey?*

She couldn't feel him at all, today, but he could do that, if he wanted. Make himself a pane of glass. She didn't see him, either, but he might be disguised as anyone.

Lai was getting his notes in order.

Kevin Vacit was right. Something was up. But what?

Could it be so simple as getting the media stirred up? That didn't feel right, not with Monkey involved.

Monkey was better than that. For years he had been the biggest thorn in her side, there again, gone again, clever and slippery as ever. If he was here now, where she might get her hands on him, he must be playing for very high stakes indeed.

And if he was here today, it would be a mistake. Ten MRA agents were planted in the crowd. Plainclothes.

Good ones.

The room fell silent as Lai stood. She stole a glance at Lee Crawford, who looked a little green, and at Kevin, who seemed to be searching the crowd as much as she.

"I call to order," Lai said. "I would like to continue my questioning of Ms. Alexander, if it please the Senate."

Blood nodded. "I'm ready. Senator."

"Very well. Ms. Alexander, can you tell us where you were on August 16, 2132?"

"Of course. I was on train 1116 from Amsterdam to Prague. We had information that a family of illegals was trying to reach India."

"Why India?"

Something was strange. She couldn't place it at first.

"Ms. Alexander? Why India?"

"Hmm? Because they give refuge to illegals. Though an EA member state, they aren't signatories to the Crawford-Tokash act."

"I see. So you were chasing this 'dangerous criminal'—Didier Krijgsman, a traffic flow analyst—his wife, Mary, and their ten-year-old son, Len. Is that right?"

She had it now. The minds in the room were silent. Even her own operatives. Someone—or several someones—were blanketing the proceedings. Why?

“The law is very clear,” she said. “They broke it. I was trying —”

*Who could have told Lai about Prague? There were no witnesses, only Teal and the rookie—*She stabbed her eyes around the room.

“Ms. Alexander? You were saying?”

She saw Daria, six rows back, and sent her scan there, brutish, cutting through the film of silence like a knife through paper.

Felt Daria’s hand, lifting something.

Then she saw it all.

“Ms. Alexander—”

“Senator Lai, get down.” She shouted at the top of her lungs, at the same moment springing up from her seat.

Daria’s dismayed face settled into a mask of determination, and her hand jerked up. Blood would never get there in time.

But she didn’t have to. The line was drawn, two eyes triangulating, and she punched her leg against her seat, launching herself into space, just as the weapon flashed. A wind blew through her, a strange feeling, and she hung for what seemed a long time in the suddenly bright air before slapping into the seats.

Pain filled her in a great rush, then, and screaming. She could not sort out the vocal from the shrieking of minds, but it didn’t matter.

Agony continued to uncurl. She couldn’t even tell where she had been hit.

Blood! It cut through everything.

Got you, Monkey. Got you, damn it.

Jesus, Blood. Jesus.

Come against me, you lose.

You’re the one dying! Damn it, Blood, I didn’t want...

“Ambulance!” Someone was screaming. Mind images of herself fell on her like rain. She was broken, lying across the seats, a hole punched through her chest.

You wanted to make it look like MRA did it. The rookie here, in plainclothes, but she would be caught trying to escape, and then they would discover she was one of our agents. They’d think we killed Lai because he really had some evidence. But now they’ll dig deeper, find out she’s one of your little rebels.

Just hang on, Blood. They've sent for an ambulance.

(laughter) You lose. You know I loved you, right?

(pause, sick feeling) No. How could I? God, don't die, Blood. If only you'd said something.

Skip it. We made better enemies than friends. Come here, though, I want to tell you something.

Everything else was slipping away. Only Monkey remained, his face as she remembered it, young, full of laughing mischief. *Come here. Let me give you a kiss.*

He came, closer, and when he was close enough, she seized him. Something was pulling her down-she had a weird image of herself flowing into a straw, a thirsty god sucking on the other end.

Blood, no!

Come along, old friend. Let's see this together. Let's go see the Sorcerer.

Down, farther, her thoughts tearing away from her one by one. It was as if she were made of fireflies, and now they were all free, spinning out into the maelstrom. And Monkey, terrified at last, squirming in her embrace, howling.

The last of her began to fall away, and Monkey went with it. Then her grip loosened. He rocketed up, out of the vortex, seeking life. She watched him go, no longer caring. Her last remembrance as the lights vanished was of her daughter, Brenna, and her last satisfaction was in knowing that Monkey would never know he was her father.

The Night, the Wind...

The Night.

UP wire service, 3 September 2133

In a desperate move to discredit the MRA, rogue telepaths last week tried to assassinate Senator Philip Lai.

The attempt was made by Daria Beaudain, a rogue telepath who had infiltrated the ranks of the MRA. A full investigation has been launched into the matter, and there is some

suggestion of involvement on the part of certain members of the Senate.

Senator Lai expressed his remorse over the death of Desa Alexander, who ironically sacrificed her life for his, even as he was accusing her of murder. Said Senator Lai, “A truly moral man knows when to admit he has made a mistake. I may not be truly moral, but I do strive to be, and I here, now, humbly admit a terrible error. One that cost the life of a courageous woman, and for which I can never forgive myself.

“I allowed my self to be deceived by people I thought I could trust. I have scrutinized the alleged evidence they supplied me, and now judge it to be unquestionably false. I only hope the public can forgive me my haste to judge. The experience has left me wiser and much, much sadder.”

When asked for his comment, Senator Lee Crawford, the head of the Senate oversight committee for MRA, said, “The loss of Ms. Alexander was a terrible one. She was like the daughter I never had, and my grief is too private and strong to commit to public record. As for Senator Lai, I’m only happy that the MRA was able to perform its function; without her metasensory powers, Desa would never have been able to detect and react to the assassin in time. Senator Lai is as bright a young man as the Senate has seen in a long time, and his concern is evident. If he will agree, I’d like to have him on board the oversight committee—the MRA needs men like him.

“Those who killed Desa, I must admit, make me very angry, but I try to control my anger. Desa Alexander would have wanted me to. What she wanted for her fellow telepaths was a life that was free of fear and violence, a productive and fulfilled life like her own.

“It is truly sad when people fight with such animal violence the very things that are best for them. They deserve our pity and our compassion.”

Lee closed his eyes against the bright sun and savored the perfume of forest and water. The delta of the Kinabatangan River was perhaps his favorite in the world, its rickety stilt villages and dense mangroves somehow evoking the Mississippi of Mark Twain in a way that the modern Father of Waters could not. He journeyed halfway around the world to reconnect with the past of his own homeland. How odd, how myriad the ways men and women moved themselves through time.

“You did a good job, son,” he told Kevin. “You had it figured close to the bone, close enough for old Blood to do what she needed to do. I will miss her, damn her eyes.”

“Thanks, Lee. I wish I had figured it out quickly enough to save her.”

Lee shrugged. “Better this way, really. More dramatic. And Blood was a loose cannon, would’ve gotten us in more trouble down the road. This problem is just sleepin’ for a while, not going away. People have short memories, that much I’ve learned. In a few years, they’ll make another try, don’t you worry. Until we have the clout to make it global and uniform, the MRA is always going to have its enemies.”

“Maybe now, while Blood is still a hero—”

“No. She’s popular, but people are still a little too leery of the Authority. The Russian and Indonesian consortiums won’t let go of their own teeps until they’re forced to. This won’t change that, and we’d just raise issues best left under the loam for the time bein’.”

He paused, took a sip of his tea. “I got pretty drunk the other night. Might’ve said some crazy things.”

Kevin smiled, very slightly. “To tell you the truth, you were too drunk for me to make out anything you said. Your southern accent gets pretty thick when you drink.”

Lee scratched his chin. “That’s a fact? You know, they used us

as code speakers in the Kamchatka war, like they used the Navajo in WW Two.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

Lee nodded, then shaded his eyes and looked directly at him. “Anyway, thanks.”

“You’re most welcome.”

Lee watched the flight of a rare hornbill, at peace for the moment.

Chapter Five

Solar System Today, 18 January 2148
Interplanetary Expeditions spokesperson Ezinma Roberts today reported the successful completion of an eighth experimental station on Mars, near Syria Planum. The IPX station was built to explore the Martian permafrost and refine the process of creating arable soil. “This takes us another step closer to the permanent colonization of Mars,” Roberts proclaimed, “but we’re still a long way off. Making a home for humanity on another planet will require the sustained will of the entire world.”

“Kind of—as they say—a stuffed shirt, are you not?”

Kevin Vacit glanced sideways at the speaker, a young woman in her midtwenties seated to the left of him on the plane. In the right frame of mind, he might have summoned a mild admiration for her bronze hair, startling jade eyes, and generous lips. At the moment, he felt instead a mild irritation.

“Officer—Davion, is it?”

“Elle-meme. That is absolutely correct. Ninon Davion, at your service.”

“Yes. Well, Ms. Nina Davion—”

“Ninon. Use your nose, you know? Ninon.”

Suppressing a sigh, he tried another tack. “I’m attempting to read, Ms. Davion.”

“And I’m bothering you?”

“You are—distracting me.”

“What you are reading—it is important?”

“It is entertaining.”

“Ah. As I am not, I suppose.” She lifted the corner of his book and peered at the title. “The Demolished Man. Yes, it sounds very entertaining.” She shrugged, looking away. “It is true, I suppose. They told me this trip would be no fun at all. I said, no one can be no fun at all, but they said—”

“Who are ‘they,’ Ms. Davion?”

“Now you ask me a question? Yet how can someone so unentertaining as I provide an amusing answer? No, no—please. Go back to your book. I will sit here, silently.”

He blinked. “Thank you.”

He tried to read a few more lines, then closed the book. “Do they really say those things about me?”

She hesitated a moment. “You are speaking to me?”

“Ms. Davion, you know I am.”

She turned back to him. “Well, they say you are very efficient, very serious, very dedicated—”

“And is there something wrong with that?”

“No, no, of course not.” She rolled her eyes. “But look, have you ever been to San Diego before?”

“No, I can’t say that I have.”

“Neither have I. And what do you intend to do there?”

“I intend to solve the problem that you and I have been sent to solve.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“I’ve heard San Diego is a beautiful place. Food. Wine. Tijuana a very short trolley ride away...”

“You do understand, Ms. Davion, that we are on a mission involving EA security? At the highest level?”

“I’m afraid that the level of security is so high that I have no idea why we are going there,” she replied. “I certainly hope you do. I am just—as you say—the ‘muscle.’”

“For muscle, you certainly talk a lot.”

“Well! I was keeping silent until you—”

“Sorry. You’re right. Look, I promise to debrief you when we reach San Diego.”

She placed her hand on her chest. “Sir! I apologize for my opinion of you. You are very forward indeed!”

He actually felt his face warm. He was blushing. With a little frown he returned to his book, silently cursing Lee Crawford, who had surely done this to him on purpose.

Phillip Stoddard, the head of research for Interplanetary Expeditions, fingered his rusty beard and addressed them with a sort of benign amusement. “I don’t really understand what all of the fuss is about,” he said. “When the incident was reported, we imagined an officer of the Authority would drop by, but to have Senator Crawford’s own aide here—maybe you fellows know something I don’t.”

Kevin smiled briefly. “That’s always possible, I suppose. But the MRA always takes the death of one of its own seriously. That, coupled with the security breach in—” He stopped abruptly. “Doctor, is this a safe area?”

“Hmm? Yes, of course. The security breach was in lab 16, where the artifacts are housed. But that turned out to be nothing.”

Davion cleared her throat, and to Kevin’s vast surprise, her words came out very crisp, very professional.

“Nothing? Yet it coincided so closely with Mr. Raskov’s death.”

“Look, I know you guys are paid to be suspicious—but you aren’t serious, are you?”

“We would not be here otherwise,” Davion said.

“Well, look. The autopsy confirms Mr. Raskov died of a stroke, and as for the security breach, that must have been some sort of glitch.”

“I’m sure it was,” Kevin soothed. “But we have to check it out, you see. Orders. Anything involving the artifacts—”

“Of course. Would you like to see them?”

“Very much so,” Kevin replied.

Lab 16 was spacious, clean, white, probably as near the platonic ideal of “lab” as could be reached in reality.

Stoddard talked about security as they moved through it. “Getting into the IPX building without authorization would be a problem,” he informed them. “Reaching the thirtieth floor would be essentially impossible. Entering this lab—and these vaults—would

require the direct intervention of an omnipotent deity.”

As he spoke, the vault in question sighed open.

What was within reminded Kevin vaguely of a reptile house; a dark, cool corridor faced by brightly lit windows for the first thirty feet or so.

“When we aren’t studying them, the artifacts are kept in the vacuum vaults,” Stoddard said, gesturing toward the end of the corridor and a series of sealed lockers. “But you can see some on the tables, the ones we’re working on now.”

Kevin peered through the nearest window. On the table rested a rough torus mottled by raised bumps. In the next window there was an essentially cylindrical object exhibiting several knoblike protrusions.

“And these were found on Mars?” Davion asked.

“Yes, buried in Syria Planum.”

“What have you discovered about them?”

“Nothing new, I’m afraid. They are clearly manufactured, though the method of manufacture isn’t obvious. They don’t seem to be cast, or riveted, or welded together. They are made of highly organized alloys, some unknown. Some pieces, despite their appearance, are permeable to visible light, while others are almost opaque even to neutrinos.” He smiled broadly. “In other words, we still don’t know a damn thing about them except that they are of alien manufacture.”

Kevin nodded, still staring. He was struck by an odd and impossible sense of familiarity.

“And the breach—”

“As I said, it must have been a glitch. None of the artifacts are missing—EA security cataloged them independently and prior to us, so I can prove that—nor have they been disturbed in any way.”

“Yet the security system registers that there was a break-in.”

“A ghost, perhaps. Nothing the cameras recorded.”

“Well.” With a growing sense of disquiet, Kevin surveyed the rest of the artifacts on display. “I think I would like to see Mr. Raskov’s quarters, now.”

They broke the security seal and entered Raskov’s room. It was a jumbled mess, clearly the product of a disorganized mind. “The quarters have been sealed since his death?”

“Other than to remove the body, yes.”

Kevin paced about as Davion conducted her inspection, taking

photographs from various angles, opening drawers.

“Do you have any idea what you’re looking for?” Stoddard asked, mildly.

“Dr. Stoddard,” Davion replied, “I wonder if you don’t have more important things to do?”

He colored slightly and drew himself up. “Yes. As a matter of fact, I do. Buzz my link if you need me.” He left.

When he was gone, Davion smiled. “He is hiding something, you know.”

“Did you scan him?”

“Not a deep scan, no. But his surface thoughts showed some agitation and nervousness. Especially when he was talking about the artifacts. Most especially when he said that they had discovered nothing new.”

“That’s interesting.” He shuffled through some papers on the desk. Among them there was a sketch pad, which he flipped open. The first ten pages or so were landscapes, impressionistic, drawn with pencils and pastels. Halfway through the book, however, the theme abruptly changed. First came numerous sketches of insects—a dragonfly, several beetles, many others Kevin did not recognize. On the second page was a beetle done in pastels—a species he did recognize, though he didn’t know its name—one of those iridescent green bugs that looked almost as if it were made of colored chrome. It was very well rendered.

The rest of the notebook was filled with similar drawings. Pushing through the loose papers on the desk, he found a few more. And then another notebook full.

“Was Mr. Raskov an entomologist, professional or otherwise?” he asked.

Davion shrugged. “I still have my briefs on, when it comes to that. There was nothing in the record you gave me to indicate it.” She peered over his shoulder, her body just touching his. “It seems a recent interest. You see? He has dated his drawings.”

Kevin flipped back through. While the landscapes had been done over a three-month period, the bug sketches had all been done in three days—May 3 through May 5.

“He must have drawn almost nonstop, those three days.”

“The security breach in the lab was May 5. Raskov died on May 5.”

“So you think he became so obsessed with bugs that he had a

stroke?” Davion said.

“I don’t know. A stroke is one of the easiest things to fake.”

“You think he was murdered for an abrupt interest in bugs?” Kevin tapped his finger in the pad. “Let’s finish up here. I want to interview Mr. Raskov’s supervisor.”

“He was one of our most professional business telepaths,” Freda Noy said. Her nearly round face pinched into a broad suggestion of sorrow. “It was such a terrible thing. Did you know him?”

“I did not,” Kevin replied.

“Nor I,” Davion added. “But can you tell us what friends he might have had here?”

“Not many, the poor man. He kept largely to himself. Telepath, you know.” Her olive skin darkened a shade. “Oh, dear, I didn’t mean—well, of course you know.”

“Actually,” Davion said, “Mr. Vacit is, of course, not a telepath. I am, but I take no offense. Many who work outside tend to be introverted. It becomes tiring, trying to avoid learning other people’s secrets.”

Kevin felt a certain inward appreciation. Davion played her bad cop part very well; she kept their interviewees off-balance with consummate skill.

People were worried by teeps, anyway, and by making certain her role was clear, she cast Kevin, by contrast, as the one the normals could identify with, perhaps even confide in.

Now if only he could play his part better...

“Ms. Noy,” he said, softly. “I have here a record of the transactions Mr. Raskov monitored from the early part of May, and I thank you very much for providing it. There is only one I don’t really understand—Kuchinsky-Behn?”

“Oh. It’s a small biotech firm out of Canada.”

“Part of the larger Tangent conglomerate?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“The principals of the meeting—Kuchinsky of Kuchinsky-Behn, and Roland Hammerstein from this firm? Is Mr. Hammerstein available?”

“Oh-no, I’m sorry. Mr. Hammerstein has been reassigned to the Sandakan office.”

“Perhaps later, then. But you have a transcript of the meeting.”

“Oh, of course. Would you like a copy?”

“Please.”

Turning to her computer, she called up the file, printed it out, and handed it to him.

“Thank you, Ms. Noy. That will be all for now. I’ll probably want to speak to you again.”

“And of course, I’ll be happy to be of what help I can.”

“We’ll show ourselves out.”

Back in the hall, with no one around, Davion put her smile back on. “I have decided you will take me to get something to eat, Mr. Vacit,” she informed him.

“Ms. Davion, we have much to do. If you need something, I’m sure they have a dining room here, or you can order room service —”

“Look at the time, Mr. Vacit. Six o’clock. Work time is over, I believe, and you will find no one else here to interrogate. Now, please, you don’t want me to confirm those rumors about you, do you? I had hoped to be able to laugh in their faces—tell everyone that it only took a French key to unlock the wit lurking inside of you.”

“Ms. Davion, I’m working on what is proving to be a difficult matter. I am not, by training, a detective, and yet I am being asked to do the job of one. I—”

“You are frustrated. Your mind is as tightly wound as your ass. Unwind the one, and the other will uncoil as well. So said my grandfather, a very wise Andorran man. Really, I must insist—for the good of the investigation.”

He nodded in sudden understanding. “For the good of the investigation.”

Outside, strolling down a sunlit walkway, he glanced at her. “Okay. What didn’t you want to say in the building?”

“You can be a bit thick at times, can’t you, Mr. Vacit?”

“I suppose. I’m sorry it took me so long to catch on. So what was it?”

“I don’t feel in the mood for conversation just yet. As I remember it, you’ve agreed to take me to dinner.”

“I thought we’d just established that that was only to get us out of the building.”

“Oh, no, I meant everything I said. And I think Italian will do quite nicely.”

“Ms. Davion, I have no idea why you’ve become so fixated on this quest to ‘unstuff’ my shirt, but I assure you—it isn’t at all appropriate.”

Davion showed her dimples. “Not bad, for Italian wine. It has a certain primitive vitality.”

“We could have found a French restaurant, I suppose,” Kevin replied, steadily.

She made a face. “I do not eat ‘French’ food when I am abroad. It is too brutally disappointing. With Italian, the potential for disappointment is so much smaller.”

“Ah.”

“You do not like food, do you?”

“I eat it. It keeps me alive.”

“As I said. You do not like it.”

In response he took another bite of his cannelloni. “Oh, my God,” he said. “Delicious. It makes me want to sing.” He put his fork back on the plate. “Now, will you please tell me what you discovered back there?”

She rolled her eyes—yet again—and set her glass down. “You are so determined not to enjoy yourself. Here you have the company of a very beautiful woman—”

“Yes, I do.”

She stopped, clearly surprised. “Really? You find me beautiful?”

“Of course. But you work for me, and—”

“Ah. And I am like the food, n’est-ce pas? Very well. Two things. First—do not bother to read the transcript of the transaction Raskov monitored—it is a fake.”

“Really.”

“Really. The second thing is this what’s-his-name-Hammerstein—wasn’t really assigned to the Sandakan office. She doesn’t know what happened to him, and she’s more than a little worried about herself.”

“About her job?”

“Her life, I think.”

He picked at his food, avoiding Davion’s challenging eyes. “So we have a teep who monitors a business deal. It was a secret transaction, probably illegal, and they killed him.”

“I think so. But we cannot prove any of it. We cannot prove the transaction is a fake. We likely will be unable to find either of the principals to subpoena, but if we do they will simply quote the forged transcript.

A simple scan will show they are lying, but of course such information is not admissible in court.”

“Spectral evidence,” he murmured.

“Say again, please?”

“Nothing. But what has this to do with the security breach in lab 16?”

“Perhaps nothing. A coincidence.”

“I have very little faith in coincidence.”

“Or anything else, it seems,” she mused. Her green eyes flickered devilishly. “I believe after dinner I should like to have a walk on the shore.”

“Fine. I hope you enjoy yourself. I’ll be in my room, trying to work this out.”

“Take your shoes off,” Davion said. “Get your feet wet in the surf.” She was doing just that, playing tag with the edges of the breakers, shoes in hand, slacks rolled to her knees.

“I’m allergic to seawater.”

“Yes, I’m sure you are.” She came back to him, and to his alarm and discomfort, took his arm. “You have an interesting mind, Mr. Vacit. Did you know that?”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Oh, really? What was her name? Should I be jealous?”

When he didn’t answer, she squeezed his arm. “Ah. A secret. Another secret. You are a man of secrets, Kevin Vacit. You are made of them. I do not even think a telepath could pry them out of you.”

“Have you tried?”

She laughed. “Yes, of course, I’m trying right now. But I haven’t scanned you. That’s what I mean—I don’t think I could. Certain

normals have the equivalent of blocks—nothing telepathic, just a kind of order, of discipline. Your mind hums like a clock, Mr. Vacit. I would not dare try to scan it for fear of being pinched by a gear.”

“Aside from the fact that such would be illegal,” he reminded her.

“Besides that, yes. I like my job, and would not care to lose it.”

“You do, don’t you? And you do it well. I hardly recognize you when you are working.”

She laughed and kicked at the spray. “I’ll take that as a compliment. Two compliments from Mr. Kevin Vacit in a single day. Quite an accomplishment, you know.” She let go his arm and ran back out into the surf. “I love the sea. It is very alive. I love the feel of it. All the little voices.”

“Voices?”

“Well, not voices, actually, just a sort of—something. I suppose only a telepath would notice it. There’s nothing to read there, of course, nothing intelligent—though I should like to scan a dolphin someday. No, it’s just a kind of—loud quietness.”

“But telepathic? You get impressions from non-Human life?” He knelt and ran his fingers in the water.

“I do not think it is my imagination. I suppose everything living must have a mind, in a way. I can sense animals, of course. Not understand them, really, unless it’s something simple like hunger or fear. The ocean I don’t understand at all, though I touch it and listen very hard, but something is there. It is.” She considered him. “Poor normals. It must be like missing a sense of smell, or something.”

“Yes,” Kevin said absently. “Yes, it must. Thank you, Ms. Davion.”

“What for?”

“The evening. And perhaps the solution to our puzzle.”

“I don’t understand,” Dr. Stoddard said. “You’ve already seen them.”

“I have. I wish to see them again. It’s about the security breach.”

“I’ve explained about that.”

“Oh, yes, I know. Would you care to explain why the records of

the hour during the breach were erased?”

“What? They weren’t erased.”

“Oh, yes, they were. Very professionally done, but when I had my own people go over them again, with finer analysis, we found evidence of it.”

“But nothing’s missing. Nothing was disturbed.”

“No. No, I think that’s correct. Tell me, Dr. Stoddard, what does one need to enter these vaults?”

“The right key codes. The right retinal prints.”

“If someone entered the right key codes—but without the retinal prints—what would happen?”

“An alarm would go out.”

“And that would register as a security breach.”

“I—yes.”

Kevin nodded distractedly. “Let me tell you what happened, Dr. Stoddard. On May 1 or thereabouts, you asked Mr. Raskov to do you a favor, one somewhat outside his function as a business telepath. You had developed a suspicion about the Syria Planum artifacts, and on a lark you decided to test your hypothesis. You brought him in here, and he touched one of the artifacts.”

“Why? Absurd.”

Kevin ignored him. “Two days later, Mr. Raskov was contacted again, this time to monitor a business deal. He was chosen because the deal concerned the artifacts, and what he himself had discovered about them. Rather than expose another telepath to that discovery, you chose to use the one you had already tainted. This meeting was a secret negotiation—perhaps to sell technologies, perhaps to position certain stocks for what you think may be coming soon—and by ‘you,’ I mean both yourself and IPX, Dr. Stoddard.”

Stoddard was turning pale. He wasn’t good at this.

“In any event, it wasn’t easy, but knowing what to look for, I was able to trace a flow of funds, so I can prove this part of my story, too.

“When Mr. Raskov conducted his monitoring task, perhaps someone grew concerned. He may have looked—drawn, fatigued, as if he hadn’t slept in several nights. He may have said strange things, acted a bit unstable. Maybe he even demanded to touch the artifact again. Our records show he had a strong artistic—and somewhat romantic—streak. You probably refused. He lifted your key code

from your mind and tried to break into the lab the night of May 5. He didn't succeed, of course, but that was alarming enough that someone here—perhaps you, perhaps a superior—thought it best that he quietly expire. And so he did.”

Stoddard was still pale, but managed an insincere smile. “I don't believe you can prove any of that.”

“I don't care if I can. Open this door. I want to see one of the artifacts.”

“You don't have clearance—”

“Of course I do. I have presidential clearance. I've shown it you once. Do you want to see it again?”

“No.”

“Then open the vault.”

With obvious reluctance, he did so, and gestured for them to enter.

“No, you first, please.”

Stoddard stepped in, and they followed behind him.

At his nod, Davion removed her gloves. She went to the strange torus, hesitated for an instant, then touched it lightly with her fingertips.

She jumped back as if stung. “Oh, my God, yes!” Her green eyes were the size of coins. She stepped forward again, tentatively, and touched it again. Her face worked through a variety of strange expressions before she removed her hands.

“It is—it's very faint, you understand. My reaction was from the strangeness, not the intensity. But yes. This thing—I can feel it, as if it might be alive.”

Stoddard looked as if he were very close to tears.

“Some men are coming up, with guns,” Davion said, suddenly. “He signaled them with some kind of silent alarm on his link.”

“How far do they have to come?”

She stared at Stoddard until a sweat broke out on her forehead. “A few floors.”

“Five minutes or so?” He shrugged. “Dr. Stoddard, by that time our own team will have the building secured. You didn't think I would accuse you, here, without adequate preparation? You've played a violent card for no good reason.”

Now Stoddard started to cry in earnest. Tears ran down his face.

“There, there,” Kevin said, without any actual sympathy in his

voice. “It isn’t as bad as you think. Stand your troops down so we can avoid any unpleasant little firefights, and I’m going to explain to you how you’re not only going to avoid prosecution, but retain your position, as well. Do you understand? Is this getting through? The only difference is that you will no longer be dealing with Kuchinsky-Behn, or anyone outside IPX. Anyone, that is, save us.”

Stoddard’s eyes were beginning to clear. “But Raskov—”

“Died of natural causes. Though I will insist that the Authority receive very high compensation for what was obviously a work-related accident. Am I clear on this?”

“Yes.”

“Stand them down.”

Stoddard went to a wall phone, punched in a number. “Code 4. Cancel,” he said.

“There,” Kevin said. “You see what happens when you jump to conclusions?” He looked back at the artifact.

“Organic technology. It’s been tinkered at for centuries, with no results. Do you really think you can reproduce it?”

“I—I honestly don’t know.”

“But it seemed worth the risk.”

“Yes.”

“Next time—when you want to take a risk—come to us. I think you will find it much less dangerous—and much more profitable—than any alternative. Do you understand this?”

“Yes, Mr. Vacit.”

“Ms. Davion, will you walk Dr. Stoddard outside?”

“My pleasure, Mr. Vacit.”

When they were gone, he regarded the artifact for a long moment. “Who made you?” he murmured quietly.

He reached his fingers out and touched the surface. For a moment he felt the most profound wonderment he had ever known, a surge, accompanied by that nagging feeling of familiarity. And insects, beautiful, creatures of starlight and mist, seemed to dart behind his eyes.

He withdrew his fingers and went to join the others.

He had just removed his shoes when the knock came at his door. It was Davion, of course.

“Ms. Davion—”

“Now, now, Mr. Vacit. I have come to congratulate you.”

“No need. It was you who gave me the solution.”

“Ah, oui, but you put it all together so prettily. The biotech firm. The drawings. Wonderfully done—and I had begun to suspect you had no imagination. And your bluff—about our forces already being in the building—magnificent.”

Somehow, as she was talking, she had slipped in the door, was standing very close. He could feel her breath on his face.

“Ms. Davion,” he said, gently, “I really—”

But she stood on tiptoe and kissed him, very lightly, and it felt like lightning jolting through him.

“Really what?”

“I really don’t think you know what you’re getting into, with me.”

Her smile went away, and her gaze crystallized on his.

“I’m very good with secrets, Mr. Vacit,” she whispered. “Very, very good with secrets.”

“You’d better be,” he murmured, drawing her near, and gently pushing shut the door.

Chapter Six

Beyond the straining oaks, a blue-white crack split the mottled, eggshell sky. It mended itself faster than the eye could blink. Over the wet spattering of marble-sized raindrops, a stuttering tearing sound shuddered the air.

Lee Crawford breathed deeply of the wind from the condensing storm, watching a canopy that was like some great cathedral made of a hundred variegated marbles, grey, black, milk, dark green, not still, but constantly grinding, sluggishly.

“Nothin’ like a thunderstorm, by damn,” he murmured. The wind whipped a spray of rain in under the eaves, and he gasped in pleasure as it flecked his face. The earth trembled as the sky hammered it somewhere not far away.

When the downpour truly came, it was less interesting—just a steady roar, with no sky to see—so he went back inside. This part of the storm was best enjoyed through the tattoo it beat on the roof.

He poured a tumbler of bourbon, savored its sharp, heady smoke, and stepped into the drawing room. It felt like he had pins in his knees and back. His body ached all the time—never with great pain, just all the time.

Kevin was there in the study, shuffling stacks of books and two monitors.

“How’s it looking?” Lee asked.

Kevin glanced up. “It’s been better, Lee.” Kevin’s hair had as much iron as ebony these days, but for an instant he looked to Lee as when he had first seen him, boyishly serious.

“Well. We’ve seen this before, haven’t we?”

“Yes, we have. But there’s no stopping the hearings this time. And this time they have the goods, I’m afraid. The Chiapas incident made too big a splash. Japan, the Indonesian Consortium, Amazonia, and New Zealand are all threatening to pull out of the EA if President Robinson pushes further for a universal MRA.”

“It’s just an excuse,” Lee muttered. “The EA is hanging together by a thread anyway. Teeps are just one issue.”

“That’s true, but—do you remember the American Civil War?”

Lee rolled his eyes and waved his hands around at his mid-twenty-first-century antebellum revival house.

“What do you think?” he snapped sarcastically.

Kevin chuckled. “I forgot where I was. Then you may remember that the war was brought about by a whole complex group of economic and social issues—but it was the moral issue of slavery that proved to be its focus. It’s the same here—give the people something they can hang on to. You’re right—the Earth Alliance is trying to tear itself apart for a thousand reasons, but the Chiapas incident has given it a popular voice. You have to admit, a hundred rogues dying, singing in a church, while our officers stood outside—”

“It’s not like we set the damn fire.” Lee sighed. “Damn psychopathic martyrs.”

