

XIN: The Veiled Genocides

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Smashwords Edition

Chapter 1 Drumheller

The Sun brutalized the strange landscape with its all too familiar waves of heat. A landscape made up of large, curved hills, created by rivers that had cut deep into the sandstone and other soft rock. There were 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 just 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.

David Van Bercham wasn't a paleontologist or some professional dinosaur hunter. He was 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. Playing guitar in 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 wasn't 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. It was around the right time for the Troodons, so if he was going to find one, this was the place. Then, something strange caught his eye.

Farther up the hill of sedimentary outcroppings, there was a dense black colour that looked oddly out of place compared to its surroundings. He was too far away to identify what it was, so he climbed the steep slope to the rock outcropping that framed the dark 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 hole, but getting closer 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, but the small rubble of rocks at his feet told him something more immediate had recently happened.

He touched it, but quickly pulled his hand back. He didn't know why. Something instinctive, something very primal made him react like that. Like a cat seeing itself in a mirror for the first time. But like the curious cat, he touched it again. It felt like glass, but cold, very cold. It shouldn't feel that cold in this heat, he puzzled. Yes, that's 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. It was one of the many dinosaur extinction theories.

He could also discern it had a slight curve to it. Was this a large, volcanic rock or meteorite that had somehow found its way to this location? Melted rocks can be glassy smooth, he reasoned, trying to further convince himself. Yes, that's it, 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 past 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 couldn't 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 she reasoned it would not reach her planet of origin.

Her homeworld was called Z'va Prime, and her science probe designation was Z'va'Xin, but she much preferred to be called 'Xin' by those who knew her on a more individual level.

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 a Z'va probe's technologies. Few sentient species were morally ready for that responsibility.

Accessing past 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 past memories....

Yes, 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 couldn't predict if she would be freed from her grave through erosion, or some cataclysmic event. These were hoped for possibilities. 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 incredibly diverse animal and plant life evolved. Some became extinct, new forms were added, and everything was constantly changing. An earthquake. The layers she was in were pushed up forming a mountain, but she was still deeply buried in the soft rock. More millions of years passed, followed by more erosion. The dawn of man – the 1.176 million to one possibility was realized. A few more million years passed....

It was early morning, June 9th. 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 sizable portion of sedimentary rock outcroppings. The first sunlight in 65 million years hits a small portion of 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 half a metre of it was now visible. It was definitely curved, possibly sphere shaped, although he wasn't sure how much more was hidden within the rock. The Sun was high overhead; he felt its blistering heat on the back of his neck. The Sun was now directly hitting the black, curved object, and still no reflections. The sunlight just seemed to disappear into its blackness. 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 subroutine program became active, the threat was evaluated, tactical measures were taken, and all within a fraction of a millisecond.

There was a blinding, white light and everything went black. Dave 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 never 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 her 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 looked like the results of a mini volcano with an occasional popping lava 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 probe was a perfect sphere, about a metre in width, as black as India ink, no reflections, and back down to water freezing 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 complete recorded information from 2,941 worlds. ‘Complete’ meaning every detail of a planet from temperatures to life forms, from chemical composition 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 didn’t 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 that gravity could not be easily controlled or manipulated. Mass, however, could. 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 was sitting up now and in a daze. He was a fairly average looking Caucasian male, 26 years old, almost six feet tall, and weighed around 170 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 silently toward 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 as 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 when the mammal bared its teeth, but knew that it couldn't possibly scratch her outer shell with those bone teeth, or the composite metal tool at its feet. She stopped two metres from the life form and began the scan. A bright, white energy 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 wasn't 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 her makers that it was a virtual impossibility. Had they traveled this far while she lay dormant in the earth, or was it just an incredible random coincidence? She didn't know for she was unable to witness the events that had unfolded above her over these 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 she sought.

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

"He-llo," the probe echoed back 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, confused.

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

“As far as I know, this planet is my species origin.” Dave answered more calmly now. “We’ve 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 wouldn’t 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, or even traveled alongside a humanoid maker to ward off the loneliness of deep space travel. Xin was relatively young, and her missions were limited to this sector of the Galaxy, so there really was 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 93 million years. Some died from natural disasters, others from disease or invasion. Those that had survived these early challenges, and had achieved incredibly long life or virtual immortality, died from the results of eventual insanity. Evolving beyond the need for physical form was the most rare occurrence, but this too led to civilization’s 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 had 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 being’s name to 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 answered 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 seconds. 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 probe’s name.... Xin had given him the information she had collected on the 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 so 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, and 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 world, 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 flew straight up into a cloudless sky, increasing speed more rapidly than he thought possible. The probe looked like a dark hole quickly closing on a cyan coloured backdrop. 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 toward the Sun. A few minutes later, she was skimming over the Sun'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 toward the centre of the Galaxy, and initiated the first of a series of space folds to get her home. The space ahead of the probe became a small, swirling mass of black and dark-grey. Xin disappeared into its darker centre like a black Ping-Pong ball being sucked down a drain.

Chapter 2 A fecal fly

Xin completed the last of the series of space folds. A small, swirling mass of black and dark-grey formed in the emptiness of space, and a few seconds later, the black probe shot out of its centre with amazing speed. A split second later, Xin came to a complete stop, with no noticeable deceleration, and more abruptly than any student of physics would've believed possible. The Z'va probe was just outside of her solar system, and remained motionless as she began her scans. If viewed from within the system, she appeared as a black silhouette in front 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/green ball teeming with life, orbited by space docks, stations, and a multitude of various spacecrafts, was now a grey cinder, marred by a number of small craters. Z'va Prime, fourth planet from the sun, a world dedicated to peace, knowledge, and the arts. There was no sign whatsoever to even hint at how beautiful it once was. It was now just a large, dead, grey ball.

The other six planets were just as lifeless as they had been when last she was in this system – like her homeworld 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 were intact. There was 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 about twenty million years ago – her scans 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 exited 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 toward 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 that 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 was high, so caution had been advised. Now, all of the bridge crew were laughing along with their battle-hardened commander.

"Hah! It's 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."

"Commander, It's no longer scanning, and doesn't appear to detect us," informed the weapons officer. "Should we scan it?"

"No.... Helmsman, plot an intercept course. 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 were a race of conquerors. They expanded 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, but taller, larger, and stronger than a human. Brutish in appearance and posture, they were as fearsome as their ill-gotten weapons.

The Taelroks were the most powerful race in this 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 advance 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 cannon 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 unidentified 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 raised 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 accessed the cruiser’s data files and had learned their language. She now sent out a friendship message to the Taelroks. “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 communications officer relayed the message to the commander.

“Harm 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 flash 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 target 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 pounded his fist on his 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 missiles were in the mix.

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

There was a series of blinding flashes and silent explosions concentrated on her location, and continued for fifteen 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. They 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 thirty-two tiny, black eyes were now focused on the bridge's main screen. The large cloud now illuminated by whatever was happening inside.

The Z'va probe shot out of the cloud, and quickly came to an immediate stop. She 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 bow to 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 Taelrok battle cruiser. She could have outrun them, or just phased away. 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 Taelroks were responsible for unimaginable cruelty, violence and genocide. She had 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 the Taelroks 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 wasn't much written about them in the Taelrok's history files, making it obvious that they were as mysterious to the Taelroks as their name implied. They knew very little about the Veiled except that they were a very old and powerful race. Even the Taelroks were wise enough to know not to go up against them. It was obvious from the history files that these Veiled let the Taelroks rule this sector. The Taelroks 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 kilometres above the surface, and at 5,000 kilometres 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, and 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 twenty million years ago, wiped out all life on Z'va Prime, and left without a trace. There was nothing in the Taelrok's files to shed light on what happened here either. It even predated the Taelrok race, and according to their files, this had always been a dead world. But this was one planet the Taelroks 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 moon 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 a low orbit around the insignificant, cold world. She continued following the signal till she knew it to be 96 kilometres directly below her, and 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 a few minutes 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 contained 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.

About 300 metres down, entombed in the ice mass was the source of the signal; a small spacecraft 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 twenty 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's attack, so she began the process of super heating. When her outer shell was white hot, she simply turned off her anti-gravity field, letting herself sink quickly down toward 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 couldn't 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 its 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 inside a large cylinder 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 it, quickly moved to hovering position over it, accessed the ship's computer, and turned the spacecraft on. The black platform glowed slightly, and the cyan walls became transparent. All around her, the ice that entombed the craft was now visible. Only the access platform below her remained unchanged. Unlike Xin's situation on Earth – or more accurately, 'in' the Earth – this ship had access to sunlight, however faint. It was just enough to keep its power cells charged to minimum.

It took Xin a long time to access and learn the workings of this craft – thirty-seconds at least. After all, this craft was 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 ship, 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 captain's log. She played it, and a voice from the far past echoed within the ship's bare interior:

"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 don't 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 was 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 simply say, 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! 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 didn’t know what to do. After all, she was just 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 their 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.

First, Xin uploaded 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 had she been incapacitated, and the data was tampered with directly.

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 computer format.

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 its 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 flew 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 that planet. There was something special about those 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 our conversations are always too one sided. She smiled inside.

Chapter 4
Adjustments

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, while the rest of the world too busy with other priorities to be concerned 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 wasn't 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 wasn't 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. There was 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, and 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. Four silver legs seemed to grow out of its bottom half a few seconds before it lightly touched down on the hard, parched surface.

Now, where was that phaseway? Xin accessed the ship's schematics and 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 David 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 didn't realize 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 science ship's black, hexagon platform. He then became aware he was lying 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 called out 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, it tasted like something died in there, and 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've 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 adjustments,” 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 like a traffic cop. “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 everything Xin had said to him from the time he woke up. He knew what she was saying was the truth. He could feel it somehow.

“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. 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.”

Dave sat on the squishy, white bed silently for a few seconds taking it all in. He felt the back of his head, while Xin scanned his body, noting his blood pressure was getting a little high.

“Well, this is all great and everything, but did 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 of a 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, isn’t space 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 one of the possible exceptions – 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 a Traveler is not for you, we will return to Earth.”

“Can we come back to Earth from time to time, like for a vacation?” Dave became more intrigued, but he still wasn’t convinced.

“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 spacecraft of yours?” Dave changed the subject to give himself a break.

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 with a hint of irony.

“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 did she say that than a rectangular, white table with rounded corners literally grew up out of the transparent floor. The same table Dave had been lying on the first time he had regained consciousness. Xin continued her demonstration by forming a pilot’s 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 interest and curiosity 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 didn’t expect this reaction. “Yes, Dave, this is your ship as well. As you may 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 about how cool it would be to explore space, like on those Sci-Fi TV shows. 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. Let’s do this. 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 upset him. The word ‘freaks’ used in such a way sounded extremely negative. “Yes, but I will need to sample another human voice.”

Dave noticed his radio next to his backpack on the transparent floor. He 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, Calgary. “How about this voice?” Dave increased the volume on his small radio.

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

“Much better,” Dave confirmed.

“Good, I don’t want to freaks 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 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 finished speaking, Dave jumped straight up with all his might. To his surprise, he quickly shot up over ten metres. He cleared the science ship’s hiding place, and had less than a second to look briefly around before dropping back down to the 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, and went over to flop 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 wasn’t the same guy 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 ke g 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 a relaxing, almost therapeutic, hot shower, he ambled into the bedroom while briskly drying his hair with a navy blue towel. From the corner of his right eye he noticed the answering machine's small red light was flashing. He walked over, and pressed the play button with a tiny pang of dread.

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

"Beep! Tuesday, 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! Friday, 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! Monday, 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. He 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's 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 with 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 26 years, but Dave was getting tired of the performance. Maybe this was the last curtain call.

Dave called his friend 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 ya,” 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.”

“OK, bye.”

“See ya.”

A couple of hours later, Dave parked his yellow subcompact 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 on his uncle’s farm in southern Ontario more than a decade ago.

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, he was telling Yamir about his vacation over a burger. He left 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. A second had his arms folded over a black leather jacket, and the third was leaning back against a nearby 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 were bullies. They were nothing but cowards that picked on the weak to make themselves feel big.

Dave flashed back to when he was eleven. Every day on his way to school, an older boy a head taller would push him around, and sometimes even put him in a headlock. This had gone on for several days, until one day, he couldn't take it anymore. Dave became so angry, he punched the giant in his stomach with all his might. He hadn't even thought about 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, beefy fist slammed into his left cheek. It should've knocked him down on the ground – probably breaking his cheekbone, and even knocking out a couple of teeth – but it didn't. It felt 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.

Something came over Dave. "Gee, I didn't realize we were going to have a bitch slappin' contest." He was going to try to talk some sense into these goons, but now he was goading 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, 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 thugs were no match for him. 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 quickly got 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 toward where he had parked his car.

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. Dave turned back to confront the thugs who were still in the fight.

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

Dave was trying to figure a way to slow 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 onto the wooden floor. Ignoring the other's punches to his head and upper body, Dave 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 toward the main exit. Dave wasn't surprised. When the going gets tough, the tough guys get running, he thought.

For the first time, Dave paused and looked around the large room. He saw about a dozen people silently staring at him with looks of disbelief from various 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 his friend had used only a couple of minutes earlier.

Outside in the parking lot, Dave saw Yamir 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 his third degree stare.

"WHAT? What the hell was that back there? Did you take a black Ops self defense course, overdose on caffeine, get bitten 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, 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. 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 of a car off into the dark. He looked up at the clear night sky stippled with hundreds of glimmering 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 solar system, and perhaps even the Galaxy. Yet, there would be no fanfare, no parade, and 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 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 A grain of sand

It was Saturday, 6:35 a.m. when Yamir pulled up in his white two-seater. Dave had just finished loading the last of the cardboard boxes into the small rented truck he had acquired the day before. He 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 back of the red and white truck to see about a dozen moving boxes, a couple of guitar cases, a TV, a few suitcases, and the majority of Dave’s modest furniture. Dave was moving alright.

Dave came back out through the propped open front doors a few minutes later. He was carrying his 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 great trick, this one was the encore.

Dave went to the back of the truck, lowered the couch gently down in front of all the other items, and closed the door 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. Dave kept insisting that it would just be easier to show him, and that he wouldn't believe him until he saw it for himself. 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 toward the heart of the Badlands. The terrain became very rugged, very quickly. They didn't go too far, 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 about 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 in the distance. 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 – R2-D2, 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 dash 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, and was motionless, as if the mythical Medusa had turned him into 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 y-your friend,” Yamir finally stammer out.

“Hello, Yamir. Nice to meet you.”

“Hell-o,” 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 to 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 still 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 truck, 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 truck over the uneven, beige ground. The dusty 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; he was far 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. The truck was gently lowered, and came to 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 directly adjacent 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 finally 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, 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, if it was 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 wasn't yet in the habit of speaking directly to the small probe. He treated Xin like one would a ventriloquist's dummy, with Dave being the puppeteer. 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 vessel in the 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 any 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 most of the interesting stuff is found in the bottom half, under the floor. This area houses 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 locations of the propulsion systems. They incorporate all the 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 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. He was greeted by the bright warmth of the Sun on his face.

Dave was right behind him, but before exiting, he looked over his left shoulder to see Xin floating over the hexagon shaped main control panel busy at work. Near the bridge area, a cyan coloured barrier literally grew up from the ship’s floor. It made contact with the elliptical contour of the inner hull’s ceiling, sectioning off the bridge from the rest of the interior. “Xin, can you change the ship’s interior 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. Dave brought 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 with the white floor, the ship's floor grew up, melded and bonded with it.

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-0167," Xin informed, then added. "Only sentient ships have names. You humans don't give your toasters names."

"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 came to mind for inspiration." Dave took Xin's silence as a supportive yes.

Dave turned to Yamir. "I guess this is goodbye, at least for a while," he 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 toward him. "Goodbye, Yamir. May your Universe ever expand," Xin said solemnly, as a formal 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 leaning against the truck, and peering back at the outcropping of rocks far in the distance. A few minutes later, he could make out the tiny, silver shape as it slowly poked up from its hiding place. The elliptical craft hovered in place for a moment, and then flew straight up into the twilight sky. It accelerated from slow to way-too-fast in a couple of seconds, and disappeared into some billowy 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, 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 white hull walls faded away, 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 this 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. These 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 toward 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. In only a few heartbeats, he was standing above Earth's only natural satellite.

This transparent ship feature was an incredible way to travel, he thought. It 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 high 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 lie 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, and less uncomfortable.

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 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 phoned some of the guys from his astronomy club. They, in turn, made some calls, and before long, professional astronomers were contacted, and finally, the media got wind of the sparkly thing orbiting the Moon.

A 40 something news anchor sits at his desk waiting for his 'on the air' signal. He has male model good looks, and hair that's neatly trimmed, but prematurely white. He's given the signal and puts on the charm that made him a household name.

"This is Walter Murrow, 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, and was quickly learning how to clear his mind to 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 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. I then cross-referenced these with specific wave patterns presently emanating from space. Perhaps one of these may lead us to our goal."

The Odyssey pulled 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... "A-amazing," Dave managed to choke out. He had never felt so small.

"Wait!" exclaimed Walter Murrow. "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 their own determinations. I'm Walter Murrow, and this has been BLN. Goodnight."

Earth, the blue and 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 toward the Sahara desert.

Chapter 7 Bone yard

A dark-grey, whirling mass began to form in the vacuum of space, its darker centre slowly widening like the aperture of a camera. Seconds later, the Odyssey shot out of its centre a short distance, and immediately came to a complete stop.

The hull around the bridge became transparent as Dave powered down the ship's propulsion systems. He loved the panoramic view – the unobstructed aspect made it easier for his part falcon eyes to sweep the immediate area – but it was mostly for his amusement. The ship's sensors were more efficient, still, he liked the challenge, and he had turned it into a contest.

“There it is!” Dave exclaimed. The tiny shape was only visible due to the nearby star's light reflecting off it.

“I've already scanned it,” Xin replied pretending to gloat. “It's another dead end I'm afraid, dead being the operative word – it's a derelict vessel.”

This was just another of the many disappointments in their search. The outdated history section of the Z'va library had mostly directed them to long dead worlds. One tip had taken them to an advanced civilization, but they had deteriorated into a race of xenophobes, not even worth attempting to contact for fear of being attacked. And now, Xin had made a detour to check out a weak signal midway through a space fold that had led them here.

Dave piloted the Odyssey toward the relic. It wasn't what they were looking for, but he was damn curious non the less.

“Dave, what are you doing?” Xin floated down the hall to hover next to Dave who was seated on the bridge.

“Just thought we should take a closer look, now that we're here anyway,” he replied.

“Very well, but then we should investigate the nearby system. There might be a connection.” Xin tried to sound optimistic. “Perhaps this ship will reveal something.”

“Woh! Will you look at the size of this thing!” Dave remarked as the massive hulk quickly filled up his vision, and now loomed above them like some ancient sea monster.

The shape of the enormous ship reminded Dave of a starfish, except that the five monstrous appendages were bent back at about a thirty-degree angle from its centre. It was decorated by countless bumps of varying sizes over its entire surface, and in the dim light of the nearby star, it appeared predominantly dark-purple in colour.

“What's the diameter of this thing?” Dave asked without taking his eyes off the leviathan.

“1.956 kilometres,” was Xin's machine-mode answer.

Dave's implant made a quick calculation for him. “That's about eighteen football fields, and I mean with the end zones included – it's huge!”

“Based on my scans,” Xin analyzed, “this ship was created by a relatively advanced race. The alloys used, the propulsion system, and its power core are all quite impressive. If the civilization that created this ship still exists, they could be a possibility for the Z'va Prime library upload. I cannot get an accurate reading as to the age of this vessel due to the preserving effects of space. This is odd. I am getting some unusual readings from inside the ship. There is a considerable amount of organic matter spread out inside the entire ship.”

“What sort of organic matter?” Dave asked with a bit of trepidation.

“Inconclusive,” Xin responded, a bit perplexed. “Its hull is able to block some of my scan modes. It is organic matter but I am not getting any life readings. Also, there is zero gravity, and it is a virtual vacuum inside, except for a small percentage of nitrogen and oxygen molecules at a four to one ratio.”

“So there are frozen, floating, dead things inside – that's nice,” Dave summed up sarcastically.

“I need to get inside this ship to find and access the data storage devices,” Xin determined. “Without them being powered on, it is impossible to locate them.”

“I’m coming along this time,” Dave stated firmly. “I’ve studied all the Traveler training files,” he added to argue his case.

“Affirmative,” Xin’s logic programming agreed, “but let’s keep it simple – no space walks – just phase the Odyssey through the hull of that ship.”

“Affirmative,” Dave parroted back with a smile.

Dave’s cranial implant relayed his thoughts to the secondary control panel, which was out of sight, and located directly under his chair. The bridge had no buttons, controls, or monitors of any kind, and except for the white, square chair, the bridge was virtually empty. Everything on the ship was controlled via thought. All the information gathered went directly to the implant, and then to Dave’s brain. It took a bit of getting used to in the beginning, but the ship was fast becoming an extension of Dave’s own body, and responding to him almost as quickly.

The transparent bridge transformed back to a white hull as the Odyssey slowly moved forward. The science ship phased out and through the huge ship’s thick hull at the tip of the nearest appendage.

Xin’s clinical data of the ship’s interior did nothing to prepare Dave for the visual reality. When he changed the bridge back to transparent mode, Dave was face to face with a monstrous, floating skull, of God knows what, that was about the size of a Volkswagen Beetle.

“Ahhh!” he yelped as he literally jumped back.

After he got over the initial shock, he gazed past the frightening skull. It looked like they were inside a dark, giant tunnel with walls that seemed to give off a low, purplish glow just night-light bright enough to illuminate the horror it contained. “It’s a bone yard!” A chill went all the way down Dave’s spine, and he became aware of the cooling sweat on his forehead.

Randomly suspended in the near vacuum were thousands of bones as far as the eye could see – skulls, jawbones, rib cages, pelvic bones, spinal columns, and others that weren’t even identifiable. Some bones appeared to be from creatures the size of a mouse; others were almost as large as a whale’s, and every size in between. All of these white-yellow bones took on a purplish hue from the eerie glow coming off the walls. Some skulls looked almost familiar, while others were barely recognizable as being a skull, making Dave wonder what these creatures could have possibly looked like – extremely alien, he imagined.

While Dave was taking in the bizarre view in front of him, Xin had been doing what she did best. “These creatures are not listed in the Z’va Prime library,” she concluded after having scanned all the floating bones. “Of course, that is to be expected, as the information is twenty million years out of date, and I estimate these bones are approximately only 200 years old.”

“Well, let’s go look for computers, data storage devices, ship’s logs or whatever,” Dave uttered with a twinge of apprehension. “It’s not like I haven’t seen a few bones before, but let’s do it, and get out of here. This place gives me the creeps.”

A few minutes later, Dave had on a grey flight suit, and an envirosuit strapped in place. The envirosuit was a small, flat, triangular-shaped device that was attached to his back with a black, X-shaped harness and belt. Xin had constructed the sophisticated device in the ships’ science lab using technical blueprints accessed from the Z’va Prime library. