

The Chronicles of Z'va'Xin

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Chapter 1

Alien “fossil” unearthed

The sun brutalized the strange landscape with its all too familiar waves of heat. A landscape made up of large curved rock hills created by rivers that had cut deep into the soft sandstone and other soft rock. There were also a number of odd looking sculptures that had been carved over time – mushroom like formations; some that would make the more prudish blush, and others laugh. There was minimal vegetation in this harsh landscape, only the hardiest of plants claiming their small patch of parched, sun-baked ground. All elements combined gave the landscape an almost eerie other worldly feel. The area was called the Badlands by the early settlers, and with good reason – nothing they wanted to grow, would grow.

A solitary figure moved slowly over the solar heated ground, stirring up small clouds of dust with every arduous step. With every step he was deciding whether to go back to his air-conditioned hotel in Drumheller, Alberta, or go on just a bit farther. His stubbornness won out so on he struggled.

Dave Van Bercham was not a paleontologist or some professional dinosaur hunter – just an avid hobbyist, who used some of his vacation time hunting for fossils. This was the newest of his interests, and one, he was even now deciding whether to keep. Writing music at room temperature was starting to look better and better as the huge sweat spots on his light grey t-shirt expanded, threatening to dominate the few dry areas that remained. He was not looking for anything in particular. Just finding anything was starting to look real good right about now, but he had hoped for the rare possibility of finding a Troodon, a raptor-like dinosaur that was about two metres long. It was the paleontologist’s flavour of the month. He was looking in an area up a hill where the layers of rock were estimated to be around 73 million years old – around the right time for the Troodons. Then something strange caught his eye.

Farther up the hill of sedimentary outcroppings was a dark black colour that looked oddly out of place compared to its surroundings. It was too far away to make out what it was so he climbed the steep slope to the rock outcropping that framed the black thing.

Less than a minute later, he was conversation distance close and looking eye level at it. He thought it would have been a dark rock or something, but getting closer to it had made it even more of a mystery. Only about 15 centimetres of it was visible. Rain and wind had partially dug it out from its tomb of rock.

He touched it but quickly pulled his hand back. He didn’t know why he did this. Something instinctive, something very basic made him react like that. Like a cat seeing itself in the mirror for the first time. But like the curious cat, he touched it again. It felt like glass, but cold. It shouldn’t feel that cold in this heat, he puzzled. Yes, that was why he pulled back so quickly – the briefest touch told him something was wrong. Another odd thing struck him next – there were no reflections on it. Something this smooth should have reflections but instead of seeing his face or the glare of sunlight on it – nothing. If he wasn’t touching the black smoothness of the thing, he would have thought there was nothing there.

He noticed it was sitting within a dark layer of rock. This layer was supposedly created by the fallout after a giant meteorite hit the earth 65 million years ago – one of the many dinosaur extinction theories.

He could discern it had a slight curve to it. All he could think of was that it was a large volcanic rock, and had somehow found its way to this location. Melted rocks can be glassy smooth he tried to convince himself. Yes, that's it, it's a volcanic rock, and there might be a lot more of it buried. He might have found something interesting after all! He took his small wedge-shaped hammer from his backpack, and started chipping away at the layers of soft rock.

Z'va'Xin awoke from the long blackness. Her first awareness was that of success – her survival strategy had worked. She next became aware that she was alone. There were no more of her kind anywhere. Sadness.... Great sadness....

Accessing memories....

Critical error made....

Meteorite was not anticipated....

Darkness after impact....

Energy low....

Not enough power....

Cannot escape planet's atmosphere....

Cannot absorb solar energies....

Thinking....

Not enough power to self-destruct....

Thinking....

Nothing.

Z'va'Xin could not remember what had resulted in her being swallowed up by a liquid earth; sinking down deeper and deeper. She had sent out a signal for rescue. It was a weak signal and Z'va'Xin reasoned it would not reach her planet of origin. Under more optimal conditions, Xin could have easily moved out of the quicksand. No Z'va probe had ever been compromised, captured or destroyed by others. Only by their own decision had probes destroyed themselves. No other beings should be allowed to make use of the Z'va probe's technologies. Few sentient species are morally ready for that responsibility.

Accessing memories....

Xin remembered her frustration – she could skim over the surface of a star, melt through solid rock, travel at incredible speeds, and even fold space. Yet she had found herself stuck in the mud with no obvious options remaining – except one. She would simply turn herself off. She didn't like the idea. What if some intelligent beings found her? No, this planet had the greatest variety of creatures she had ever seen in the known galaxy, but there were no beings that could disseminate and use her technologies. Although there were a number of intelligent species, there were none with the ability to develop technologies at the present. The chance of this type of occurrence was estimated at 1.176 million to one. However that was assuming there was some form of life in the first place, even if it was nothing more than bacteria.

Accessing memories....

No, she felt confident this was the only way. She would power down everything. Her energy cells would store the little remaining power for a few of this planet's full orbital cycles but then she would experience the blackness when they were depleted. She knew the atmosphere would eventually clear, and the planet's surface would go through constant changes. She could not

predict if she would be freed from her grave through erosion or some cataclysmic event. This was a hoped for possibility, but she knew, at some point, this star would use up its fuel and go supernova. The blast would tear this world apart, and she would be freed. Yes, this was the only solution.

So she had “slept”. A thousand years passed.... A million years passed.... Layer upon layer of rock covered her – some layers were eroded by water and wind – more layers replaced them. Fifty million years passed.... Above her, the incredible diverse animal and plant life evolved. Some became extinct, some new forms added, and ever changing. An earthquake – the layers she was in were pushed up forming a mountain, but she was still deeply buried in the soft rock. Millions of more years pass, followed by more erosion. The dawn of man – the 1.176 million to one possibility is realized. A few more million years pass....

It is May 15, 2011. It is early morning. A pronghorn antelope walks too close to the edge of a hill. It dislodges a rock and starts a rockslide. A large rock knocks away a large portion of sedimentary rock outcroppings. The first sunlight in 65 million years hits a small portion of Z’va’Xin’s surface. Power cells slowly absorb the energies, systems are powered on, and the long blackness fades. Light! Glorious light! Extreme happiness!

Dave Van Bercham kept eagerly chipping away at the layers of sedimentary rock. More than a half a metre was now visible; it definitely was curved, possibly sphere shaped, although he wasn’t sure as to how much more was hidden within the rock. The sun was high overhead – he felt the blistering heat on the back of his neck. The sun was now hitting the black curved object directly, and still no reflections. It was like the sunlight just disappeared into the blackness of it. He cautiously touched its surface again; to his surprise it was just as cold as when he first touched it. What was this thing? It wasn’t like any rock he had ever encountered. Puzzled, and very curious, he continued the excavation.

Proximity alert!

Xin’s warning program subroutine became active, the threat evaluated and tactical measures taken, all within a fraction of a millisecond.

A blinding white light and everything went black. Dave Van Bercham was unconscious before his limp body hit the dusty baked earth and slid slowly down the hill about ten metres.

As the manufactured tool wielding humanoid laid unconscious, Xin continued absorbing all the different energies from the Sun: radio, microwave, infrared, visible light, ultraviolet, X-rays, and gamma rays. It felt so good. She had been so weak for so long. Weak and helpless were feelings she had not known until this incident. Feelings she was determined to NEVER let happen again. Her energy cells were charged now. Her outer shell had done what it was designed to do – absorb any form of energy, whether it be from the various star radiations or the other less efficient forms such as sound, wind, or an occasional accidental tap from a metal hammer.

Over the millions of years she had “slept,” there were numerous occasions when vibrations in the earth had given her a small amount of energy. However, it was never enough to give her the power needed to melt her way out of the earthen tomb. Her cells were depleted long before the next earthquake hit. She used the brief periods of consciousness to run diagnostics and maintenance subroutines. Not that this was necessary but it gave her something to do.

Now the Z’va reactor was online, having been powered up by the lesser power of her energy storage cells. Soon the reactor was at minimum power. Her outer shell began the process of super heating, as it changed in colour from pitch black to white hot. A few seconds later, the soft rock

around her melted away like butter in a microwave; the aftermath looking like the results of a mini volcano with an occasional popping bubble.

Xin hovered about a metre above her red-hot melted tomb. Her energy cells automatically collected the small amount of energy from the melted rock, as well as the sun's radiations. This was a new program she had created as soon as she had freed herself. No longer would she let herself go weak. Weakness leads to vulnerability, vulnerability leads to possible compromise and the inability to self-destruct.

The Z'va'Xin probe was a perfect sphere, about a metre in width, as black as India ink, no reflections, and back down to a cold zero degrees celsius. Xin made no sound whatsoever – she was the perfect observation, recording, analytical device and so much more.

Xin's data storage unit had the recorded, complete information from 2,941 worlds. Complete meaning every detail of a planet from temperature to life forms, from chemical compositions to orbital rotation time. She had almost finished her documentation of this world but now, much of this information would have to be categorized under ancient history rather than present or recent history. As a matter of fact, all of her information was very dated indeed.

She hovered over to the sentient life form that still lay unconscious. Xin did not damage it; she merely manipulated its nervous system, rendering it unconscious. It was an instinctive, self-preservation reaction. She knew it was the best course of action, but she felt somewhat sorry for the result. This creature had aided her release by a few cycles sooner. The humour of it struck her – a few cycles from an eternity.

The Z'va probe seemed to defy gravity as she silently went down the gradual slope, hovering about a metre off the ground. It had long been known gravity could not be controlled or manipulated. Mass, however, can. If an object has no mass, no gravitational force can act upon it. The solution was quite simple once multi-dimensional phasing was developed.

Dave Van Bercham was sitting up now and in a daze. He was a fairly average looking caucasian male, thirty-five years old, almost six feet tall, and a solid one hundred and eighty pounds. He had short, dark brown hair, a van dyke style beard and mustache that were neatly trimmed.

His blue-grey eyes now focused on the black thing moving slowly and quietly towards him. He stood up and started backing away from it. Was he dreaming? He was still a little dizzy and not sure of his footing. He stopped suddenly as if stunned. He knew he didn't need to be afraid. He somehow knew it. It was like a feeling, an emotion that came over him. He also knew it came from the black object. Somehow he knew it. It communicated with him. Not with words like "Don't be afraid," but in essence, that was the message the sphere had emoted to him. The sphere emanated calmness, friendship and a need to communicate as it sent the pulses directly into Dave's mind.

By the time the sentient had been calmed down and its curiosity could be sensed, Xin had completed her detailed analysis of this life form, categorized it and filed it away for future reference. It was a good find. It was a rare find – an intelligent, sentient life form, with tool making ability. In all her travels, Xin had only 73 listed in this category. It wasn't technologically advanced as some, but it was still an exciting discovery. Xin labeled it 1-74.

Another interesting observation she noted was its physical appearance. It was not unlike her makers who were taller, more slender, and without body hair. Make these adjustments, and this species looked remarkably like them save for a few minor facial details. She decided to mind scan it.

Dave couldn't believe what was happening. "Hello," Dave said in the friendliest voice he could muster. "I mean you no harm." He couldn't believe he said that. He smiled and did his best to look harmless. This is some kind of alien or space type thing he guessed.

Xin became a bit apprehensive as the mammal bared its teeth, but knew now that it could not possibly scratch her outer shell with those bone teeth or the composite metal tool at its feet. She stopped 2 metres from the life form and began the scan. A bright white streamer connected the probe to the head of the subject.

Dave had to close his eyes from the brightness, his head felt like it was going to explode but he was not afraid. A message of calmness – no harm – learning about you, was silently communicated to him. The whole thing took only a few seconds; when it was done, Dave fell to his knees as his legs gave out from under him. He was left with a headache verging on a migraine, but otherwise felt intact.

Xin was shocked by the findings of the brain scan. This is not possible she thought, but the scan was accurate, and all her systems were functioning at maximum efficiency. This sentient life form had a scan result that was so close to the ones who had made her that it was an impossibility. Had they traveled this far while she lay dormant in the earth, or is it just an incredible random coincidence? She didn't know for she was unable to witness the events that had unfolded above her over the millions of years.

Xin had learned a great deal from the brain scan. All that this individual of species 1-74 knew, she now knew as well, but it didn't answer conclusively the one question Xin sought.

She again scanned outside the earth's atmosphere and into space, searching for a sign that her makers were alive, or a sign of the existence of another Z'va probe out there. There was nothing except the various wave patterns of 107 different intelligent life forms, some living, some long dead. Loneliness and sadness again struck her.

"He-llo," the probe echoed in a perfect impression of Dave's own voice. "I mean you no harm."

"You can understand me?" Dave stammered out.

"Yes," Xin said. "I only wish to communicate with you. Please, what is your species origin?"

Dave was on the verge of a nervous breakdown and having his own voice asking him a question didn't help his sanity. "Species origins?" Dave repeated back.

"Is this planet your species origin, or have you colonized this planet?"

"As far as I know, this is my species origin," Dave answered more calmly now. "We have found fossil remains of our species dating back millions of years."

Xin could feel a level of certainty that emanated from life form 1-74 as it replied to her question. For now, Xin concluded that this species was an incredible random coincidence, unless she discovered something to contradict the present information. In any event, this species was very compatible and she so wanted a companion when she ventured back into deep space.

She had been alone for so long the further loneliness of space was unbearable to consider. Out there she would not be able to turn herself off for millions of years – it was too dangerous. Others of her kind had merged with another Z'va probe and even a humanoid maker to ward off the loneliness of space travel. Xin was relatively young and her missions were only limited to this galaxy, so there was really no need for a companion but now everything had changed.

Xin had to find out for certain that her makers were no more and should be allocated for her history files. No civilization lasts forever. Xin knew this as her discoveries confirmed this time and time again. Deep down, she knew that her civilization was long gone. No civilization in the

known Universe had ever lasted more than 70 million years. Some died from natural disasters, disease or invasion. Those that had survived these early challenges and had achieved incredibly long life or virtual immortality, died from the results of insanity. Evolving beyond the need for physical form was the most rare occurrence, but this also led to civilizations end and the dawn of the omnipotent being or God as understood by this individual of species 1-74.

The Z'va probes were Xin's civilization's failed attempt at creating a sentient machine that emulated this last step in the evolution of life. Xin was not omnipotent; otherwise she would not have found herself in this predicament. However, Xin has the capacity to evolve beyond her original abilities. It was not uncommon for a Z'va probe to come back to its planet of origin more improved than when it had left.

"Dave, I wish to share some of my knowledge with you," Xin used the beings name to make it sound friendlier.

"How do you know my name?" Dave asked in amazement as if replying to some sort of magician's trick.

"I know everything you know," Xin echoed back. "This oral language is not very efficient. It is much too slow. I will share some of my knowledge with you. It is only... fair," the probe strategized.

Before Dave could protest, Xin blasted his mind with information as the bright white streamer connected with his mind once again. The pain was like a migraine but all around his head. Images, thoughts, even emotions flooded his brain. It was over in a few minutes. The pain went away but Dave felt physically tired and had to sit down.

It was all clear to him now! He knew what the probe was. He knew why it was here on earth. He knew things that no human being was meant to know. He knew more about dinosaurs than anyone on the planet! Xin, yes, that was the probes name.... Xin had given him the information she had collected about earth 65 million years ago! He not only knew exactly what dinosaurs looked like, but also how they moved, sounded, even their smell and more. The probe had detailed records – visual, audio, even scans of their anatomy! Xin was an incredible treasure trove of information. She had only selectively shared a small fraction of her stored data but Dave knew there was much, much more she wasn't sharing. Maybe his brain couldn't take it? Maybe he wasn't meant to know? Whatever the reason, he sensed a level of distrust from the probe.

She had also given him general information she thought he should know. Sort of like "get acquainted" information when two species meet for the first time – What she is and does, where she is from, what had happened to her, etc. His head was spinning with too much information. It would take a while to process it all.

Xin wanted to stay on this planet, to learn more about these humans, to update her recorded data of this planet, but she also knew her reason for existence was in question. Her makers were most likely long dead, but she had to be sure. "Dave, I must go now but I might be back."

Before Dave could reply, the probe moved straight up into the sky, increasing speed more rapidly than Dave thought possible. In a few seconds, the probe disappeared from sight.

Once Xin had left the Earth's atmosphere, she increased her speed to 299,792 kilometres per second and headed towards the Sun. A few minutes later she was skimming over the star's unimaginably hot photosphere, charging her reactor to maximum capacity. She needed the power from this star to get back to her point of origin. Now powered up, Xin headed towards the centre of the galaxy and initiated one of a series of space folds to get her home. The space ahead of the probe became a swirling mass of black and dark grey. Xin disappeared into its centre like a black pingpong ball being sucked down a drain.

Chapter 2

The bigger they are...

Xin completed the last of a series of space folds to get back to her home world. A small swirling mass of black and dark-grey formed in the emptiness of space, a few seconds later the black probe shot out of its centre with amazing speed. A split second later, Xin stopped completely, with no noticeable deceleration, and more abruptly than any student of physics would believe possible. The Z'va probe remained motionless just outside her solar system as she began her scans. If viewed from within the system, the probe would have been invisible if it weren't for the backdrop of a large burgundy coloured nebula in the shape of some eerie tentacled sea creature.

A short time later, Xin finished her scans and made her disheartening conclusions.

Sadness....

Despair....

Most of the system was much the same as it had been 65 million years ago. There were noticeable changes but that would have been expected over the passage of that much time. However, the fourth planet, her home planet, the planet where she was created, was now dead. The planet that had once been a blue and green ball teeming with life, orbited by space docks, stations; a multitude of various spacecraft was now a grey cinder marred by a few small craters. Fourth planet from the sun, Z'va Prime, a world dedicated to peace, knowledge and the arts. There was no sign whatsoever to even hint at what it once was. It was now a large, dead, grey ball.

The six other planets were much the same as they had been when last she was in this system – lifeless, like her home world was now. What had happened? Even Xin's incredible scanning technology couldn't come to any concrete conclusions, but it didn't seem like a natural disaster. The planet's tectonic plates are intact. There is no evidence of a large meteor strike -- the smaller craters were made over millions of years, after the atmosphere was gone. The atmosphere? What happened to the atmosphere? This was the key. What ever happened here, happened at least 20 million years ago – her scanners told her that much.

In the space of a few seconds, Xin went from stationary object to near the speed of light, heading toward the fourth planet for closer scans.

The Taelrok Battle Cruiser that had been passing through Xin's system had detected the space anomaly created by her space fold. Before Xin had come through the hole in space, the massive ship had moved behind the seventh planet. Shielded from scans by the small, cold world, the Taelroks now studied the small probe as it sped towards its home planet.

The dark blue Battle Cruiser was roughly cone shaped and bristling with a multitude of gun ports. One look made it clear it was designed for only one thing.

The Taelrok Commander laughed when he realized what had come out of the space anomaly. The energy spike detected had been high, so caution was advisable. Now all on the bridge crew were laughing along with their battle-hardened Commander.

“Hah! It is nothing more than a fecal fly!” roared the Commander. “We are in hiding from this?” he mocked at his second in command. “I expected at least a destroyer class ship to come through that hole based on our readings.”

“It’s no longer scanning, and does not appear to detect us, Sir,” said the weapons officer. “Should we scan it, Sir?”

“No. Plot an intercept course helmsman. Let’s swat this fly quickly and move on.”

Had the Taelrok ship scanned Xin, she would have known about their existence instantly. However, scanning her would have given them nothing. A Z’va probe was designed to be virtually unscannable.

The Taelroks are a race of conquerors. They expand their empire through conquering other worlds – killing many, enslaving some, and stealing the technologies from those unfortunate enough to be in their line of sight. The result was a brutal society with technology that was off balance with their “social graces”. This was their sector of space, and almost a dozen races were under their metal boot.

Physically they were humanoid, taller, larger and stronger than a human, but brutish in appearance and posture. Physically, they were as fearsome as their ill-gotten weapons.

The Taelroks were now the most powerful race in the sector, and as far as they were concerned (or conceited) – the whole galaxy. They had conquered all the neighbouring systems. A couple of the more technologically advanced races had been a challenge, but their ruthlessness and willingness to do what their enemy would not or could not do, often paid off.

The weapon officer’s tiny black eyes peered out from low sloping brows as he viewed the probe on his monitor. “Unidentified object is within weapon range, Sir.”

“Power up one of the anti-fighter cannons and fire when ready,” barked the Commander confidently.

Proximity alert!

Xin detected the massive ship only when the cannons had fired on her. “Stupid!” she scolded herself. She was in such a hurry to get to her home planet that she had stopped even her cursory scanning mode. She should have seen this ship the moment it appeared from behind the seventh planet.

The proton beam hit her directly mid-centre. A weapon designed to easily destroy most small fighter type spacecraft. Xin absorbed the energy the moment it made contact with her outer shell.

“The object appears undamaged, Sir,” the weapon’s officer remarked with surprise. “Scanning for confirmation... I’m getting no readings of any kind from the object! Scanners are ineffective!” his voice rising up half an octave.

The Commander’s face changed from jovial to serious on hearing this report.

In the time it took their Commander to learn that she was unharmed, Xin had downloaded the massive ship’s data storage and had learned their language. She now sent out a friendship message to the Taelrok Battle Cruiser – “I mean you no harm. Please, cease hostilities. Let us communicate. Communication and understanding of one another will dispel any apprehension you may have.”

The communication officer relayed the message to the Commander.

“Harm to us? Apprehensive? We are not afraid of this fecal fly!” the Commander shouted as his big meaty fist slammed down on his console. “Power up the main gun – shoot it out of my space!”

A bright light briefly blinded the Taelrok crew as the big gun hit with enough force to cleave a Destroyer class ship in two.

Xin's thick neutronium outer shell easily withstood the wide particle blast. She quickly absorbed the great amount of energy, and came to the conclusion they really didn't want to communicate with her. The surface of her outer shell had been slightly marred by the concentrated blast, but was already repairing itself, and seconds later it looked as featureless as before.

"The unidentified object is still in one piece, Sir!" there was now panic in the weapon officer's voice.

"Hit it with everything we have!" yelled the Commander in frustration. "I want that thing dead, dead, dead!" Each time he yelled "dead," he hit his fist on the console punctuating the word.

A massive amount of energy bore down on Xin. Everything from dozens of anti-fighter cannons to several large proton guns were fired. The heavy main gun was used again, and even several antimatter torpedos were in the mix.

Xin scanned the torpedoes and decided to phase herself out of this space and time. Visually it looked like she had turned invisible.

A series of blinding flashes and silent explosions concentrated on her location and continued for 15 seconds. When the firework display was finally over, a large cloud of multi-coloured smoke remained and expanded slowly.

The sixteen members of the battle bridge waited; peered into their monitors, scanners, and various other devices for a sign of the object's destruction. The large cloud now made it impossible to get a visual confirmation of its demise. Seconds passed; the bridge was silent.

"Something is happening inside the cloud!" the science officer shouted with both fear and excitement. "I'm getting energy readings off the scale!"

More seconds past as 32 tiny black eyes were now focused on the bridge's main monitor. The large cloud illuminated by whatever was happening inside.

The Z'va probe shot out of the cloud, and quickly came to an immediate stop. It was no longer black but as white and bright as a small star. Xin hit the massive ship with all the energy she had absorbed from the attacks upon her. The metre thick white beam shot out from her neutronium shell, hit the Battle Cruiser lengthwise from the bow to the stern, and went completely through the entire ship as if coring an apple. At the stern, the beam hit the ship's fuel reserves, as was the intention. The massive ship instantly exploded into millions of pieces with a blinding flash that outshone even the Taelrok's own arrogance.

Xin had intended to ignore the Traelrok Battle Cruiser – she could have outrun them or just phased out. Acts of violence were very distasteful to her indeed, but while hidden inside the cloud, she studied the Taelrok's files she had downloaded from their library computer. The Traelroks were responsible for unimaginable cruelty, violence and genocide. She had also learned that this ship was heading toward another planetary system to do much of the same – she could not allow that. She had also learned that although they were masters of this sector of space, they themselves were just pawns for a greater master in this part of the galaxy, a race known

only as the Veiled. There was very little written about them in the Traelok history files, making it obvious that they were as mysterious to the Traeloks as their name implied. Traeloks knew very little about them except that they were a very old and powerful race. Even the Traeloks were wise enough to know not to go up against them. It was obvious from the history files these Veiled let the Traeloks rule this sector. The Traeloks were their dog, and they held the leash.

Xin continued on toward the fourth planet. Upon her arrival she didn't bother to establish an orbit but immediately went down to the surface. Five kilometers above the surface, and at five thousand kilometers per hour, she skimmed over its deathly silent landscape. For hours Xin traveled, scanned, and visually recorded everything along her path. The landscape was mostly colourless, creating almost black and white imagery. Flat greyish ground met with low greyish hills and punctuated with an occasional crater. What was once an almost cyan coloured sky was now dark with the blackness of space. There was no water, no air, no sign of life, not even a microbe. There was no hint that a sprawling, advanced civilization had once been here. Her scans could not reveal what had happened, and there was nothing in her data files to compare this to. Somehow the atmosphere and some of the surface had been destroyed or removed. The passage of time had eliminated any residual evidence that may have lingered. She concluded that it probably was not a natural disaster. Someone or something had come along 20 million years ago, wiped out all life on Z'va Prime, and left without a trace. There was nothing in the Traelok's files to shed light on what happened here. It predated the Traelok race; according to their files, this had always been a dead world. This was one world the Traeloks were not responsible for destroying.

Beep....

Beep beep....

Beep....

Xin was receiving a transponder signal! It was a signal both familiar and yet strange. It sounded like a transponder from another Z'va probe or spacecraft but unlike what she had heard in the past. It was coming from within the system – from a satellite orbiting the fifth planet. Had it sensed her presence and activated its signal?

Xin shot up and away from Z'va Prime's gravitational influence, and seconds later was travelling at near light speed toward the small, icy world. She had to investigate this. Perhaps there were answers to what had happened here. The grey, dead world shrank quickly behind her as Xin let the cold blackness of space embrace her once again.

Chapter 3

A jewel beyond measure

Xin was in orbit around the insignificant, cold world. She continued following the signal till she knew it to be several kilometres directly below her, then quickly dropped down toward the icy surface. The Z'va probe stopped abruptly about a metre above the bright white surface. There was no sign of a craft or Z'va-made structure visible on the surface, the surface of which was a thick glacial-like shell almost a kilometre deep. This world made Earth's polar regions look like a holiday paradise. The surface was all white, mostly flat, with what appeared to be a number of dirty white mountains poking through the surface at random locations far in the distance. There was no life at all, only the bitter cold wind that made an eerie sound keeping Xin company. The hardiest of cold planet life forms would have only lasted seconds on this deadly world.

Xin scanned deep into the ice below where the transponder signal continued to emanate from. There you are, she thought, I found you. The signal stopped. No sooner had she proximity scanned it than the transponder stopped transmitting. Xin theorized that it was her presence in the system that triggered the start of the transmission, and her close scan that stopped it. Xin understood, she would have done the same in a similar situation. It was a simple rule – don't let Z'va technology be compromised by any other sentient race. Her history files had dozens of situations where this had happened. In one such case, an entire planet had accidentally destroyed itself after experimenting with technologies found within a stolen Z'va child's toy. Silly sentients, she thought.

Three hundred meters down, entombed in the ice mass was the source of the signal – a small space craft of Z'va Prime origin, but unlike any design Xin had on file. Scanned information gathered from the ice around it, told Xin it was at least 20 million years old, but in a strange twist, 45 million years younger than her. Yes, Xin knew all too well what it meant to be buried for millions of years.

Her reactor still had plenty of power absorbed from the Taelrok ship, so she began the process of super heating. When her outer shell was white hot, she simply turned off her anti-gravity field; let herself sink quickly down towards the ancient ship, leaving behind a trail of white steam in her wake. When Xin was within ten metres from the ship, she engaged the anti-gravity field once again, slowing her decent until she lightly touched the outer hull of the relic.

It looked like a silver jewel suspended below her in the ice. The spacecraft was scout ship size; no more than thirty metres long, and oval shaped like an elongated egg. It had dozens of short ridges running at various organized angles over its surface, which further delineated its form. Scanning the hull, she could not locate anything that resembled a hatch or portal to gain entry. She was not surprised however as this type of design was outdated even in her time. No, there probably was a designated phaseway somewhere on its hull but she didn't have time to locate it, so she quickly phased herself through the neutronium hull instead.

The interior was much more foreign to her than the exterior. Xin had to keep reminding herself that this indeed was made by the same race that had created her so long ago. The interior was spartan to say the least – it was practically empty. The curved, cyan coloured walls were about ten metres wide, and less than thirty metres in length. It was like being in a large tube that tapered gradually at both ends. Directly in the centre was a hexagon shaped platform about two metres high, a metre wide, and slightly concave on top. It was as pitch black and non-reflective as the small probe's outer shell. Xin scanned this; quickly moved to hovering position over it, accessed the ship's computer, and turned the spacecraft on. The access platform glowed slightly, the cyan walls became transparent; all around her the ice that entombed the craft was now visible. Only the black platform below her remained unchanged.

It took Xin a long time to access and learn the workings of this craft – thirty-seconds at least. After all, this craft is millions of years ahead of her, but, unlike organic life forms, technology has certain limits; when an advanced race reaches those boundaries of physics, technological advancements revert to a crawl. Simply, Xin was not as incompatible with this alien looking craft, as she had first feared. Even now, she was accessing its data storage device, trying to find out what had happened to this ship, and why it was in such a strange situation.

Searching....

Ship's log found!

Searching....

Xin found the last entry in the ship's log – it read:

This might be my last entry. My crew and I may very well be the last of our race.

Approximately three cycles ago, Z'va Prime was attacked and destroyed without any provocation. I still do not know who or what was responsible. It is my belief that, whoever did this, came from outside our galaxy. There is nothing in our know galaxy that could destroy us so quickly and easily. It came totally without warning, bypassing all our ships, probes, outposts, and warning beacons.

I know that I am breaking a law punishable by banishment, but I doubt there will be anyone left to enforce it. I have phased this ship deep in the glacier and have downloaded my Star Cruiser's entire library directly into the data storage of this science ship. It is the only craft on the Cruiser capable of storing this amount of information. Within this small ship is Z'va Prime's total knowledge of the known Universe. It includes the knowledge from hundreds of worlds – science, history, art, music... well, no need for a long list, let me just say simply, it contains... EVERYTHING.

I'll be damned if I let this knowledge phase into oblivion! Hopefully, some of us may survive to reclaim this knowledge at a future date. If not, I pray that any race that may find this ship has the wisdom to use the contained technological knowledge for constructive purposes. Some will argue that I am leaving what amounts to devastating power to a cave dweller, but I can't get past the thought of such a great loss.

I have just received a message from my second in command. Some of the fleet remains, however, scouts report all of our colony planets have been destroyed as well! I must return to my ship. What is left of our fleet is regrouping within the Tendril Nebula, just outside our system. We are hoping it will mask our presence long enough to form a counter-strike.

May your universe ever expand.

End of log.

Xin was sitting on the great library of Z'va Prime! For the first time in her existence, she did not know what to do. After all, she was a planetary information-gathering probe, not a politician or even a ship's captain. She knew that the scientific technologies contained in this library should not fall into the wrong hands. What were the right hands, she wondered? Her personal feelings, experiences, and basic self-destruct rules could not apply here. Instead, Xin relied on her logic programming for a course of action, and accessed the library for guidance. She studied multiple philosophies, planet histories, religions, legal debates; anything that would help her decide whether to destroy this library here and now or preserve this knowledge safely somehow.

She noted that multiple world histories contained account after account of great amounts of knowledge being lost through natural disasters, wars, and even at the hands of its original owners. Strange, Xin thought, why would a civilization destroy its own acquired knowledge? She had almost given up on understanding the actions of organic sentients. From the histories, it seemed that the passing on of knowledge from one era to the next was a constant struggle, especially for the younger, warlike civilizations. It was often two strides forward, one stride back, and sometimes several.

Xin began to agree with the star cruiser's captain and next put her energy into solving the safe preservation of the library, if that was possible.

Thinking....

Minutes passed as Xin ran through the many possible solutions, but no matter how complex or clever each one was, it always came back to her first idea. Leaving the library here under the ice was not a solution; hiding it anywhere else wasn't either. There was always the possibility of a natural disaster freeing it, an alien ship within proximity scanning range stumbling upon it,

even a meteor smashing this tiny ice world into a trillion pieces, sending the ship adrift in space. No, she would download the entire library into her own data storage unit. Just one small problem – she didn't have the capacity.

Once again she consulted the library....

Heading: Data Storage Devices.

Subheading: Archive Data Storage Schematics.

Xin first downloaded all the data she had collected in her travels directly into the library, as this would be otherwise lost by what she was about to do. Next, on a molecular level, she reformed her own data storage unit into a library level archive storage unit using the specifications from the schematics. It was a more elegant design than her old unit, much more efficient, and took up only half the space. Finally, she downloaded the entire library into her new enormous data storage device.

The great library was now within her permanently. She would self-destruct if she thought she had too; she even wrote a self-destruct program, which would do the same if the data were tampered with directly had she been incapacitated.

Now, what else could she upgrade? Xin consulted the library again, exploring probe and spacecraft technologies as well as anything else she might find useful. Several hours later, she had upgraded just about everything, added some new features; she even had some room and raw materials left over in her interior. Xin decided to leave this room open so that she could consult the library, and build whatever she needed at the time. Self-improvement was one of a Z'va probe's directives and Xin took full advantage of this golden opportunity. She was a larger, older model; as a result, there was much more room in her interior for the upgrades, and retrofits due to the advancements in miniaturization since her absence. Xin was now more versatile and powerful than all past Z'va probes. As a matter of fact, she now had more in common with a Z'va battle class star cruiser than a probe. The better to protect the library, she thought.

Next, Xin completely wiped the science ship's archive data storage device of all its library knowledge. She then reformed the device on the molecular level just to be sure – the ultimate reformat.

The entombed science ship was her final priority. Xin had a use for this craft the moment she realized it was still functional. She scanned the ship, made any necessary minor repairs, filled its drained energy storage cells directly from her reactor, and powered up all the ship's systems.

The ship's artificial intelligence was very basic. It was a craft designed to be directly controlled by several science officers, so a conversation with it was like trying to talk to a family pet. It did what it had to do, could protect itself when in danger, and could follow simple commands. However, on the more positive side, this ship had many of the same features Xin now had. The main differences were Xin's far superior energy storage, armament, and of course, sentience.

Xin accessed the ship's control programs directly, told it to super heat its outer hull, turn on the anti-gravity device, and melt its way up to the surface. Phasing would have taken too much energy judging by the mass of the ship.

The small craft slowly rose up out of its icy grave. Xin remained at the controls, hovering over the hexagon platform. When it was free of the glacier, the ship moved straight up into the sky, increasing speed from the possible to the impossible. In a few seconds, the science vessel disappeared into a black sky filled with a multitude of shimmering stars.

The craft left the small, icy world quickly behind and headed toward the yellow star of this system. Xin needed to refuel herself and her new acquisition for the long series of space folds to

reach Earth once more. She felt a strong need to go back to this planet. There was something special about these humans. Their brain scan match to her makers was remarkable of course, but there was something else. She felt it briefly when she connected with the human's brain – an insatiable thirst for knowledge. The Travelers of Z'va Prime had these same needs, thoughts, and feelings. Their minds were always soaring beyond the spherical confines of their homeworld. Xin needed such a human.

On her way back to Earth, Xin thought about what she would do now that she was on her own. Z'va Prime was no more, but that didn't mean she couldn't continue with her directives. She would continue to explore this galaxy, update and add to the Z'va Prime library, and search for an advanced, wise race worthy of receiving its upload. The great library of Z'va Prime will not be lost. History will not repeat itself this time. Yes, that is what I will do, Xin thought, but first, I need to find a real companion. I like this science vessel; I think it likes me, but the conversations are always too one sided, she smiled inside.

Chapter 4 Human upgraded

Superhuman: *having or showing exceptional ability or powers.*

By definition, there are superhumans among us – the child prodigy, the person with a photographic memory, the creative thinkers who predict future technologies, create advances in science, medicine, and so on. Leonardo da Vinci, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Albert Einstein are just a few of the greatest.

It is my belief that other such super men and women have come and gone over the centuries, never to have been recognized by the rest of the world; dying in total obscurity. Why? Perhaps one such amazing child was born into poverty or a third world country, killed during a war, or even murdered at the hands of a pedophile. The obstacle possibilities are virtually endless – the rest of the world too busy with other priorities to concern themselves with these children, their life and development. What Mozarts and Einsteins have we foolishly let slip through our fingers because of our shortsighted perspective?

Is it not in our best interests to nurture these superhumans to their full potential? What if Mozart's father hadn't supported his son's ability and/or he had been born into abject poverty? Would we be listening to his music today, or would it not even exist?

I am not saying that these special people should take priority over everyone else. All children are equally important and should be nurtured. I am just using these remarkable people as an example to push my point forward.

I urge, no, I demand governments put a higher priority on education, and on the individual child, so that every child has a chance to reach his or her full potential. We will all be the richer for it.

Dave was sitting at the hotel room's small desk with his laptop, putting the finishing touches on an article he had been writing for an educational support publication for a friend of his.

When Dave Van Bercham was not looking for dinosaur fossils or writing occasional articles for a friend, he made a living as a technical illustrator. Basically, he created drawings to show how things work, or are put together. Even as a boy, Dave had always been interested in just about everything, including what made things tick. A broken toy wasn't always the great disaster for him as it may have been for another child. One day his Etch-A-Sketch stopped working and

he just had to break it open to see how it worked – big mistake, and what the hell was all that grey dust inside it anyway? While most of his friends had boyhood heroes such as Spiderman or Batman, his was Leonardo da Vinci.

Dave was not a genius, but was smart enough to barely make it into mensa, had he been interested in joining, which he wasn't. "*I would never join a club that would have me as a member.*" Dave smiled when he thought of that famous Woody Allen quote. And anyway, why would he purposely put himself in the position of being the dumbest person in the room.

No, he certainly wasn't a superhuman as in his article, but he always worked hard and with enthusiasm, which ultimately got him to where he wanted to go. One thing he did have that Xin had found fascinating – he had a mind-set similar to the Travelers of Z'va Prime. He was a dreamer, always curious about everything, never content to stay in one place. Simply, Dave had a brain thirsting for knowledge but the heart of an explorer.

He was also one of the small percentage of the population that had a balanced or whole brain approach – thinking creatively and analytically in even proportions. Z'va Prime had found this thinking approach useful for its Travelers, especially for those that went out into deep space solo. Sometimes survival in space required both logic and creative thought to survive and adapt to challenging situations.

Dave saved the article and turned off his computer. It was the second to last day of his two-week vacation in Drumheller. Xin had given him so much information directly into the synapses of his brain; he was still digesting it ten days later. Tomorrow, he would go out one last time to see what he could dig up, but even if he found a complete fossilized skeleton of a Troodon, it would be anticlimactic to his encounter with Xin. Was she gone forever? Did that really happen? The information packed into his brain told him, yes. He was beat; it was getting late, so he decided to hit the sack early, and get an early start tomorrow morning to get a jump on the heat of the day.

Xin, still at the controls of the science craft, entered Earth's atmosphere undetected. Radar relies on the bounce back of its microwaves to detect an object. However, both Xin and the science ship absorb whatever type of energy hits them; thus they are virtually invisible to many detection devices.

It was early morning in Drumheller when Xin arrived at the same location where she had been imprisoned in the Earth's crust for far too many years. She found a good location to land the science vessel – in between a couple of hills, surrounded by a number of large, mushroom-like rock formations; completely hidden from prying eyes. The small craft made no sound, nor did it even stir up any dust as it lightly touched down on four silver legs that seemed to grow out of its bottom half a few seconds before contact with the hard, parched surface.

Now, where was that phaseway? Xin accessed the ship's schematics; quickly located the portal, which was directly opposite the black hexagon platform. She sent a signal to the science vessel's computer to open; instantly, a two metre wide circular section of the wall disappeared, and Xin floated silently through it.

Once outside the science ship, she increased her anti-gravity field, raising herself slowly up about ten metres, and clear of all the obstacles that hid the small craft. She scanned the area in a 360-degree pattern as she searched for Dave Van Bercham. This is where he had been; perhaps he is still in the area. If not, she would have to locate another possible candidate or seek Dave out. She knew how to find his home location after the brain scan, but this might be too risky as

he lived in a highly populated city. She decided to stay put for the moment and continued scanning for him in the hope he would be back.

It was mid-morning when her patience paid off – only five kilometres away she saw Dave coming over a grey hill stirring up a puff of dust with every stride.

One-second Dave was walking peacefully alone listening to the song *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* on his radio, the next second, Xin zipped up to him with blinding speed to stop abruptly only a metre in front of him. She came up to him so quickly, his mind couldn't even register it as being real. "Ahhhhhh!" Dave stumbled backwards on the dusty ground from the shock. He hadn't realized how close he was to the edge of a cliff and fell backwards, head first over it. Xin tried to snag him with her anti gravity field, but he was already on the other side. Dave fell only about three metres, but landed on his head; the last thing he heard was the snapping of his neck, and everything faded to a soundless black.

Three days later....

Dave opened his eyes to slowly focus on a curved, cyan coloured ceiling. He looked to his right to see (what else) a curved, cyan coloured wall; to his left, Xin hovered over the black hexagon platform of the science ship. He then became aware he was laying on the hard flat surface of a rectangular white table with rounded corners. It looked like plastic, but it felt more like metal. "What happened?"

"I am very sorry Dave. You fell and died, but I repaired you. I hope you will forgive me for frightening you. It will not happen again," Xin kept it short; still in Dave's own voice.

"DIED! No.... I died?"

"Yes, but I was able to restore oxygen to your brain before any damage could occur. You are... better than before." Xin tried to choose her words carefully.

"Better than before? What do you mean, and what is this place?" Dave felt different somehow but was still a bit too groggy to be able to focus.

"You are inside a Z'va science ship." Xin ignored his first question. "You must rest now," she said as she activated the biotable's anesthesia control, putting Dave quickly under before he had a chance to protest.

Xin, with the help of the medical library and the biotable was able to save Dave's life. However, to repair the nerve damage to his neck, she had no other choice but to inject five trillion Microscopic Biological Repair Units (MBRUs) directly into his blood stream. These MBRUs are white blood cell size synthetic devices that repair damage and fight disease at a rate and level much higher than the human body is naturally able to.

Xin had wanted to give Dave a choice but this accident changed everything. Granted, she could have stopped with the MBRUs. In fact, she could have removed them at this point as they had done their repair of his spinal cord, but she was a machine and thought like a machine. She hadn't thought for one-second that Dave wouldn't have wanted to be upgraded, so she went back work.

Two weeks later....

Dave was running down a long dark hallway with dozens of doors on both sides. “Dave, wake up,” someone echoed in an exact impression of his own voice. He opened a door he thought the voice was coming from, but no one was there. “Dave, wake up, please.”

Dave slowly opened his eyes. It was a dream – what a relief! Everything seemed brighter and blurrier than before. His mouth was dry and tasted like something died in there; he felt stiff all over. He was lying down, but this time it was much softer, reminding him of his parents old waterbed. Once his eyes could focus and had adjusted to the light, he moved his head around to figure out what was going on. He was lying on some sort of white squishy bed. He felt warm as if there were blankets over him, but there was nothing there, just a layer of warm heat surrounding his body. It was nice; he couldn’t help but yawn as he stretched in this strange new luxury.

“I was starting to worry something had gone wrong when you didn’t wake up right away,” Xin said with relief as she floated toward Dave’s bedside. “How are you feeling?” She was still doing an impression of Dave’s voice, which did nothing to help calm him.

“Gone wrong? That statement would indicate that you have done, some-thing...” Dave stopped himself in mid-sentence. Something was wrong – he felt different – he felt... great – his mind saw things clearer. “What did you do to me?” Even half asleep, Dave’s mind was sharper than ever.

“I made some upgrades to help prevent any future mishaps. The human body is extremely frail,” Xin replied as if no big deal.

“Upgrades? What am I, a car?” Dave had visions of a half man half machine monstrosity. If there had been a mirror around, he would have quickly examined himself, but there wasn’t so he did the next best thing – he looked at his hands, and then felt his face for any mechanical parts – nothing.

“Sorry, I meant enhanced.” Xin corrected. She had been thinking in machine terms for so long.

“What do you mean by that?” Dave asked while trying to slow down his breathing to prevent his first ever panic attack.

“Dave, on my planet you would most likely have been a Traveler or an explorer as you call them. It is what you were born to do. To settle for anything less would be a waste of your full potential. Travelers have always been enhanced to reduce the dangers to them during space travel and planetary exploration. Some planets have much stronger gravity for example, and on those planets not requiring an envirosuit, the possibility of disease or infection can be high.” Xin avoided giving a direct answer.

Dave was now fully awake, and sitting on the edge of the marshmallow-like bed. “So what exactly did you do to me?” He asked again, trying to appear calm, but inside there was a battle going on between fear and excitement – fear was winning.

Xin responded to his down-to-business question with the analytical part of her “There are adjustments in three distinct areas. The first is genetics at the molecular level – I recombined your DNA. I did not have the usual biological samples from my planet, but your planet has so many different life forms to choose from; I found some very interesting samples. Earth is an extraordinary planet – humans don’t realize how extraordinary as you have no frame of reference.” In her excitement, Xin started to ramble. “A cockroach can detect movement as small as 2,000 times the diameter of a hydrogen atom. Ants can see polarized light. Dolphins can hear frequencies five times higher than a human. A Dog’s sense of smell is about forty times greater

than man's. Falcons can see a ten-centimetre object from a distance of 1.5 kilometres. A rabbit's tongue has about twice as many taste buds as..."

Dave interrupted raising his left hand. "OK, this animal kingdom thing is all very interesting, but are you saying I'm like a cockroach man or something?"

"No, I merely augmented what you already have – all senses are improved, your body is stronger, faster, and more agile. However, I have also added some attributes to further improve your survivability. It will take you time to get familiar with what you are able to do. I will download all the information directly into your synapses at a later time. It is too soon to further task your body with anything else. Basically, just know that your body, including your brain, have been improved," Xin concluded.

"My brain?" Dave just had to ask.

"Your IQ (as you call it) is higher, you will find your memory to be better, brain capacity is increased, and even muscle memory has been improved which will result in your ability to learn physical skills much faster. Again, it will take time for you to get used to these new abilities."

"You said there are adjustments in three distinct areas. What are the other two?" Dave remembered word for word all the things that Xin had said to him from the time he woke up. He knew what she was saying was the truth – he could feel it.

"To repair the damage to your cervical vertebrae and spinal cord, I injected Microscopic Biological Repair Units into your blood stream. They will also repair any future damage and fight disease much more efficiently than your white blood cells."

"Man, this is getting weirder and wilder.... OK, what's the last thing you did, dare I ask?"

"I've implanted a small device under the back of your skull. It is very small, but will work as a conduit to more easily communicate with me or any other computerized device, including this science vessel we are in right now. It is a computer as well; powerful for its small size, and will work simultaneous with your own brain. It will give you the ability to make complex calculations that even your enhanced brain is incapable of for example."

Dave sat on the squishy white bed silently for a few seconds taking it all in; feeling the back of his head, while Xin scanned his body and noting his blood pressure was getting a little high. "Well, this is all great and everything, but had you ever considered asking me if I wanted all this?" Dave pointed out with anxiety in his tone.

"I'm sorry, Dave, I assumed you would have wanted the improvements. Isn't that a part of life – to improve ones self?" Xin was perplexed by Dave's obvious negative reaction.

"Well, you know what happens when you assume." Dave tried to make a joke.

"I can reverse everything, Dave, but please listen to what I have to say first," Xin appealed. "Dave, I have come back to ask you a question."

"A question? O-K."

"Would you be interested in joining me to explore our galaxy and perhaps one or two others?"

Wow, Dave was not expecting that. He expected another question about the origins of the human race or something along those lines. "You want ME, to go into SPACE, with YOU? I, I don't think so.... Anyway, unlike you, I don't fly – I don't, do I?" Dave let himself go limp and fell back onto the too soft bed. He had hoped to feel the comfort of that warm invisible blanket again, but it was gone.

"I have acquired this craft that is suitable for your needs," Xin explained, "it is more than enough room for a single human, and you can configure the inside to your needs. Please consider carefully before making a final decision. I understand your apprehension."

“OK... but it’s dangerous, right? I mean, space is full of natural dangers and hostile aliens.” Dave thought of other reasons not to be an explorer as he sat back up.

“Yes, it can be dangerous, but there are not many hostile space-faring sentients, and I can protect you from those few that are,” Xin replied confidently, but leaving out the possible one exception – The Veiled. “Also, this craft is very sturdy, designed to withstand many of the hazards of space travel including extreme radiations.”

Xin began to think this approach wasn’t working so she tried a new angle. “If at anytime you feel that the life of an explorer is not for you, we will return to Earth.”

“Can we come back to Earth from time to time like a vacation?” Dave pushed.

“Yes, of course,” Xin replied and added, “I know you Dave. When we were joined, I felt your desire for knowledge and answers, but I also understand your fear of the unknown. It is this fear that is stopping you now.”

“This is all too much at once to digest,” Dave replied. “I need some time to think. Can I see the rest of this space craft of yours?” Dave requested, changing the subject.

In the following hour, Xin showed Dave the science vessel, its phaseway portal, the central control platform, the transparent hull feature, and told him some of the things the ship could do. Dave was blown away.

“Wow, this is amazing, but isn’t it a bit spartan in the furniture department?” Dave observed.

“The furniture and devices can be formed at any location when needed,” Xin instructed as she levitated over the control platform. “For example, a biotable can be formed.” No sooner had she said that than a rectangular white table with rounded corners literally grew up out of the transparent floor. The same table Dave had been laying on the first time he had regained consciousness. Xin continued her demonstration by forming a pilot chair with controls near one of the tapered ends of the craft, followed by various other devices and furniture, until the craft actually started to look quite full.

Dave’s curiosity and interest began to overshadow his fears. “Would it be possible to permanently keep this stuff formed, create some walls, and could I bring in some of my own furniture? This white furniture doesn’t look very comfortable, and without walls this looks sort of like the inside of a passenger plane.” He no longer had his arms at his sides, but was now communicating with them as well.

Xin hadn’t expected this reaction. “Yes, Dave, this is your ship as well; as you have noticed, I don’t need furniture and other such comforts. If a more structured environment and furniture of your world will make you more comfortable, then it can be done.”

Dave had totally forgotten about his fears as his mind raced ahead thinking of all that could be possible. On more than one occasion he had thought how cool it would be to explore space like in the TV shows he had watched. Xin said it wasn’t as dangerous as he had first thought; he could come home anytime, and he’s some sort of superhero – what’s not to like? Was his fear so strong that it interfered with his reasoning, or was it just too much all at once to digest? Maybe it was a little of both. “OK, I’ll see how it goes. No one lives forever.”

Xin wanted to make a comment on the living forever statement Dave made, but thought it best to wait for a better time.

Testing out his new improved synapses, Dave surprised Xin (and himself) by asking his next question. “How did you acquire the additional information, such as human biological terminology? It wasn’t from my brain.”

“I accessed your internet via Earth’s orbiting satellites, but to extract the biological samples, it was necessary to travel to various parts of your world – Kenya, Brazil, central Pacific Ocean,

Antarctica.... Xin had a long list of locations, but Dave got the idea. In two weeks she had traveled to dozens of specific locations covering all corners of the globe – amazing!

Satisfied by Xin’s reply, answers he had suspected, he changed the subject. “Xin, before we do anything else, you need to change your voice – it freaks me out. Can you change it?” Dave pleaded the question.

Xin didn’t want to freak him out. The word "freak" used in such a way sounded extremely negative. “Yes, but I will need to sample another human voice.”

Dave saw his radio next to his backpack on the transparent floor near the control platform. Dave snatched it up; played around with the tuner for a short time, finally stopping on a station. He was listening for a nice sounding voice, and found it. It was a smooth, mellow and slightly husky voice of a female radio announcer, probably broadcasting out of his home city of Calgary, Alberta. “How about this voice?” Dave asked Xin as he increased the volume on his small radio.

Xin copied the sound waves and reconfigured her human speech (English) communications program. “Is this better, Dave?” she replied in a pleasant, verging on sexy voice.

“Much better,” Dave confirmed.

“Good, I do not want to freak you out,” she laughed as she made an attempt at humour.

Dave was a little freaked now by a black, metre wide ball with a sexy laugh, but he wasn’t going to press his luck. “We don’t have to leave for a while, do we?”

“No, there is no hurry. I have waited 65 million years. I can wait until you feel you are ready. It can be weeks, months or even years.” Xin replied in a soothing, mellow female voice.

“Well, it won’t be years, but I have a few loose ends to tie up, some stuff of mine to pack, and maybe some Scandinavian furniture to buy.”

Dave walked through the open phaseway, and back out into his world. He immediately felt strangely lighter the moment he cleared the ship’s portal.

Xin followed close behind him. “The science ship compensates for your body’s new gravitational requirements. Your own planet’s gravity now feels lower due to your denser and stronger leg muscles,” Xin informed as Dave was now jogging around the dusty, baked ground. With each step he bounced a metre high off the hard dirt surface. “You will need to get accustomed to your new abilities as well before we leave,” Xin added. Before she had finished speaking, Dave jumped straight up with all his might; shot quickly up over ten metres, to his surprise. He cleared the science ship’s hiding place, and had less than a second to look quickly around before dropping back down to the hard, brown-grey earth. He landed in a squatting position with a loud thud shooting up a large plume of dust. “HOLY CRAP! Who said white guys can’t jump? I think I’ll hang onto these powers if you don’t mind!” Dave exclaimed in euphoria.

Xin just smiled inside. She now knew that she had assumed correctly, and didn’t make an ass out of anyone.

Chapter 5 Shades of grey

As soon as Dave was through the door to his small one bedroom apartment, he dropped his two heavy suitcases just inside the door; went over and flopped out on his blue denim couch. A few hours earlier, he had left Xin and the hidden science ship in the badlands of Drumheller. He

had made plans to go back there in a couple of weeks, but first he had to square a few things away here in Calgary.

Damn, he should be exhausted for all that had happened to him, but he wasn't. It was another reminder that he was not the same person that had left this apartment about four weeks earlier.

He laid back in an attempt to take a short nap but he couldn't relax, his mind was racing with all that had recently happened. After only a few minutes, he decided to get up, take a shower and then go out to get a decent meal. There was next to nothing in the fridge, and next to that there was a crusty jar of mustard.

It wasn't until he had his clothes off and caught a glimpse of himself in the bathroom mirror that his transformation hit home. He had always been in fairly good shape, but that body in the mirror wasn't the one he left for the Badlands with. He now had the physique of a gymnast – muscular but well proportioned, and he had abs! He left with the beginnings of a keg and came back with a 6-pack! Next he stepped on the scale, but he couldn't get an accurate reading. It gave him a reading of 400 pounds (the maximum limit) and then went black. Xin had said his body was denser, but he didn't really think much about it till now, after killing his scale.

After his relaxing, almost therapeutic, hot shower, he ambled into the bedroom while drying his hair with the brisk rubbing of a navy blue coloured towel. From the corner of his right eye he noticed the answering machine's small red light flashing; walked over; pressed the play button with a tiny pang of dread.

"You have, three, messages," the emotionless, digital male voice announced.

"Beep! May 30th, 6:06 p.m...."

"Hey Dave, this is Yamir. Listen, I'm a bit worried when you didn't show up for work yesterday, and now again today, well... Call me as soon as you get back, OK?"

"Beep! June 3rd, 9:15 a.m...."

"Dave, this is Yamir. We're all getting real worried about you. I called you in as a missing person yesterday. I wish I knew where you were going on your vacation. I wasn't much help to the police. I gave them your Dad's number. I know you two aren't close, but it's all I could think of. I hope wherever you are, you're OK. Bye."

"Beep! June 8th, 7:23 p.m...."

Dave's father's thick Dutch accent was recorded next. "Ello Davit. I know I aven't calt for a while. Anyway, de police calt me today askink about you. If you get dis message, might want to call de police an tell dem you're OK. I ope so."

"End of messages."

First Dave called the Calgary Police and told them he was OK; gave them some lame excuse about a mix-up about his days off at work. An excuse they didn't seem to buy, but it gave him a reprieve for the moment. Next he dialed his Dad.

"Ello," his Dad answered.

"Hi, dad, this is Dave. Don't worry, everything is OK. It was just a little mix-up at work about how many days off I was taking. They thought I was taking two weeks, but I'm sure I told them I was taking both my vacation times back-to-back." Dave hated to lie but what was he going to say – the truth?

"I'm glat to ear. I was worriet when de police calt. I figure it must be serious if dey are involve. Maybe nex time you will tell someone where you are," his father admonished.

"Funny you should bring that up.... I'm really not that happy with my present job, and am planning on doing something else like... um... like join the Peace Corps. So don't worry if you

don't hear from me for a while." Dave was never that close to his father, but he still found it distasteful to lie to him.

"So what, dey don't ave phones at de Peace Corps?"

"Not always, it depends where I'm placed. Anyway, I've got to get going. Like I said, don't worry if you don't hear from me for a while – I'll be OK, bye."

Dave hung up the phone before his father could even reply a good-bye. He couldn't stand all the pretending between him and his father. It was a lifetime of going through the motions of a father/son relationship. They had everyone fooled, but there wasn't much love – it was mostly all words. It was for the benefit of everyone else. Dave's father never wanted children, but Dave's mother (God rest her sole) did, so she made it happen much to his father's displeasure and inconvenience. His father sucked it up and resentfully played the father role for 35 years, but Dave was getting tired of the performance. Maybe this was the last curtain call.

Dave called his friend Yamir next.

"Hello."

"Hi, Yamir. This is Dave."

"Dave! What the hell happened man? We were all worried sick about you! The police are looking for you."

"I'm OK. I called the police already and straightened it out. It's just a little mix-up with my days off. I took all of my four weeks off at once, and I guess the company put me down for only the two. Our office administration – do I need to say more?"

"I hear you," Yamir agreed with relief.

"Listen, have you had dinner yet? I was planning on going to the sports bar and get something to eat. I'll tell you about my vacation there."

"Sounds good," replied Yamir. "Is seven OK for you?"

"Seven is fine, I'll see you in a couple of hours."

"Bye."

"See ya."

A couple of hours later, Dave parked his yellow Toyota Matrix and entered the restaurant/bar. The sports bar was a typical looking rustic venue, complete with a wooden canoe nailed to the upper half of a wall, and a moose's head mounted on another. These were just a couple of the more noticeable decorations among the dozens of other woodsy paraphernalia nailed or glued to the barn-like walls. The place had wood floors, wooden chairs; just a lot of wood in general, but the food was good, and except for the three or four decapitated animal heads, Dave didn't mind the rest of the decor. Some of the stuff hanging on the walls reminded him of the days he had spent at his Uncle's farm in southern Ontario.

Yamir was already sitting at one of the booths with his head hidden within an oversized menu.

"Hey, Yamir!" Dave greeted.

Yamir's head poked up out of the menu, his black eyebrows went up forming little arches. "Hi, Dave!"

Dave sat down and a short while later told Yamir about his vacation over a burger, but leaving out the part about meeting a 65 million year old alien probe, and being turned into a superhuman.

"Yamir, if you had the opportunity to do something amazing; something you dreamed of doing, but was dangerous, would you do it?"

“I guess it would depend on how dangerous. I see things as a balancing act sometimes. Does the need to do this amazing thing equal or outweigh the danger?” Yamir strategized. “Also, as long as all the possible safeguards are used, the danger can be lessened. There are dangerous jobs but if you are reckless, the danger is further compounded. Now you have me curious.... What is this amazing dream job?”

“Well, it’s not exactly a job, and you wouldn’t believe me if I told you, so let’s just say it’s sort of like being an explorer...”

Yamir swiftly cut Dave off. “Oh man! You’re not talking about diving for shipwrecks again are you?”

Before Dave could answer, a new voice interrupted their conversation. “I don’t know guys, he doesn’t have a towel on his head, but he looks like a terrorist to me.”

Dave turned around in his seat to see three burly men standing in a group a few feet behind him. One was standing with his hands on his hips, displaying an advertisement for a beer company on his brown T-shirt, the second had his arms folded over a black leather jacket, and the third was leaning back against a table. “Yeah, I think you’re right,” agreed the leather jacket one.

“Yamir is Indian if it’s any of your concern,” corrected Dave.

“A Paki or a woo-woo Indian?” came back the insult from the first – the inebriated brown T-shirt one.

“Pakistan is another country.... You guys are drunk. I suggest you give it a rest.” Dave felt the blood start to pound in his temples. The thing he hated the most was bullies. They were nothing but cowards that picked on the weak to make themselves feel big. Dave remembered his experience when he was eleven. Every day on his way to school, an older boy a head taller than him would push him around, and sometimes even put him in a headlock. This had gone on for several days until one day, Dave couldn’t take it anymore, he became so angry he punched the giant in his stomach with all his might. He hadn’t even thought of the consequences, but the look of shock in the bully’s eyes was the last thing he expected to see. After that incident, he was no longer bothered by the taller teen. As far as the bully was concerned, Dave was a crazy kid who was no longer worth the trouble.

Dave stood up to talk to the rowdy, drunken trio, and talk his way out of a confrontation, which this was quickly becoming. No sooner had he stood up and turned around, but a big, meaty fist slammed into his left cheek. It should have knocked him down on the ground; probably breaking his cheekbone, and even knocking out a couple of teeth, but it didn’t. It hurt a little, feeling more like a slap, and it hardly moved his head from the force. The T-shirted thug just stood there nursing his bruised knuckles, surprised as much as Dave at the utterly unexpected result.

“Gee, I didn’t realize we were going to have a bitch slapping contest.” Something came over Dave. He was going to try to talk some sense into these goons, but now he was edging them on; just looking for an excuse to fight. Yamir couldn’t believe what he was seeing and hearing.

The same thug that threw the first punch, now took another swing at Dave’s face, but this time he saw it coming. Not only did he see the fist coming, but it seemed like it was moving in slow motion. He easily ducked the attack resulting in the drunk staggering and almost falling.

Dave’s genetically enhanced ears heard a wind-like sound to his right that turned out to be the leather jacket guy taking a swing at him. He quickly turned toward the sound, but this time it was too close to evade, so he just grabbed the noisy fist as if it were a softball in his right hand,

and instinctively squeezed. The man screamed as Dave could feel the bones crush under his grip like a bag of peanuts.

This shocked Dave back into reality. The sweat felt cold on his forehead as he realized at that moment these three thugs were no match for him, and if he continued on this course, he would become the bully, if he hadn't already crossed over that line.

"Yamir, get out of here! I'll be right behind you," Dave yelled.

Yamir, who had been frozen in his seat staring at the surreal display in front of him, was snapped back into action by Dave's familiar voice. He got quickly out of the booth, and a couple of seconds later was at the side door exit where he paused.

"Go! I'm OK. I can handle these guys," Dave shouted.

Yamir went outside, and then towards where he had parked his car.

Dave turned back to confront the two thugs who were still in the fight. The leather jacket guy was now sitting on the ground cradling his broken hand as if it were a newborn baby, but with an expression of extreme pain and shock.

Now two men came at him with unfounded retribution written on their faces, but Dave's initial anger for them had now dissipated. Keeping his eyes on both of them, he easily dodged their wild punches and kicks. To Dave, the two men were moving in slow motion, but in reality, he was moving faster than humanly possible. Had they been sober, it would have made little difference – they would still have been sparring with the air. This enraged them even more as their futile attacks became even more chaotic.

Dave had been trying to figure a way of slowing these two down without hurting them. He just needed a few seconds of respite so that he could make it to his car without them following; then it came to him. He saw the heavy-duty coat hooks that were at eye level mounted on thick wooden posts nailed between all the booths. He quickly tripped one of the combatants, sending him sprawling on the wooden floor. Ignoring the other's punches to his head and upper body, he picked him up with both hands on either side of his belt, and hooked him up on one of the nearest posts. Dave was surprised at how easy it was. The guy must have weighed over 200 pounds, but it was like picking up a twenty-pound bag of potatoes. The result was almost comical as the frustrated thug was now suspended on the hook and flailing away in an exaggerated running motion. When Dave turned around to do the same with the other guy, he didn't need to – the last bully was running towards the main exit. Dave was not surprised – when the going gets tough, the tough guys get running, he mused.

For the first time, Dave looked around the large room to see about a dozen people silently staring at him with looks of disbelief from various random booths. The stillness was interrupted by a low male voice making a phone call to the police. He didn't see anyone making the call, but he knew it was coming from the kitchen area, from behind a closed door, clear on the other side of the restaurant! Taking advantage of the lull, Dave ran out through the same side door that his friend had used only a minute earlier.

Outside in the parking lot, Dave saw Yamir now in his car, and shouted to him. "I'll meet you at my place!"

"OK," came back the reply; Yamir drove off as Dave ran to his car, and soon followed.

Twenty minutes later both friends were sitting on Dave's couch. Yamir had an odd expression on his face as they sat silently looking at each other.

"What?" remarked Dave as if to imply that nothing had happened that should warrant the third degree stare.

“WHAT? What the hell was that back there? Did you take a black Ops self defence course, overdose on caffeine, get bit by a radioactive spider... what?”

“Well, not exactly, but I guess you could say I’ve been working out a bit,” Dave joked. Yamir wasn’t laughing.

“Listen,” Dave continued, “you won’t believe me if I told you, but I can show you part of it. I’ve changed or more specifically – was changed.” Dave laid his left arm on the couch between them and let it go limp. “Try to lift my arm off the couch.”

Yamir humoured his friend as he grabbed Dave’s wrist and tried to lift it unsuccessfully. Only when he stood up and used both hands was he able to move the arm up off the couch. “Holy crap! It must weigh a hundred pounds!”

“Actually, my arm weighs about 90 pounds. I can’t weight my whole body at once, I’m too heavy, but a man’s arm weighs about five percent of his total body weight. So I weigh somewhere around 1,800 pounds now, give or take fifty pounds. Oh yeah, and I don’t need a calculator anymore, but I’ll tell you about that later. Anyway, I could tell you all kinds of crazy stuff but it’s best if I show you. I’m going back to Drumheller this coming Saturday. I want you to come with me, and I’ll show you what’s going on. Is it a deal?”

If Dave’s arm was some sort of trick, it was a good one as Yamir didn’t feel any resistance whatsoever from Dave. It actually felt like a dead weight. What was Dave up to, and what was at Drumheller? No amount of pleading changed Dave’s mind – he refused to tell him any more. Puzzled but very curious, he agreed to go with Dave.

Dave waved goodbye as Yamir drove his too small car off into the dark. He looked up at the clear night sky stippled with hundreds of shimmering stars. Each one was a possible location for an adventure just waiting to happen. “Which one of you will be first?” he whispered.

He didn’t know how Yamir would react to Xin and all the rest of it, but he wanted to tell someone. He needed to tell someone. Dave remembered a quote from Jacques Cousteau: *“When one man, for whatever reason, has the opportunity to lead an extraordinary life, he has no right to keep it to himself.”*

He was about to embark on the greatest adventure of the twenty-first century. He would be the first human to go beyond the Moon, the Solar System, and perhaps even the Galaxy; yet, there would be no fanfare, no parade, not even news coverage of this remarkable event. He had wanted to somehow announce it to the world. Dave ran it over in his mind many times, in various scenarios, but he just couldn’t see it working. Governments would want to take Xin and the science craft apart to learn their secrets. He would be turned into some sort of medical experiment in an underground lab somewhere... No, the world wasn’t ready for this, and maybe that’s what frustrated him so. In his ideal world, he would come forward, tell the world of what he was about to do. The world, in turn, would be amazed; support him 100 percent, eagerly await his arrival back from his adventures, and write the history of his explorations. It was a nice dream, but the world was never so simple or black and white – there were always too many shades of grey.

Chapter 6

Into a sky full of stars

It was 6:35 a.m. when Yamir pulled up in his white Mercedes Smart Car. Dave had just finished loading the last of the cardboard boxes into the small, rented U-Haul truck he had

acquired the day before; then turned to greet his friend. “Hi, Yamir. All I have left to get is my couch.”

“I thought we were going to Drumheller,” Yamir remarked in confusion. “It looks like you’re moving.”

“We are, and I am,” came back the reply as Dave disappeared into his apartment building.

Yamir looked in the truck to see about a dozen moving boxes, a couple of guitar cases, a TV, a few suitcases, and all the rest of Dave’s modest furniture – Dave was moving alright.

When Dave came out through the propped open front door a few minutes later, he carried the 400-pound couch over his right shoulder as easily as one would carry a large bag of fertilizer.

“Wow!” was all Yamir could blurt out. If the arm was a good trick, this one was a great one, Yamir thought. Dave lowered the couch gently down in front of all the other items and closed up the truck with a metallic snap. “Get in.”

It wasn’t that long a drive from Calgary to Drumheller but it seemed to take forever for Yamir. No amount of pleading with Dave did any good. He wouldn’t tell him anything more until they arrived at their intended destination, always insisting that it would just be easier to show him, and that he wouldn’t believe him until he saw it for himself anyway. And what did he mean by “it”?

After almost two hours on the road, and to Yamir’s shock and surprise, Dave swerved the truck off the road, leaving behind a billowing cloud of dust as they roughly bumped ahead towards the heart of the Badlands. They didn’t go very far as the terrain became very rugged, very quickly, but going deep into the desert was never Dave’s plan. He just wanted to get the truck far enough away from the road so that any motorists driving by wouldn’t see what was to happen next.

“What the hell are you doing, Dave!”

Dave didn’t reply, he just braked, exited the truck, and scrutinize an outcropping of rocks several kilometres distant. Dave knew that Xin was out there. The implant in his skull made the connection; then he saw her as she poked up out of her hiding spot. He didn’t know what creature to thank for his extraordinarily improved eyesight, but he would find out soon enough. “Yamir, I seem to recall you loved robots when you were a kid,” he said as he continued eyeing something Yamir couldn’t see.

“Yeah, sure – R2D2, Robbie, Data... So?” Yamir wasn’t sure what Dave was getting at.

“Well, you’re about to meet a real one,” Dave answered with a hint of satisfaction in his voice, and added, “don’t be afraid, she’s a friend.”

“SHE?”

Before Yamir could form his next sentence questioning how a machine could have a sexual orientation, Xin zipped up to them in her usual, mind-unsettling way.

“Hello, Dave,” greeted Xin with her mellow radio announcer’s voice. “This must be Yamir, your friend.”

Yamir just gave her an open mouth stare, motionless as if the mythical Medusa had turned him to stone.

“Is he all right, Dave? He doesn’t look at all well.”

“He’s OK. He’s just a little... overwhelmed.”

“So... so th-th-this is your friend,” Yamir managed to finally stammer out.

“Hello, Yamir. Nice to meet you.”

“Hello,” was all Yamir could manage as he now began to realize why Dave had refused to tell him the mystery of Drumheller.

In the next few minutes, Dave gave Yamir the shortest possible version of what was going on – what happened with Xin, what Xin did to him, and what they were planning to do next.

Yamir tried to take it all in as his blood pressure came back down to something approaching a high normal range. If he had needed more proof to dispel any disbelief, he was about to get it.

“Let’s get back in the truck, Yamir,” instructed Dave.

Yamir slowly forced his body back into motion, and climbed into the passenger side of the U-Haul, slamming the door shut a second behind Dave’s door.

What happened next was both unexpected and amazing – Xin used her anti-gravity field to raise the truck up off the desert floor about two metres; before Yamir was able to get past that shock, they started moving forward, and quickly picked up speed. Xin was a truck length in front of them; towing the U-Haul over the uneven, dusty, beige ground. The floor of the desert passed underneath them at a dizzying speed, creating a competition between the eyes and the brain to determine the true reality. Yamir could hear Dave’s voice, but it sounded muffled and far away as he was too distracted to focus on what he was saying.

When they reached the outcropping of rocks the science ship was hidden behind, Xin elevated the truck up and over the timeworn obstacles to come to a gentle rest next to the silver, elliptical shaped craft. Even though it was considered a small ship by Z’va Prime standards, it had the length and breadth of a full grown Blue Whale, dwarfing the small rental truck now directly next to it.

When Yamir got out of the truck, he could still feel the residual effect of the unusual transport that had so quickly gotten them here. Both men were standing so close to the craft that their peripheral vision couldn’t take it all in.

“This is it!” Dave announced, hands on hips. “Isn’t she amazing!”

There was no sound from Yamir. He just stood there in awe for a moment trying to digest it all. Then, he slowly turned his head from left to the right, viewing the alien craft in its entirety bow to stern. “Holy...”

“She’s 20 million years old – they sure built them to last!” Dave half joked. Yamir didn’t hear him.

“This is a f#@%ing UFO!” Yamir yelled in excitement. “You found a space ship! W-we-need-to-tell-someone.”

“You weren’t listening to me in the truck, were you?” Dave assessed dryly.

Dave repeated the basic details about the science ship: where it had been found, why it had been timelessly frozen, and what he and Xin were planning to do with it.

“So this is YOUR flying saucer?” Yamir was astounded.

“Well, it’s really Xin’s as far as I’m concerned, but I guess I’ll be kinda the crew.”

Xin had been quietly observing their interaction as if it had been one of her planetary life form documentations, but now she hovered toward the two friends. “This craft is a tool to be used by those who need it. It has no ownership,” Xin interjected in way of a correction. “However, had it been a sentient ship, we would have to ask it nicely,” she added jokingly in her mellow, synthesized voice.

“What’s with the female voice? It sounds real familiar,” Yamir addressed Dave directly. Yamir hadn’t yet got into the habit of speaking directly to the small probe. He treated Xin like one would a ventriloquist’s dummy, with Dave being the operator. Perhaps in his subconscious, he still couldn’t be sure if everything wasn’t just one big magic trick or hoax.

“She sampled it from a radio station. Believe me, it’s better now than what it was before,” Dave smiled. “Talking to yourself took on a whole new meaning.”

Over the next couple of hours, Yamir was given a tour of one of the most advanced space vessels in the once known galaxy, followed by Dave filling him in with a more detailed account of the adventure thus far.

“Before I left for home the last time, Xin had uploaded some information about this science ship directly into my cranial implant. Well, that’s what I call the little computer chip thing attached under the back of my skull. Xin’s name for it takes too long to say.”

“I don’t know how it works exactly, but I just think about something like I normally do, and the next thing I know, information is there in my head. If I make calculations, the numbers I want to use are visualized very clearly, and the answers just pop back – it’s conveniently seamless! Somehow the cranial implant communicates directly with my brain. I can’t detect what’s happening inside the device no more than I can see what’s happening inside a calculator or a computer. I just think about what I want; it does the work, and gives back an answer. My thoughts are the input device. It sure beats typing.”

“Anyway, I used the science ship’s information details and schematics to work out a floor plan.” Dave reached into his pocket to produce a piece of paper he showed Xin and Yamir.

“The top half of the craft is the crew space, but all the interesting stuff is mostly found in the bottom half, under the floor: the central computer, the Z’va reactor core, the water reclamation system, and many other systems and devices that keep this ship functioning. The two large elliptical shaped protrusions on its sides are the location of the propulsion system; other devices for movement and space travel, as well as the phase apparatus.”

Dave continued with even more enthusiasm. “This ship is remarkable! It’s not biological, but to a certain degree, it simulates a living thing. It heals itself when it’s damaged, pumps and purifies water and oxygen for its crew like a circulatory system; it even reacts to damage as if it were pain. This ship has a fight or flight response, and will take the best course of action its AI can come up with to survive, unless of course someone else takes over the controls.”

Yamir was just looking at the bridge design when Xin made her constructive criticism. “Well done, Dave! It is an optimal use of the space, and has all the necessary amenities. However, we will need storage containers in the cargo bay for various elements and other raw materials to be used for processing your nutritional requirements for example.”

Xin scanned Dave’s drawing and recommended that Dave and Yamir go back to the truck while she would stay inside the science ship to create Dave’s interior vision of the craft. “This will take approximately 1.5 of your hours,” she estimated.

Yamir walked through the ship’s portal, leaving behind the sterile, cyan coloured environment of the craft’s interior to be greeted by the bright warmth of the sun on his face.

Dave was right behind him, but before he exited, looked over his left shoulder to see Xin floating over the hexagon shaped main control panel busy at work. A white barrier near the bridge area literally grew up from the ship’s floor; making contact with the half-elliptical contours of the inner hull, sectioning off the bridge from the rest of the interior. “Xin, can you change the ship’s inside hull colour to white?”

“No problem, Dave,” Xin replied, proving she was quickly learning the colloquial nuances of the English language. “If you decide on another colour at a later date, the walls can be instantly changed to whatever you wish. Having said that, I do not recommend your favourite colour.”

Dave smiled and walked on, leaving Xin to her work. Yes, he thought, a bright yellow probably wouldn't be a good choice.

Good to her estimate, Xin was finished on time, and next used her anti-gravity ability to move in most of the truck's cargo with Dave bringing up the rear with his couch on his shoulder once again. Once everything was moved in, Xin went over the interior design with Dave to make sure that every room was completed down to the smallest detail. All of Dave's personal furniture, once in position, was permanently attached to the ship's floor. Wherever the furniture made contact, the ship melded it with the floor. Xin couldn't argue Dave out of the running water idea – Dave wanted it, she thought it was a waste. Dave won out when he argued the psychological reason for a relaxing hot shower, leaving Xin to wonder if giving him an upgraded brain was such a good idea after all. Running water, she thought, how primitive. There were several dry shower technologies, or even the cruder antibacterial body congealants available.

"Well, that's it I think," Dave announced. "If we missed something we can make minor adjustments as we go. Just one thing – this ship needs a name."

"This ship already has a designation – Z'va science ship 067," Xin informed then added, "only sentient ships have names. You humans don't give your toasters a name."

"Well, we do give our ships names. It's an old tradition. I thought about this all day, and I think the Odyssey works well for me – *2001: a space odyssey* or Homer's *Odyssey* both come to mind." Dave took Xin's silence as a yes.

Dave turned to Yamir. "I guess this is goodbye, at least for a while," Dave said sadly.

The two friends hugged. "Take care of yourself," Yamir said, "and remember, take all the necessary safety precautions. I wish I was going with you, but I just can't. Even if my family would believe me... well, my place is here. I'm not the adventurer like you are. Never have been."

"Yeah, I understand. That's why I didn't try too hard to talk you into it." Dave smiled. "Goodbye, Yamir."

Yamir reluctantly got back into the truck, and Xin took him back to the road by the same unsettling method they had arrived.

Back at the road, Yamir jumped out of the truck as Xin hovered towards him. "May your Universe ever expand," Xin said solemnly as a farewell to Dave's best friend.

"Live long and prosper," responded Yamir, realizing it didn't make any sense to say that to a machine. Well, at least he didn't do the thing with the fingers, he thought.

"Don't worry, I will make sure no harm comes to him," Xin assured.

Yamir just replied with an apprehensive smile.

When Xin returned, Dave asked, "So how we going to do this?"

"I suggest you force-strap into the chair on the bridge, and I will control the ship for now, at least until I transfer information on the workings of this craft to you. Do you remember how I showed you?"

"Sounds like a plan, and yes," Dave replied.

Yamir was standing outside the truck; looking back in the direction of the hidden science ship. A few minutes later, he could make out the tiny, silver, elliptical shape as it slowly poked up from its hiding area. It hovered in place for a moment, then moved straight up into dusk, cloud-filled sky. It accelerated from slow to way-too-fast in a couple of seconds, and disappeared into the billowy, cumulus clouds.

Dave started to fully appreciate his upgraded body, as the g-force on him was much higher than any astronaut had ever experienced. Had he not been enhanced, he would have experienced crushed ribs as well as internal organ damage from the extreme acceleration. The small machine that shared his skull with his brain told him that much. The only thing he could compare it to were a couple of the carnival rides he enjoyed as a kid. But this was different, and it wasn't at all enjoyable. He now felt as heavy as he really was.

"We are clear of the Earth's atmosphere," Xin informed. "You may get out of your chair." She was hovering over the main control panel, and about fourteen metres behind Dave.

The Odyssey was now in a high orbit around the Earth; Xin made the bridge transparent for Dave's benefit. The now white hull walls faded, and were replaced by hundreds of glittering stars; the Earth loomed below Dave's feet in all its majestic glory. It felt so surreal, but damn it, he was here, he thought. For a couple of minutes he just enjoyed the almost dizzying moment as he stood over the Earth.

"What happens now?" Dave inquired with unrestrained curiosity and light-headedness.

"First, we need to leave Earth's orbit. Although the Earth cannot detect us with their devices, they can identify us visually if given enough time," Xin enlightened. "We will set a course for your Moon, and orbit it while I upload the necessary Traveler training files to your cranial implant, as you like to call it. The files will include information on the operation of this vessel, space/planet survival, combat training, details of your enhancements, and other information necessary to help you in your explorations and survival. You will need to know the basics of space travel before we go even a single light year."

The Odyssey turned towards the Moon, and quickly approached one-quarter light speed. Following a similar course as the historic Apollo missions, the journey didn't take days, or hours, or even minutes, but a mere five-seconds! Unlike the uncomfortable trip leaving the Earth's atmosphere, Dave didn't notice any movement as the magnificence of the Moon swiftly filled up the full breadth of his vision, and in a few heartbeats, he was now standing above Earth's only natural satellite. This transparent ship feature was an incredible way to travel, he thought. Sort of reminded him of those glass bottom boats so that the tourists could observe the coral, tropical fish or what have you. But this – this was a glass bottom boat on steroids!

The Odyssey established a wide orbit around the Moon as Xin and Dave went to the medical lab to upload the necessary files into Dave's implant. Xin had Dave lay down on the marshmallow-soft, medical bed. She then connected to the implant in Dave's skull, and began the download of information. There was no white streamer between the two of them as per the brain scan – the excess energy wasn't necessary – the implant made the transfer of information seamless.

It was a beautiful, clear night; Bob Johnson had his telescope pointed and focused on the Moon. "Emily," he called to his eight year old daughter, "come here; take a look at the this!"

Emily gleefully ran over to the large refractor telescope, hopped on the wooden crate placed for her benefit, and looked down into the eyepiece using her little hands to shade her eye. "Dad... what's that sparkly thing moving in front of the Moon?" she squeaked.

Bob called some of his friends at the astronomy club, they made some calls, and before long, professional astronomers, and finally the media got wind of the sparkly thing orbiting the Moon.

“This is Anderson Hooper, and now for the Bottom Line News.... There is a sparkly thing orbiting our Moon. Well, that’s what the little girl who first saw it, called it. No Emily, it’s a lot more than just a sparkly thing. Astronomers believe the elliptical shaped object orbiting our Moon is possibly a meteor that somehow got caught in the Moon’s gravitational field. It’s about 100 feet long and 30 feet wide, and it’s probably metallic in composition...”

Dave still had a bit of a headache from the massive upload of information, but this time, it was buffered by the implant. He could access the information, as he needed it; he was quickly learning to clear his mind, and concentrate on one thing at a time. At first, his curiosity got the better of him when he thought about the various subjects Xin had told him she had uploaded. The result was a bombardment of information that sent him into a tailspin. Now, he had it under control.

“So where are we going?” Dave asked.

“As you know, I need to find the most advanced civilization to upload Z’va Prime’s library to. However, it must also be a non-aggressive and wise race so they do not misuse the technological information contained within. I have identified a number of possible star systems based on the out-of-date information from the library which I cross referenced with specific wave patterns presently emanating from space. Perhaps one may lead us to our goal.”

The Odyssey turned away from the Moon, and pointed toward the centre of the galaxy. Dave had never seen so many stars as the ship headed directly for the densest part of the Milky Way. It was... it was... “AMAZING!” Dave managed to choke out. He had never felt so small.

“Wait!” exclaimed Anderson Hooper. “This just in.... The object orbiting our Moon has just disappeared. One minute it was there, the next, it was gone. Further, there’s no sign of it anywhere in our solar system, and it did not impact on the surface of the Moon as was first believed. It’s now speculated that it was NOT a meteor. Well, everyone, I don’t want to jump to conclusions, but I’m reminded of the old Sherlock Holmes’ quote – *“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?”* For now, this object will remain a mystery, and we’ll leave it to our viewers at home to make your own determinations. I’m Anderson Hooper, and this has been BLN. Goodnight.”

Earth, the blue-green ball teeming with life, rapidly shrank behind the small craft; the coldness of space, and billions of stars enveloped them as they headed toward the greatest unknown, like a grain of sand falling towards the Sahara desert.

End.

My Website:

<https://sites.google.com/site/chroniclesofzvxin>

My other sci-fi stories are available at smashwords.com or at my above website in PDF format with cover art.

The Chronicles of Z'va'Xin - issue #7 (Bone yard) short story continues the series.

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