“But the perception that they would rather die than be regulated by the Authority, that’s the point. People generally like martyrs.”

“Don’t they,” Lee said, taking another sip. “Even if it means letting the world go to hell in a handbasket.”

Thunder growled in the distance—the heaviest of the rain had already passed. The evening would be nice-damp, whippoorwills. He could fall asleep on the porch, rest...

He sighed and stood. “Vacation’s over, Kevin. Call the airstrip and tell them we want to leave within the hour.”

Kevin nodded. “It’s already done,” he said. “And Shell is waiting upstairs to help you pack.”

“Good.” He paused. “Kevin?”

“Yes, Lee?”

“Why are you still with me?”

Kevin frowned. “What kind of question is that?”

“A sensible one. Everyone else is gone. Alice. Tom. Those that didn’t leave me are dead. You could’ve—hell, after that thing back in ’43 you could have run for office yourself—yet thirteen years later, you’re still workin’ for me.”

“And you could have run for president ten times and won. Why didn’t you?”

Lee smiled. “And take a demotion?”

Kevin returned the grin. “And now you have my answer. Besides that—” He looked down at the table, then back at Lee.

“Besides that, I’m proud to work with you, Lee.”

Lee felt his eyes growing moist. Damn, but he was a sentimental old fool. Was this what the first signs of senility were like? “I’m proud to have you with me, son. I can’t even say how proud.”

Shell Alexander flashed him a smile as he entered the room. She was placing his suits in a hanging bag. As with Kevin, he was stunned by a moment of *déjà vu*. It could have been Blood standing there.

But Shell was not Blood, and on second glance didn’t even look much like her. Her thick tresses were brown rather than midnight, her skin pale. Her eyebrows flirted with being red, and her chin was longer and narrower than her grandmother’s, tapered. No, Shell resembled Blood in much less tangible ways. The set of her stance, the flicker in her eyes, the way her hands moved. Like many in the “kith” of the Authority, she had kept her grandmother’s name, as well. Mitochondrial descent, they called it.

“Hi, Uncle Lee.”

“Afternoon, Shell. I’m sorry to have to ruin your day like this. I know it’s goin’ to be a terrible thing to have to see your fiancé back in Geneva.”

She shrugged. “He’s okay. They certainly could have picked someone worse for me to marry.”

“I thought you fancied him. Michelle, just say the words, and I’ll—”

“Hush, Uncle Lee. No. I don’t want special treatment. My grandmother wouldn’t have wanted that, nor my mother. I’m her daughter, and I’ll set a good example.”

Lee patted her shoulder. “You’re a fine woman, Shell. A credit to your mother and her mother. You should be proud to bear their name.”

“I am,” Shell replied. “Now. Do you want all of these suits, or just—”

She was cut off by an inarticulate yell from below. For an instant, Lee felt his blood freeze. There hadn’t been an attempt on his life in years, but—”

“No, it’s okay,” Shell said. “It’s just Kevin. He’s excited about

something. I can't..." She trailed off as Kevin burst into view. He was grinning like a cat, something Kevin rarely did.

"Senator, you better get downstairs. You aren't going to believe it. You really aren't."

He put the image up for the tenth time.

"I knew they were there," Lee whispered. "By God, I knew they were there."

"That ship must be a kilometer long. At least."

"Where are they from?"

"We don't know. The guess going around is Proxima Centauri."

Lee nodded. His eyes felt damp. "Damned if I didn't do it. I lived to see it. The most important day in the history of humanity." He looked around at Kevin, Shell, the rest of his staff. "Remember this moment. Tell your children about it. Nothin' will ever be the same again."

"The Men Within, the Alien Without: Rethinking the MRA." In *Comprehensive Modern History: An Anthology*. Teller, Brahe, and Asanji, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2210.

It is widely believed that the arrival of the Centauri saved the Earth Alliance from collapse, for on April 6, 2156, differences between the key nation-states seemed irreconcilable. By the evening of April 7, however, mankind had begun to unite in a way unknown in Human history. The differences between Arab and Israeli, Malay and Chinese, Japanese and Gaijin were suddenly understood as superficial and trivial in the face of the true unknown, the Centauri. Some may claim this overstates the case—after all, there are still social, religious, and status conflicts on Earth that sometimes turn violent. The true student of history, however, can see the difference. In 2156, a clear line was drawn that has never been crossed since—with one salient exception.

Out of all humanity, one group was suddenly elevated to a new status of persecution. When it was discovered that the Centauri—and the other alien races they spoke of—also had telepaths, many on Earth suddenly suspected Human telepaths of being part of some sinister alien design, perhaps of being aliens themselves.

Suspected of acting as spies, saboteurs, and agents of cultural subversion, telepaths were once again subjected to levels of violence not seen since the horrific year of 2115. Then a countering sentiment arose

—that if aliens had telepaths, Earth most certainly needed them, too. This logic prevailed in the end, but only after much bitter loss of life.

President Elizabeth Robinson was not a physically big woman, but an immense sense of presence radiated from her steel-grey eyes. Her squarish, ebony face had character to spare, more so in person than what was portrayed on the nets.

“Senator Crawford, it’s wonderful to see you again.”

“The pleasure is most certainly all mine, Madam President,” Lee said.

“Please, have a seat. Coffee?”

“Please.”

She signed, and a man brought them each a cup. “Well, first, let’s congratulate ourselves, shall we? I know you’ve worked for the formation of a universal registration and an independently chartered MRA since before I was born. Today, you got your wish.”

“I couldn’t have done it without your help.”

She shrugged. “Thank William Karges for saving my life. Thank the Centauri for showing up. Thank the fates. After that, I’ll accept your thanks.” She took a sip of her coffee and set it down. She leaned back and peered at him over steepled fingers. “However, unlike those others, I have a favor to ask.”

“I’m inclined toward favors, Madam President. What do you need?”

“I’d like you to resign from the Senate.”

He blinked, but could find no answer. He was still searching for one when she went on.

“The charter for Psi Corps calls for its administrator to be appointed for life, by the president. I need you there. You have the know—how, the staff—you’ve been with the MRA since the beginning.”

He grinned. “This won’t make you popular with some of the folks in the Senate.”

“This is my last term. The hell with them. You’re the man for the job.”

Lee pretended to muse for a moment. “I wasn’t lookin’ forward to another campaign anyway. Madam President, if you want me, you’ve got me.”

“Perfect.”

“Madam President, I was wondering...”

“Senator?”

“I realize that access to the Centauri is still very limited. Even the Senate has not yet been allowed to meet one of them. But—I’m an old man. I’ve waited my whole life to meet a real, live alien. I wonder if I might have my wish indulged.”

She took up her coffee again. “I think it a matter of the highest security that the head of EA Psi Corps meet with the Centauri ambassador to discuss the telepaths of both races. After all, our visitors claim we are their long-lost colony, don’t they?”

“You sound skeptical.”

“That would be putting it mildly. But—the first permanent ambassador will be here in a month. I think I can arrange a meeting within the first week.”

“Madam President, I will be eternally grateful.”

“I’m sorry you can’t come, Kevin.”

Kevin shrugged. “It’s okay. I’m just concerned about security.”

“So are they, apparently. Your car can follow me to the compound, anyway. I doubt I’ll be long inside.”

“I’ll be waiting outside when you’re done. You can tell me all about it over a drink.”

“As if you would have one.” Lee started to get into the car, then turned back to face his aide. “I was damn sorry to hear about Ninon Davion, Kevin. I know you two were friends.”

Kevin nodded almost imperceptibly. “She died doing her duty. She would have wanted that.”

“I feel sorry for the little girl.”

Kevin cleared his throat. “Better get going, Senator.”

“Right. See you soon.” He ducked into the car. A moment later, it began to move silently forward.

He watched the streets of Geneva as they glided by. Buildings a thousand years old side by side with offices that looked as though they had been built yesterday. He thought about the books he had read as a child—the classic twentieth—and twenty-first-century novels. How many times had first contact been written about?

How many times had the future been imagined?

Sometimes you recognized that you were living in the future, and sometimes you did not. He had been the boy with the flashlight, standing beneath the stars, shining Morse code up, hoping it would be seen. He had traveled through time, eighty creaking years, to finally see what that boy dreamed of.

In the end, time travel had hurt more than he ever imagined it would, but it was worth it. Worth the old bones, the shortness of breath. It was worth it because he had kept his eye on the prize. It was worth it because, by damn, his journey would be remembered.

The car did something strange; a sort of hiccup, and then another. He watched with incomprehension as the window he was staring out was suddenly mottled by snowflake designs, accompanied by a vague vibration but no sound.

Then there was light, terrible, terrible light, and sound at last for an instant before his eardrums were gone.

And then blackness.

He awoke, probably a few seconds later, to pain like he had never imagined. One of his eyes didn't seem to be working, but the other puzzled at what it saw for a few moments before recognizing blood, the sharp end of a bone sticking out of his thigh.

His breath was sucking in his chest, which felt as if syrup were filling it up.

Bastard, he thought. *You bastard*.

He meant, as always, the universe.

He lay there, as his breaths came shorter and shorter. Couldn't they have waited another hour? Just another hour?

He wondered where everyone was. Kendra, Alice, Tom, Blood, Shell—Kevin. He would like to see Kevin again.

He would like to have seen a Centauri, damn it.

And then Kevin was there, bending over him. He tried to reach the boy's face, wipe the tear from his eye, but his own blurred...

He blinked, and a Centauri was there. He must have heard the explosion, come out of his compound to see what all of the fuss was about. He looked exactly like they had on the nets, hair swept back, face Human—and yet not. Sharp teeth.

"Got you, you bastard," he told the universe.

And he died.

That was damn nice of you, Kid.

The voice came from the darkness; Kevin couldn't pinpoint quite where. If he concentrated he probably could locate the source, but it wasn't worth the effort. He wiped his eyes.

He deserved it, he sent back. Despite it all, he deserved that, at least, to see a Centauri.

I don't think I've ever seen you cry, Kid.

I haven't cried—I haven't cried since my mother died, holding me.

And now you get sentimental about some normal—not just any normal, but the bastard who was responsible for Psi Corps.

Monkey, you don't care about anything as long as you can blow things up.

I didn't see you objecting. You could have stopped me anytime. I'm strong, but there's never been anybody like you, Kid. Even Blood never recognized you. I'm the only one who has ever known, and that's only 'cause I raised you.

No, there was one other, Kevin sent. Which reminds me...

(slight resignation) You gonna do me now, Kid? You probably could, but I wish you wouldn't.

No. This has all worked out pretty well. You have the underground, and now I have Psi Corps. No, I need a favor. He sent Monkey the images. A woman, an infant.

Holy shit. When did you ever have time to get a baby on someone?

Kevin smiled at the bittersweet memory of precious hours and days stolen here and there over the last ten years. Ninon had been required to marry a teep, of course, and Kevin had never been able to tell anyone but her his own true nature. He had worked too hard and too long to cover it.

She had understood. Ninon had been the greatest risk of his life, but she had been worth it. And the miracle that she had had his child, so shortly before he lost her...

There was time, was all Monkey got.

You don't want your kid in Psi Corps.

No. Some unpleasant things are going to happen in Psi Corps in the next few years, and I won't be able to protect her if she is there. But you can protect her.

I'm gettin' pretty old, Kid.

Not too old. Her name is Fiona. She's only two months old. Take good care of her.

I'll fight Psi Corps, Kid.

(shrug) I don't care. Just don't get my daughter killed.

What kind of game are you playing? I don't understand this at all.

Don't worry about it. Just do what you do. Help the rogues all you want. I may even be able to help you from time to time. But if you get caught—if you get caught, I may not be able to help you.

You were always a strange one, Kid. Good luck.

Good luck to you, too, Monkey. And Monkey?

Ook?

Don't tell her about me. She can't know.

And Monkey was gone. Kevin stayed with Lee until the police and the ambulances got there, and after. He touched the tears on his face and wondered at them.

“Goodbye, Lee,” he whispered. “You showed him. You showed the bastard.”

Then he straightened, and went out to do his job.

Part III

Resistance

Chapter One

The scream was her compass. Fiona kept it in her mind, as she had been taught, turning it around to see where it was clearest. That still gave her two corridors to choose from, so she took the left one.

It was an old school: floor, wall, and ceiling tiled with ugly but nearly indestructible Vibralite—what Grandpa Monkey referred to as “tech-nouveau riche” architecture. It was the logic of a whole era—you come up with a cool new synthetic and you build everything out of it, no matter what the cost to the senses.

Half the buildings in Malaysia were Vibralite. Architecture may have taken a more aesthetic turn, but Malaysians were pragmatic—if it was still in good shape, use it. It could have been the national motto.

Vibralite would still be in good shape when the Sun went nova.

The best thing about the stuff was that it was like paper to psi powers. She whisked past roomfuls of normals and suppressed their uncontrolled babbling as background noise; the scream was still clear, the pain, the confusion. She had to hurry.

If she had known more about schools, she would have found him more quickly, but she had never been in one before—her education had always been dealt with on the go, through netlinks, home schooling, tutors.

But eventually, following the mental cry, she found the school nurse’s office—or so the label on the door proclaimed. An agitated man in the uniform of a guard and a frowning woman in a brightly colored Muslim head scarf turned to scrutinize her as she arrived.

“Is that where he is?” she asked. “Is my brother in there? Please, I have to see him.”

The look she got was rather peculiar, and a surface mindflash showed her why: the boy huddled inside, in tears, had features darkly Dravidian—an ethnic Indian. Her own skin was light, her hair auburn.

“He’s adopted!” she said, desperately. “What’s wrong with him?”

“We’ve called the doctor, young lady,” the woman said. “I really think it best you wait until they arrive.”

But Fiona knew that was a lie even without a surface scan. Grandpa Monkey’s com mole had picked up their call to Psi Corps. Which was why she was here.

“You have to let me see him,” she repeated.

“Young lady, do you have any identification?” the guard asked pointedly.

“Not with me.”

The administrative type frowned. “Stay here with Mr. Bao,” she said. “I’ll be right back.” (*suspicion*) Right, Fiona thought. *You’re going to call for more muscle. You know this kid doesn’t have a sister.*

She had only a few seconds then, so she did something she really hadn’t wanted to do. She walked toward the door, as if agitated, and then pretended to trip. The guard reached out to catch her—and she fugged him.

His eyes went wide and blank, as whatever his last thought had been began suddenly repeating itself, freezing his mind in the moment. It wouldn’t last long. It also left her worn-out, and her blocks slipped, so when she opened the door the boy’s mental keening was almost too much for her.

He was there, curled up on the floor, maybe twelve years old, just like the image she had read from the guard’s mind.

Come on. Come with me if you want to be free! she sent, as strongly as she could.

“Make it stop!” he shrieked hysterically. “Make them all stop! It’s cutting me up!”

I’ll make it stop, I promise, but first you have to come with me.

“Please—”

Come on!

He responded to the order, coming jerkily and uncertainly to his feet. She grabbed his hand and practically dragged him through the doorway.

By the time the guard started shouting, the boy finally got the idea. She put the thought in his mind that running would get him away from the voices in his head, and once he thought that, she had a hard time keeping up with him.

The front doors of the school had locked automatically by the time they reached them—except that she had propped one open, so the bolt poked impotently out into thin air.

After that, fifty steps got them to the scooter, and she had the boy on it, and they were racing away from the school. There was no pursuit.

The boy started calming down. He was strong, but not so strong that the voices of other children could follow him this far up the little road. They rode into hills and palm plantations, where stray thoughts were few.

But she needed to prepare him, for soon they would be among the sprawling factories and rise housing of Kuantan, where his newly opened and unprepared mind would be assaulted once again.

Look, she told him. You're okay. There's nothing wrong with you. You're just special, that's all.

I'm a demon. Auntie Po said—

You aren't a demon. You're just like me, a telepath. I'll take care of you. Now the first thing. You have click-builders?

That's for little kids.

But you had them?

Yeah.

Good. Pretend you have a whole pile of them. Pretend you're building a wall around yourself, one clickbrick at a time. See? Here, I can help you...

By the time they got to Kuantan, he had a thin but adequate block up.

She pulled into Lot 66 feeling triumphant. The restaurant was empty—they served only the evening meal, which gave them the daytime to transact their real business. Nearby, the South China Sea rolled crests of sunlight toward the shore. The scent of chili, ginger, and lemongrass mingled with salt wind. Grandpa Monkey stood in the kitchen, grinding the spices in a stone mortar.

What the holy hell did you do? Sounding just as pissed off as she thought he would. His ancient face looked like an apple shriveled around God's own frown.

You weren't here. We got the call. If I had waited for you, Psi Corps might have gotten him. (defiance) Besides, I'm a big girl now. Hell, I'm nineteen! How long are you going to try to keep me from doing my part?

You do your part, smartmouth, and don't argue with me. Of all the stupid—

Oh, yeah, I get to do tactical. Build bombs, but never set them off. Look at maps, but never make the steal-and-run. You train me and train me for everything, but all I do is sit behind a com-link. I'm—

The training is for emergencies, not so you can run off and get yourself killed-or worse, caught.

“Well,” she said aloud, “I didn’t get caught, did I? I’m not stupid. I know the nearest Psi Corps precinct is in KL! That’s half an hour even by—”

But she stopped abruptly, as both she and Monkey turned to stare at the boy. Her words had triggered a mindflash in him. All of their eyes went round as an image shouted itself, of a man in a black uniform, with a bronze and copper badge, bending over the child.

“Shit,” Monkey said. “Psi Corps has already been at him. That means—” He stopped, staring upward.

“Choppers! Go, Fiona. Take the kid and go. Get to the old temple.” *Your father is going to—*Then the thought snapped off, as it always did, when it came to her father.

“Oh my God,” she said. “I led them right here. I led them—”

He grabbed her in a rough hug. “Go. Now. You might make it. I have to crash the system, you get it? Go!”

And he shoved her out the door and toward her parked scooter.

I can’t leave you!

Damn straight you can. What did I teach you? Jeez, Fee, I’m over ninety! How much longer did you think I was going to make it, anyway? I can’t run anymore, and I can’t fight. But you can. Next to me, no one knows as much about things as you. So they can’t have you. Too many people count on you. Go!

But you...

Not to worry. Love you, Kid. Now get the hell out of here.

She had been moving all along, almost propelled by his insistence. She mounted the scooter, got the boy up behind her, hit the switch, and whirred away.

Monkey sighed and looked about the restaurant. It was very old—once it had been open-air, but the heavy pollution and fires of the early twenty-first century had led the owners to close it in. He poured a glass of shaoxing, dropped in one of the little dried shrimp one drank with it, and raised the glass. “To you, Blood, whichever hell you’re in. Teal, Smoke, Mercy—” He paused and shrugged. “—Kid.” He took a drink of the wine, and waited.

He didn’t have to wait long. The door burst inward, and four men in black, close-fitting armor jackets stepped in, eyes glittering with jubilant cruelty. Psi Corps Hounds, not exactly chosen for their

table manners. Behind them followed two Psi Cops, pistols trained on his heart.

“Hello, folks,” he said, raising his glass. “What can an old man do for you?”

The Hounds surged forward, but the lead Cop—a tough-looking black woman—restrained them.

“Jack O’Hannlon. I have many warrants for your arrest. And the confiscation of your property.”

Monkey laughed. “Jack O’Hannlon. Now there’s a name I haven’t heard in a very, very long time. I don’t much think I care for it.”

“Please stand up. Slowly.”

“Sure thing, sweetie. But to be fair, I have to tell you that what you have here is your typical ‘beep-beep-zip-bang’ kind of situation.”

The Psi Cop nodded to her men, who started forward cautiously. “I don’t follow you.”

“Not a fan of twentieth-century vids, eh?”

“Can’t say that I am.”

“Well, here, I’ll explain it. ‘Beep-beep,’ that’s the call of a certain flightless bird. ‘Zip’ is the sound of something moving very fast. And ‘bang,’ well, bang—” He grinned and raised the glass.

Even two hundred yards away, the shock of the explosion twisted the scooter off the road. Fiona managed to take it on her leg, shielding the boy with her body, but they ended fetched up against the embankment. She turned her eyes in horror to the mushroom of black smoke rising into the blue Malaysian sky.

“Grandpa...” Her mouth worked soundlessly for a moment, and she began trying to crawl from beneath the cycle. Then she was suddenly paralyzed by whole new kind of pain. In dull incomprehension she looked at her grotesquely twisted leg. Her head suddenly felt very large, as if it were a balloon expanding. The last thing she saw was a black Tawanaka sedan pulling up a few yards away, the Greek letter “psi” plainly emblazoned on its doors.

Chapter Two

Kevin Vacit sighed wearily as he settled behind his desk. At seventy, he had no right to feel and look as well as he did, but that didn't stop him from wishing he felt better.

He began going through the daily reports, and did feel better. Twenty new registered teeps, one a potential P12—and as good, some fourteen detected who had somehow slipped through the Corps' fingers. Evolution.

The somewhat rough birth of the Central African Block was finally smoothing out, and commercial teeps were once again profitable there. The rebuilding was going well on Mars, and EarthForce had requested five more telepaths to keep security tight on the Red Planet.

His desk link burred. "Sir?" his secretary asked.

"Yes?"

"One of the interns to see you."

"An intern?"

"Yes, sir."

"What does he want? I don't have any appointments, do I?"

"No, sir. But she says to tell you her name is Alexander. Natasha Alexander."

"Oh. Send her in."

A moment later the door cracked, and a young woman stepped through. He caught himself staring; the resemblance was striking. Oh, of course she was a woman—quite beautiful at that—but with that queue of flaming red hair and upturned nose, she so strongly resembled Monkey that he almost expected to hear his first mentor's taunting voice in his mind.

Then she turned, and he couldn't see it anymore.

"Sir?"

"Sorry, Intern," he said. "You reminded me of someone."

"That would be my mother, Michelle Alexander. I understand that the two of you were friends—that you worked for Senator Crawford together."

He nodded. “Indeed. I was fond of your mother. I was sorry to hear about her death.”

Natasha met his gaze levelly. “I miss her. She was a good friend, perhaps my best. But the Corps is mother and the Corps is father, sir.”

“Yes,” he replied. “I’m glad we can be a comfort to you. And I hope you further understand that the friendship between your mother and I was just that—between us.”

“Oh—yes, sir. I’ve come to ask no favors of you.”

“Good. I’ve followed your progress, of course. You’ve been a model student here and an exemplary intern. I wouldn’t want to see you mar your record by seeking some sort of favoritism. After all, as you say, the Corps is mother and father—and good parents cannot play favorites.”

“I understand completely. No, sir, I’ve come to you because of something I discovered in my research. I thought I should bring it to your attention, personally, myself.”

“Why did you feel the need to do that, rather than passing it up through proper channels? I assure you, I review all research that’s done here.”

“Yes, sir. But some things my mother said led me to believe it was best I come to you directly. I tried to make an appointment—”

“—but the director doesn’t see interns by appointment, I know. I have to admit, Ms. Alexander, you’ve piqued my curiosity. Exactly what did Michelle tell you?”

“That you and she shared a common curiosity about the origins of telepathy. It was almost an obsession of hers, and I gathered that you were—um—very interested in it, too.”

He allowed himself a smile. “Yes. It’s an important question, don’t you think? Those in the know realized very early on that teeps must have been the product of genetic manipulation. That was before my time, of course, and the knowledge was suppressed to prevent panic. They were already killing teeps in those days, and the idea that some government or corporation had created teeps for some devious, sinister reason—” He broke off. “Are you saying that you have the answer?”

“Sir, I have the beginnings of an answer.”

“What might those beginnings be?”

“That we’ve been looking in the wrong place. After sixty-five years, I think we can be certain that it was no corporation or

government. For one thing, we still don't know exactly how telepathy—much less telekinesis—operates. On the genetic side, we've come to understand that the level of sophistication required to engineer it would have produced spin-off technologies that we simply have never seen."

"Agreed. But this is nothing new."

"I've turned up something new, sir, but I don't know what to make of it. Perhaps you will."

"Go on."

"My specialty is actually in history and anthropology. I was hoping to be placed with the proposed applied social sciences division, but it never materialized."

Kevin shook his head. "No. Normals aren't quite ready to have their lives planned by teeps."

"Of course, and so I'm interning as a business teep. I'm only a p5—"

"Nothing to be ashamed of. Speaking as a P-aught."

"I know. Though I think Mom was disap—well, that's neither here nor there. My point, sir, was that I did a rather involved project on the syncretism and evolution of twenty-first-century religious cults."

He nodded for her to go on.

"You see, when times change rapidly—or catastrophically—there is a tendency for people to become dissatisfied with traditional religions and seek something new. Looked at historically, we see flashpoints in which hundreds of small religions arise—the two best examples I can think of are the early Christian era and the late twentieth century. And now, of course, in the wake of the Centauri and the perspective that brought..."

"I'm familiar with the phenomenon. Sort of a natural selection process, wouldn't you say? A variety of new religions are born, and those that best satisfy the needs of people survive. The rest vanish."

"Yes, sir. You can count on one hand the number of actually new religions in the last two thousand years that have lasted. Anyway, that's what I studied. Obscure, I know. I was looking at the twenty-first century, which for the most part was a period of winnowing—the hundreds of late twentieth cults were dying out and consolidating. But I ran across a small anomaly."

"That being?"

"A number of small cults floesced in the twenty-sixties. At first

I thought they were hang-ons from some of the late twentieth astronaut/angel cults—”

“Astronaut/angels?”

“Yes, sir. That’s really a glib label for a broad phenomenon. Velikovskians, Raeleans, Heaven’s Gate—it was basically a belief that aliens had visited or were visiting Earth, that our cultures, religions, destinies, perhaps even our genetic makeup had been shaped by ancient, godlike astronauts. Our legends of gods and angels and so forth were supposed to be race memories of those visitors. We now see the cults as an effort to syncretize science with ancient modes of belief, and most of these cults had waned by the twenty-twenties.”

“But they came back in the twenty-sixties?”

“Briefly. That stands out because they all peaked in popularity during a three-year period between 2059 and 2062. After that they faded again, and by the end of the next decade, there is no record of them—as such.”

“The timing aside, what’s so odd about that?”

“If you excuse me, sir, I don’t think the timing is aside—it’s the point. My great-grandmother—this isn’t well known, sir—before she joined the MRA, my great-grandmother Desa was something of a, ah...”

“She was a mercenary, a grifter, and at times a thief. I knew her well. Anything dubious she did in her youth was more than made up for by years of faithful service and her heroic death.”

“Yes, sir. As you say. In the early twenty-one-teens she led a religious cult—purely a scam on her part, she never believed in it. It was a sort of Mayan-prophecy religion, but with very strong echoes of the astronaut/angel cults. So I checked, and sure enough, she had pieced her phony religion together from some of the things her father really believed.”

Kevin leaned forward, frowning. “What are you saying?”

“I checked membership against the teep registration base, and did some basic genealogical extrapolation. I found that sixty percent of registered teeps are descended from a member of one of those cults. The other forty percent I don’t have enough data for. I also ran the stats for the general population—only one person in two thousand living today had ancestors in one of the cults.”

“So it’s not a coincidence or an artifact. Teeps really are descended from these cultists.”

“Yes, sir.”

“How much further can you go with this?”

“Well, I was working on a synthesis—trying to pull together some of the common elements of the various cults. I’ve also got the locations of some of their worship locales—a cave in Yucatan, an old Buddhist temple in China, a mountaintop shrine in the Philippines. I think those bear checking out.”

“You say you were working on this synthesis.”

“Well, yes, sir. Now I’m an intern in the commercial division, so I won’t have time to—”

“How would you like to work with my office? I could put you on this full-time.”

She made no attempt to hide her joy at that suggestion. “That would be wonderful, sir.”

“Good. I’ll make the arrangements.”

Chapter Three

Fiona woke in pitch darkness. She was in a coffin. The walls were of some soft, padded substance that she could not tear.

Air sighed onto her face from a small tube. If she wiggled, she found she could move several inches in any direction. She could turn over, though it hurt her leg, which was encased in a heavy cast. She could not sit up—and she didn't quite have enough room to pull into a fetal position.

“Where am I?” she whispered.

A few instants later she was screaming it, as her limbs began to itch, and then her belly, and her brain. And then she couldn't stand it, the very thought that she couldn't move her limbs through their full range of motion.

She didn't know how long that panic lasted, but finally she grew calmer, used the relaxation techniques Grandpa Monkey had taught her. And she listened.

Almost, there was nothing—only the very vaguest chittering at the edge of perception. She pushed her mind out with everything she had.

Nothing.

She found two more tubes next to the air tube. One provided for water; the other, some sort of tasteless paste. So they weren't trying to starve her.

She tried to reach out again. If only she could find another mind, one that stood beneath the Sun, one that had some grasp on the passage of time—but there was nothing. It had been a faint hope, at best—without line of sight she could have contacted only a teep as powerful as herself.

She passed the time doing multiplication tables, telling herself stories, remembering the hundred landscapes of her life—the rocky hills of Andorra; the cold green beauty of Alaska; the hustling madness of Tokyo, Singapore, New York, Mexico City; a quiet, still night on the waters of Tasik Chini...

It all ended, eventually, with her pounding at the walls,

screaming just to hear something. Of all the places she had ever lived, none of them had ever been silent, both to the ear and the mind.

She awoke violently. Someone had been talking to her, hadn't they? Telling her something. There was a lingering feeling of comfort, of happiness, that tasted somehow plastic.

Fiona. It was a strong, clear voice. She grasped at it, ran toward it. It was everything.

Fiona, I can save you. But you have to do what I say.

Please, get me out of here.

I will. But first you have to do something for me. You have to promise you're going to be a good girl.

I promise!

There was a brief pause, (skepticism, biting hard) I don't believe you. You shouldn't lie to me, Fiona. I'll come back when you mean it.

And the voice vanished as if it had never been.

Hours, days, months, or years passed, she couldn't tell which. She clung to the hope that the voice would return. Just when she knew she was at the edge of madness, it did.

Hello, Fiona.

"Please don't go again. Please."

Are you ready to be a good girl?

I'll do anything you want.

You've been involved with some very bad people. The man you called Grandpa Monkey—Jack O'Hannlon—was a murderer. He raised you, so you can't be held responsible for your feelings toward him, for the crimes you yourself committed at his behest. I can wipe all of that clean. I want to be your friend, Fiona, truly I do, but you have to help me.

How?

You've seen things. You know things. These people are not your friends, Fiona. They are criminals and killers. They planted a bomb, Fiona, in Geneva. They killed a lot of people.

Psi Corps, she answered. We bombed Psi Corps...

Images suddenly burst into her head. A girl of perhaps thirteen years, most of her face gone. An old man, moaning, reaching for something with a hand he no longer had. A cloud of pain, exquisite

and complex.

What do you imagine Psi Corps is, Fiona? They are the villains your brave, heroic underground murdered.

Your own kind. People just like you, trying to find a safe place, a place where the normals won't hate them, fear them, kill them. And when they find that safe place, what happens? More murder, this time by their own kind. That's what you've been a part of, Fiona.

She didn't want the voice to go away. She didn't. She didn't like what it was saying, but it was far better than silence. She felt as if she were on the edge of a precipice with nothing, nothing at all below her. Only the voice kept her from plunging over.

You lie, she said. You lie. Psi Corps is slavery.

The scan hit her hard and fast, the most powerful, brutal attack she had ever experienced. For an instant she nearly surrendered, but Monkey had taught her well. She punched the invading mind back, first by inches, then by yards, threw up levees, dikes, and finally walls that enclosed her. Weeping, she touched the sky of her tiny world, trying to prove herself real, and almost failing.

Her greatest fear was that soon she would fail.

She slept again, and the voice came back. Her walls went up automatically, woke her. As soon as she dozed again, the voice came back. It went on, and on, until something in her exploded, leapt out of her, a whip, a blade, and she felt a terrible satisfaction at the cry of pain.

For a time they left her alone again.

And then—so faint she thought at first she was making it up—she heard another voice. When she understood it was real, she first thought it was another trick. But it was too weak, groping in the dark, as frightened as she.

And it could not reach her without her help.

Still suspicious, she ignored it as long as she could, then reached out again.

Who are you? she asked.

Who? Who?

Are you an owl, then?

(something like laughter) No. I'm a prisoner, like you. In a little box. I've been here. The voice weakened, fluttering in her mind like a candle in a draft. She nursed it, as she might a little flame.

My name is Fiona.

I'm Matt. Matthew, (pause) I think I'm losing my mind. I think I'm

making you up.

Maybe I'm making you up.

(pause) We have to resolve this, don't we? Matthew said. Tell me something I don't know.

That would prove nothing. Descartes said—

Please, no philosophy. That's the last thing we need, some dead Frenchman trying to convince us we aren't real.

I think you may be another one of these Psi Corps goons. What do you think about that?

I may be. Or we may be each other. Maybe we're both insane. All I know is, I feel better now.

Me, too. I—Matthew? Matthew?

But he was gone.

Fiona?

Where have you been? she angrily demanded.

They tried to scan me. I think I passed out.

You're even weaker than before.

I'm okay. I'm just worried that they'll—they'll find out about us.

You mean that wild night we had on the beach in Santa Cruz?

(laughter) Hell, I'd like to know more about that.

You picked me up at a party, she began. It was boring. The host had this ugly little dog he kept trying to make do tricks—

—and we went to the carnival, and rode all of the rides, until we noticed a dwarf and a giant following us—but we got away from them, and when the chase was over, we were on the beach, and I was cold so you gave me your coat—It was sweater, actually. Then you told me how big and strong I was, and asked if I'd ever been swimming in the Pacific

—
Hey, hold it, buddy, Fiona said. I don't go that far on a first fantasy. Straighten up.

Sorry. What if we just walk hand in hand and look for starfish?

Better. Much better.

Then we can go back to my place—

And eat pizza. God, I could use a pizza. And a beer.

The next day the other voice was back, but she shut it out. She no longer needed it as she had. What was more, she had no intention of opening even a crack for them to learn about Matthew. It was clear her captors had made some sort of mistake; they had taken pains to isolate her so that the only contact she had was with them. They had underestimated her, or Matthew, or both.

“Come on,” Matthew said. “I’ve got something to show you.”

They stood in darkness, a thin, cold wind whipping around them.

“Where are we?”

“Just wait.”

Over time, their illusions had gained clarity as each surrendered control to the other. It was not exactly like reality, or even like a dream, but like the sharpest of memories.

They sat on a pinnacle of stone, and the sky gradually began to grey. A line appeared, far away, darkness separating from light, and then, with breathtaking suddenness, a thumbnail of brilliant orange appeared, and a plain of copper. She gasped with the intensity of it.

“That’s the Sulu Sea,” he said, quietly. “See those dark places? The Philippines.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“This is one of my favorite moments. I climbed up here in the dark. I almost got sick from the altitude, and I sat here, not believing it would be worth it. I almost went back down, while it was still night. Then this...”

He trailed off as the liquid sun separated from the waters, and the whole world emerged in shades of gold.

“Where are we?”

“Mount Kinabalu, on Borneo. I wish I could see your face,” he murmured.

“Oh, if you could see it you might not say that,” she said. “It’s funny, isn’t it? We carry such clear pictures of everything but ourselves.” His face, an indistinct oval, nevertheless seemed sad.

“Wait,” she said, and concentrated. She brought up the image of a model she had seen on the vids, in magazines.

“Oh!” he said, and then, “No. That isn’t you. Put her away. I can wait.”

“Wait? Wait for what?” she asked, bitterly.

“We’ll meet,” he said. “We’ll meet, and I’ll know you.”

“Sure,” she murmured. “Sure we will.” She looked back out at the flaming waters. “Thanks. Thanks for showing me this.”

He nodded. “You’re welcome, Fiona.” She felt something like an arm going around her, and a flood of warmth, tenderness—

And then searing light, so bright it was painful. She coughed back a shriek as Matthew and the Sulu Sea vanished, replaced by

the hideous brilliance and the sudden clashing of metal. She shut her eyes, tightly.

“Get her out,” a voice—a real voice, made of quivering air—said. “Put her in compound five.”

She was out. Out of the box. They lifted her up, but her legs would not, of course, support her. Two men dragged her along, and still she could not open her eyes.

Matthew? But he was gone, not even a whisper of him left.

Chapter Four

Stephen Walters grinned toothily at the look of outrage on the secretary's face.

"Mr. Walters," she said, "I'll thank you not to do that."

"It was just a thought, darlin'," he replied.

"Yes. Your thought, and quite at home in your foul little head. Please keep it there."

"Hey. Your loss. Is he ready to see me?"

"In a moment."

He put his hands behind his back and took one with the other, glancing aimlessly around the office. Despite his bravado, he was intensely curious. What could the director want with him?

The door opened up, and Walters put on a cocky smile when he saw who came out. "Well, if it isn't my old friend Fedor!"

Fedor's return grin was froglike, so wide was his mouth, and his black eyes shone with good humor. "Hello, moi droog. What terrible thing have you done, to be called before the director himself? It wasn't that Turkish girl, was it? I warned you they were funny about such things there."

"I can't imagine what you're talking about, Fedor. And I might ask you the same, you know."

The secretary coughed for attention. "Mr. Walters. The director will see you now."

"Well, it's been nice knowing you, Stephen," the little Russian said. "If you have a moment before they lock you in prison and throw away the key, come by my place. And bring that bottle of vodka you owe me. Potato, not grain, for God's sake."

"I'll do that, friend," Stephen said. He clasped Fedor's hand warmly and watched him go. He brushed his uniform and straightened it, combed his fingers through dirty blond hair, shot the secretary a final leer, and entered the director's office.

"Hello, Mr. Director," he said. "What is it today?"

Kevin Vacit looked up at him. Walters tried not to show it, but Vacit gave him the creeps sometimes. The director had a mind that

ran on tachyons, always on top of everything—but behind the now-and-then smile and the benign expression, there was something more alien than even the few Centauri he had met.

Something extra—or something missing. It was a good thing, he reflected, that Vacit was not a teep—then he mentally blushed, realizing that the director might have any number of teeps around monitoring him anyway.

“Stephen Walters,” Vacit said, glancing at the contents of a file folder. “Born June 15, 2155, in Casper, Wyoming, U.S.A. Joined EarthForce in 2172—served in the 355th North American. Won the EA Silver Star for bravery at the Battle of Douala. Because of this you weren’t court-martialed the very next year, in 2173, for striking a superior officer. Served as a mercenary soldier in the CAB until 2175, when you manifested latent telepathic abilities. Eventually rated P8—very surprising for such a late bloomer. Joined the Corps voluntarily that same year. You’ve been in the special ops division since then.”

“That all sounds right, sir.”

“You’ve done mostly undercover work, is that right?”

“Yes, sir. I’m not strong enough to be a Psi Cop, so I do what I do best.”

“And I hear you do that very well—except that you are perhaps too enthusiastic.” Vacit pulled a new page from the file. “Others are unwilling to work with you. They say you take too many chances.”

“I just prefer to work without a net, sir. You can’t win a race without getting on the fastest horse.”

Vacit locked his hands together and put them before him on the table. “Well, Mr. Walters. I’m going to give you a chance to do what you do best, and I assure you, this time you will be very much without a net.”

“The Corps is mom and dad, sir. I’m up for it.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Vacit lifted a packet and passed it to him. “Those are the files on one Fiona Temple. She’s presently in our internment camp near Kuala Lumpur. I want you to break her out.”

“Sir?” He shuffled through the photos. They depicted a young woman, maybe twenty. She was pretty, with auburn hair, high cheekbones, and large, blue-green eyes.

“Ms. Temple was, until recently, a member of one of the most powerful cells in the resistance. We haven’t been able to learn much from her; she’s a P12, and very good at blocking even the most

determined scans. We could dig until she broke, but I think we would lose far too much that way. In the end, I think she would be more useful to us free than interned.”

Walters nodded. “I see. The old buddy game. Yes, sir, I’m up to it.”

Vacit nodded. “Again, good. But Walters, you speak of this to no one. You report only to me, in the field or anywhere else. As far as the Corps goes, you don’t exist anymore, is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Walters?”

“Yes, sir.”

“This woman is important. I don’t want anything to happen to her.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You will have some help in escaping from the re-education camp—I’ll give you the details later. But understand, no one in the camp will know about you. If you misstep, you’re just as dead as any rogue trying to escape.”

“I sort of figured that, sir.”

Vacit nodded. “That’s all that need be said just now, then. You’ll be flown there in two days. I suggest in the meantime you familiarize yourself with the area and work on your story. Make it close to the facts so your surface thoughts don’t contradict what you say. She’s good enough to do light scans without you noticing.”

“With all due respect, Director—that you don’t have to tell me. Like I said, I do what I do best, and this is it.”

“It had better be, Mr. Walters. It had better be.”

Kevin watched Walters go with some misgivings. Monkey’s death had come as something of a blow—he somehow never thought the old man would die, but there could be no doubt this time. It had taken days to find a fragment of him large enough to identify, but forensics not only had confirmed that it was him, but had enough of him to prove he was dead. Of course, it might have been a clone—No. Monkey would not be able to stand the thought of another him.

And Fiona had been captured. He had always known it was a possibility. Monkey had never put her on the front lines, so to speak, but Monkey himself was never far from danger, and Fiona was never far from Monkey.

He had to be careful, very careful. He was sure some of the

more powerful teeps suspected him, and perhaps a few senators. One got old, after all. And though none of his enemies was in much of a position to touch him, it wouldn't do to underestimate them. If they were to discover that he had nurtured the resistance, even as he made the Corps stronger—well, he doubted any explanation would save him. Worse, everything he had done would be for nothing.

He would do what he could for Fiona, but daughter or no daughter, there was only so far he could go.

He looked down at his agenda. All routine, all things he had done a thousand times and would do a thousand more.

Then he looked at the new report on his desk, and thumbing through it, felt an itch he hadn't felt in a long while.

He chimed his secretary's comlink. "Has the travel office put together the equipment I asked for?"

"Yes, Director. The team will be ready to leave Thursday."

"Inform them that I will be joining them. Notify Mufwene that he will be in charge for a few days. And get me Ms. Alexander. I want to talk to her."

And there was another thing he had been putting off. "Get me a meeting with the Centauri ambassador, as well."

Chapter Five

Fiona fell into the filthy water for the third time, choking on the fetor of human waste and dead fish. An involuntary breath sucked the filthy muck into her mouth and nose. Her stomach tried to vomit, but there was nothing in it.

She tried to push up on trembling limbs. Though her broken leg was healed, more than a month in the isolation tube had left her with the resilience of a boiled noodle. The Malaysian sun had raised moonscapes of blisters on her back and arms. The fever that caused—and the lack of food—were no help to her atrophied muscles.

Her arms gave out, and she collapsed back into the flooded rice paddy.

“Get up, you lazy bitch!” The voice sounded far away. She understood that her head was underwater, and that she might well be drowning. She couldn’t muster the energy to care.

“Bitch!” And then a jolt that yanked her whole body into a ball, cramped with agony.

Ah, yes, agony. Leave it to real pain to show how sunburn, starvation, and fatigue were nothing but pretenders.

She came out of her ball like one of the cobras that hung around the paddies, uncoiling each screaming muscle in a single motion that ended with her fist displacing the guard’s jaw four inches upward. Not a big man anyway, he went back into the sludge, flattening rice as he did so.

She stood there, glaring down at him, as other guards began shouting and a couple of shots were fired.

The downed guard stood, his eyes full of a piggy sort of hatred. She balled her fists.

He advanced, raising his shock stick. She snarled and assumed a boxing stance. Kicking would be useless in this gunk.

The guard regarded her, and then exchanged the baton for a pistol.

“Hey! Hey!” One of the other prisoners was slogging through the water toward them. “Don’t!”

The guard quickly shifted his aim.

“Hey! Just wait a minute, fellah!” The man was tall, strong-looking, a dirty blond, even dirtier now.

“You. Shut up.”

“Just—hey, listen, man! Look at her tattoo. P12. You know what that means?”

“Shut up!” He cocked the hammer back.

“Okay, okay. But how do you think the Psi Cops are going to react when they come around and find you’ve scragged one of their possible recruits? How many P12s do you think there are anyway? It’s not like she was trying to escape.”

The guard narrowed his eyes. “You aren’t a P12,” he observed.

“No.”

The guard slammed his pistol back in its case and strode toward the big man. He hit him in the neck with the shock stick. The prisoner gurgled and folded, but did not fall. Fiona started forward, but two more guards grabbed her from behind. The guard hit the blond man again, and again, and again, until he was still in the mud.

“You mindwitches. You make me sick. You think you are so much better than us. But Osman Taheng will show you who is better. You’ll learn that, if nothing else.”

He turned back to Fiona. “You will carry him back to the camp. Whether he is dead or alive, you will carry him.”

The fellow began to groan about halfway back to the camp, which meant they only had five more kilometers of torturous mountain ridge to negotiate. She had wrapped his arms around her neck, and was dragging him behind her. Fiona had lost count of the times she had collapsed under the man’s awkward weight. Worse, the guards were holding the rest of the work gang to her pace. This meant they would be as delayed as she, quite possibly beyond the evening meal, which was meager enough as it was.

All in all, it was better than the isolation tube. Except—

Except she missed Matthew. She hadn’t found him since she emerged. For all she knew he was still in his hole. Or dead. For the briefest instant she had thought the man she carried—who had come charging to her rescue—might be he. But a glimpse of his mind was enough to dash that hope.

“Hey—woddja—th’ bulls loose mom—” He sucked a long, shuddering breath, and she stumbled again, this time just to her

knees.

“Ey, no—” he said, a little more strongly. “I c’n walggh—” He gagged into silence.

“I doubt that. He hit you seven or eight times. You shouldn’t even still be alive.”

“Hell, my momma used to do me more times than that every morning.”

“Oh. So this is just nostalgia for you. And I was going to thank you.”

“Walk!” A guard jabbed her in the back with a stunstick, but it wasn’t charged.

“Oh-kay, here we go—” She draped his arm back around her shoulders and heaved him up. His legs kicked a little at the ground.

“Be-still,” she grunted. “That’s-not-helping.”

“Sorry.”

A few minutes later, he did manage to get his legs under him again, and she felt more than half of his weight come off of her shoulder. At that point the guard hit him with his stunstick again.

“You son of a—” She choked, as her charge collapsed once more.

“I said carry him. Carry.”

Which she did, from there on out. If the fellow regained consciousness, he was smart enough not to reveal it this time.

Fiona finished her bowl of rice and cast a longing glance at the one on the ground, a few feet from the unconscious man. She had, after all, carried him for almost ten kilometers. She had burned her calories and his, too.

But that would be what they wanted, and she wouldn’t give them the satisfaction, even to fill her still-growling stomach. Instead she sighed and took a look at his wounds. None of the burns looked particularly serious.

At her touch, though, he stirred and hesitantly opened his eyes. They focused on her, and for a moment he looked at her without recognition.

“Oh,” he mumbled. “You. Sorry.”

“You probably saved my life. No reason to be sorry for that.”

“Yes, but you had to carry me.”

She shrugged.

“What’s your name?”

“Fiona.”

“Irish name. Good name.”

“Hasn’t brought any luck with it that I can see.” She considered him for a moment. “On the other hand, maybe it has. I could be dead now. Been here long?”

“A few weeks, I think. Time flies when you’re having fun.” He held out his hand. “Stephen Walters.”

She took it. His handshake was weak, the fingers still trembling. “Nice to meet you, Stephen Walters.”

“And you? You just got here, right? I never saw you before last week.”

“I was here. They just had me in a hole.”

He managed a weak whistle. “What did you do to deserve a hole?”

“I’ve no idea, but I’m going to try not to do it again.” She shifted on her haunches. “Better eat that. They’ll take up the bowls soon.”

“Thanks for saving it for me.” He lifted the bowl and began pawing the rice out, first gingerly, then with greater gusto.

“Where did they catch you?” she asked quietly.

“Angola, in the CAB. The Corps came in the same day they changed the laws. I thought I could slip past ’em. I heard there was some sort of underground, but I didn’t have time to make the connection. You?”

“Not far from here, I think. Kuantan.”

He seemed to expect a little more, but she left it at that.

He finished his rice, and then glanced back at her. “Maybe I should’ve gone to Psi Corps.” He sighed.

She bit off a harsh laugh.

“Well, it’s gotta be better than this.”

She frowned. “Is this a recruitment speech?”

He snuffled out what may have been a chuckle and pushed himself, hissing, into a sitting position. “Not hardly. That’s not my style either. Not that they would take me now, anyway. You, on the other hand—”

“Yes, you said something about that. What did you mean?”

“I was in another camp, somewhere in the CAB. We had a P12, guy named Tycho. They put him in a hole for a while—then the Psi Cops came and took him. Maybe that’s why they put you in a hole—to break you down, get you to join the Corps. That was my guess, anyway, and I saw your rating tattoo, and—”

“Not from where you were standing, you didn’t. The rating’s too small. How did you know?”

He flashed her a reluctant smile. “I’ve been watching you, I guess.”

“Really?” Her voice sounded a trifle cold, and she was glad.

“Not—not what you think. I mean, you’ve got a nice face and a sweet smile, but that outfit has to go. And you could use more than a little cleaning up.”

“Look who’s talking. Look, vacbrain, I appreciate what you did, but—”

“Hey, hey. I’m just kidding. That’s not why I’ve been watching you. Well, maybe it’s what got my attention, but it’s not what kept it.”

“What then?”

“Fire, that’s what. You’ve got some real fire in you. Enough, maybe—maybe to...” He trailed off. “Never mind. Guards are coming anyway, and there may be teep-snitches out there. Some people’ll do anything for a little extra food, even sell out their own kind.”

She nodded. “Yep. Well. Be seeing you around, Stephen Walters.”

“Abacus.”

Over the next few days, as they cut ditches to flood several new paddies, she began to feel stronger. The viscous, clinging heat of the Malaysian day was no stranger to her, and her muscles were finally adjusting to being used again. She saw Steve for a few minutes each day, but they mostly just exchanged pleasantries.

She searched more for Matthew, but if he was out there, he wasn’t letting on. She held on to the images—the sunrise, the house where he grew up, the beach at Santa Cruz. None of it real, of course, and yet somehow more real than what she was going through now.

Monkey was dead. She had tried not to think about it in the hole, but it had come at her in nightmares. Back out here, in the world where he died, she could no longer deny it. He had gone out like she always knew he would, in a big fat blaze of glory.

She hated him for it. More, she hated herself, because it had

been her fault. She had led them there.

She jammed her shovel into the ground. *My fault. My fault. My fault.* A thousand spades of dirt like that.

She could fill the world and it would still be true. Sweat stung her eyes, but not tears.

Two days later she burst out laughing, because “my fault my fault my fault” had somehow become *maaffaud*, Malay for “forgiveness heart.” Just the kind of stupid pun Monkey would have loved to make. For that matter, it could be *mayafaud*, “illusory heart”; or, better, *mawa faud*, “monkey heart”; or *mawa foti*, “monkey photograph”...

Now she was crying, but the tears held something of joy in them. What would her grandpa Monkey say?

“Fine, you feel guilty. Makes you feel all moral, right? Kid, there’s nothin’ less moral than guilt. You screwed up? Okay. You want to do something about it or just shoot yourself in the head? Because for a thinking being, there are no other choices.”

She came to with cold water on her face, thinking that there seemed to be a damn lot of coming to in concentration camps. She opened her eyes to Stephen’s grey ones.

“Water break,” he said. “You went out, but I don’t think anyone noticed. The heat?”

“No. Epiphonic shock.”

He blinked. “You say the damndest things, sometimes.”

“So do you. What did you mean about me having fire the other day?”

“This isn’t a good time—”

“Because if you mean you want help getting out of here, let’s do it.”

He grinned. “Now?”

“Now.”

The grin faded. “You’re serious.”

“Yep.”

He gave her the water cup. “Okay. We’ll talk tonight.”

They left the food line, moving toward the village “square.” The camp was an old *kampung* village—tin and concrete buildings, a few old-style houses up on stilts. Beyond that were the fences, three rows of them, stunfences with concertina wire strung along the top. There were supposed to be mines in between.

“I do have a plan,” Stephen said. “But I figured—”

“You need a P12 to do it”

“You aren’t scanning me, are you?”

“You’d know. No, it’s just obvious.”

He shook his head. “No. You’ve got what it takes to escape, and most of these don’t, sorry to say. I need a P12—I need someone like you even more.”

“I’m listening.”

“Just be ready. Stay on your toes. You’ll know when the time comes.”

Chapter Six

Ambassador Vitari grinned his sharp-toothed grin and took a drink of the Evan Williams. He made a face.

“Director, that is a most unfortunate substance.”

Kevin nodded. “An old friend of mine used to favor it. I don’t drink, myself.”

“I am sorry to hear that. Is it serious, this medical condition? It sounds quite serious to me, not being able to drink.”

“It’s a matter of perspective, I suppose.”

He watched as the Centauri downed the rest of the drink, his backswept hair briefly replaced by his several chins. Vitari’s face was somewhat less contorted when it reappeared.

“I begin to warm to it,” he allowed. “Now, then. You wished to speak about telepaths. Nasty creatures, I think. Always at your back, you know, helping your enemies to plot your downfall. Still, a great house cannot hope to succeed without at least a few. And the women can do quite interesting things when they put their minds to it.” He cackled, slapping Kevin’s shoulder. “Did you hear what I said? Put their minds to it.”

“That’s very funny, Ambassador.” He tried to sound as if he really meant it, but that sort of thing had never really been his forte. It didn’t seem to matter. The Centauri, still delighted by his own remark, was pouring himself a full snifter of the bourbon.

“Yes, telepaths,” he mused. “What is it you want to know?”

“Well. Ambassador—I was wondering if you can tell me something of the history of telepaths in the Centaurum. Have you always had them?”

“Aha! You ask a very interesting question. The answer, of course, is no. When we were less evolved as a race, no significant part of our population was telepathic.”

“They are the product of evolution then?”

“Not as such. They are an indicator of evolution. I will tell you a peculiar thing, Director. It is a little known—but not particularly secret—fact that all of the more advanced races have telepaths. The

lower ones do not. And so, in the not too distant past, it occurred to us to wonder why this might be so. And do you know something?”

He sloshed a little of the bourbon from the overfilled glass, gesturing obscurely. “We found a sort of marker in the DNA of telepaths, quite remarkably the same among the various higher races. Now, you understand, of course, I mean among races that evolved from quite different sorts of creatures.”

Kevin blinked, but otherwise did not show his surprise. “That’s interesting,” he said. “I wonder that I’ve never heard that.”

“I presume because you’ve never asked, Director.”

“What do you make of this peculiarity, Ambassador?”

“Well, it’s quite obvious, isn’t it?”

“Not to me.”

“As I said, it’s a sign of favor—from the Great Maker or the gods if you wish, or the universe itself if you don’t. Once a race reaches a certain point in its evolution, telepaths inevitably appear. It is a law of the universe!” He emphasized this by half draining the glass.

“Is there any proof for this—spontaneous process?”

“Proof, proof. Always you Human people desire proof. The Narn have no telepaths! That is proof enough! Narn are a primitive, underevolved, childlike race. What further proof do you need?”

“I understood that the Narn once had telepaths.”

“Yes, I’m sure. And your Earth-dogs once had wings and built amazing statues of glass bricks on mountaintops and destroyed them all to the last molecule of silica that you should never, never know. Director, the Narn will say anything to create the impression that they are anything other than what they are—semi-sapient who are happiest when laboring for their betters. I give their so-called civilization another decade on its own before the inertia of the Centauri presence among them dissipates itself. Then they will beg to have us back. So you see? The Narn have no telepaths. They are not evolved enough to have them. What further proof do you need of my thesis?”

“None, I suppose.”

“Now you sound skeptical, Director. What hypothesis do you propose, eh?”

“I have no hypothesis, Ambassador—”

“Come. You have something on your mind. Please, tell me.”

Kevin frowned. How far did he want to go with this? But the

Centauri, despite some rather—exaggerated—claims in the past, had known other races for a long time. This one was drunk, and from what he could tell, only partially believed what he was saying about telepaths.

“Suppose... Is it possible that some more ancient spacefaring race might have—tinkered—with all of our evolutions?”

A brief look of displeasure crossed the Centauri’s face, an indefinable sense of some unsettling emotion that lay behind it. Then the alien bared his teeth in simulated humor. “Director. As well ask if the fairies from your folktales were responsible. We Centauri are the oldest, most evolved race in the galaxy. There are, perhaps, a few others who approach us in age, but none who surpass us. I’m aware that some rather unpleasant incident occurred because of a paranoid belief that we had somehow saddled your people with telepaths. Surely you are not bringing this up again, now that it has all finally quieted down?”

“No, Ambassador,” Kevin replied. “That would be a terrible mistake, and I thank you for pointing it out to me. It was only, after all, an idle thought.”

“Well, idle thoughts are better than none at all, Director, so long as we learn not to speak them.” He patted his hand upon Kevin’s. “I will see to it that all of our information on telepaths reaches your hands, Director.”

“That would be most kind.”

Natasha Alexander was waiting in the hall outside. He shook his head, a silent no. “Do we proceed to Yucatán then, sir?”

“Yes. And Ms. Alexander—”

“Sir?”

“I’m going with you. I’ve seen to the arrangements.”

The daylight behind them had thinned to a pearly film, and the darkness ahead exhaled a peculiar scent, resinous, pinelike.

“What is that?” Kevin asked their guide, a spindly little man named Roberto.

“Copal,” he said. “It’s what they burn to please God.”

“It comes from a tree,” Natasha added. “Legend says that, once, the lords of death craved human hearts, but the hero twins tricked them into feeding on the smoke of copal, instead.”

Kevin nodded absently. He was remembering a time when he was very young, before his mother died. When they lived in the ancient, sprawling Zuni pueblo, filled with the scent of sage burning, of pinon crackling in the horno ovens. The clarity of the memory startled him. It had been a very long time since he had thought about that time in his life.

“Did Blood ever come here? Your great-grandmother?”

Natasha shook her head. “I don’t think so. She didn’t believe in this stuff.”

Kevin nodded to the Psi Cops with them. “I think it’s time for the torches,” he told them.

Harsh electric light flooded the cave, and now he could see the faint curls of smoke, the faded paintings on the walls. He made out a creature with the body of a man but the head of a crawfish, something that might have been a serpent, rows of glyphs he recognized as Mayan writing. The rest was patchier—a hand here, part of a headdress there, a goggling eye that did not look remotely Human. He wondered how old the paintings were—if they dated to pre-Columbian times or if they were the product of more recent cultists.

“Sir,” Natasha began hesitantly, “are you certain you want to proceed? I don’t really think the director of Psi Corps should risk—”

“Thank for your concern, Ms. Alexander. If this becomes too taxing physically, I will let you know.”

“Yes, sir.”

They descended through the narrowing tunnel, and after a time, heard singing. Again, Kevin experienced an odd sense of displacement. The song—and the language of the song—was unknown to him. But the rhythm of it, the intervals between its four notes, struck sparks in his oldest memories. Shalako spirits, dancing into the square to the sound of rattles and chanting. The taste of fresh bread, the crisp scent of an open cooler full of ice and soft drinks in a general store. Fumes of old-style gasoline engines.

His mother dying. The dark waters. The dance hall of the dead. The gift...

He blinked, and the tunnel had widened into a chamber. The singing stopped, and he heard their guide begin speaking in a language he did not know. He could circumvent language to get to meaning with a scan, but was reluctant to do so.

As it turned out, there was no need.

The singer was a wrinkled man of many years. He wore a colorful headdress something like a turban, and a red loincloth. The rest of his body was bare, and black with tattoos. In one hand swung a censer, from which the pungent copal smoke drifted. He squinted into the electric torches.

“Put out the lights,” Kevin ordered.

In the gentler glow of candles clustered on a sort of altar, the old man’s eyes were opalescent.

“You come for me?” he croaked, in English, reaching to finger Natasha’s Psi Corps badge. She backed up a pace.

“We came to ask questions,” Kevin replied. “May I ask your name?”

“I am the priest. This place is in my care.”

“I am Kevin Vacit. This is Natasha Alexander, a telepath with Psi Corps.”

“He’s a teep, too, sir,” Natasha said. She turned toward the priest. “Are you aware, sir, that you are required by law to register with EarthGov and Psi Corps?”

“I am aware. I did not do so. I am registered with a higher authority.”

“There is no—” Natasha began, but Kevin waved her to silence.

“The priest before you. Was he a telepath, too?”

“Yes. And him before him, and so on—back to when time began.”

“And how do you know this?”

The priest cocked his head. “It is spoken, it is written. These things remember themselves.”

“You have written records of every priest of this place back to the beginning of time?” Natasha asked, skeptically.

“Yes.”

“May I see?”

The priest flushed darker, but then he shrugged and went to a wooden box. He lifted from it a folding-screen book, opened it, and pointed to columns of hieroglyphic characters.

“That is Blood Woman, the first,” he said, “Then Cedar Jaguar, Jaguar Night—”

“I only count seven names,” Kevin interrupted.

“Yes. I am the seventh priest.”

“I don’t understand—”

“Excuse me, sir, if I may?”

“Go ahead, Ms. Alexander.”

She turned back to the priest. “When did time begin?”

The priest consulted his book. “It began six katun, seven tun, two uinal, seven kin ago.”

“What? In English, please.”

“Time began May 11, 2055,” the priest replied, with what might have been a sneer.

Kevin blinked. “I see.” He glanced at Natasha. “Consonant with the beginnings of your cults.”

“Yes.”

He again confronted the priest. “What else do you have in these caves? Any workrooms, laboratories, storage rooms?”

“Below here, nothing, only the dark of Xibalba where live the lords of death. Perhaps it is the place for you.”

“Is he telling the truth, Ms. Alexander?”

“He’s blocking me, sir.”

“Sir!” It was one of the Psi Cops, a very dark young man named Okonkwo. “Sir, I’m getting other teeps, somewhere near—”

“How many?”

“Hard to say. Something was hiding them before, but—” Okonkwo suddenly froze in place as a chant began, this time sounding from many throats. The priest was suddenly transformed, a thing part man and part jaguar, and from the deeper depths of the cave came more things. With them blew a dark wind of power, the greatest Kevin had ever felt.

Chapter Seven

They came for Fiona early in the night, two women with shotguns. They took her to the showers, cleaned her up, and put her in a crisp cotton dress, dark green. After that they escorted her to one of the larger buildings—one that the prisoners were never allowed near, though it was still within the gate. She noted the small helicopter outside—a Foyle 350, with ground effect jets—as black as the starless sky. The air was heavy with the scent of gathering monsoon rains.

Her guards walked her to the door, rapped, and stepped back. *Come in.* It was a strong voice, one she recognized.

A gust of cool air met her as she opened the door, the breath of a benevolent god after days in the stifling dormitory buildings.

“Ms. Temple. Come in.” The Psi Cop was a tall man with an equally long face, pleasing to the eye. He motioned her toward a couch. “Can I get you anything? Water? Wine? Sake?”

She didn’t answer.

“I think I’ll have some wine, myself.” He considered, taking a decanter from the small table in front of the couch and pouring a glass of deep red. “You’re sure you won’t join me?”

“I would sooner drink with Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, or Hiram Tower,” she said, sweetly.

The Psi Cop shrugged, and indicated the couch again. “Sit. Please.”

She did, and he took the chair on the other side of the table, swirled his wine and sniffed it, took a small sip.

“Aren’t you on duty?” Fiona asked.

He lifted a hand in a “so what” sort of gesture. “Not as such. I’m not out performing genocide at the moment, which—by your references—you seem to think is my business. For the moment I’m here to chat with you, and in that capacity I’m inclined to indulge myself. But I’ve been rude, haven’t I? My name is Joseph Teal-Montoya.”

“Nice to meet you, Joe. Again.”

“You recognize me. I’m pleased.”

“How could I forget your little brainwashing operation? Tell me, what do you wear when you’ve got a girl trapped in a tube, poking at her mind? What’s appropriate for rape?” She glanced significantly at his uniform. “But I suppose I’m about to find that out, aren’t I?”

She thought she caught a glimmer of discomfort from him, but he covered it well. “Ms. Temple, I do not enjoy that part of my job, but I do it because I must. Do you think I like letting these—these normals torture my people? Because that’s whose hands you are in. Normals. And not just any normals, but the ones who hate our kind so much that they volunteer to torture them. Do you understand? It’s part of a very old compromise in the EA. Telepaths get two chances to escape the persecution of the ignorant, Ms. Temple. If they take the sleeper injections, deny their heritage, and become part of the cowlike herd, they get left alone. If they join the Corps, they get to live, love, and serve among their own kind. Besides that, there is only this. Normals cannot bear the thought of us hiding among them. They will not tolerate it, and when they catch you, this is what they do to you.”

“I remember being captured by Psi Corps.”

He made a face. “Yes. You’ve committed crimes, Ms. Temple. Even Psi Corps must mollify the government.”

“Just tell me why I’m here.”

“Because you are a P12, of course, and I think you know that. You are, whether you like it or not, special, and so we are allowed extra latitude in trying to teach you reason. Your crimes won’t be remitted, but you can serve your time as parole, study, learn to use your talents more effectively. In time, you can begin to serve. I offered you this once, and I admit that I did so in a dishonest way. But, Ms. Temple, I’ve seen too many of my brothers and sisters slip away—dying filthy deaths in these camps—from malaria, infection, at the hands of these thugs they call guards. I will do everything in my power to save who I can. With you, I failed once. I get one more chance. Won’t you please help me?”

Fiona leaned back and clapped her hands lightly. “Very moving. Have you ever thought of doing Shakespeare?” She leaned forward intently. “Let’s get a few things clear, shall we? I am not ‘your kind.’ I am not your sister. I’ve spent my life fighting you jackboots, and I’m not about to stop now. And this good-cop-bad-

cop drivel isn't fooling me. But you know what? I don't think you got me all spiffed up and poured into this dress so you could invite me to be one of your storm troopers. So why don't we skip the vacuum and get straight to Mars?"

He took another sip of his wine and set it down. "I was afraid that would be your response. O'Hannlon had nineteen years to condition you, and next to that I have had very little time to make you see the truth."

"O'Hannlon?"

He smiled. "You never even knew his name. Monkey, he called himself. I believe he took the name from Sun Wu Kong, the Monkey King of Chinese legend. Monkey, the brash trickster, who thumbed his nose at all gods, all conventions, all law, who fought heaven and hell and won—for a time. It was a grandiose appellation your grandfather took, disguised as a joke. But if you've read the story of Sun Wu Kong, you know that that brashness and pride finally led the Monkey King to ruin, to face himself, to at last submit to his better angels, seek wisdom and service to others. The true story of the Monkey King is that he abandoned his selfish nature. Our old friend O'Hannlon never learned that." He took another sip of wine.

"Perhaps he got bored with that part of the book and quit reading it. You—you, Fiona, are his legacy. You are the part of him that continues—who can at last learn the wisdom that eluded him."

Fiona smiled. "Strike two."

He shrugged. "For you, not me. Very well, Ms. Temple. You will go back to the camp, as you seem to wish, and doubtless die young. That should give you a great deal of satisfaction. First, however, you will repay your crimes. Many in the Corps lost their lives due to your actions—oh, I don't think you killed anyone directly, but everyone in your resistance cell is equally guilty."

"Isn't my rotting in this camp good enough for you?"

"Good enough for the normals, yes, but not for the Corps. We require a different sort of payment. A life for a life, if you will. Ms. Temple, as a P12 your life is very dear to us. You wish to throw it away—that is your prerogative. I cannot stop you. But your genes are another matter. They belong to us all." He clasped his hands over one knee. "Again, you have two choices. One involves certain mechanical devices. The other is much more pleasant, and would probably require you staying here, in comfort, for quite some time."

"With you, you mean."

“Yes. I am a P12 also, of course. I’ve had the genetics run. Our child would be a P11 or P12.”

“No.”

“Understand. Either way, you will have my child. This is not my choice nor yours, but the choice of the Corps. The Corps is mother, the Corps is father. They were to me, and they will be to my child. Our child.”

“No.”

“You cannot say no. You can be restrained, you can be sedated, you can be artificially inseminated—but none of these would be very pleasant for you. I can make things very nice for you indeed. I would prefer it.”

“No.”

He sighed. “Let me add just one more, very small incentive before I give up. I can be very persistent, you see.” He clapped loudly, and the door opened again. Two Hounds pushed through, holding a man she had never seen before between them. He was emaciated, filthy, his black hair long, tangled, hiding his face.

Fiona?

Oh my God, she thought. Matthew!

She watched as they pushed Matthew roughly into a chair.

“Yes, we discovered your little liaisons,” Teal-Montoya said, returning to his chair. “Not, unfortunately, in time. I was puzzled by your resistance—and his. After we gave up on you and pulled you out, he eventually succumbed to a scan. His feelings about you were quite plain.”

“But he wouldn’t join you, either.”

“No. And do not worry—he will also make his contribution to the gene pool. There are a variety of ways he might do so, some very unpleasant indeed. I think I will leave it up to you to decide exactly how unpleasant it gets for him.”

Fiona. It was Matthew. Fiona. Don’t... His mind dissolved into chaos as the nearest guard struck him with a shock stick.

“You bastard!” Fiona snarled, standing, hurling hate and pain at the Psi Cop with every ampere of will she possessed. His eyes widened, and he dropped his glass, reeling back. Then he recovered, his blocks shutting against her, a grim look appearing on his face.

“Perhaps, after all, this is just a waste of my time,” he said. “You two—” He gestured toward his Hounds, froze, and looked

extremely puzzled as he toppled and fell. First one, then the other Hound followed him to the floor. Fiona stared, not quite understanding, and then noticed the thin sliver of bamboo, ending in a little cone of latex, standing out from Teal-Montoya's carotid artery. Then a motion beyond the half-open window.

A moment later, Stephen Walters eased through the door. In his hand he carried a bamboo tube a few feet long.

"What—" she started.

"No, shh. Time to go."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because he might have picked it up from you, and then we would have both been done."

"But you said you needed me."

"Yes. They wouldn't have brought anybody but a P12 in here. And after they brought you in here, and I got this far—I needed you on my side."

"What. What do you need me for?"

He pointed to the downed Psi Cop. "He isn't dead. I hit him with a nerve toxin."

"Where in the hell did you get a nerve toxin?"

"Modified cobra venom—plenty of those around here. Fiona, I'll explain in detail later. Right now I need to know if you can do something."

"What?"

"His chopper won't work without him at the stick—unless he authorizes a change in bioident. We need that to happen. I've heard some wild stuff about what P12's can do. Can you plant a suggestion in him that he turn his chopper over to me?"

She frowned. "I can't control him, if that's what you mean."

He shook his head. "No. The toxin will wear off fast, but when he comes out of it he'll be confused. If he wakes up with a strong urge to transfer idents—maybe to someone he thinks is one of his Hounds, because he's sick or injured, maybe dying—"

"Yes." She shook her head vigorously. "I think—yes, I think I can do that."

"You do it while I take care of the guards." He paused, looking at Matthew. "Who's he?"

"He's going with us."

"Look at him, Fiona—he'll be deadweight. What's going on here?"

“He’s going with us, or I don’t do this.”

“Damn it—” He blew out a breath. “Fine. That means we have to carry two people out to the chopper undetected.”

“I carried you, remember? I can carry Matthew.”

Teal-Montoya was beginning to stir as Stephen pushed him into the pilot’s seat. A commotion had also begun at the other end of the camp.

“They’ve noticed I’m gone.” Stephen gritted his teeth. “Get him in.”

She heaved Matthew into the backseat less gently than she meant to. “Okay.”

“Get in.”

They closed the doors and sat in the cabin, each with a pistol, as they watched dark figures moving back and forth across the square. After a moment, bright lights snapped on, flooding the entire compound.

“C’mon, wake up,” Fiona said, patting Teal-Montoya’s face. Then, when that failed to produce results, she slapped him.

His eyes slitted open.

“You’re hurt, sir,” she hissed. “Remember? They shot you? We have to get you to a medic. But I can’t fly your chopper.”

She had deep scanned him, found an old incident in which he had been wounded, doctored it. There had been no helicopter or transfer of bio-ident that time, but he had to stay confused only for a moment—Steve tapped her on the shoulder. From the corner of her eye, Fiona noticed two guards entering the building they had just left.

“Sir, hurry. You’re bleeding.”

“Ah. Yes.” He groaned weakly. “Computer—transfer bio-ident and voice recognition from Joseph Teal-Montoya, 49-156667349—to—what was your name?”

“Lenya Kolkin, 60-234637586,” Fiona said. One of her aliases, hopefully one that was still active. The door to the house banged back open, and two men came out, both with rifles, looking around wildly.

Teal-Montoya was looking at her oddly. “Do I know you?”

“Hurry, sir!”

“Is your hand on the plate?”

“Yessir.”

“Car, transfer. Go.” He looked at her again. “I do know you,

don't I?"

Stephen hit him in the jaw with a right cross—the Psi Cop gagged and slammed against the window. Fiona scrambled over his body, grabbing at the controls.

"You were supposed to transfer it to me," Stephen hissed.

"Tough. Hang on."

"You know how to fly one of these?"

"I'm about to learn. If you have any tips..."

If Stephen had any, they stayed in him, bottled there by the sudden g-force as quick-jump ground effect jets kicked them straight up, away, to freedom.

Chapter Eight

Kevin closed his eyes against the nightmare that had battered its way through his blocks. It was an unfamiliar experience, shocking. No one had ever gotten in there, behind his mask.

Nor did he want them there. The force was clearer to him now. This wasn't one very strong mind, but many weaker ones bound together.

And yet not entirely together; their gestalt was like an octopus, separate tendrils supporting one another, working in unison to pry him and the others apart. Their monstrous forms were, of course, illusion.

He took his own mind from its box, a keen, razor-edged saber, a sleek and deadly thing. He cut in small slices at first, but with precision, one tentacle at a time.

Panic. They hadn't considered him a threat—hadn't been able to see, even, that he was a teep. It was his mother's parting gift, this invisibility.

Whick, whick-snicker-snack. They fell away, but his mind was starting to ache, like a muscle clenched too tightly for too long.

One of the Psi Cops shook loose, saw what was happening, and his pistol barked. The priest went down.

Again, and what remained of the octopus flew apart, worms wriggling away, trying to burrow into the earth.

In a few minutes it was over; those who were not dead had surrendered. Kevin surveyed them. No longer monsters, they were old men and women, children.

"As I said," he breathed, trying not to sound weak, "search the cave."

Something sweet touched his lips.

"Sir!" Natasha whispered.

His nose was bleeding, and he was weeping tears of blood.

"Sir, I didn't know—"

"I did not intend for you to know, Ms. Alexander. Or anyone else for that matter. If the normals ever discover that the director of

Psi Corps is a telepath...”

“Yes, sir. No one will know, sir.”

He nodded wearily. “It’s our destiny, not theirs, Ms. Alexander. Never forget that.”

“I never will, sir.”

“This is all we found, sir.”

It was like metal, smooth and hard, but with a faint shimmering and shifting that was not like metal at all. He recognized it instantly as being like the artifacts from Mars. When he touched it, he felt a vague shock, and for an instant he was back in the storm of his mother’s death, staring up at the Shalako in fear and wonderment.

He handed the small shard back to Natasha, watching for a reaction. If she felt anything, she did not show it.

“It was on the altar, sir. There was no sign of any equipment that might have been used to manipulate genes.”

“They subradared the whole place?”

“Yes, sir. Nothing.”

“Well. For the moment, at least, we seem to have reached a dead end. There are more sites like this?”

“A few.”

“Check them out. Take more people this time, and if the places have guardians, take no chances. Use gas or nerve collapsers. There are questions I want answers to.”

Chapter Nine

It took him a good long while to stop gritting his teeth. Fiona was managing the chopper pretty well for someone who had never flown one—which was to say that every moment he spent looking at the windows sent his life flashing before his eyes.

So he concentrated on other things. Binding and gagging Teal-Montoya, for instance. He uplinked long enough to get a fix on their location and a map of the area, then cut the satellite link, after which he methodically shut off anything else which might help Psi Corps, local cops, or anyone else following them.

Fiona made exactly one call on the local link, spoke in what sounded like gibberish for ten seconds or so, and then let him shut it down, too.

Half an hour later, she landed the craft in a small clearing next to a lake.

“We get out here,” she said.

“In the jungle?”

“Yes.”

“What about the Psi Cop?”

In answer, she opened the door and dumped the now-conscious Psi Cop onto the ground. He lay there, glaring at them. Fiona ignored that, ran to the back door, and opened it.

“Matthew?” he heard her say.

“How is he?” Stephen asked, scanning the surrounding jungle. Teal-Montoya’s gun felt good in his hand.

“Still unconscious.”

“He’s got a pulse, though.”

“Yes,” she snapped, a little irritably.

“Listen,” he said, “not that I want any thanks, or anything...”

She softened. “I’m sorry, Stephen. I’m just worried about him. That was—what you did back there was wonderful. You saved me from something very unpleasant, and I don’t know how I’ll ever make it up to you.” She smiled, and it was a very nice smile. She held out her hand, and he took it, felt the tingle of her gratitude.

“We make a good team,” he managed, wondering why the words sounded so thick and dumb in his throat.

“Of course, I’m fresh out of plans, now.”

“Don’t worry about that. I think I can pick up the ball for a while.”

She cocked her head winsomely. “You’ll have to explain about the nerve toxin someday.”

“Oh. I was a chemist, hard as that may be to believe, and I worked for a pharmaceutical company. Cobra venom is a nerve toxin, and with that and a few handy prison-camp supplies you can make some pretty interesting things.”

“Apparently so.” He liked the sound of her admiration. Too bad about the half-truth—he had studied chemistry, and had even made the nerve toxin, but with items Vacit had had smuggled to him. Oh, well—praise based on false accomplishments was better than no praise at all.

“So,” he asked. “What now?”

“Now? Now I would suggest lowering your pistol, at least for the moment.”

Stephen followed her gaze, and realized he was staring down the barrel of a rifle. All around him, the forest whispered as a small army appeared.

“Stephen Walters, I want you to meet Helang.”

Helang was a small man with the quick black eyes of a predatory bird. Like the rest of his twenty-some-odd people, he wore camouflage. “I don’t know you,” Helang said.

“He helped me escape,” Fiona said. “I vouch for him.”

Helang considered for another moment or two, then nodded briskly. “This way, then.” He motioned out into the forest.

“What about the chopper?” Stephen protested.

“We’ll take care of that,” Helang replied.

“You’ll ditch it?”

“No, Mr. Walters. We’ll use it. But first we will lead your pursuers on a merry chase.”

“What about the Psi Cop?”

“Don’t worry about him, either,” Helang said, his smile a little nasty.

Stephen glanced at Teal-Montoya. *Serves you right, you son of a bitch*, he thought. *I wanted to snap your neck myself when—*He suddenly realized that he might be sending and cut himself off.

Fiona didn't seem to have noticed, anyway—she had turned to Helang and begun chatting in a language he didn't know.

I'm just along for the ride, now, he reminded himself.

They followed a trail through the jungle for a few hundred feet, two of Helang's men carrying Matthew.

They came to the bank of a river, where several very long canoes were tied up. The unconscious Matthew went in one, between the two men who were carrying him. Fiona, three of Helang's men, and he crowded into another. Someone handed him a paddle.

"We're going to paddle? Paddle away from Psi Cops with helicopters?"

"Paddles don't leave chemical trails or send out EM pulses or even generate heat," Fiona pointed out. "And the canopy will keep us from visual sightings from the air. Have a little faith, Stephen. We'll be using faster transportation soon enough."

"What now?" he asked, about an hour later as they put in at a small kampung. Fiona got out of her canoe and went to check on Matthew, and Stephen followed.

"There's a link here," she explained. "They're just checking in to see where the cops are—where it is and isn't safe to go."

"Who the hell are these guys?"

"They call themselves the Orang Asli," she said. "It's an old term for the aboriginal people."

"Some of these guys don't look aboriginal to me. That one's blond."

Fiona nodded, wiping Matthew's face with a damp rag. "It's just a name. They have different backgrounds."

"But they aren't telepaths."

"No. They're revolutionaries, of a sort, mostly refugees from Sarawak and Kalimantan. The Indonesian Consortium forcibly resettled them here back in the thirties, when they controlled Malaysia. They want their homeland back."

"And this has what to do with us?" Stephen asked.

"The telepath underground has worked with them before," Fiona said. "We supply them with our special kind of information; they help us move people along the underground railroad in this

part of the world.”

“Whoa. ‘We’ve worked with them before’? Underground railroad? What have I fallen into, here?”

“Welcome to the resistance, Stephen.” She considered for a moment. “You have two choices now. I can do my best to get you away from here—to somewhere safe. Change your identity, have some fake test results forged. Or—” She turned her gaze on him. “We need people like you, Stephen.”

He had known the offer would come, of course—it was what Vacit had counted on—but somehow it was still a jolt. Fiona was sincere, fiercely so, and though she wasn’t trying to broadcast, her passion leaked.

“I’ll—ah—can I think about it?”

“Of course.”

Helang came back and squatted down near them. “Problem,” he said. “The usual connection in Singapore won’t fly. In a week or so, maybe—”

“In a week or so, they’ll find us.”

A little cough interrupted them, and they turned to see that Matthew had opened his eyes. They were fixed on Fiona, as if she were the only thing he could see, but he spoke to all of them. “I know another way,” he said. “At least, I think I do.”

A giant opened the door. His ebony features swayed over them for an instant before a huge grin nearly bisected them.

“Brother Matthew!”

Matthew clasped the giant in a hug, then held him at arm’s length. “Still growing, I see!” he said.

“Only in my heart, I hope. The beds here are too short for me as it is.” A frown crossed his features. “We thought you had been taken.”

“I was. Brother Justin, please meet Fiona Temple and Stephen Walters, my earthly saviors.”

Fiona found herself gaping at the whole exchange, as she took in the giant’s brown robes, the crucifix and rosary about his long neck. “You—you’re a priest?” she asked Matthew.

Matthew placed a hand on her shoulder. “No. I was a monk, for a time, here. But—”

“But Brother Matthew was not content to let trouble come to him,” Justin finished. “He would rather go into the world and find trouble. And bring it here, apparently. Please, all of you, be welcome.” He made the sign of the cross, and they stepped into what seemed a limestone cathedral. It was a natural cave, or mostly natural. They had climbed for almost two hours up the steep side of a sort of mesa before finding the little door—still some two hundred feet or so short of the top. They could see out the top, now—a shaft of sunlight speared into the chamber from a natural opening above, its light falling near an altar.

“You know why I came here?” Matthew asked. “I hate to put the order in danger, but—”

“But you have need of us. I understand, Matthew.”

Another monk approached them, this one considerably shorter than Brother Justin. Older, too. He had a round, pleasant face.

“This is Brother William,” Justin told them. “He can be trusted.”

Brother William smiled glowingly at each, as they were introduced. “Brother Matthew! I have heard so much about you, and it’s a pleasure to finally meet.”

Matthew nodded, but as he reached to take the monk’s hand, his legs wobbled.

“Please, our pardon!” Brother Justin said, reaching for Matthew. “Of course you need rest, food, medical care.”

“No time,” Matthew said.

“It will take time to arrange your travel,” Brother William soothed, “certainly a few hours. You will be safe here until then.”

Matthew nodded reluctantly.

“Come, Matthew,” Brother Justin said. “Let me take you and Stephen to clean up and eat. Brother William will make certain Ms. Temple has the privacy to do the same.”

“Thank you, Brother Justin,” Matthew said. He took Fiona’s hand. “It’s okay. You can trust them.”

She nodded, and turned to follow William. They left the sanctuary and began moving through Human-cut corridors.

Brother William glanced over at her. “I was sorry to hear about Monkey.”

“Thank you.” She wasn’t really surprised. The Church was one of their staunchest allies, though very cautious of the aid it gave them. Monkey had dealt often with them.

“Well. He left something here for you. Would you like to see it?”

“Left it? When?”

“Long ago.”

“Please. I’d like to see it now, if I may.”

“First bathe and eat. I’ll bring it to you soon.”

“Now, please.”

William shrugged. “If you wish.”

“Damn, that feels good,” Stephen said, easing into the steaming water. “Double damn.”

“I agree,” Matthew murmured from his own tub a few yards away. He closed his eyes and lay back. “Thank you.”

“For?”

“Helping Fiona. Stopping the Psi Cop from—”

“Hey, my pleasure, believe me. So, Matthew. Are you a part of this resistance, too?”

“Sometimes.”

“Is that how you and Fiona met?”

“No. We met in the holes.”

Stephen sat up. “I thought the holes were isolation cells.”

Matthew nodded. “They put us too close.”

Matthew’s tattoo was just showing. A P12. At the sight of it he felt a surge of resentment, and Matthew noticed it. “Sorry,” Stephen said. “I’m just a lousy P8.”

“None of us can help how he is born,” Matthew said. “It’s what we do with what we have that’s important And you—without you, things would be very bad for Fiona and me right now. Very bad.”

“I don’t know. Fiona’s quite a gal. She would’ve come up with somethin’.”

“She is amazing,” Matthew agreed, and Stephen found himself disliking his tone, too.

The image was a little blurry, as if the crystal was not quite compatible with the reader. Or perhaps it was the film of tears she kept wiping away.

Grandpa Monkey’s face filled the screen.

“Fee, if you’re lookin’ at me here, it means I’m dead. I’ve left a few of these around for you, not knowin’ when and where you’ll

come across 'em, but I do know they won't get handed out till I'm on the slab. So.

"I've raised two kids in my life, Fee, neither of 'em my own. The first one was your father, the second one was you. I'm sorry you missed your father—I know I haven't talked much about him. When I found him, he was just a little thing. It took me years to learn what happened to him, what made him like he was. His mother died holding him, killed by normals. They were both telepaths, and I think... I think she took something with her when she left, and left something else behind. I've never known anyone so driven and so passionless all at the same time. Anyway.

"I lost him for a while, and when I saw him again he gave me you. I don't know anything about your mother at all, Fee. And your father—" He scrunched his face in unaccustomed lines of pain, or regret, or both. "Your father didn't want you in Psi Corps. He was absolutely clear about that. Clear. And you know how I feel about the whole thing. Anyway, I promised him I would take care of you, though the last thing I wanted was to raise another brat.

"You turned out to be a good brat, though. You're everything your father wasn't. You have passion, kindness, love, honesty. Your pop wasn't a bad guy—just cold, very cold. I think him givin' you to me was the closest thing to love he's ever been able to do—well, maybe the second closest thing. So take it as a compliment.

"I'm rambling, and I hate thinking about my own mortality, which this damn morbid business is doin'—so, two things.

"One: If I'm dead, and you're not—surprise, kid, you're the leader of the resistance. I've been puttin' this damned thing together for umpty years, and it's finally gettin' a little steam behind it. So I'm goin' to tell you where to find all the information I probably just blew up—the cells and their contacts, the underground railroad routes, all the good restaurants along the way, yada-yada-yada. You may want to do this or you may not. If not, pass it on to someone else—I'm dead, I don't care."

He paused again, and his brows arched in amazement. "Well, whadaya know, I do. Look, Fiona, this is important. A hundred and fifty years ago, there were no telepaths. This is still the start of things, but things have a tendency to get set in their ways in the beginning. Listen, Fee. Telepaths are from every country, every ethnic group, every religion. But they are your people. We are becoming a people, that's inevitable, because normals will never

accept us entirely. We have to find a way to hang together. Psi Corps—they found one answer to that, but it's the wrong answer. Very wrong.

“The resistance isn't an answer, Fiona. It's the search for answers. It's an effort to create possibilities, to give us many roads to choose from. When I was young, I didn't think anything was important. I just loved to cause trouble. I thought of myself as chaos, spreadin' anarchy just for the hell of it. Live and learn. Now I want my people to have choices. Given choices, some of us will eventually hit on the right path for teeps. There's a very simple word for what I'm talking about, but simple words tend to lose their meanings when you say them too much. Freedom. That pretty much sums it up, when you do the addition.

“So, there, that was One, and a very long One at that. Here's Two, not quite so long.

“Two: I love you, Kid. Go get 'em.”

Stephen lay looking at the ceiling, unable to sleep. Everything seemed to be going according to plan, but something was bothering him, something itching in the back of his brain.

A few moments later, he gave up, stepped into the loose pants the monks had provided him, and padded out into the corridor. He found the sanctuary again. It was night, and the only light was cast by the candles at the altar.

So far, so good. He had accomplished his first two goals—won Fiona's confidence and gotten them out of the re-education camp. He was as good as in with the underground. So what was bothering him?

The camp had gotten to him, maybe more than he wanted to admit. He didn't really have sympathy for rogues, but nobody deserved that kind of treatment. Still, when the Corps was stronger, they would surely correct the situation. The camps were bad because they were controlled by normals. Teal-Montoya—he was just a bad apple, a typical petty chieftain, exercising what he saw as his prerogative. Hell, if he had been in Montoya's place, ordered to get a child on Fiona, wouldn't he have done the same thing?

He felt a sudden flush of anger and shame at the thought, and that took him by surprise. He liked to think of himself as a

pragmatic fellow, who did the things that needed to be done. He had rarely felt guilty in his life, most certainly not for a lascivious thought. But Fiona—he sighed. He was no dummy. He had to admit that he liked her, perhaps more than liked her. He had been ordered to protect her, but he would have done it regardless, because it felt right.

Which would make it tough to betray her, when the time came. But according to the game plan, that time was still in the future, perhaps the distant future. He could worry about that later, couldn't he?

None of that was what bothered him. He was still trying to trace the source of his unease when he saw shadows moving among the candles.

Fiona rose and dressed, followed the silent call in near darkness. She found Matthew waiting for her at the head of the corridor, just outside of the sanctuary. For a long moment, they stood a yard or so apart, just looking at each other, saying nothing. His eyes were polished iron, translucent jewels—*That's your own reflection*, his mind wisped.

She felt her blocks snap up, shutting him out.

"It's funny, isn't it?" he whispered aloud. "How our faces and bodies get in the way?"

"It's just—I mean, it's all so fast. This is the first time we've really met."

"No. It's the first time we've drawn apart." He held out his hand, his gaze so steady on hers she couldn't bear it, so she closed her eyes. But his were still there, only brighter, deeper, and then she really did see herself in them. Her own features, the ones she hadn't been able to picture clearly in the hole. She had seen them in mirrors, of course, evaluated them, wondered if her nose was too small or her eyes too wide apart—but now her face blazed, and it was beautiful, and she wondered how she could have ever forgotten what it looked like.

Gently, like silk sliding to the floor, her blocks went down, and she touched his hand. He stepped forward, his hand cupping gently behind her head, but she was hardly aware of that. They were already kissing when his lips touched hers.

A hundred feet away, Stephen felt the kiss like a knife in his heart. Pretty damn good for a guy who did nothing but lay there while I saved her, he thought. He nurtured the anger for a moment, turned it this way and that until it made sense. Fine. This would just keep him from being a damn fool. It would allow him to do what he had to do.

But it still hurt.

He was turning to go when he noticed someone else moving in the sanctuary. At first he thought it was one of the priests, but something about the way he moved, pantherlike, triggered something in him, and it all clicked into place.

Brother William. He had seen the monk before, at the academy. He was Corps.

Chapter Ten

He snaked across the sanctuary, wishing he hadn't left the pistol with his other stuff. Where the hell was his mind, anyway? The only saps bigger than he were Fiona and Matthew, obviously locked in their French hello as at least three Hounds converged on them.

He was still ten yards away from the Hounds when they noticed him.

The Corps is mother, the Corps is father, he sent.

They paused, and he leapt, muscles exploding like uncoiling springs. A pistol flashed, a silencer masking its deadly bark, and he felt a sirocco breathe past his ear, but then he was there, driving his fist straight into the Hound's face. He let his momentum carry him over with the toppling man, as another gun whistled. He rolled, came up in a crouch, and launched himself at the second shadow, chopping hard at the extended wrist and spinning to throw the full weight of his charge into his elbow. He felt it crush larynx, and then

Stop or die.

The thought was so certain, he did, actually feeling the aim on his heart. He turned, slowly, to see "Brother" William, pistol in hand. A third Hound was covering Fiona and Matthew. The two he had hit still lay on the ground.

"That's enough," Brother William said. "I don't want to kill any of you, but I certainly will if I have to."

"Don't do this," Matthew said.

William laughed harshly. "Spare me. And don't count on Justin or any of the rest for help. They are—indisposed."

"If you've hurt them, I'll—" Matthew stepped forward, fists balled.

"You'll nothing." He gestured with the gun. "But not to worry. Justin and the others are safe, for the time being. They'll stand trial for their crimes, of course, and in the end may wish I had killed them here and now."

"How long?" Fiona asked. "How long have you—"

“It seems like an eternity, my dear, and not an eternity I’ve enjoyed. I hold you and O’Hannlon responsible, damn you both. We had hoped to get him when he ran, but of course the miserable creature blew himself and one of our best officers to kingdom come. Still, we knew he’d left the crystal for you. It was keyed to your bioident, of course, so we couldn’t open it. We were going to send it to the re-education camp—but you’ve solved that problem very nicely. The terminal you read it on copied the pertinent information. Now, I would prefer to keep you alive, in case the other information is similarly protected.”

“The hell with you.”

“Not yet, my dear, and I don’t believe your defiance will last very long. I’ve read Teal-Montoya’s report on you and Mr. Dexter here, but your little display of a moment ago made it quite unnecessary. You’ll cooperate or I’ll take Mr. Dexter apart, a bit at a time, and I’ll make sure you feel it as he comes to hate you for what you’ve done.”

“That won’t happen, Fee,” Matthew said, low. “He can do anything he wants to me—I’ll never hate you. Protect the resistance.”

William shrugged. “You’d be very surprised what changes sufficient pain can incite in a person’s personality. It’s no matter, really. There are other things we can do if that fails. With proper drugs and deep scanning, Ms. Temple will do whatever we want her to do, though it might not leave much of her mind. A pity, but she’s proven she’s unredeemable, anyway, so—”

Then Stephen felt it, like a hole opening in his heart. Fiona was tensing to spring, to make the Hound kill her. The Hound felt it, too, and his finger tightened on the trigger. Stephen leapt, hurling himself at the Hound, knowing he would be too late—And something caught at his limbs, froze them, and he crashed to earth.

An instant later, his limbs unfroze, and he climbed slowly to his feet.

William stood like a statue. So did the Hound. For a moment he didn’t understand, but then he saw Matthew, eyes like glass, his whole body shuddering.

“Hurry,” he said, gritting his teeth. “I can’t—only a second or two—”

Stephen and Fiona understood at about the same time. She leapt for the Hound, and he jumped William just as Matthew

groaned and staggered back. William swung the pistol straight and true, but he just didn't have time to fire it. He might be a Psi Cop, but the monastery had made him slow and lazy. Stephen hit him very hard, went down with him, and made sure his neck snapped before he rose.

When he was finished, Fiona had two guns and the Hounds were all on the floor.

"You killed him," Fiona whispered

"Damn straight," Stephen hissed. "He knew, right? Where this information about the underground could be found? Now he doesn't. We have to do the rest of these, too."

"No," Matthew said, voice shaky. "We can't kill them in cold blood. Brother Justin—Brother Justin and the rest will find something to do with them."

Stephen wanted them all dead—what if one of them had recognized him? But he brusquely agreed.

"Fine. What now, then?"

"Find Justin and the rest," Fiona said. "Destroy the terminal. Then—" She grinned. "The information Monkey left me is in the U.S. Five will get you a hundred that 'Brother William' there has a jet somewhere and has already registered a flight plan with Psi Corps to go pick it up. The whole operation will be covert, so he won't be scheduled to check in again until he gets there. He probably has border clearances, everything."

"Maybe, maybe not. And we can't fly his plane if it's keyed to him."

"That we can get around," Matthew said "Brother Justin has the equipment for that, and to transfer the clearances to our fake ids. Fiona, you may be right."

"We'll see, won't we? Matthew, are you okay?"

"A little drained I'll be fine."

"Stephen?"

"I'm okay." He paused. "Thanks to Matthew."

"Sorry I caught you in the freeze, there, for a second. It's hard to be selective."

He nodded curtly. "Well. Let's get to work, shall we?" An hour later, they were high over the South China Sea, streaking eastward toward America.

Chapter Eleven

Natasha Alexander joined him at the start of his second mile, looking trim in her black bodysuit. She slowed her pace to match his.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning, Ms. Alexander. I hope you won’t run me to death today.”

“I’ll try not to—sir.”

“You have something to tell me.”

A look of dismay crossed her features. “Am I leaking? I hoped I had learned better control than that.”

“You have fine control of your blocks and guards,” he said. “It’s your face and voice that give you away.”

“Oh.”

“We spend so much time here teaching you to deal with other telepaths, we forget the more ancient forms of mind reading. The late Senator Crawford—now there was a man who could read minds, though he had no trace of telepathic ability. Until my forced display in Yucatán, even the most powerful telepaths failed to detect me, nor did I really fear that they would. Crawford, I worried about.”

Their pace had slowed even more, he noted. Time was, he could run at a good clip and still have wind for a conversation, at least this early in the run. “Don’t let an old man bore you,” he said. “What do you have for me?”

“As you know, we’ve learned very little from the various cult shrines. Though there is one peculiar thing I ought to mention.”

“That being?”

“A myth. When we questioned the survivors of the Qahsah cave site in Yucatán about the metal—or what we thought was metal, anyway—they all told the same story. It’s a variant of an ancient Mayan myth. The upshot of it is that there were twin brothers who descended into the underworld to battle the lords of death by playing a sort of ball game against them. The lords of death won

and killed the brothers. Their heads were cut off and buried. From one of those heads, a tree grew, and the tree produced a fruit that looked like a human skull. A daughter of one of the lords of death came by. Her name was Blood Woman—”

“Blood Woman?”

“Yes. I think that’s where my great-grandmother got her name.”

“Likely. Go on.”

“Anyway—this part is strange—the skull spit into her palm. She became pregnant and gave birth to another set of twins, identical to the first. When they grew up, they, too, went to battle the lords of death. They defeated the lords of death, but one of the twins was killed. The other rose up into the sky and became the morning star. The one who died did something similar to his father—a tree grew from him, and there a skull grew from the tree. But this one spit in the palms of many women, and was reborn in small pieces all over the world. Finally, a special woman took the skull itself. That piece of—of whatever it was we found in Yucatan is supposed to be part of the skull.

“To make this more interesting, I’ve found variants of this story at some of the other cult sites. The names and details change—at the Indonesian site, for instance, the two brothers were shining diwas—sort of like angels.”

He mulled that over as they reached an incline, and he didn’t have the breath to talk, anyway. On the downhill slope, he glanced over at her. “That could encode some memory of genetic manipulation. The twin brothers—clones? The spitting in the palm, some sort of injection?” He sighed. “Sometimes I think Humans go way out of their way to make the comprehensible as incomprehensible as possible. Do you have any thoughts on this?”

“The lab boys think that ‘metal’ is really organic—that it might have been somehow alive at one time.”

“Yes.” He nodded to himself.

She gave him a puzzled look before going on. “I know that various corporations experimented with that sort of thing earlier this century, but none of them got anywhere. Even the Centauri don’t have anything like it.”

“That we know of,” he cautioned.

“Have you considered asking the Centauri about it—the artifact, I mean?”

“No. I somehow think that would be a very bad idea.”

“I think I see your point, sir.”

“You have something besides all of this, don’t you?”

Fresh excitement tinged her voice. “Yes, sir. I went back to my demographic database, the one I used to make the teep/cult connection—I’ve improved the base, and I thought I might have missed something. I had.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, sir. We place the first generation of teeps born in the twenty-fifties and early twenty-sixties—”

“About the time the priest told us the world began.”

“Yes. And I’ve tied a very high percentage of teeps to original members of those cults. But I started running random checks against other demographic bases, chosen by stratified random sampling, and I found an even stronger correlation to both cult membership and teep ancestry.”

“That being?”

“At one time or another, they all visited or lived in Antarctica.”

“Antarctica?”

“Yes, sir. Despite a few military incidents and the Chilean war of 2035, Antarctica has been international territory since the late twentieth. Every major country has a base, if not a colony, there.”

“And there are a lot of tourists. Are you saying every tourist or colonist in Antarctica is a teep ancestor?”

“No, sir, only a very small fraction. It’s just the conjunction of that with the other data sets that is suspicious. That’s not all, though—”

He chuckled, and that forced him to stop running altogether. Natasha slowed with him.

“Sir?”

“At the Mountains of Madness,” he said.

“Sir?” she repeated.

“An old story, by an author named Lovecraft. Never mind. Is there more?”

“Yes, sir, there is. I checked the logs of the various colonies and tourist expeditions. All the teep ancestors we have records of—and that’s not many from the total, sir—but of the ones I have, all of them seem to have gone missing for a few days. They claimed to have been lost, but showed few signs of frostbite or malnutrition.”

“That,” Kevin allowed, “is very interesting indeed. Did they all

vanish near a common location?”

“Yes, sir, they did.”

“Curiouser and curiouser. And you have that location, I presume.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well. Let’s go, then.”

He stepped out for some air. The air was ninety below. Kevin Vacit had twice been to the Moon and once to Mars, but in its own way the bottom of the Earth was more desolate than either, and certainly more dangerous. Anabatic winds that whipped up to a hundred and twenty miles per hour and temperatures that dove to a hundred and thirty below made it the solar system’s harshest, coldest desert with an oxygen atmosphere.

Small wonder that, after almost three centuries of settlement, Antarctica still had only a few more inhabitants than Mars.

At the moment, the winds were a mere thirty miles per hour, so he could see most of the Vostok colony—a series of domes and covered walkways, some caked with ice, others freshly thawed. An ugly place with a population of less than a hundred.

“It is a cold place, but I find it beautiful,” a muffled voice said behind him.

Kevin turned to regard Sergei Zviyagin, a middle-aged man bundled, like himself, in a heavy parka. “Hello, Commander,” he said.

“It is a big place with little motions. I call it a white book of a thousand pages—and hidden in those pages are a few haiku, written, perhaps, in invisible ink.”

“That seems apt,” Kevin remarked.

“Well, my thanks, Director. I aspire to be a poet, you know. A poet-detective. And I must wonder—as a poet-detective—what haiku are you looking for, written out there on the sastrugi, around the subglacial Gamburtsev Mountains, at the Pole of Inaccessibility? What could be of interest out there to your organization?”

“We’re searching for a colony of rogue telepaths.”

Zviyagin stared at him for a moment, and then burst into deep belly laughter. “You see, Director! You see how wise I can be, in my way? I’ve waited, waited, waited for a chance to speak to you out

here, where ears and microphones hear nothing but snowy hiss, unless you stand very close. And now none of your people—or mine—will know that I laughed at you. Nor will my people know that you insulted me.

“You want me to think you believe there are telepaths, burrowed down in the ice that covers the Gamburtsevs, gradually evolving into creatures of crystal? Come, Director. Your people—your Psi Cops and soldiers and scientists—they have put a strain on our existence here. Our once orderly lives have been disrupted, and you wish to repay me only with something I can laugh at?”

Kevin turned his face back out toward the white plain. “Earth-Gov has approved my stay here, and our business is a matter of internal security. That will have to be enough for you, I’m afraid.”

“I see.” He paused, rubbing his mittened hands together. “You search for something, a dark spot in a satellite photograph. Remote sensing registered a gravitational anomaly there a hundred years ago. Now it is gone.”

“You know something of this?”

“I know there are a thousand dark spots in the snow—mines that didn’t work out, homesteads, craters dug by missiles during the conflicts. But I think I know the one you are looking for.”

“Why didn’t you say this when I asked for information earlier?”

“Because I do not care to be kept in the dark on my own command. Because I do not care to be lied to. But—I will take you to it. I will see what you see. You need tell me nothing.”

The wind picked up. The snow tickled his nose like dust. “Very well,” Kevin said, finally. “But, as you say—I can tell you nothing.”

The power sleds bumped painfully over a sea of frozen waves, formed where wind scoured away the softest ice, leaving behind jagged drifts. Sastrugi, they called it. It was something he could have done without, but the wind was too unpredictable to trust planes or helicopters. Even flyovers were canceled, and Kevin did not want to use the satellite systems. Too many people might notice his scrutiny of this place if he diverted orbital gazes.

The Sun was out today, spilling a fury of heatless light upon the plain. His goggles helped—and would certainly filter out the high UV levels—but still, when he shut his eyes, he saw only flat

redness.

After many hours, a sort of blue-grey lens appeared in the heretofore uniform brightness, growing larger as they approached it.

“There you go, Director,” Zviyagin shouted. “Your hole.”

It was, indeed, a hole.

They stood at the rim of it, staring down. He could not see the bottom; a mist of snow dust obscured vision after a few hundred feet.

“How deep is the ice here?” he asked Zviyagin.

“Two kilometers. Maybe more.”

He measured the diameter with his eye. A hundred meters? Two hundred? It was hard to say.

“The wind is better for flying right now?” he asked.

“Well, yes, right now, but that can change very abruptly—”

“We’ll risk it. Natasha?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Have one of the Garuda-class choppers meet us here.”

“Yes, sir. Can I tell them why?”

“I have to go down there.”

They descended through a cyclone of their own making, descended through time, past ice laid down when Lincoln was president of a fractured United States, when Alexander marched, when the Great Wall of China was built. Below waters that had last been clouds when Sumer was founded, when the first grains were planted, when Neanderthal and Homo sapiens shared the same forests in Europe, until at last they settled once again on the snows of their own century, a few inches that had drifted down to coat the hard earth, the foothills of the Gamburtsev Mountains, whose highest peaks never felt the Sun.

“Floods,” Kevin ordered, and the world became light.

Ice gleamed around them. Not the familiar ice of the world they knew, but ice bruised by two kilometers of its own weight. It was striated, black, aquamarine, subtle pearl, milk, jade. Chunks the size of cars had spilled from the walls, from here and higher up. Some seemed to have exploded like bombs.

“This hole can’t be too old,” Natasha whispered. “The ice shifts

—not a lot, but it’s always moving.” He got a chill from her that had nothing to do with temperature.

“Sir, it’s not safe. Another piece could fall anytime. The whole thing could collapse.”

“I know.” He turned, walking in a circle around the chopper, feeling something—a trace of something. He kept walking.

“Sir, radar doesn’t show anything but ice. I really think—”

He didn’t hear the rest, as light and sound exploded around him, wrapped him in vision.

When someone died, something of them lingered. Their thoughts and memories, what they had been, what they might have been. Not for long—most often for fleeting moments only—but it did linger. A sort of shadow of the mind, cast upon the particles of creation itself, perhaps, fading as the universe moved without it. No one knew how it worked—any more than they knew how telepathy itself really worked—but it was, like telepathy, an observed phenomenon.

Someone had died here. Something was left.

A thing, a structure—a ship, huge, scintillating, alive. He saw chambers, corridors—people, floating in transparent, fluid-filled tubes. Voices, throbbing below the level of understanding, voices like the grinding of worlds against one another. And duty—an important one.

And pain. An enemy, a darkness. Pain and sorrow, memories of a thousand years, hopes for a thousand more. The air shattering. Life shattering. Gone.

He became aware of his own breathing, harsh, like a runner in panic. Sweat had filmed over his face and was beginning to freeze there, and Natasha was holding his hand, shaking it, mindscreaming at him.

Director! Mr. Vacit! Kevin!

“I’m here,” he murmured.

“Oh, God. Thank God!” She buried herself against him, and he felt her concern and—love?—rush over him like a wave.

He pushed her gently back. “It’s okay. I’m okay, Ms. Alexander. Did you feel it?”

She mastered herself quickly. “Feel what, sir? You just started staring into space, shaking. You were blaring static. I thought something was wrong with you.”

“It was like a death-trace, but—” He couldn’t find it. “Is this

where I was standing? The whole time?”

“Yes.”

“And when you came over to me, you felt nothing?”

“No, sir. I’m sorry.”

“No. It’s okay. There’s nothing here, you say?”

“Radar and sonics show nothing. Very slight lingering background radiation. It’s an empty hole, sir.”

“It is,” he agreed. “It is now.”

Part IV

Legacy

Chapter One

Stephen jerked his head back from around the corner of the stable. Inside, a horse snorted uncertainly.

“Damn!” he snarled. “They’ve already got him. I count—holy Moses!—three Psi Cops and a goon squad of maybe ten. All of this for one kid?”

“Block!” Matthew hissed. “They’re sweeping!”

Stephen snapped his guard up, felt his companion’s stronger power settle over both of them—not just blocking, but making them transparent to a searching scan—hopefully. He swallowed his resentment and checked the rounds in his clip.

After a moment, Matthew relaxed. “Okay,” he said. “That was tough.”

“Well, now what? Two against thirteen, three of them Psi Cops.”

Matthew sighed. “I guess we can’t win them all. Better pull out before they do notice us.”

Stephen nodded affirmation and stood, slowly. “Still—” he said. “Three Psi Cops. If this kid rates that much attention—” He scratched his head. “What did the report say again?”

“We didn’t get much of it, and parts of it were garbled. The Corps has a new code, and about twenty percent still comes through scrambled. A boy, age thirteen—Remy Ligeau. The usual stuff—freaked out in church, somebody passed it on.”

“I’m surprised,” Stephen remarked. “I’ve never seen a more closemouthed community.”

“Yes, but the reward for turning in a teep can be pretty steep.”

“I guess. There must be more. This just doesn’t smell right. Three Psi Cops in Wherethefrag, Canada, two hundred miles from anyplace with a population higher than a dachshund’s IQ? Uh-uh. Head for the woods. I’ll meet you in town, at the café, say about ten o’clock or not at all.”

“What? Stephen, wait—”

But he was already gone, sprinting along the edge of the trees.

He waited a few moments, to give Matthew a head start, then began firing, short, controlled bursts. The tableau seemed frozen for a moment—the Psi Cops, two with their hands on the shoulders of a boy; a man and woman, presumably the boy’s parents, standing on the porch of a cabin, looking worried; a perimeter of guards, way too relaxed.

His first three shots hit the wagon they had come in, and by the third he was sure he had taken out the power system. Then he started in on the guards. By that time it was self-defense, as bullets laced the air around him. He ducked back into the woods, dove behind a downed spruce. He popped back up and fired again, hitting a second man in the shoulder. At about the same time, the man on the porch—the father—was somehow holding a shotgun. It roared and belched a cloud of smoke, and one of the Psi Cops mindscreamed as he sprawled among the chickens pecking around the yard. Then both the father and mother went down as the remaining Psi Cops opened up. Stephen calmly shot another Psi Cop and the nearest guard, as an inch from his head the bole of a spruce tree opened a smoking eye. He ducked again, but not before he noticed the boy running into the woods. The remaining guards and cops seemed not to notice—they had sights only for him, now, and things became very violent around his log.

The house sat at the top of a mountainous ridge that ran to his left and right. The road he and Matthew had come up on went right—the boy was going left.

He started wiggling backward, down the incline, raising his arm high for a shot now and then. When he thought he had enough of an angle, he jumped up and ran, paralleling the ridgetop.

As he ran, he counted what he had last seen. One Psi Cop left and four grunts. Still not good odds—but he should have a little time now. Psi Cops weren’t usually wilderness types. His original plan had been to take out the car and then pick them off one by one as they headed to town on foot, but this was better, if he could catch up with the boy before they did.

Reaction was setting in, and his legs felt a little quivery. What the hell was he doing? Matthew had a way of bringing out the stupid in him, like no one else besides Fiona. But of course, the two were very much corollary.

Puffing, he worked his way back to the top of the ridge, tearing through a stand of dense secondary growth, and then back into

clearer woods. He did a quick pivot, but no one was following yet.

He found the boy's track easily enough, and took off after him.

He found the boy huddled against a tree at the edge of a ravine, watching him approach with wild eyes.

Easy, Remy. I'm here to help you. It'll be okay. He glanced behind him again, feeling imaginary crosshairs on his back.

Remy Ligeau inched closer to the abyss, whimpering. Stephen walked a few steps closer, hand outstretched.

C'mon. We have to hurry.

Bad, bad. Run hide run hide papa says don't don't just, no not ever dark angel touch me but still my boy love redeemer please just a little thing didn't mean to papa papa...

Stephen slapped his hands to his ears involuntarily, but of course it didn't help, though his blocks did. He felt disoriented, not so much by the words as by the stream of images and feelings that bellowed from the boy's mind like a bullhorn turned up to the point of distortion.

"Good Lord..."

A bullet spanged from a nearby rock, and he dove forward, grabbing the boy and yanking him down. Remy thrashed like a wildcat, and for a moment, the two of them hung at the edge of the cliff before falling.

Stephen's gut floated empty for an instant, and then they hit a talus slope, rolling, skittering down about thirty feet before he caught hold of a scraggly cedar. A good thing, too, for another ten feet and the slope of loose stone spilled over the final lip of the crevasse. Swearing, he hung on to the boy with one hand and the shallow-rooted cedar with the other. The rifle lay perhaps five feet upslope.

"Grab a tree, boy," he snapped. *Grab a tree!* The boy looked at him, uncomprehending.

Two, then three figures appeared at the top of the ridge.

"Bring us the boy," one shouted down.

"Shoot me, and we both fall."

Bring us the boy! It had the force of command, and Stephen had to fight the sudden instinct to do exactly what the Psi Cop demanded. But he couldn't anyway.

The Psi Cop seemed to dive off the edge, followed by the man next to him. The third turned, raised his rifle, and did a back flip. The first two bodies bumped down the slope and off into space,

while the third fetched up against a large boulder.

Matthew appeared, staring down at them, and then he, too, fell. The reports of rifles clapped in the chasm, loud, then faint, then loud again...

Grab a tree! Stephen flung again, furiously. *Papa says grab a tree!*

Eyes still clouded, the boy finally did, and Stephen scrambled free. Matthew had fallen at a strange angle, and was out of sight. Stephen got the rifle and crawled upslope on his belly.

Stones began dancing around him, and more applause rose from the ravine. Breathing slowly and evenly, he tuned that out as distraction, sighted the head he could just barely make out, focused on its barely discernible thoughts, fired, fired, fired as something hot scored his shoulder—He felt it, a rush of horror, surprise, resignation, nothing. The shooting from the top of the ridge stopped.

There was one more out there. Or would they have sent one to get help?

Matthew? Matthew, are you there?

Nothing. He glanced back at the boy, who seemed to have finally grasped the notion that he would fall if he didn't hold on to something. Five minutes crawled by, and he repeated his call to Matthew, with the same negative results.

Ah, well. Good riddance. It would make all sorts of things easier.

He was surprised to feel a bit of self-loathing at that thought. But self-loathing was a feeling he had come to terms with. Like every time he sent the director a memo.

He began inching toward where he had last seen Matthew. It paid to be sure.

He found the other man scarcely a yard from the edge. His shoulder was bleeding and his eyes were closed, but this close Stephen could feel the life still in him. One little push could fix that. A very small push, indeed.

He let himself down toward Matthew, cocking his leg back to kick him. The leg was shaking.

He didn't know how long he lay like that, but in the end he gave up, grabbed Matthew, and hauled him up the slope to safety. The wound was bad, but shouldn't be fatal; the purpling spot on Matthew's head was a better explanation for his little nap. He lifted

the eyelids and found the pupils were the same size, so no concussion.

He went back down and helped Remy up. The boy had gone silent—almost catatonic, in fact. When he returned, Matthew was raised up on one elbow:

“What happened?”

“You saved my life,” Stephen told him, brusquely. “Then one winged you from behind. It was pretty funny, really. Like you were all just walking up to the cliff’s edge and falling over. Like lemmings, or something.”

When Matthew didn’t laugh, he continued, “I guess you had to be there.”

“Are they all dead?”

“There’s one more, I think.”

“I shot one back at the house,” Matthew said.

“Oh. No, we’re jake then. But we should get out of here. We’ll go back up to the old farmstead, and then I’ll go down and get the car.”

He found them in the barn, Matthew seeming woozy and the kid looking as crazy as ever.

“C’mon, Matthew, up and at ’em. I don’t know what this kid did—swallow the president’s secret résumé or what—but there’s another squad of cops in town, gettin’ ready to come up as we speak. They already found our car.”

“Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes. I don’t know how long we have, but I’d say not too long. I’m going to grab some food and things from the house—do you know how to saddle a horse?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I like to saddle Jisabelle.”

They both turned in astonishment to behold Remy, stroking one of the horses.

“You get the food, Matthew. I’ll help Remy—I haven’t ridden in a while, but I think I can remember the basics.”

“There’s only two horses.”

“Remy can ride double with one of us.”

As it turned out, it was Matthew riding up behind Remy, because once on the horse, the boy suddenly seemed to come alive, the voices bubbling out of his head reduced to a sort of rhythm-mantra, wordless.

Was he in the horse's head? If he could do that, it certainly would make him valuable to Psi Corps.

It felt good to ride again. He had spent considerable time galloping the plateau around Casper when he was a kid. Riding a horse wasn't exactly like riding a bike, but it did come back to you.

They found a back way down the mountain, went up a creek for a time, starting the occasional false trail.

Sundown found them in an elevated pass, with a good view back toward where they had come from.

"They'll bring helicopters soon, with microdoppler and infrared. Tomorrow, maybe, the next day at the latest." Matthew sighed, leaning back against a stone.

"Better have a fire now, then, while we still can," Stephen reasoned. He gathered the wood and soon had one going. Remy had at first refused to dismount, but did so when he saw the fire, coming to watch the flames in fascination. Matthew broke out some food—homemade bread and goat cheese.

"What was with those folks, anyway?" Stephen asked, after swallowing a bite of his sandwich. "I mean, we liked things kind of old-fashioned back in Wyoming, but Remy's people didn't even have a refrigerator." He hunched closer to the fire. "Not that they need one, I suppose." A deep chill had fallen with the night, reminding him that October in these latitudes could be murderous.

"I think they were Pareilists," Matthew said. "Sort of like the Amish."

"Huh. Weird that anyone would choose to live like that."

"Weird to me that anyone gets to choose how they live. Have you ever tried to imagine it, Stephen? Being able to pick where you want to live, how you want to live, what you want to do?"

"I don't have to imagine it," Stephen remarked. "I didn't get my stuff until I was twenty-two. For a while, the whole world was open to me."

"Maybe that's worse, then—to have freedom and then lose it."

Stephen laughed a little bitterly. "I was doing a damn good job of narrowing my choices before I went teep. No one has real freedom."

“Being able to make your own mistakes is freedom. Freedom isn’t about making the right choices, or about everything working out fine. It’s about getting to decide for yourself and taking the blame yourself if you blow it.”

“That last is a right a lot of people don’t really want.”

Matthew chuckled painfully. “Sometimes, Stephen, I wonder what keeps you with us. You don’t seem to really believe in what we’re doing.”

Stephen stirred the fire with a stick, and a nebula of sparks lifted toward their stellar cousins. “Believe? I just like a good fight. Have I ever given you cause to doubt my enthusiasm?”

“No. I just don’t understand you. You’re always closed to me.”

“I’m a private kind of guy.”

Matthew was silent for a moment. “Do we know where we’re headed?”

Stephen nodded. “Dena country isn’t far. The underground has a cell there.”

“Dena country? That’s more than a hundred miles.”

“You have a better idea?”

“No—Stephen, look at that!”

Something funny was happening with the fire. The sparks were forming odd patterns, clumping here and there. As Stephen watched, a small chunk of glowing wood joined its smaller, fiery brethren in a weird cyclonic dance.

“Holy Moses,” Stephen breathed.

Matthew nodded. “A telekinetic.”

“No wonder Psi Corps sent the A team.”

Intent on the coal, Remy seemed not to notice them at all.

“That means they won’t turn loose, either. Not that they would, anyway, after we killed those Psi Cops, but—Jesus. This is the first teek I’ve ever seen. Are they really all like this—a little soft in the head? That’s what I’ve heard.”

“He can hear you, you know, even if he doesn’t respond.”

“Yeah. Sorry, Remy. Man, look at that.” He took a swallow of water, still watching the display. “Think of what he could do. Throw switches. Jam guns. Maybe even do things inside a man, like monkey with blood vessels, or whatever.” He paused. “I guess they want to breed him, huh?”

“Or dissect him. Or both.”

They paused, as the thought set in. It was Stephen who broke

the silence.

“Okay, Matthew. You don’t understand me—I don’t understand you. We keep fighting this fight, but where is it all going? Eventually, even friendly countries are going to say enough is enough. Right now we just shuffle people around, from here to there, but in the end nothing really changes, does it?”

Matthew leaned back on his elbow. “Maybe we are the same, in a way. It’s not about winning—not right now, at least—it’s about the fight. As long as we let them know we won’t go quietly, we keep the idea on the table that we are people, that we have rights, that there should be a place for us. I don’t know where. Maybe here, maybe in the stars—all I know is, when you give in, when you let them put you in a hole, it can take a long time to claw your way back out. So we stay out, make them take notice of us, keep the idea of freedom alive until we can see a way to fill the hole in.”

“By which ‘hole’ you mean Psi Corps.”

“By which I mean all of it. The normals who won’t accommodate their lives to fit us in. The senators who only use us as chits in a political game. The corporations who exploit us, the bigots who kill us. And yes, Psi Corps, who would try to forge us into mindless weapons.”

“We’re beatin’ ourselves into weapons. We kill, Matthew.”

“Yes. That’s the problem, isn’t it? Trying to keep from becoming the thing we hate.”

Stephen didn’t answer. What could he say? The show was over—Remy had somehow dropped off to sleep in a sitting position. “Poor kid. He doesn’t know what kind of life he’s in for, does he?”

“Sometimes,” Matthew replied, softly, “not knowing is better than knowing.”

Stephen snorted. “That’s the kind of thing I’ve come to expect to hear you say. Makes me want to twist your head off, sometimes.”

The next day the clouds blew in, along with a few snow flurries. It got colder, and they drew the blankets they had taken from Remy’s house tight around them. They didn’t see any choppers until nearly sundown, when Matthew spotted one near the horizon. By that time they had worked their way down out of the mountains and were in high plateau, a mix of spruce forest and open grassland. It made for

better time, but when the choppers expanded their search pattern, hiding would be a lot harder.

“Fire?” Remy asked, hopefully, as the dark drew down upon them.

“Sorry, Remy,” Matthew told him. “The bad guys will see it.” As he said it, he listed in his saddle a bit.

“We better halt here,” Stephen said. “You need the rest.”

The Moon drizzled milky light into the clouds, but beneath the high trees, darkness lay unchallenged. Remy huddled against Matthew. Everybody loved Matthew.

“How did you end up being a priest?” Stephen asked, to distract himself from the marrow-chilling cold.

“Monk,” Matthew corrected. “You’ve never asked me that. You’ve never asked me much of anything, Stephen. Five years we’ve worked together, and yet we’ve never become friends.”

“Yeah? But you keep tryin’. Too hard sometimes. Why?”

“Because Fiona loves you.”

Stephen knew he didn’t hide his shock, not all of it. He felt his throat close up. “What?”

“She cares deeply about you. You’re important to her, and I trust that.”

“That’s no good reason to trust somebody.”

The wind hissed in the trees, and his body began to shiver uncontrollably.

“We’re all going to have to huddle together or freeze,” Matthew said. “Come over here with us.”

“No, thanks.”

“Not just for you. Remy and I need you.”

“Maybe I will in a minute.”

“You really don’t like me, do you?” Matthew said.

“What’s brought all this up?”

“You don’t want to answer?”

Stephen gnawed his lip for a moment, and then he said, “All right, no, I don’t like you. You took advantage of Fiona, and you won’t let her out of it. You’ve used her to make yourself a big man—everyone in the resistance loves you, and it’s because you’re married to her. Hell, the whole underground would fall apart without you guys. Everyone does what they do for you, not because it’s right, or best, or sensible—but because they want to be you.”

“What are you talking about? How did I ‘take advantage’ of

Fiona?”

“They were brainwashing her. It’s an old technique. Cut someone off from everything outside, wait till they start to go crazy in their own heads, then step in with a sweet voice and nice promises. They fixate on you like a baby bird. Only you got to her instead of Psi Corps, didn’t you? She would have fallen in love with anyone in that state.”

“You forget I was in that state, too. When I lost her—when they took her out of the hole—it nearly killed me. I broke. I’ll break again without her. Think what you want, Stephen, but if you think all we have is fixation, then you haven’t been paying attention for five years.”

“Shut up.”

“Or maybe it’s something else. Maybe you wish it had been you, there in the hole with her. You jumped like a scared cat when I told you she loved you. Have you ever admitted just how much you love her?”

“Shut up.”

“Why didn’t you kill me back there? You could have. You know you wanted to.”

Blinding, murderous rage pulsed through Stephen, came and went like a flash of lightning. “You scanned me?”

“No need. Why didn’t you kill me? I think that’s a fair question.”

Stephen stared up at the grey clouds. His voice felt oddly detached from his throat, as if it were a bird flown from it, singing on its own now. “I didn’t kill you because it wouldn’t have changed anything. Believe me, if I thought killing you would get me Fiona, I’d do it so fast—” He broke off, started again. “But it wouldn’t, you see? She wouldn’t love me any more than she does, and maybe she would hate me for lettin’ you get killed. So you’re safe with me.”

Matthew reached over and laid a hand on his shoulder. “I know that, Stephen. I knew it before I asked the question. I’m just not sure you did. Now, please, come over here and keep us from freezing.”

“Please?” Remy added.

He awoke, crouched against them in the grey dawn. Quietly, quietly

he untangled himself from Remy's arm, stood and walked off among the trees and mist so they wouldn't see him cry.

It had been a long time since he had slept with anyone.

Oh, yes, sex he had had. He wasn't worshiped like Fiona and Matthew, but he was a hero of the revolution, and there were always women passing through willing to bed a hero. But he had never slept with them, never stayed the night.

Telepaths dream. And when telepaths touch, and dream, they dream together...

Remy. His mind was a kaleidoscope, broken, each thought refracted so many times it made no sense. But he knew he had lost his papa and mama, knew it in his bones, and his loss was no less terrible because he couldn't express it. No, it was more terrible.

And Matthew—Matthew dreamed only of Fiona, of her dark red tresses, the sweetness of her lips, of melting against her body, of the worlds within worlds they shared. All of the things Stephen could never have. But those things were nothing—even hair and skin and flesh were just things, things he might possess if he killed Matthew and stole her away, despite what he had said the night before.

But he could never have what Matthew felt. Stephen had believed he loved Fiona, but compared with Matthew he was a firefly hovering next to a supernova. What Matthew felt was so big, so powerful, so absolutely real it made him ashamed of his own pale emotion.

It's what she felt, too. Thousands of miles apart, in their dreams, they still somehow touched—lighter than a ghost's eyelash, below the level of thought and image. Maybe even they weren't aware of it. But he was, now.

And so he wept, there among the spruce, as a new snow began to fall, and it felt as if his heart were contracting, understanding suddenly how empty it was. Collapsing, fading—even his hatred of Matthew was a lie. Even, really, his love for Fiona.

And so he had nothing left, did he? Except his mission.

He should have kept that knowledge close to him all of the time, kept focused on his mission. The problem was, he didn't know what his mission was anymore. To stay with the underground forever, always the traitor, yet always doing his best for them, too? Would he never be released, taken back into the Corps?

Couldn't he just end it now, turn Matthew and the kid in, go

back home? It wasn't what the director wanted, but who knew what that crazy old man was up to?

A thought more chill than the weather struck him. What if the old man was dead? What if his reports were going into nothingness, and no one even knew who Stephen Walters had been, that he was undercover, any of it?

The snow answered none of his questions, so he went back and woke Matthew and Remy. With luck, they could finish the trip by the end of the day.

Midday they sighted a mile or so of glittering train on the horizon, watched it vanish in the distance. They rode parallel to the tracks, knowing that would bring them to a town.

It did, though not much of one. Matthew, of course, managed to remember the name of the contact. Stephen—the least suspicious of the lot, being unwounded and capable of speech—walked into the local general store, a thirty-year-old prefab building crusted in antlers, furs, and old traffic signs. A vid blared loudly as he walked in. The owner was a bored-looking man with a seamed, square face the color of old leather. He wore a baseball cap.

Stephen told the man he was looking for Russ Telling, whom the man didn't seem to remember until he bought a pickled egg for twenty-five Northam dollars. He got directions, and by a few hours after sundown, they had followed them to the end of a dirt road, a log cabin, and a yard full of dogs that were suspiciously close to wolves in appearance.

"You guys are in a lot of trouble." The man peered down at them from his front porch, a shotgun slung casually under one arm. He was old, with close-cropped silver hair and the nose of an eagle.

"You know who we are?"

"Murdered a bunch of Psi Cops up in the hills, I hear. Is that you?"

Matthew cleared his throat. "Yes. That's us."

"Did you kill 'em?"

"Yes."

"Come on in, then."

He gave them hot coffee and roast venison. "I'm called Russ Telling," he said, as they ate. "It ain't my name, but it's something to call me. I don't much care for those guys, the Psi Corps. They got my wife. Tried to get my sons."

"Did you send your sons away?"

“Yes. Into the hills. There’s plenty of land here to hide in. The only reason they got my wife is because one of our people went over and helped track her down. We killed him, though, so now they don’t have nobody that knows the land. It costs too much to hunt them down.” He wagged a finger at them. “You, they will hunt down, whatever it costs. We’ll hide you for a while, move you around—but in the end you’ll have to go.

“In the morning, the brushmen will come for you, keep you safe. You got here just in time, you know. There’s a Psi Cop in town, waiting on you. We’ve been giving him the runaround.”

“You knew we were coming here?”

“The brushmen felt the boy. He’s a loud one. He can move things, can’t he?”

“I move things,” Remy confirmed.

“We don’t want ’em to have you, do we? No, not you.”

He turned back toward them. “We’ll set something up, don’t you worry.”

The “brushmen” turned out to be twins, two young men about twenty years old. They wore heavy coats made of some kind of animal skin and looked like they came out of some ancient book.

They ate eggs and hash with the old man, saying little—little out loud, anyway, and Stephen kept a polite distance. No point pissing these people off.

“Here you go,” one of the brushmen said, dumping a bundle out on the floor. “You guys change into this.”

Matthew went through the stuff. It consisted of long underwear, jeans, shirts, and heavy coats like the boys wore.

“We have our own coats,” he pointed out.

“Not warm enough, and too much metal in them. You want to hide from helicopters, you’d better listen to us.”

So they changed, and headed out into the woods.

“Why do they call you brushmen?” Matthew asked the boys, as they walked along.

“An old legend,” one of them said. “The brushmen were sort of supernatural people who went off to live in the wilderness. They didn’t live in houses. People were sort of scared of them, but also came to them when they needed favors. That’s us. Teeps. When we

get word that the Psi Cops are around, we just hit the woods, hunt for a while.”

He turned to confront Matthew. “You’re Matthew Dexter, right?”

“Yes.”

“It’s an honor to have you here. We—” The two seemed to confer for a moment. “We admire you a lot.”

“You’re the admirable ones,” Matthew said. “Taking in strangers, eluding the Psi Cops.”

The twins laughed, in tandem. “I’m Mike—this is Jimmy. How many strangers have we taken in? A few. We’ve helped some get from one coast to another. But you, Mr. Dexter—you and Fiona make it all happen. All of it.”

Stephen just listened, dully. Even here, among the last of the hunter-gatherers, he couldn’t escape. At least he didn’t care anymore.

Real snow came, and they moved from shelter to shelter. He and Matthew spoke little—it seemed they had exhausted everything they might say to each other. After you admitted to a man that you wouldn’t mind killing him, what else could you say?

The brushmen, sensitive to his moods, sent him out to hunt, alone. He rarely got anything, but then that wasn’t the purpose of his expeditions.

His modern rifle notwithstanding, he fell into a Paleolithic rhythm. Alone, in the woods, tracking prey, he found a purpose to keep the emptiness at bay.

Until the call came. The first day it was only the merest whisper, but by the second it had gained strength.

Clarity came on the third day, when the touch resolved into his name.

Walters. I’m alone, unarmed. I need to talk to you.

He scanned the valley below, searching for the source. Whoever it was probably had him in line of sight, and he didn’t like that.

By the river. Morning.

The man approached with his hands open, a gesture as ancient as humanity. Stephen did not reciprocate—he kept his gun up. Thirty

paces away the stranger stopped, pushed back the hood of his parka.

“Fedor?”

“Yes, of course. Who else would they send to find you?”

“You crazy Siberian. I’m amazed you’re still alive.”

“I love you, too, my friend. How are you?”

He regarded the dark-haired man for a moment “You tell me, Fedor. Have you come to kill me.”

“The Corps is mother, the Corps is father, Stephen. I’ve come to bring you back, not kill you. The director sent me.”

“Did he? What does the director care about me?”

“Come, come, *moi droog*. I know your mission. I know, also, that you must be near—how is it in English?—near the end of your rope. You’ve been out far too long, too long away from the family. But now it’s over at last.”

“Over? Or do they just want the boy?”

“He belongs with us—you know that. Only the Corps can care for him properly. We tried to get word to you before, before the bloodshed—”

“Yes, what about that? I’ve killed my own kind, Fedor. I—it was part of my orders, but—”

“It’s forgiven. No one will even know.”

Stephen lowered the rifle. “I can go home?”

“Yes. It remains only to get the boy, and this Matthew Dexter. Then—”

Fedor understood what was happening even before Stephen did himself. Before he could lift the nose of his rifle, the Russian was reaching behind him. As his hand snapped back over, now holding a pistol, Stephen’s own muzzle finally came up, and the explosions rang together.

Together, they pitched backward into the snow.

Son of a bitch! Stephen sent. He couldn’t move his body at all, but there was no pain, either.

Fedor’s touch was losing strength fast. *You love them. Why didn’t you tell me, moi droog? I wouldn’t have—*

You shot me! Stephen sent, angrily.

Self-defense. I saw it coming. Your mind—

Stephen understood, now. *It’s true. Fedor, I’m sorry. You can’t understand.*

I understand you have killed me. What else is there to understand.

Ah, God! It's so stupid for me to die because you were in love and didn't know it.

Stephen tried once more to rise, but couldn't. *I'm sorry Fedor,* he said again.

I wish I had some vodka. And a smoke. I wish...

Stephen had the impression of a door swinging open, slamming shut, light, then silence.

He lay there, just he and the sky, and for the first time in his life he thought he felt truly at peace.

He awoke on a sledge. Matthew was pulling it, the brushmen and Remy walking on either side.

"Matthew—" he managed

"Shh, Stephen, you've lost a lot of blood."

"Not important. I've got to tell you some things."

"It can wait."

"Maybe not. I—I'm sorry, Matthew. I didn't understand."

"Understand what?" Matthew stopped, turned toward him.

"A while ago I said that the resistance only worked because of you and Fiona. I made it sound like an insult. The thing is, you guys—" He clenched his teeth at a hard, deep pain. "The thing is, most teens turn rogue not for some abstract cause, not for some high ideal, but because life is stacked against them. Their lives are misery—hunted, hurt, never anywhere long enough to make friends. Searching for just a minute of happiness in years of pain. They go on because they hope. If they had no hope, they'd join Psi Corps or take the sleepers.

"But hope is so fragile, Matthew. It's the easiest thing to kill. And yet there you two are, in the eye of the storm, and everyone can see how you feel, feel how you feel. They can see it's not stupid to hope. You love each other, and so they love you. I—I think I've known it for a long time, I just didn't want to see it."

"Because I destroyed your hope," Matthew whispered.

"No. No. Listen to me, Matthew. I wanted Fiona. She gave me desire, not hope. Only you guys together gave me that. Only the both of you." He licked his cracked lips. "There's something else. I want you to scan me. I want you to know everything."

"You aren't strong enough for that."

“But if I die—”

“You won’t die,” Matthew said. “We’ve got our connection. Baraka Industries sent a chopper three hours ago. We’re going home.”

“Where—” He coughed on what felt like a live coal. “Where is home this week?”

“You know. Wherever Fiona is.”

Chapter Two

Senator Khalid Ahmed of the United Islamic Nations (UIN) had a sleek face, the eyes of a tiger, and a smile that meant nothing at all. That he appeared on the comscreen and not in person diminished his presence not in the slightest.

“Director Vacit,” he said. “I hope you are well today.”

“Very well, thank you, Senator. What can I do for you?”

“You can explain to me why you are preparing the Varona for a Venus run. Correct me if I’m wrong, Director, but I’m fairly certain that—as lead boils on its surface—there are no rogue telepaths on Venus.”

“You never know where you will find rogues, Senator.”

“Mr. Vacit, you have never been known for your humor. I respectfully suggest that it is too late in your career to begin trying to build a reputation for it. We both know where rogues can be found—here, on Earth, on every continent, in every country. And yet, oddly enough, though you direct a well-funded, highly organized institution with broader discretionary powers than any similar organization on or off Earth, these rogues seem to not only be thriving, but doing more damage each day. Bombings all over the globe. Schoolchildren snatched from testing lines. Three re-education camps ‘liberated’ in as many months. And here you want to jaunt off to Venus.”

“There’s been a murder there, on the orbiting station.”

“Fine. Send a telepath—on the next supply transport.”

“The killer may have been a rogue telepath, as I told you, and thus the matter requires Psi Corps investigation.”

“In that case, I require the details of the case.”

“You will have them. When I return. I’m already on Station Prime, and our departure window draws near.”

“Perhaps you can simply tell me why the director of Psi Corps needs to go along on a simple murder investigation.”

“It’s within my boundaries as director.”

“Yes, it is. But that isn’t a reason.”

Kevin replied with a simple shrug.

Ahmed turned a shade darker. "I have to tell you, Director, many of us have grown concerned over leadership at Psi Corps. You might want to keep that in mind."

In other words, some of you have begun to think yourselves powerful enough to retire me, Kevin thought, as he acknowledged the statement by inclining his head and severing the link.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Ms. Alexander?" He turned and immediately had to catch himself as his Earth-born reflexes again betrayed him in the zero gravity. They still had an hour or so of turnaround—it was always wise to run a few tests on the fusion drive before kicking it back on for the deceleration leg of the journey. Even though he understood that, he would be happier when he had weight again, even if it was the result of confused inertia rather than the product of real gravity.

"May I ask a question?"

"You've been my assistant for what—fifteen years now? I suppose you may."

"Why are we going to Venus?"

"Such impertinence," he responded wryly.

"Yes, sir, I know, but after four days in a ship, one begins to wonder these things."

"Aren't you enjoying your book? Isn't it keeping your interest?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, I suppose. Did this Bester ever write anything else?"

"Yes, he did, and it is probably the second-best work of twentieth-century speculative fiction. The one you're reading is the best. You don't agree?"

"I haven't read much science fiction, modern or ancient. It's—well, the language is strange. It's amusing that they refer to 'scanning' as 'peeping,' though. I suppose I don't really see the point in the literature as a whole. All in all, Bester did a poor job of forecasting the future."

Vacit fingered his chin. "The point of science fiction isn't to predict the future, but to imagine it. Those are two very different things. I didn't understand either, when Senator Crawford introduced me to the subject, but over time I finally grokked it."

"Sir?"

"Never mind."

"I'll keep reading, sir." She hesitated. "And if you can't answer

the question, sir—about why we’re going to Venus—you can just tell me so, rather than distracting me.”

“We’re going to Venus to find what was in the hole in Antarctica,” he said.

Her eyes went very wide, not something he often saw them do anymore. It reminded him of the much younger intern who had walked into his office, long ago.

“What makes you—why Venus, sir?”

He composed himself, reached out to make certain that no one else was within ear—or mindshot. No one was. Besides himself and Natasha, there was the flight crew—all P3s or under—and two Psi Cops, both presently asleep aft. As for electronic spies, his personal team had debugged the Varona.

“This is for you only. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Years ago—before you were born—I touched an alien artifact, one IPX had found on Mars. Not Centauri, not Narn, but produced by a technology like we’ve never seen—until that fragment you and I found in Yucatán. The same technology, Ms. Alexander. Organic in nature, very advanced.”

“I see. Sir, you might have told me about this—”

“The artifacts of which I speak are among EarthGov’s most highly classified secrets, Ms. Alexander. I shouldn’t be telling you about them even now. I do so only because of the great trust I have in you.”

“Yes, sir. I appreciate that, sir.”

“Then you will appreciate that what I tell you next is more than classified—it is unknown to everyone except me.”

She nodded.

“The fragment from Yucatán—did you perceive anything unusual when you handled it?”

“Not really, sir—but I’m only a P5.”

“The artifact from Mars had a certain—signature. When I touched it, I felt—I suppose I must call it awe. Ms. Alexander, you must know me well enough to know that I despise the unempirical, the untestable, particularly when considering them as a basis for action. I distrust what cannot be objectively verified.

“Perhaps that is why I have waited all these years to act, to do anything about this, to even try to verify what I suspect—because the basis of my suspicions are so—questionable.” He paused to let

that sink in. She did know him well. She didn't prompt or cajole him, but waited for him to continue, knowing he would.

"I must digress again. When I was very young—eighty years ago, when I was four—my mother died. She was holding me. She was a powerful teep, and I was, too, even at that age. I went with her, when she died, via a sort of involuntary deathbed scan. I went beyond the doorway, and I think I almost stayed there. I saw a Shalako—a sort of spirit my mother's people believe in. I felt it was good, and kind, and very powerful. And then it became my mother, giving me a gift.

"I've always believed that the gift was real, in some sense. I think she gave me some of her strength, enhanced my abilities. As you know, the scales can't rate me, but I think I'm at least a P13. But since Antarctica, I have begun to question whether that is all that happened."

"You felt something in Antarctica, I remember."

"Yes. I felt a death-trace, one so old that it shouldn't have been there. I've sent P12s back to that site since—without telling them, of course, what to expect—and they felt only a faint presence, nothing like what I perceived. The same with the artifacts—while P12s feel something, they seem to receive no impressions as clear as my own."

"But, as you say, sir, you are stronger than they. And at least you've obtained objective confirmation that your experience was the result of some external cause."

He nodded reluctantly. "The death-trace in Antarctica was—familiar to me. It was something like the Shalako, from when I was young. And like the artifact from Mars and the fragment we found, but stronger—stranger, and yet, more familiar. It was"—he struggled—"almost as though this was a piece of me. A part of myself I recognized."

"That's not an uncommon phenomenon, sir, especially with teeps."

"No, it's not, but in most cases it is an illusion, a trick of the mind. And so I wish to test this, as best I can. You asked what this has to do with Venus. The impression I got in Antarctica was of two beings, two Shalako, two—whatever they were. One had died, and it was his trace I felt. You remember the story you told me? About the two brothers who battled the lords of death? One died, and his essence remained on Earth, the other lived and became the morning

star?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The morning star is Venus.”

Natasha finally looked a little troubled. “Sir, I hope you have more to go on than that.”

“I do,” he said, feeling frustrated. “But it’s in here.” He tapped his skull. “It’s like I’ve known it for a long time. Like it’s always been there. Yet it took you, and fifteen years, to convince me to actually trust it.”

She considered that for a moment, then looked at him frankly. “Sir, if you say you trust a feeling—well, I trust it, too.”

“Thank you, Ms. Alexander. There is a bit more—something a little more substantial. You remember that satellites had, in times past, mapped a gravitational and magnetic anomaly at the Antarctic site? Well, I’ve located a similar anomaly on Venus—so similar that it matches to within ninety-eight percent both in strength and dimensions. It’s at the Venusian south pole. So it may be that I’m not entirely crazy. Nonetheless...” He paused

“Yes?”

“Ms. Alexander, if you ever suspect I have gone mad, or even senile—I count on you to tell me.”

He expected her to laugh it off, but instead she pursed her lips thoughtfully.

“Sir—I don’t think you’re mad, or senile. I’ve never thought so. But there is something I don’t understand. It’s been bothering me for some time now.”

“That being?”

He felt her scanning—not him, but for “peepers.”

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “Nothing is leaving this cabin unless we want it to.”

Even so, she lowered her voice to a whisper. “You could have shut the underground down ten years ago, shut it down cold. I’m certain of it. But you didn’t, and I think you’ve even helped them a little. Why?”

He cracked a rare grin. “I thought you had figured that out,” he said. “I leaked it to you very slowly, watching you carefully the whole time.”

“But the risk—what would you have done had I tried to betray you?”

“I honestly didn’t think you would, but if you had—I don’t

really have to tell you, do I?”

“No, sir.”

“And you really want the answer to this question? Even knowing that you may not like what you learn?”

“Yes, sir. Very much.”

“When I first became Senator Crawford’s aide, I was infiltrating the MRA organization—not to sabotage it, necessarily, but to understand it from the inside, to form an opinion of it. Over time, my opinion of it grew, and I began to see its importance.

“When I touched the artifacts from Mars, I came to understand something else. Something truly profound. There are beings out there in the cosmos, Ms. Alexander, beside whom even the Centauri look like cavemen. Some, I’m certain, are benevolent—those who made the artifacts on Mars, for instance. At least so it seems. But I also have the impression—no, the certainty—that there are others, who could and would destroy our race with no more thought or effort than you and I would expend to kill a bug on our kitchen floor.

“When we meet those beings, we will need every weapon we can get our hands on, and among those weapons I include ourselves. We will need the most powerful teeps we can find—more powerful than any we presently have, I think. P14s, P30s, if such a thing is possible. And stable telekinetics.” He heaved a sigh. “I can’t even tell you why I think that, exactly, and for some reason it angers me when I examine it closely. But I am certain.”

“So the arranged marriages were your idea. To prepare us to fight these aliens, if they truly exist?”

“Oh, they exist. But no, the genetic matching was already in place when I started working for Crawford. I encouraged it.”

“And the underground? How does that fit?”

“Evolution. Think about it. Which teeps escape the grasp of the Corps? The smartest, the strongest, those who best know how to work together and alone. The underground is the gene pool that we draw from. If it were to disappear—if there was no underground—we would lose the selective process. Intentional selection—breeding—can produce faster results, but evolution does the unexpected. I think—I thought, anyway—that we would need both to produce our best future.”

Natasha turned her book over in her hand a few times, clearly disturbed by what had been said.

“Speak your mind, Ms. Alexander.”

“I never—sir, I’ve always understood that you had some deeper agenda, some purpose that drove your actions. I’ve always admired you, always trusted your judgment. You’ve always seemed to be completely rational, governed by reason...” She stopped, apparently unable to finish.

“You never imagined that, at the bottom of it all, there was an article of faith? I don’t blame you for being disturbed, Ms. Alexander. I would be disappointed in you if you weren’t. I’ve struggled with this for years myself.” He turned for a moment to the small port, gazing out at the enigmatic stars beyond.

“Let me put it another way, Ms. Alexander,” he continued. “One you may find more palatable. Assume I’m wrong about our powerful, alien enemies, and my intuitions are proved just so much fantasy. We still have the normals to deal with. Right now, however much we hate to admit it, they are our masters. I am the director of Psi Corps only because they do not know what I am. The next director will probably be a mundane, and who can guess what direction politics might take in the future?”

“I have seen our situation shift too many times in my life. It will shift again. Perhaps one day they will decide that Earth would be better off without our kind altogether. If they have us all registered, all in the Corps, all in one place—well, that will make their job the easier, won’t it?”

“Personally, I think the Corps is our best chance—already we have more power than EarthGov suspects. And one day—one fine day—normals will awaken to find that it is we who are the masters, as it should be. But that day is not yet come, and until it does, I think it wise not to keep all of our eggs in one basket. The underground is not the enemy, Ms. Alexander. Normals are the enemy.”

He turned away from the stars. “I’ve never said these things to anyone, Ms. Alexander. I once loved a woman, and I never even said them to her. But I grow old, now. And I know you—I know you understand me.”

Her gaze was steady on his again. “I think I understand you perfectly, sir. And agree completely.”

“And what do you think of my sanity now?”

“I think,” she replied, matter-of-factly, “that I have never met a saner man in my life.”

“Thank you. I trust you mean that. You’ve asked why we are going to Venus. The answer is that I think we’ll find an answer there. We’ll find our past, and in so doing—our future.”

The station commander pretended outrage when the Varona came into dock, but there was little he could do about it. There had, in fact, been a murder on board the Lucifer. It was unlikely in the extreme that a rogue teep had been involved, but Officers Trout and Sasaki—the two Psi Cops they had brought along—had their orders. When the Varona left Venus orbit, it would be with the corpse of a verified rogue, P10.

In the meantime, Kevin had places to be. He had one of the Varona’s two shuttles outfitted for an orbital jaunt, so Natasha and he left only a few hours after their arrival.

As he watched the wheel-shaped station vanish against the marbled immensity of Venus, Kevin’s confidence began to wane. Not his faith in his people, but in himself. He had come an awfully long way and risked a great deal for—for what? What did he really expect to find?

There was no question of landing on Venus to investigate the anomaly. Oh, ships had gone down there, twice, and both times had discovered that reaching the surface was no problem. Leaving again was. Their own shuttle wouldn’t even make it through the clouds of sulfuric acid that veiled the goddess of love, much less endure the nine-hundred-degree, ninety-bar kiss of her surface.

Nevertheless, Natasha piloted the shuttle into geosynchronous—no, he supposed that was Aphroditosynchronous—orbit over the south pole, where they waited, watching hurricanes chase one another through the roiling upper atmosphere.

“We have oxygen enough to stay two more days. Lucifer Station keeps calling to ask if we need assistance.”

“Tell them no, again,” he replied, wearily. “Continue to hail the surface.”

Natasha did so. He didn’t sense any doubt from her, despite the two fruitless days they had spent, hovering above the planet. Her trust in him seemed in inverse proportion to his trust in himself.

Another day passed. He sent down the second of the surface probes—he’d sent one the first day. He beamed messages in all

languages and on all wavelengths, from modulated radar to gamma bursts.

He remembered Lee Crawford, trying to speak to the stars with a flashlight.

In the dark, two Shalakos came to him. Kevin could just make out the outlines of the surrounding pueblo, the ladder emerging from the kiva, where the great mysteries were kept. The Shalakos gestured, and he followed them into the deeper dark of the kiva.

There they danced, and sang of the days when his people had been creatures with webbed toes and feet, of the days when they had lived far beneath the earth. As they danced, they became the twin war gods, the children of the Sun, shining with all of their father's brightness. They sang of leading his ancestors from darkness to the world above.

The world was overrun with monsters, dark and terrible, but the twins went among the monsters, killed them with lightning and fire. On they sang, these masked dancers, of evils over which they triumphed, and of greater evils still to come.

In the end, they had to go. In the end, they could leave only a wonderful gift for the children, whom they had brought from the depths of the Earth, raised from slimy things living in the waters to the five-fingered people of the pueblo.

In the end, one of the twins died, and the other danced away. Kevin approached the corpse, still shining with terrible beauty, still masked. He removed the mask.

He saw beneath it his own face.

"Sir!" He lurched awake, the dream stripping away from him, thoughts and feelings he hadn't experienced in eighty years remaining at the edge of his mind. He had rarely thought of and never believed those things so dear to his mother, that world of spirit and faith she inhabited. For eighty years, his mother's teachings had been nearly silent in him.

Now they were awake.

"Sir, there's something happening."

"What, Ms. Alexander?" Waking was harder at his age, as if his

body demanded practice for death. He rubbed grit from his eyes.

“All of our sensors went down a few minutes ago,” she said with remarkable calm. “All of them.”

“Tap into the satellite net.”

“That’s down, too, and I suspect Lucifer Station is down. Something is jamming everything.”

Kevin pulled himself forward to the cockpit. The nose of the shuttle was pointed directly at the planet. Night bisected the view, clotted cream and darkness. Against the white and yellow arabesques, something was growing. A dot, a circle, not just coming closer, but blooming like an orchid, or perhaps like a beetle unfolding its wings.

It was a ship, but a ship unlike any he had ever seen, and it continued to grow until there was no Venus, only the ship, its carapace scintillating, shifting vaguely and constantly.

It opened a mouth and took them in.

COME. The voice coalesced out of sudden static, as order emerging from chaos. It was impossible to tell if it was a voice of sound or the mind.

He glanced at Natasha, who had gone alabaster. “Did you hear it?”

“Yes, sir. Sir, hull sensors are back up. It’s an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere outside, and pressure has equalized.”

He peered through the port, but beyond lay only darkness.

“Well, Ms. Alexander,” he said softly. “Let’s go see your astronaut/angels.”

As he set foot on the floor, faint patterns began to appear—like a phosphorescence he had once seen on the surface of the ocean at night. The light gradually rose, mother-of-pearl, glints flashing from a dragonfly’s wing. It reminded him, too, somehow, of the kiva. So many echoes. And to the ear there was no sound, but below the level of sound—what Monkey used to sometimes call the “wind”—a faint modulated humming.

Kevin couldn’t actually discern anything specific—no thought, no emotion. Instead what he got was a sense of perfection, like seeing the best solution to a problem, of suddenly understanding the symmetry in a pattern that had—an instant before—seemed elusive and chaotic.

Gaining confidence, he reached his mind out further. Again an overwhelming feeling of familiarity surged through him like a

wave.

I've been here.

YES. A hundred times stronger than before, the voice filled everything.

Where are you? Who are you? Kevin asked.

I AM HERE. I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN HERE.

And the Shalako stood before him, blazing light and glory, its headdress like the rays of the Sun. A sense of awe—worship even—smote him so hard he almost tumbled to his knees. And something sounded inside of him, as a string sounds when a like-tuned string vibrates nearby. Vision engulfed him.

He saw a war, fought on a scale beyond imagining. The enemy was darkness; the ships, black spiders.

Worlds fell before them, whole races perished. They were entropy, they were the end of everything, they were the monsters out of the birth of time... An explosion of images, too much to understand.

The war ended, but only for a while. They were not gone, the monsters, only waiting. Their enemies waited, too, these things that looked to him like Shalakos, like angels, like gods because it was the only way he could understand them. They waited, and they prepared the younger races for what was to come. Even the race so young it knew only the vaguest echo of the last war. Humanity. Two came, together, to prepare them. One died...

The experience devolved into images, so fiercely bright and alien that he felt himself slipping away. He was dying, all that was him hurtling into nothing. But there was a way, a piece that could remain, a container that had been prepared for it. A place to wait, and sleep, and one day wake. He went into that place and rested.

He was back in the cave, in his mother's arms, and he felt her slipping away, and himself along with her, and the storm, the light, the Shalako, the gift.

The moments became one, the death, the resting, the gift. The images became one. And he understood—some of it.

You made us, he told the Shalako. Took some of us, altered us for centuries, brought our genes back to Earth, implanted them in people.

YES.

To stand against these monsters. To save ourselves.

YES.

The gift—my gift—it was from you, somehow. What was it? Why

do I see your—brother? Why do I feel what he felt?

THE MIRROR NEVER SEES ITSELF. THE REFLECTION NEVER IS ITSELF.

Kevin wanted to rephrase his questions, but there was a silent punctuation to the Shalako's reply, a certainty that this vague riddle was his last word on the subject.

You—led me here.

YES.

Why? What am I supposed to do?

A momentary pause, like looking over the edge of a very high cliff.

EVOLUTION CRAWLS TO IMPERFECTION. IT ENDS IN EXTINCTION.

And it was gone. The light faded.

GO NOW.

Back on the shuttle, surrounded once again only by space, Kevin stared out at the stars, seeing now the terror that lurked between them. The Enemy. He felt a hatred for it that was and wasn't his. He heard the words of the Shalako.

Natasha coughed softly behind him.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Ms. Alexander?"

"When you—What did it look like to you?"

"A bright spirit. My mother. Myself."

"I saw an angel."

"I suspect it isn't so much what you see as what the thing you see represents."

"It was—it was wonderful."

"Yes."

"What do you think he meant, at the end? It sounded almost like he was telling us to do something."

"Evolution crawls to imperfection." Kevin sighed. "I should have seen it long ago, but I didn't. I've wasted time."

"I don't understand."

"I was right, about the need to produce powerful telepaths. You saw the enemy?"

"I saw—terrible things. Creatures of darkness."

"Yes. But we can hurt them, somehow—or our children can. I think that's why one of the—angels—died. I think the enemy found them on Earth, saw what they were up to. They had to fight, then,

to protect the secret. Protect us. They made us, Ms. Alexander. They took the raw stuff of humanity and made something better. I think they started very long ago, helping us along, guiding us. But just over a century ago, they gave us the final push, the final gift. Now it's up to us. The ship is gone, isn't it? And the anomaly?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes. He stayed here until we found him. Now he's gone."

"Evolution crawls to imperfection?"

"Yes, of course. Evolution is about reproduction, nothing else. It never produces anything 'better' except in that sense. It evens out extremes in preference to flexibility. What we want is an extreme—the best telepaths possible. Evolution is a blind process. Natural selection can't plan for anything, it can only respond—with glacial slowness—to present conditions. But sentient beings can plan and design. We are outside of evolution now, beyond it, free of its limitations. Telepaths weren't produced by evolution; better telepaths won't be produced by it either. Not fast enough, anyway. It's up to us to take up the work where our creators left off. It's up to Psi Corps." He smiled faintly. "The mirror never sees itself."

They were silent for a time, and Natasha fell asleep. He held himself up against the gentle pressure of their acceleration, gazing down thoughtfully at her. She had been a good aide. A good friend, even. He trusted her more than any living person.

But he didn't trust her this much. He didn't trust her with this. This was his mission, his burden. He still had life enough and time to do the things that needed to be done.

Psi Corps was already on the right course—he had done most of the right things. He had known. How was still unclear—had the dead Shalako somehow passed a piece of its soul to his grandfather, thence to his mother, finally to himself? Or was it more subtle than that, an imprint on the genes that formed neurons, a program, software that would lie dormant until triggered by certain input?

He didn't know, and didn't really care. All he really knew was that he no longer had any doubts.

His mistake had been the underground, and there he had let emotion cloud his judgment. For Psi Corps to be what it had to be, some unpleasant things had to happen to its members. His love for Ninon Davion and her daughter—his daughter, Fiona—had led him to rationalize a wrong and almost disastrous course. Ninon would not have wanted to see her daughter in the Psi Corps he was

creating.

But his sentiment was as nothing when measured against the greater need. If humanity fell, was extinguished, the struggle of teep against mundane was meaningless. Only an organized force could stand against the coming darkness, and only the Psi Corps could create it. He would spare Fiona if he could, but the resistance had to end. And it would, very soon.

His mission. His burden.

He extended his fingers until they lightly touched Natasha's face.

And recoiled. The Shalako—or whatever it really was—had left something there. Something small, almost unnoticeable, but something in her brain. Like a seed.

He brought his fingers back down and did his work very lightly. She would remember everything, but never desire to speak of it, save to him. When he died and she died, then no one would know.

But the machine would have been built by then. The machine would run without knowing why. It was best that way—a machine that knew its purpose, its destiny, might fight against it, try to steer its own way.

Humanity—and telepaths—no longer had the luxury of that sort of spurious freedom.

He settled back into his own couch, weary, seeking sleep without dreams.

In her own dreams, Natasha Alexander saw the being of light, and it looked back at her with a light that illuminated thought and bone and blood and marrow; it looked upon her genetic structure and was pleased.

IT WILL BE YOU, IF THE DARKNESS COMES SOON, the light said, OR ONE IN YOUR LINE, IF THE DARKNESS COMES LATER. YOU, OR THE ECHO OF YOU, WILL HEAR THE CALL, AND YOU WILL COME TO US, AND WE WILL FINISH THE WORK WE BEGAN IN YOU.

And as the light faded, Natasha Alexander wept tears of ultimate love, and dreamed of being finished: gleaming, indestructible, whole.

And she knew one thing: They would meet again.

Chapter Three

Fiona put on her winningest smile for the young doorman. He looked uncertainly back down at his clipboard.

“I still don’t see your name on the list.”

“Sure you do. Miriam Soto.”

“Oh. That’s funny, I thought you said a different name. Must’ve heard wrong. You can go in, then.”

“Thanks, handsome.”

She left him blushing at the door. She had plucked the name from his mind easily enough—along with the fact that he didn’t know what this Soto looked like—but when the real Miriam showed up, that would make things sticky, so she had best hurry.

The Four Seasons ballroom was just starting to fill up, so it was still easy to pick people out at a distance.

She spotted the tall, elegant figure of Holden Waters right away, surrounded by a small flock of pretty young things. Trying to sashay—not quite sure she knew how, and not at all happy in her strapless evening gown—she went to join the flock, waiting at the edge until she caught his eye.

“Oh, my,” he said, “I don’t believe I’ve met you.”

“How soon they forget,” she replied.

“But don’t tell me that we have! I couldn’t forget such a face.”

“Well, perhaps it isn’t my face you would remember,” Fiona said, sweetly. This prompted huffs of outrage from the other women around Waters, and two of them drifted off.

“Young lady—” he began, more than a trace of irritation rising in his voice.

“Yes—Daddy?” She raised her voice on the last.

“Young lady, I don’t know who you are—”

“That’s okay, Daddy, the paternity test knows who you are, and —”

“Could we have a word in private?” He glanced around the room. Like neutrons caroming through plutonium, the first girls to huff off had begun a chain reaction, and attention was shifting their

way. She smiled and waved languidly as Waters led her off, gripping her arm gently but firmly.

A few moments later, they were in a small lounge.

“Now. Young lady. I don’t know whether we’ve really met or not—”

“Daddy, you might want to turn the camera off, if there is one in here.”

“Stop calling me that!”

He said nothing about a monitor, and she understood from his surface reaction that there actually wasn’t one—as far as he knew.

So she smiled sweetly, pulled a molded plastic gun from her purse, and shot him. There was only a suspiration—the pistol used CO2—and a little blood as the flechette pricked into his throat. His expression was just turning to horrified shock when his legs went. She caught him on the way down, eased him into a chair.

“Here we go!” she said, removing her long-sleeved gloves. She placed her hands on his temples and scanned. When she had everything she needed, she planted a very firm, clear thought in his mind. When he awoke, he would know for certain that one of his factories was about to explode, which one, and when. He would have just enough time to evacuate his workers, and no more.

She put her gloves on, reached back into her purse, and pulled out a black marker. She left him with live free printed across his forehead.

She didn’t go back through the ballroom, but slipped out a back door she had been informed of—it could be exited, but not entered.

She returned to her van—a late-model Cortez—drove a few blocks, parked, and shucked out of the dress, exchanging it for jeans, T-shirt, light chest armor, and a sweatshirt. Then she resumed driving.

She pulled onto I-5 and headed south toward Tacoma, past Boeing-Mitsubishi Field, and took an exit into the grey heart of an industrial park. She parked outside the outer fence, retrieved an assault rifle and wire cutters from a compartment under the seat, and got out.

The outer fence was mostly symbol, there to keep kids out—the real security precautions were farther in, and were someone else’s responsibility. She cut through the mesh in a few minutes, checked her watch, stepped through the gap, and waited, watching the

blinking lights perched on the high vents of the Waters complex.

She tried to remain collected, but the sight of the sleeper factory tightened angry cords in her chest. No one who had met one of the zombies the anti-telepathy drug eventually produced could really imagine it was a legitimate option. Yet it was manufactured by the ton, wasn't it? Normals watched their neighbors take the injection twice a week, without blinking.

After this, maybe they would blink.

At 10:00, klaxons started wailing. Hopefully this meant only that Waters had awakened and done the right thing.

Fifteen minutes later, she heard the sound of several people running toward her and raised her rifle to greet them, just in case they weren't who she expected.

Matthew?

It's us!

At about that same moment, three small suns appeared in the Waters complex, and an instant later the shock of the explosion blew over her. Hard on its heels came Matthew, Stephen, Cinnamon, Adam, and Phoebe, and she threw herself into Matthew's arms, allowing herself the luxury of a quick embrace.

"You did it!"

"Perfect plan!" Stephen said, slapping her on the back. "Perfect, that is, if we don't get caught. Let's move, people!"

They piled into the van and Stephen took the wheel. He gunned the engine, and they streaked out of the lot.

"Any problems?" Matthew asked, squeezing her hand.

"Only the walking-in-high-heels part."

The van rattled from the shock of another, greater explosion.

"That was the sleepers," Stephen remarked. "Had to clear the building away first in order to get maximum dispersal."

"The weather is holding," Matthew observed. "The cloud should drift right through Seattle. Maybe after normals get a taste of the stuff, they won't be so eager to inject it into us."

The evacuation rush—and the related panic that swept through the nearby areas—covered their escape nicely.

They got back on I-5, exited again a few miles later, and made a quick stop at a friendly house in Renton.

There Cinnamon, Adam, and Phoebe piled into a green Makarov Bogatyr utility and headed due south toward Portland. Fiona, Matthew, and Stephen continued in the van, driving for six

hours on back roads, rounding the imposing Mount Rainier, out through the Yakima valley, until they at last reached a private airstrip belonging to Rentech Corporation.

A dapper young man in a black three-piece suit met them at the gate.

“You aren’t looking for the wine country, are you?” he asked.

“Yup,” Stephen replied, “I’m lookin’ for a bottle of ’61 Chaldee.”

The fellow nodded in satisfaction. “Welcome, Mr. and Ms. Dexter, Mr. Walters. Your travel arrangements have been made. Your plane is boarding now. My name is Rinaldo D’Aguiila, and it will be my pleasure to accompany you on your journey.”

“Pleased, I’m sure,” Stephen replied.

Fiona bounced twice on the bed, experimentally. “I think I’ve forgotten exactly what this is,” she remarked, collapsing spread-eagle on the huge four-poster.

“It gets better,” Matthew said, peering into the next room. “A shower. Shall we get clean before we get dirty, Mrs. Dexter?”

“Why compartmentalize?” she asked, arching an eyebrow. She took one more bounce on the bed to catapult her toward Matthew.

Later, as they lay sweaty and gripped together, Fiona glanced sleepily around the room. “Y’know, I didn’t even think about whether there might be a camera in here.”

“Too late to worry about that now.”

Do you trust these people?

I’m naked in one of their suites, which doesn’t say much about my intelligence, because no, I don’t. But they’ve always played well by us. We would have had a hell of a time blowing the sleeper factory without their help, and even more trouble getting away.

Now we’re in a nice room, we’ve got a day or two to amble around the French Quarter while they get us ready for the next leg. It beats our usual travel arrangements. He smoothed his hand across her belly.

(skepticism) They helped us because Waters competes with them in pharmaceuticals, not because they care about teeps, Fiona replied.

True enough. But if the underground ran exclusively on altruism, we’d be in pretty bad shape.

Which she couldn’t disagree with.

Fiona slept restlessly. The bed was too comfortable, the room too nice. Some of her people were sleeping on the streets tonight, some in concentration camps. It didn't seem right that she should be surrounded by such luxury.

But that wasn't all of it. She eased out of bed and went to the window, gazing out at the lights of New Orleans. The new French Quarter stretched out below, rebuilt after the terrible flood of 2092. It didn't look so new anymore. So much of the city had been destroyed in the flood that many had wanted to call it New New Orleans, but it hadn't been a very popular suggestion.

Deep down, she wondered if she didn't need a New Fiona.

She loved her cause, but she had changed a great deal in the fourteen years or so since she had taken Monkey's place. At first, she had believed she could somehow win, change the whole world. That had been a good feeling, the best. The little victories were good—when they snatched a kid from Psi Corps or blew up a sleeper factory—but in the old days those all had been garnishes to the main course, the dream of that last battle, after which everything would be okay.

The years had gnawed at that dream, and without knowing exactly when or how, she one day had realized that winning small battles was all there was, because the war—the war could not be won. They were bailing water from a hulled lifeboat.

Eventually she came to where she could admit this to herself, and even make a little peace with it. The problem was that she could not even begin to speak of it to others, not even Matthew. What recruited people and kept them going through everything was the very simple belief that one day it would be over, and they could all step into the sun. What kept them going was hope.

And she and Matthew, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, had become the center of that hope, the axis of it. How would the rest feel if they knew she, Fiona, the mother of the revolution, had no real hope left in her own heart?

Her musings were interrupted by a soft knock on the door. She found her jeans and pulled them on, tugged the sweatshirt over her head, and went to the peephole.

It was D'Aguila. What could he want?

She opened the door a crack.

“Ms. Dexter?”

“That’s me.”

“I hope I didn’t wake you, but a matter of some importance has come up, and we rather hoped we could request your services.”

“You need a scan done? Now?”

“Please.”

She considered. This was one of the prices they paid, when they got corporate help. Rentech probably had a hundred teeps in their employ, but they were all Psi Corps, which meant they wouldn’t do illegal scans.

Already feeling dirty, she nodded. Matthew was still asleep, and she didn’t wake him.

The “matter of some importance” was a young man—perhaps twenty-five—with curly blond hair and a pleasant, round face. It would have been even more pleasant, she imagined, without the split lip and bleeding nose. She regarded him through a one-way mirror, beyond which he sat in a grey room with a small table and two chairs.

“He’s a teep,” she told D’Aguila. “A strong one.”

“Strong enough to be a Psi Cop?”

“Yes.”

D’Aguila made a sort of grating noise. “He started working in our technical support department about a year ago. We caught him trying to send files out to somewhere, but he was able to erase both the files and the intended destination before we caught him.”

“What do you want with me?”

“I want you to tell me what he’s doing here—whether he knows about our arrangements with the underground, and so on.”

“It won’t be easy. He’ll block.”

“Do what is necessary.”

“He may be stronger than I am.”

“We can only ask you to try.”

She nodded, feeling sick to her stomach. But she went inside.

She felt his touch leap to her immediately.

“You’re one of us,” he said, softly.

“I doubt that very much,” she replied. “I make you for a Psi Cop. What about it?”

Yes, I’m Corps. I’m proud of it. What I meant was, you’re one of us, a teep. In or out of the Corps, we are the same. Kith.

“Speak aloud,” she said.

You don’t want me to speak what I know aloud. You’re with the

underground, I guess.

Good guess, she replied.

You do a lot of business with these people. They're just using you, you know.

And we use them. To fight you jackboots. What's the difference?

That's what I'm wondering, (pause) They're going to kill me.

That's not my concern, Fiona said. You dug your own grave. But if you cooperate, let me scan you, I might be able to get you out of here in one piece. I don't know what I'll do with you then, but I won't kill you.

(laugh) If you find out what I know and tell them, they will most certainly kill me. And you, too.

"Let me scan you."

You want it? You got it.

Her mind filled with images. How long, she could not say, but at the end of it she was trembling.

Stay quiet, she told him, when it was done. I'm going to tell them I couldn't scan you.

He nodded, and she left the room.

"Well?" D'Aguila asked.

"Too tough. For now. Keep him in there and don't let him sleep. I can get it in the morning."

D'Aguila shifted uncomfortably. "I'm supposed to have the results by ten o'clock."

"You will. I promise you. Matthew can help me."

"Very well." She felt a touch of suspicion. Not, she hoped, too much. "I'll find my way back, if you don't mind. Having someone near me right now is—uncomfortable." She tapped her head.

"I understand."

On the way back to her room, she stopped and knocked on Stephen's door. After a few moments—and some muffled curses—he peered wearily out.

"Hey. What's up?"

"Come over to the room for some coffee." *It's important. Bring your stuff.*

"Early day, eh? Okay. Be there momentarily."

They paced on the balcony, waiting for Stephen to finish.

"Nothin' out here," he finally said, stashing the bug sweeper back in his bag. "I think we can talk."

"Good. I've already told Matthew that they asked me to do an illegal scan on a Psi Cop."

“Son of a bitch. Did you?”

“Yep. Didn’t have to try hard, though, he gave it up. I pretended I couldn’t nail him, told ’em we’d all come back for another try in the morning.”

“Okay. I’ll bite. Why the Japanese opera?”

“Because the Psi Cop wasn’t here to investigate the underground. He was here to investigate a slavery racket.”

“What?”

She abruptly swung her fist into the wall, almost taking pleasure in the sudden sharp pain in her knuckles.

“Jeez, Fee—”

“For every three teeps Rentech moves for us, one vanishes. We thought Psi Corps was doing it. They weren’t. We’ve been helping these bastards enslave telepaths.”

“Holy Joe.”

“You’re certain about this?” Matthew asked.

“You scan him.”

“No, no, of course I believe—damn. What now?”

“This cop has all of the major locations for the trade in his head. We can track them down, one by one, get ’em back. But first we need the cop. I’m not leaving him here for these monsters.”

“He’s a Psi Cop,” Stephen rambled. “He’ll betray us first chance he gets.”

“I’m not going to adopt him,” Fiona said, “just get him out of here.”

Matthew was nodding. “Fiona’s right. This is our fault—we sent those people to Rentech, and now they’re slaves. Our problem. We get the cop.”

“I’m not arguing this one,” Stephen said. “But we can get what the cop knows and then—”

“Then what?” Matthew demanded. “Kill him in cold blood? I’ve killed Psi Cops when they were shooting at me, sure, but this? No.”

“Okay, okay. We get the cop.”

They took the guards with Fiona’s flechettes. They never knew what hit them. D’Aguila—and the burly man standing beside him wielding a street sweeper—proved to be bigger problems. Opening the door must have triggered some sort of alarm; the big man

already had the shotgun raised as they entered, and D'Aguila was pulling a Browning.

Fiona hit the bodyguard with everything she had, fugeing him even as his finger tightened on the trigger.

D'Aguila got a shot off, which hit Stephen square in the chest. Though the impact must have hurt considerably, even through his body armor, Stephen's charge did not slow. He slammed D'Aguila into the wall so hard that cracks spidered in the plaster. Matthew, meanwhile, calmly shot the frozen guard with the flechette.

The Psi Cop was right where she had left him, though he had been beaten some more.

"Knew you'd come around," he said, lisping on a freshly broken tooth.

"Shut up. How well do you know this building?"

"Well enough to get us out. But they have four teeps here, in the building, ready to transport."

"And you know where."

"Yeah, sort of. What we have to do is get to a link, call Psi Corps—"

"No," Stephen grated, cocking D'Aguila's confiscated Browning.

"No, you show us where they are. Letting Psi Corps have them is no better than leaving them here."

"You don't believe that."

"Shut up and do it."

"Okay. You're the ones with guns."

"Damn straight."

"Wake D'Aguila up."

That took a little doing. They finally had to reach into his mind and pull him out of it.

"Wha...?" he said groggily.

"Here's what," Matthew said. "You have four teeps held in this building. You'll take us to them and then get us all out of here."

"Impossible. The whole complex must be on alert by now."

Stephen jerked him by the collar. "You'd better hope that isn't true, or if it is, that you can do something about it. Because if you are right, you're a dead man. And don't try to lie to us, either, or walk us into a trap, because you know you can't. Now be a good boy, okay?"

D'Aguila's eyes flicked from one to the other, perhaps searching for some sign of mercy. If so, he found none.

“There is a way, maybe,” he allowed. “The esps are on D level. We might be able to get from there to the helipad by using the executive elevator. Might.”

“Might makes right,” Stephen replied. “Can you access the system to set off some false alarms in another part of the building?”

“Yes.”

“Do it.”

They avoided the guards in the halls by sensing them ahead of time, but motion detectors were harder to fool. By the time they reached D level, Fiona had a definite sense that the noose was tightening. As the elevator opened, her suspicions were confirmed by the bright, metallic smacking of bullets near her head.

Stephen bellowed and opened up with the street sweeper, spraying lead pellets as if with a hose. Two men screamed and crumpled in bloody ruin.

“End of the hall,” D’Aguila said, staring and obviously trying not to vomit.

“Fine. Matthew and I will go. Stephen, watch the elevator.”

“Roger.”

“You could give me a gun,” the Psi Cop said. “I could help.”

“Very fat chance,” Stephen replied.

The doors were locked, of course, but D’Aguila’s card opened them.

Two African-looking girls—twins, maybe twelve years old—a red-haired boy who might have been five, and a thin young woman in her early twenties turned listless eyes up at Fiona as the door slid open. She could feel their numbed minds and it almost made her retch.

“Sleepers. Damn them to hell.”

“Come on. Come on all of you. We’re getting out of here,” Matthew said.

More gunfire sounded from down the hall.

“Damndamndamn,” Stephen swore, as they approached. He was bleeding from a score on his arm.

“Children?”

“We have to get out. You, D’Aguila. Which way?”

“The rest of this level is storage. The elevator is across the

warehouses.”

“Lead.”

Suddenly the doors to the stairs banged open, and two egg-shaped objects bounced through, spinning near Matthew’s feet.

“Matthew!” Fiona shrieked as Stephen yanked her down to cover.

But there was no explosion. An instant later, Matthew came hurtling by. “Gas! Go!”

They wove in and out of what seemed a rabbit warren of small workstations and storage areas, Matthew running point with D’Aguila, Stephen bringing up the rear, she and the Psi Cop in between, encouraging the fleeing teeps to run faster.

Stephen was fighting a rearguard action as they moved through a large warehouse area and at last reached a small elevator. D’Aguila’s card and bioident got them in, and they had perhaps twenty seconds of breathing time before the doors opened again.

Unbelievably, the rooftop was empty when they exited. A chopper stood empty on a large pad, but they had crossed only half the distance to it when bullets cracked the concrete around their feet. With no cover, Stephen threw himself flat and unloaded the street sweeper again. Matthew was right beside him, firing six shots and then changing clips.

Three guards in heavy body armor were crouched behind a large antenna, firing Naga nine-millimeter submachine guns in controlled, professional bursts. They had a clear view of the fugitives all the way to the helicopter.

Fiona made her decision. She knelt and took careful aim at the guard she could see best, squeezed off a round.

Get ’em in the copter, Psi Cop. We’ll be there when we can.

You won’t make it.

None of us will make it without cover fire. Go!

She fired again and didn’t watch the Psi Cop and his charges as they broke for the flier. She was too busy.

She counted slowly, estimating how long it would take them to make it. After thirty seconds, the guards found some nerve. Two started forward from cover, as the other two stood and fired almost nonstop.

Matthew had to roll to avoid being cut in half, and sparks struck inches from Fiona’s face. Desperately, she reached for their minds, but they were too far away to get a decent lock on amid all

the commotion.

Stephen roared, bounced up, and charged toward the nearest man. He'd dropped the empty street sweeper and was snapping off fast rounds from a pistol he'd picked up, probably back on D level. One guard pitched back, his teeth blown down into his neck.

The elevator door opened. Fiona spun desperately, firing between her knees. She hit two of the five newcomers, but the bullets spanged from body armor. She pulled the trigger again, and the piston cracked on an empty chamber.

She kicked back from the return fire, knowing as she did so that it was over.

Then the elevator and everything near it ceased to exist. It was replaced by a flare of painfully white light and as quickly by an ugly black cloud.

She had no idea what had happened, but she leapt up anyway, spinning just in time to see the Psi Cop turn the grenade launcher—sling mounted in the chopper—on the men at the antenna array.

He grinned at her as she leapt aboard, followed closely by Stephen and Matthew.

They ditched the chopper in the Atchafalaya basin, stole a battered Volkswagen truck from a used car lot, and drove west toward Mexico. Stephen and Matthew took the cab, while Fiona, the Psi Cop, and the rescued teeps piled into the back. Fiona checked them all for wounds. They seemed okay, but Fiona was by now certain that they had been given more than sleepers. They probably weren't even aware yet of what had happened.

The Psi Cop grinned around broken teeth at her.

"We make a good team," he said. "I make you to be a P12. You'd be a hell of a Psi Cop."

"Say that again, and I'll open you another set of eyes," Fiona replied pleasantly.

He shrugged resignedly. "What now, then?"

"First, I thank you for saving our lives back there. After that, you tell us which other Rentech installations have teeps."

"Most of them aren't at Rentech sites. They're rented out, sold to private citizens, to criminal syndicates, kula rings, you name it."

"But you know how to get the records of those sales."

“Yes I do.”

“I want them.”

“Why? So you can fight a war on two fronts? One against Psi Corps, the other against Rentech? I doubt you have the resources for that.”

“You have no idea what we have. We’ll do it.”

“Worse, Rentech is one of your allies. Will you examine all of the ‘friends’ of the underground more carefully now? Once you start turning over these rocks, you never know what you’ll find. If you get too picky, the underground won’t have any allies left at all.”

“Give me the locations.”

“I won’t.”

Fiona snorted. “Oh, yes you will.”

“No. What kind of life can you offer these kids? Always on the run, at risk of this same thing happening again? Out here, among the normals, our people will never be anything but victims.”

“And with Psi Corps we’ll never be anything but slaves.”

He shook his head. “I pity you if you really believe that. This is what we do—protect teeps. Normals hate us. They’ll never see us as anything but something to use for their own ends. Psi Corps is the only place we can be safe, free. I won’t give you the locations.”

“We’ll tear them out of you.”

“You would do that to one of your own kind? Then everything they said about you fanatics is true.”

“Look—what’s your name?”

“Heckman. Claude Heckman.”

“Claude, I’ve been in the camps. I’ve seen what the sleepers do. I know what Psi Corps is, and I want no part of it. You can’t see it because they brainwashed you. You’re a good little soldier. But don’t expect me to buy any of it, okay? You take away people’s most basic human rights, and that opens the door to the kind of crap Rentech is doing. Nobody cares because teeps have no rights, and Psi Corps keeps it that way, makes it okay.”

“Psi Corps cares. I was almost killed proving that.” He raised his chin toward the sleeping children. “You talk about freedom. Ask them which they want. The freedom to be abused—or to be protected, cared about, among their own kind?”

“I’m not arguing this with you.”

“What will you do with me? After you fry my brain?”

Fiona watched the thick-footed rows of cypress go by for a

while without answering.

“Here’s the deal,” she finally said. “You give us the locations for half and keep half. We hold on to you long enough to be sure you told us the truth, then we let you go be a good little soldier some more. Half for us, half for Psi Corps. If you don’t like that, we tear it out of your head and finish you off with a bullet.”

Claude considered. “It’s a mistake,” he said, finally. “But yes.”

“Fine.”

One of the twins rubbed her eyes, sat up, and hesitantly approached.

“Come here,” Fiona said, opening her arm. The girl nestled under it and closed her eyes.

Fiona closed her own, over a wave of tenderness that quickly became anger, both surprising in their intensity. The Psi Cop thought he had a family, but she knew what family was, and Psi Corps wasn’t it. But neither was the resistance—it was just the hope of a family, someday. The prayer for one.

And suddenly she understood where her own hope had gone, and maybe—just maybe—how to get it back.

Chapter Four

Jenny Winters' Diary

July 21, 2189

Dear Diary:

I can't say it, so I have to write it. Fiona told me I should start a diary. I didn't think it was a smart idea. What if the Psi Cops found it, and it had all of this information in it? But she told me about another girl, long ago, named Anne Frank. She said sometimes it was worth the risk, and what if a Nazi had found her diary and read it; maybe it would have broken his heart, rid the world of at least one evil man the best way. Not by killing him, but by making him good.

I wish I had started it earlier, so I could have written down the happy things.

Because Fiona is dead. And Matthew is dead. And Stephen is dead. And if you are a Psi Cop, reading this, I hope it breaks your heart. Because they were people so good I don't have any words for them. They gave us love, and hope, and dreams that no one can take away from us.

I hope they aren't dead, but I know they are, because no one has heard from them, and they wouldn't be gone so long without letting us know they were okay. I hope they aren't dead, but they are.

I should introduce myself, I guess, since this is my diary. My name is Jenny Winters, and I'm thirteen. I was born in the United

States, in Vermont, but I don't remember Vermont. My mom was a teep, like me, and her and dad had to move a lot. She won't tell me, but I know what happened to dad. He got tired of it, and he left her, and he turned her in, but she took me and ran. That was in England, I think. And we went from there to India, and then to Amazonia. Mom got a job there working for a corporation. I won't write down the name, or even the city, because they knew she was a teep, and they hired her to do illegal scans. They didn't pay her much, and we had to live where they said.

Where we lived wasn't much, just a sort of dark little room with one bed and a kitchenette. But we had plates there. Me and Mom bought them together, and she let me pick out the design. We never had real plates before that. My neighborhood was nice, with a park and even a beach not far away. I learned Portuguese pretty fast, and had a few friends—Mily, Paolo, Rex.

They never T-tested me in school. Mom said her company fixed that for us. I think that was the main reason she worked for them, because I think she didn't like what she had to do very much.

I'll write some more tomorrow.

July 24, 2189

Dear Diary:

I almost didn't write in this anymore. I listened in on one of the meetings the other day. I'm not supposed to, but I'm practicing being stealthy. I've heard all of the stories about Fiona and Matthew and Stephen, and I know to be a good resistance leader you

have to be as good at sneaking around as at fighting.

That's what I want to be, too. I don't want to just ride the railroad to someplace safe. I want to fight. I want to blow Psi Corps up completely, and maybe EarthDome, too. Fiona and Matthew said not to think that way, that we only should blow things up when we have to. I think Stephen likes to hear me say it, though.

I like Stephen. Matthew is great, but he's married to Fiona of course, but maybe I'll marry Stephen someday.

Except he's dead. It's just that I can't imagine anything that could kill Stephen. He's been shot about sixty times, and he always gets back up.

I'm losing track of this. I almost didn't write anymore, because at the meeting (no, Mr. Psi Cop, I won't tell you who was at it) at the meeting they said we were losing heart. They said that some people in the underground never liked Fiona and Matthew anyway, and now they're going to do as they please. And other people are losing hope. I think a lot more people have been captured since F and M and S disappeared.

Anyway, Mom died in Amazonia. I don't know exactly what happened, because at first I wouldn't listen to them, and then I didn't believe them. Some men came from the company Mom worked for, and they told me she was dead, and that they would take care of me. I was about ten, then.

What they did was, they sold me to Mr. Farber. Yes, Mr. Psi Cop, I am telling you his name, and I didn't slip up. I don't care what happens to Mr. Achilles Robert Farber. I worked in his house. I got my voices when I was nine, and he knew that. He made me

listen in on things. He made me feel things that other people were feeling, and then made him feel that. Bad things, like people getting stabbed and beaten up. Other things that maybe felt better but which Fiona says ought to be private.

Sometimes he did things to me, and made me make him feel it at the same time. I won't tell you all of the things, but Fiona said I should talk about it. That I shouldn't be ashamed or anything because it wasn't my fault. So I'm not ashamed. I wish I could forget some of it, though. I used to drink and sniff paint and that kind of thing, hoping I might forget, but Fiona put a stop to that. I used to like drinking, especially vodka or whisky when I could get it, but now I don't miss it at all.

July 25, 2189

They were like king Auther and Guinever and Lancelot. Well, not exactly, but I thought I should make a literary reference, like you're supposed to in school. I knew how to read when I came here, but Fiona taught me to like reading. What I mean is that they are like a king and queen and the perfect Knight, even more perfect than Lancelot, because Stephen would never betray Matthew, and neither would Fiona.

Maybe they're more like the three Musketeers.

A few months ago, they got word that a boat getting teeps out of China was going to be boarded and searched by the Psi Cops in Capetown. They got down there in time, tied up the Port Authorities, and disguised themselves as them. Then they led the Psi

Cops onto the wrong ship, which was owned by a certain Tong lieutenant who shanghaied the Psi Cops and put them to work in the poppy fields someplace. I guess they're still there. Serves them right.

Another time Fiona and Matthew got captured in the Central African Block. Stephen just walked into the holding station and killed everyone there, like an avenging angel.

See, leaders don't have to put themselves in danger. You didn't see president Indrasingh leading the troops during the Quebec riots, did you? But They do. They won't send any of us to do a job they wouldn't do themselves.

They say that king Auther isn't really dead, but just waiting until he is needed. If that's where F & M & S are now, waiting till they're needed—we need them.

I don't think the three Musketeers are supposed to be waiting anywhere, but we could use them, too.

August 2, 2189

I'm pissed. Me and one of the boys went to the market, and we played the deception game. It's good practice for being stealthy. And we got a bottle of something that tastes bad (I can't read the writing here) but man, is it strong.

Well, so what. If Fiona didn't want me to drink, she shouldn't have got killed. I hate her.

I have to go. I think I have to throw up.

August 4, 2189

I didn't mean to say I hate Fiona. I don't. Sometimes I get mad when I drink.

I didn't tell you how we first met. They found me at Mr. Farber's house. Mr. Farber helped them sometimes, but when they found out about some of the things he does, they hit his house hard, anyway. He must have got wind about it, because he wasn't there when they came. Stephen found me in my room. I thought he was part of another game, but he got me dressed and told me we were leaving. Then Fiona came, and when she saw me she cried. Her tears almost filled up my head.

Stephen wanted to kill Mr. Farber, but they couldn't find him.

I think the resistance is going to hell. They blew up a train station, and a lot of normals were killed. Fiona and Matthew wouldn't have let that happen. They would have hated it.

Anyway, we have to move now. I don't know when I'll be able to write again.

September 3, 2189

I can't believe it. I don't think I've ever been this happy.

Fiona and Matthew and Stephen aren't dead. They're here. And the best thing, the very best thing of all, is why they were gone. It wasn't because they were captured or because they didn't care anymore. They were gone because Fiona was having a baby! They named him Stephen, of course, "Stee" for short, so they don't confuse him with big Stephen. I can't even write here how happy I am. It's like the Sun went away for a long

time, but then came back even brighter and better than before.

I can tell Stephen is proud. He actually holds the baby, as goofy as that looks. He told everyone he was the godfather. But they still had time for me! Stephen gave me a big hug as soon as he saw me, and asked how I had been running the revolution while he was gone. I didn't tell him things were going wrong, because it doesn't matter anymore. Fiona and Matthew hugged me, too, although they are very busy. Everyone wants to see them, and they have the baby. I think Fiona was sad, because I think she smelled the stuff on my breath, but now that she's back I'll stop, of course. I'm just going tonight, because my friends say we should celebrate, and they know where we can steal some real whisky, not that stuff we've been drinking.

I can't believe I'm so happy. Everyone else is, too. A baby! In Psi Corps they make you marry people you don't want to, because they breed people like they breed dogs to get poodles and things. And out here, they steal babies, take them off, and raise them. But Fiona and Matthew had a baby, a real, fine beautiful free baby.

Every time we give up hope, they bring us more. I heard one of the older women say that.

So, mister Psi Cop, if you are reading this. You lose. You can't keep us down, no matter what you do. You can't.

Kevin Vacit thumbed through the rest of the pages in the little book,

but they were all blank.

“So I’m a grandfather,” he murmured. “Imagine that.”

He hit his com. “Send Ms. Alexander in, now.”

“Yes, sir.”

Natasha entered a few moments later.

“How is the girl?” he asked.

“She’ll be okay, poor thing. They had to deep scan her, of course, but she’ll recover.” She shifted uncomfortably. “She isn’t going to a camp, is she?”

Kevin shook his head, tapped the little diary. “No. She’s already suffered enough at the hands of normals. We have everything she needs to straighten out right here. Structure, authority, and a family. She’s confused and damaged, but it’s not too late for her.”

“The Corps is mother, the Corps is father.”

“And we need that, we orphans. She’ll see in time. Tell her teachers to use extra patience.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And this other matter. You have the location of the eastern base of operations?”

“Yes. And they won’t shift because we planted a cover to make it appear the girl was picked up by local mundanes for stealing. They don’t know we have her.”

He nodded. “It’s been a long wait, but I think it’s time to move. The underground is completely out of hand. Even their supporters in the Senate have to admit that. It’s time to clean it up. And this Fiona and Matthew Dexter, they seem to be the heart of it. I want them alive—martyrs we don’t need. When they join the Corps and come out against the underground, whatever remains of it after tonight will dry up and blow away.”

“Yes, sir. But what if they won’t join, sir?”

“They will, because we need them to. The people in the psych department have made a few breakthroughs in conditioning techniques. I hope to convince them with reason, but if we can’t, then we can’t.” He smiled dryly. “First we have to get them, of course. I want double the necessary strike team. Oh—and the girl’s diary confirms the rumor—there is a child. Be certain it is not harmed.”

“Will do, sir.”

She left, and he thumbed back through the book. A card he hadn’t noticed fell out. Someone—presumably the girl—had

sketched a picture on it in colored pencils. A king and queen, each wearing a crown, a knight in golden armor, and in front of them a manger. Beneath it she had written, "Galahad is Born."

On the inside it said, "Happy Birthday, Stephen Kevin Dexter."

Chapter Five

Fiona padded to the crib, unsure what had awakened her. Little Stee was asleep—miraculously. By this time of the morning he was usually either bawling or sandwiched between Matthew and her.

She knelt, gazing at him in renewed wonder, feeling his small dreams of color and smell. She did not even have to reach to find them; he was broadcasting already. Not for him the sudden, jarring transformation of later life.

“Everything okay?” Matthew asked.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t. I was awake when you got up.”

He swung his feet over the bed and came to join her. “He is beautiful, isn’t he?”

“When he isn’t crying, you mean?”

“Even when he is crying. When he chooses to cry, my son is the best damn crier in the world.” He yawned.

“Doesn’t really do it that much, though.”

She kissed him, a quick peck, and thinking better of that gave him a firmer buss on the lips. He returned it.

I love you, as the kiss lingered.

Sometime afterward, when they were back on the bed, Stee began to snuffle a little, and Fiona went and got him.

“Vacation’s over,” Matthew said, tickling her belly.

“Vacation? I don’t remember a vacation. I remember weighing a standard metric ton and—”

“I stand corrected. I meant—I wonder if we made a mistake, dropping out of sight like that. Things are pretty shaky around here.”

“We had to do it,” Fiona said. “We needed it. Our son needed it. We took a little breather, and now we’re ready to start again.” She paused for a moment. “I’m worried about Jenny. Did you see her? She’s drinking again.”

“I—”

“What?”

“I was waiting for the right time to tell you. This isn’t it, but—”

“It’s about Jenny?”

“Yes. She’s missing—apparently about three days now. Not Psi Corps; the local sheriff picked her up for shoplifting.”

“And you didn’t tell me this?”

“I only found out a few hours before bed. I was going to tell you in the morning, after you got some sleep. Fiona, I set some of our best people on it. We’ll get her back.”

“Three days? What about bail? Why didn’t I notice?”

“You’re a little busy now,” he said, tapping Stee on his soft head. “And the problem with bail is finding her. She went into the juvie system, and that gets confusing. We have to play someone as a relative, and for that we have to wait on documents.”

“We should have taken Jenny into hiding with us. I knew better than to leave her here.”

“If we’d followed that logic, we would have had everyone with us,” he murmured.

“I know. I know. Poor Jenny.”

“We’ll find her. Stephen’s going out tomorrow.”

“Okay.” But she lay on her back, worrying, and could not sleep again.

And then, suddenly, Stee gave a weird little cry. It did not sound like any noise he had ever made before, not like a baby at all. It sounded like an adult, somehow—not the quality of the sound, which, after all, came from immature vocal cords—but something about the tone and inflection. It was a cry of terror and despair, and it sent up all of the hairs on the back of her neck.

He did it again, and now she felt his mindcry behind it.

“Matthew? Matthew.”

He came awake just as Stee screamed like a torture victim.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s feeling something. Hearing something and—” She sprang out of bed and ran to the wall com, snapped it on, thumbed the number one switch. A primitive system, built of spare parts, with no AI, but it worked and the parts weren’t traceable. They had had trouble with AIs having hidden instructions, betraying them when linked to nets.

The panel lit to clean static.

She thumbed number two. More of the same.

Number three flickered on, and there was Chin Hsung and Ned

Kowalewski, chatting. They looked at her in surprise.

“Hey, little mama,” Kowalewski said. “What’s up?”

“Ned, One and Two perimeters aren’t responding. What’s going on up there?”

“What?” He began punching at his control panel. “Ah, shit. You’re right. Might be a malfunction—”

“No. Ned, Hsung, fall back, get out of there!”

Hsung was lifting his rifle when the door behind them suddenly crumpled inward. The first instant of the explosion must have overloaded the audio sensor, because after a quick crack it was soundless. From the smoke, two black-clad Psi Cops emerged, weapons spitting flame. Hsung never got off a shot; Ned got off two, but didn’t seem to hit anyone. Then one of the Psi Cops took aim at the camera and the screen went solid.

“Oh, my God.”

She hit the alarm, and then the fifth switch. Behind her, she heard Matthew swearing and jerking his clothes on.

The screen lit again, this time to Terrence Enoch’s square, serious face. “Yes?”

“Terr, it’s a raid. They’ve taken out One, Two, and Three perimeters already—at least. I’m on my way. Blow the Neck and start the evacuation.” She reached for her clothes.

No revolution could be entirely mobile. There had to be bases of operation, nodes, vaults, resting places. The underground railroad circulated people from house to house, from country to country, and for the most part, that was the underground. But they had a couple of fortresses that shifted only every few years, nerve centers that no one should be able to find—not without their knowing they were found.

This was one of them—a series of caverns beneath Tennessee. A hundred and thirty years ago it had been a hotel, a tourist attraction, but had gone broke. It had been quietly purchased by a mining company, but if one followed the maze of paper to the actual source of the money, it led to one Josiah Tozer, a very wealthy man who had lost his only son to Psi Corps.

This was his memorial to his lost son, his revenge against Psi Corps, his gift to those still free. Periodically abandoned and re-occupied, it had been one of their best centers of organization. Tozer had been dead for ten years. He would never know that his legacy had finally failed.

When Fiona and Matthew reached the ops room, it was a strange combination of bedlam and grim efficiency.

“They’re hitting everywhere,” Enoch told them. “Andorra, Singapore, Salt Lake City—every major house, node, fortress. We’ve lost all of them.”

“Couldn’t they just be jamming us?”

“Oh, they are. But we have antennas twenty miles from here and cables snaked through solid bedrock they don’t know about. You want to watch the Colin Bateman show, you can. You want to raise the safe house in Norway—no.”

“How? How?”

“It’s been coming for a long time,” said a voice behind them. They turned to find Stephen Walters.

“That bastard, Vacit. I thought I had him figured out, thought I had cut him off cold when I came clean with you guys. But he’s been playing with us all along. He could have done this anytime. Back when I was his man, he had all of the information he needed to shut the whole thing down—I know, ’cause I gave it to him.”

“Why now, then?”

“Something’s changed. I don’t know. Back then, it almost seemed like he wanted the underground to survive.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Vacit’s a strange old man.”

“It doesn’t matter now. What matters is getting out of here and salvaging what we can of the situation.”

“We have to get Stee out,” Fiona hissed fiercely, hugging the infant to her chest. “My son won’t grow up in Psi Corps. He won’t.”

“Okay, folks!” Matthew raised his voice. “It’s the scatter! It looks like they only know about the front way in, so we need to start bleeding people out through the back doors. They’ve probably got satellites lookin’ for that, so the first out will have the best chance. Run like hell—don’t go anywhere right away, just travel. We’ll set back up somewhere and let you know what and where is still safe.” He paused for a moment.

“I love all of you,” he said. “You’ve been champions. Just hang on, wherever you go. They can pound us but they can’t keep us down. Now go, get safe!”

He turned back to Enoch at ops.

“Are you tracking them?”

“Yes. They overrode the AI somehow, but I’ve got them with

the motion detectors. They're still consolidating Vestibule section."

"That mean they aren't past the Neck yet."

"That's right."

"Why haven't you blown it, then?"

"Two reasons, related. The motion detectors are hardwired here, but everything else goes through the AI. They've crashed that."

"Monkey's number one rule," Fiona said. "Always hardwire the explosives. Why didn't we?"

"I think Kim did that. She wanted the AI to be able to do it while we ran."

"Stupid. Or maybe she was a Psi Corps sleeper. Damn it."

"Another thing—for the same reason, we haven't been able to alert the people staying in the Ballroom."

"How many?"

"About twenty."

"No!" Stephen roared. "That tears it! The hardwiring goes as far as the relay, right? So I can set off the charges from the Grand Ballroom and get them out at the same time."

"Except that you aren't going to," Fiona said.

"What? Fee—"

"No. I'm making this quick, Stephen. You have to get out, now. Because you're taking your godson."

"No, see, that's what you should be doing."

"Can't. Look at them, Stephen, they're falling apart. We have to pull them together, or Psi Corps will get them all. And we have to do it here, now. We'll go to the Neck, blow it, get those people out. That'll give us lots of time."

"Great. Plenty of time. Then you wait here, with Stee, and—"

"Stephen!" Fiona's voice rose to its loudest. "For the love of God, get my son out of here! Can you really think of anyone here he would be safer with?"

Stephen opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"It's true," Matthew said, lower. "You're the only one we really trust, Stephen. And you're the only one who can keep the underground going if something happens to Fiona and me." He grasped Stephen's hand and dropped subvocal. *If Fiona and I cut and run now, it's all over. You called it, ten years ago. I didn't believe—didn't want to believe it—but since we've been gone, I can see it. Too many people trust us. Too many people depend on us. This is bigger than*

our lives, Stephen, but I'm selfish enough to want you and my son safe. That's the most important thing, period.

Fiona joined them. *Please, Stephen, don't drag this out. You know we love you. Now go—we'll see you in a few days. We'll meet at the place in Missouri.* She reached to embrace him, kissed him on the cheek, and then, very carefully, handed him the sling carrier and Stee. "And I'll see you soon, too." She kissed her son, and then quickly turned away.

"Okay!" she shouted. "I need ten volunteers! We're going to blow those Psi Cops back to Geneva!"

A ragged chorus of cheers went up, and a good deal more than ten stepped forward.

For a moment, Stephen stood paralyzed, but then he dropped his gaze down to his godson, and he suddenly understood. Enough of this—he had orders. Time to be the soldier, no matter how wrong it felt.

Once, the two main galleries of the cave had been connected only by a crawl space a foot or so high. The entrepreneurs who had decided to create the Styx Hotel had enhanced that to create a grand hallway reminiscent of Gothic arches. The "rooms" of the hotel varied, one side to the other. The Vestibule chambers, accessible to the outside for centuries, had been something of a mess. Stalagmites and stalactites had been broken off or blown from the ceiling by centuries of teens with shotguns.

As a result the outer sections were made up of small rooms and old administrative offices. Now they served as perimeter guard posts, with a maze of small mines and coded gates that it would take the Psi Cops a while to work through. The inner gallery was the Grand Ballroom, a glittering cyst of mineral wonders.

Far beyond that, in the maze of smaller, water-carved passages that snaked down below, were the nerve centers of the resistance. But transients stayed in the comfortable rooms—cabins, really, carved into the living rock, tier upon tier of them stacked up around the ballroom. Some called it the Kobold Condominiums.

The Psi Cops were still working their way through the outer rooms, the staccato bursts of their weapons drifting far ahead of them.

Fiona ran into the Grand Ballroom. It was full of people, the residents of the Kobold Condominiums, wondering what was going on.

“All of you!” she shouted. “We’re under attack by Psi Corps. I need you to clear the gallery, head back toward the dispersal stations. We’ll give you the time you need, but you have to go now. Leave your things.”

She left Jean and Wen to organize that, and then quick-timed the rest to the AI terminal node. She put two from her team to the task of finding the hardwiring for the charges, and took her remaining six up the grandiose Neck. There they fanned out, took positions, and waited.

They did not have to wait as long as she had hoped. The invaders weren’t all Psi Cops—most were probably Hounds and special ops, probably with a few EarthForce normals thrown in to fill out the cannon fodder.

Matthew came up beside her and took her hand.

“Ready?”

“Let’s go.”

Their minds came together almost seamlessly, organizing and focusing the lesser talents of the others who accompanied them, painting the picture they wanted those who were approaching to see.

The invaders arrived in her mind’s eye, and she felt their confusion at what they saw. The image she and Matthew projected was reflected back from their minds, and she enhanced it, added it to the original illusion, created a loop. The Hounds stopped, staring. They saw the Neck already shattered and collapsed, water cascading down the debris, filling the chamber they stood in. In point of fact, there was a river above them.

Part of it had once flowed through the caves, but its bed had shifted, leaving the caverns dry. The charges had been laid to open a long seam to it, however. Once Psi Corps found a fortress, it could never be used again. Monkey, who originally set the caves up, had been a firm believer in scorched—or in this case drowned—earth.

The illusion held for a minute, as the Psi Corps troops doubled in number. Among them she now felt very powerful minds, the Psi Cops themselves. Their doubt slammed against her will like a sledgehammer, pounding almost physically in her skull. She gritted her teeth, gripped Matthew’s hand more tightly. If they could hold

it long enough, even the Psi Cops might begin to believe it. Once belief was firm, they could keep the illusion up for hours.

Another minute or so passed, as the attackers began discussing the situation. One fired a burst at the debris, and imaginary sparks flared on the stone. The imaginary water level rose.

A Psi Cop fired another burst, and that broke someone, probably Mikko. Fiona felt him shake loose, weakening the rest, and sudden thunder to the right revealed his panicked alternative.

That was it. She yanked out her Naga, aimed around the column of stone she crouched behind, and began to fire.

The cavern filled with the whine and ricochet of bullets.

Surrender! We don't want to harm you! The combined urging of the Psi Cops battered her, and for an instant she considered it. At least she would be alive, and Matthew would be alive...

She clenched her jaw and fired again. Her life was hers to win or lose, not Psi Corps' to give her. "Live free!" she yelled. "Live free!"

Limestone spalled all around her.

They must have it by now. Start the retreat.

Mikko was already down—she'd heard his death scream. Mustapha and Chapman—something was making them sleep.

"Gas!" she hissed. *Go!*

The remaining three ran back down the Neck as she and Matthew lay down cover fire. Then she tossed a grenade and ran herself, just as something struck her oddly, made her head whirl and her body seem far away.

Matthew was dragging her, almost, and suddenly the whole situation seemed more than a little ridiculous.

She giggled.

Her grenade went off, and she felt someone die, and that snapped her out of it. She must have come in contact with the gas they were using. As she ran, she could feel it wearing off—it must have a short life, sensible in a cave. Had the cops been wearing masks? She hadn't been able to see.

By the time she reached the end of the corridor, she felt almost sober again. They reached the team at the AI at a dead run.

"Got it?"

"Got it."

"Blow, then."

An instant later, very near, the sky fell. There was no sound of

explosion, just a dull sort of vibration in the stone, and then a low, grinding crash followed by the gush of water. A ragged cheer went up, and Fiona recognized her own voice in it.

Ops was on skeleton crew when they got back.

“How is it?” Matthew asked Enoch.

“Not good. They had Two and Six staked out. I don’t think anyone got through. They found One and Four about three minutes ago. We’ve sealed them all and diverted everyone to Five, Seven, and Eight.”

“Which way did Stephen go?”

“Eight, I think.”

“Good. Good. How many do we still have in here?”

“Us, and maybe thirty more.” He hesitated. “We’ve lost every major nexus now. They’ve shut the railroad down. There’s nowhere to go, even if we get out.”

“We’ve got time to breathe, though.”

“Sure. We’ve teams at all the other entrances. We can blow ’em as we find ’em. But you two better go, now, while you can. They’re picking off our exits pretty fast.”

“I’m not leaving until everyone else is out,” Matthew insisted.

“That won’t happen,” Enoch said. “Because I’m not leaving with you two here. Capische?” He glanced at a sudden glare from his board. “There went Seven.”

“We still have Eight, though?”

“Yes,” Enoch replied. “Stephen should be out by now.”

“Eight, then,” Matthew said. “The caves are filling up. Time to go, and all of us are going together.”

Chapter Six

Stephen emerged on a mountainside, stepping into the cool night air. His namesake was awake, but quiet, almost as if he understood the need for it. Perhaps he did. The kid was already a powerful teep. Stephen scanned the valley and hillside through his night goggles, but noticed nothing peculiar.

“Okay,” he said, to the other five or so in his group. “Spread out. I know you want to stay together, but you can’t. Stay away from the highways and small towns—go cross-country when you can. Time works for you, so put as much of it as you can between now and when you have to put yourself in danger again. If you hear choppers, hide under something, and don’t move. Try to get to Chattanooga or head south. Keep your ears to the ground; we’ll get the railroad back together, but it could take a little while.”

They nodded solemnly, and reluctantly started away. All but one, that is, a fifteen-year-old girl named Valerie. She stood as if petrified, staring at the cave mouth.

“Where are Fiona and Matthew? Why aren’t they coming out?”

“They’ll be out, don’t worry.”

“I’m going to wait for them.”

“If you wait here, you’ll only tip off any air surveillance the Psi Cops have, Valerie. Go!”

“I’ll wait for them inside of the cave,” she said stubbornly.

“No. They will find this entrance, it’s just a matter of when. You’re one of the lucky ones, so don’t be stupid and blow a chance others would kill for.”

She turned her terrified gaze on him. “I’ve never been in the woods. I don’t know what to do.”

He sighed. “Come with me, then. You can help me with the kid.”

She brightened a little at that.

He watched where the others went—mostly down into the valley, which made sense. It was narrow, almost a gorge, and sparsely populated, with heavy cover and a stream.

So, of course, the cops would look there first. He turned and started up the mountain, Valerie in tow.

It was harder even than he thought it would be, leaving Fiona and Matthew. He strained to find their thoughts, though he knew it was impossible, through the layers of ancient stone. He kept catching himself dragging. Think of the kid, he would remind himself.

He was so preoccupied that he almost missed the choppers. They were running nearly silent, without lights, but they blotted the stars at the edge of his vision, and through the night goggles he could see that they left a faint trail.

“C’mon!” he told the girl, urging her up the next slope. There was nowhere to hide, here, nothing that would provide shelter from infrared sweeps, or from radar so refined it could detect a heartbeat. The choppers weren’t close enough yet, but they would be soon. Odds weren’t good that he could take a chopper with his rifle, much less the three he counted.

Valerie began to whimper; she had noticed them, too.

The rise brought them to a small road, one that hadn’t seen use for a while, judging by the high weeds thrusting through the black pebbles that remained from the ancient asphalt. Over the centuries, rural populations had continued to contract toward cities, as fuel prices rose and private cars gave way to trains and monorails. The cheap fuel cells that powered cars now had done a bit to reverse the trend, and people kept predicting—as they had for two hundred years—that cheap communication and AI nets would eventually decentralize civilization. But cities had become a habit with humanity, a hard one to break, and the countrysides had been given over to national parks and big industry. For the most part, people liked things that way. The Appalachian Mountains were littered with ghost towns.

They didn’t find a whole town, but the remains of a house, its slate-tiled roof mostly intact. It would have to do. He hustled Valerie into it, found that it had a cellar that had been dug into the rock. Even better.

The girl was near panic, and Stee was picking up on it, starting to wail.

“Here,” he murmured. “Watch Stee, will you? I’m not so good at it. That’s what you can do for Fiona and Matthew. Watch their baby. It’s the biggest job there is.”

Taking the baby seemed to calm her down. He crawled back to where he could see a sliver of sky and waited.

The helicopters went over, and kept going, making a beeline toward entrance Eight.

“Okay,” Fiona hissed. “Matthew and I will scout point. Terence, China, you watch our flanks. They might be out there and they might not, but we should be ready for a fight.”

She could feel their tension, and nothing else. If there were cops outside, they were quiet, well shielded.

She poked the nose of her rifle into the air, looked around carefully, and followed it out. Matthew was right beside her.

Okay, Fee?

Seems okay. I just—no! Above us!

Almost too late, her night visor showed her the faint pools of heat. Metal began clanging all around them.

Bombs! But no explosions—

Gas! She sent it as loudly as she could. Masks! She pulled her own on, hoping the invaders weren’t using a nerve agent. Some of her group either didn’t hear or weren’t fast enough, but most got them on by the time ropes began snaking from the sky. She lifted her rifle and fired at the dark shapes that were sliding down.

A man screamed and thrashed to the ground.

Out! OUT AND RUN.

She put her back to Matthew’s, and they both kept firing up, their tracers cutting loops in the sky. Men poured out of the helicopters like rain from a thunderstorm. She hit another, and another—The choppers began to fire back. The tracers ate toward them, as Fiona pumped bullets toward the gunner.

Behind her, the rest of their group were doing as ordered, fleeing through the holes as Matthew and she opened them.

They both dove flat as the fire from the choppers thudded the earth where they had been standing.

The gunfire was tiny, almost inaudible in the distance, and Stephen shook his head. Poor bastards. He wondered who it was.

But then, in a terrible flash, he knew, because he caught a hint

of Fiona, mindscreaming.

Too far. Way too far. Your imagination, he told himself.

But he knew it wasn't.

It didn't usually take Stephen long to make decisions. It didn't now.

"Watch Stee," he grunted to Valerie. "I'll be back for both of you. Stay here and do not move."

Fiona had seen movies in which one or a small handful of commandos or cowboys or policemen fought against fifty times their number, and won. The way the scenes were shot, it seemed credible. The method was to break the action down into a lot of smaller confrontations. What the films generally left out, purposefully, was the big picture, the aerial views, because this would show the fights for the fantasies that they were and leave the audience wondering why all of the bad guys to the sides, behind, and above the hero were holding their fire so said hero had to shoot only those in front of him.

She and Matthew survived in such a situation about as long as one could, perhaps twenty seconds.

Then a mule kicked her in the back.

Fee! But then several somethings hit Matthew, too, somethings that hurt him a lot more than a mule.

The only place they could go was back into the cave, and the muffled whump! that greeted them as they stumbled into it—more charges farther down, sealing it shut—reminded them that they couldn't go far that way, either.

Matthew had dropped flat next to Fiona, continuing to fire methodically, despite the pain she felt radiating from him. She stood straddling him, because she knew if she squatted or lay down she wouldn't get back up.

Her breath came painfully—the impact of the bullet on her vest must have broken ribs.

She fired all of her rounds and then ducked around the corner.

Matthew gurgled, and she grabbed his foot and dragged him around, too, tossed her last grenade so that it bounced out into the clearing, then began changing clips.

Stephen tore down the hill, stumbling often. Once he fell a full thirty feet, and his head cracked against rock, but he kept going, blood welling along the rims of his goggles. The helicopters bobbed in and out of sight.

He couldn't hear gunfire anymore, but that might be because of the blood pounding in his ears.

When she peeked around the corner to fire again, the tunnel filled with lead. She got off only a shot before something tore the rifle and most of her shoulder away. She grunted in surprise and fell back against Matthew, where he lay bubbling blood from a hole in his throat.

Take them alive, you idiots!

That from a Psi Cop outside.

"Alive!" she muttered. "Alive."

Fiona...

She stripped off her goggles and mask, pushed his up, and bent to kiss him. She didn't need to see his face anymore, or her own.

Surrender, Fiona, he managed.

And go back to one of those camps? No. They can use us, program us, make us betray ourselves...

She felt them getting close outside. She hunted on Matthew's belt and found his last grenade.

Remember that wild night in Santa Cruz?

The boring party? The carnival? The midget and the dwarf?

And we went walking on the beach.

*I remember you were shy. You wouldn't go skinny-dipping. Wouldn't go that far on a first—*He coughed, and something broke loose inside of him. *I love you, Fiona.*

I love you, too. She pulled the pin.

The last thing she saw was sunrise over the Sulu Sea.

Stephen was still eighty feet up the hillside when a tongue of flame curled out of the cave mouth below, and he felt them go.

He screamed. He screamed and he began to fire. Sparks flew from the nearest chopper, hovering at about his own level, and it turned, sluggishly, its sixty-millimeter barking to life. He stood,

watching the fire hunt him, squeezing the trigger of his rifle in metronome bursts.

The gunner fell back.

He was empty. He put in armor-piercing rounds and started again. It took eight shots to crack the cockpit, another three to take out the pilot. The craft dove into the mountainside, its rotors exploding as they dug at rock.

He walked farther down the hill, took the time to shoot a couple of men coming up it, but now the other two choppers were after him.

He stepped behind a tree, felt it shiver like a drumhead under the impacts. He pulled the pin on a grenade, counted six, and then stepped out and flung it as far and high as he could.

It detonated short, but the blast picked the chopper up a few feet. He pulled, counted five, threw again. This time he got the rotors.

He realized that he was still screaming, that he almost couldn't see for the blood and the tears. Fiona and Matthew were dead. He would kill every one of the bastards. Every last one.

Of course he was out of ammo, and grenades, too.

He pulled his knife, and then the tiniest bit of sanity crept back into his head.

Stee. If he died, who would take care of Stee? It was their last wish, the only thing they had asked of him.

So he sheathed the knife, as the last chopper rose like a death angel above him, and he began to run, weaving through the trees. The stupidest thing he could do was lead them straight back to the kid, so he wouldn't do that. He would lose them first, then go back. If only Valerie kept her head.

He plunged down the hill, leaves kicking behind him. They couldn't possibly see him anymore; they were hunting him on radar and infrared. He stayed in the tallest stands, to make them keep their distance.

He took a bullet anyway. Coming straight down, it shattered his clavicle, wobbled along his ribs and dug into his hip. Shocked, he ran headlong into a tree, rolled, and plunged into freezing cold water. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he managed to kick himself up under a mass of debris that choked the stream to one side.

The chopper flew on.

He stayed there a few more moments, breathing hard, then tore two strips from his shirt, plugged the entry and exit wounds on his shoulder, tore a third strip, and tied it tightly around both.

The arm hung uselessly.

He drew the knife again, and waited.

He didn't have to wait long. In what seemed only a matter of moments, he saw two dark forms, stalking down the stream, moving their rifles in careful arcs. He stayed still, blocking, until they were fifty feet away, thirty. He felt their minds and realized that he was lucky; they were bloodhounds, not Psi Cops.

Twenty feet and one suddenly stiffened, turning his head this way and that.

He couldn't charge from where he was. He just stood up, very slowly.

"Hello," he said.

The first man snapped his rifle up and fired. The bullet went wide, hissing into the water a yard to his left.

The second man did the wise thing; spun in search of ambushers from another direction. Stephen surged into motion.

The next round caught him in the chest, and the impact against his vest nearly toppled him backward, but he felt huge, massive, a neutron star, and an awful laughter bubbled up from his chest. The boy—and it was a boy, no more than twenty—fired again, missed—and Stephen drove the knife through his throat. The second Hound opened up on full automatic as Stephen turned again, using the impaled Hound as a shield. A bullet blew through the body and scored along his head, another weirdly smashed into his thigh, but by then he had gone cold, and all that meant nothing. He dropped with the body, pulling a pistol free from its belt, and shot the second Hound between the eyes.

Then the river was silent. In the silvery moonlight, the blood was only one more shadow.

Grunting, he pushed up, stripped the Psi Corps uniform from the larger man, and changed into it, no easy matter with a shattered shoulder. The chopper whirred over again, but it didn't fire. Now there was no way of knowing who was friend and who was foe—the cops must be everywhere.

Grimly he set out up the hill.

He encountered only one more Hound, and his stolen uniform allowed him to get close enough to kill silently.

But when he at last reached the abandoned house, there was no one there. Shell casings littered the ground, and the tall weeds had been trampled by boots.

He slid against the wall, too tired to weep, too tired to think. He went to sleep, praying silently not to awaken.

Epilogue

It is a fact that the time it takes the Earth to orbit the Sun is—with a tolerance of a few nanoseconds—the same each revolution.

It is nevertheless a fact that each year passes more quickly than the one before.

Kevin Vacit tried to measure his footsteps, as he could not the years. Tried to make them even, regular. But in his memory, the real rhythm of his life would not be fooled. Eternal days in the New Mexico sun, playing tag with Monkey, chasing lizards, and watching ants build jeweled hills. The bright, strong years with Lee, each day like a new epic, each moment condensed with peril and potential. Ninon Davion, and the years coming quicker, never time enough for anything. The last two decades—what were they? Mayflies laughing briefly at him as he tried to make it all last, create something that would continue after him, somehow.

He approached a door, and the guards, knowing him instantly, simply stood aside, asking no questions. His steps carried him on, past painfully young, clean-scrubbed nurses, smiling nervously as he entered the creche.

He strolled past the rows of infants, some silent in sleep, some crying stridently, some noticing him vaguely as he walked by. He approached one, one particular one, that stared at him with wide, dark eyes.

He touched the wrinkled parchment of his hand against the child's new skin, and closed his eyes.

For the child, each day was still a universe, almost infinite, shaped by desires as simple as gravity, modulated by incomprehensible curiosities.

Life should be lived backward, so we can end like this, merging gradually into the background unconscious of the universe. Instead, we grow more self-aware, more disconnected, the better to scream our terror and loss as we plunge into the abyss, unable to recognize that the abyss is just something we are a part of, an eddy in space that becomes, for just a moment, unique from all other things.

He blinked. Philosophy. Lee would have called it a damned waste of time. Lee would be right.

He sighed and smiled in gentle self-mockery, and removed his hand from the brow of his grandchild. *I'm sorry, Ninon. I'm sorry, Fiona. But this was the way it had to be. You can be proud, though. He's a P12.*

"You are my legacy," he said to the child, his voice so faint even he wasn't sure he was using it. "You are the part of me that will go on. You are Psi Corps."

He moved to the end of the little crib, to the blank tag there, and considered his decision. For this child, the Corps would truly be mother and father. He was no longer the child of Fiona and Matthew Dexter. He was no longer the grandson of Ninon Davion and Kevin Vacit. He was a future still to be imagined.

He paused an instant longer, and with a rare, wry smile, took a pen from his pocket and wrote a name on the tag. Then, measuring his footsteps, he walked away.

Freda liked the children, even when they were trouble. That was a good thing about Psi Corps—if you didn't like what you did, everyone knew it. You couldn't get away with neglecting the children, here.

She cooed to her older charges and introduced herself to the new ones. She was most curious about the one the director had come to see, but she checked the children in the order she came to them. It wouldn't do to go out of order, perhaps miss one. When she finally reached the child, he was asleep. A very handsome boy, with a good head of hair already. "Well, hello there, Alfred," she said, very softly, looking to see what name was on the tag. "Welcome home, Alfred Bester."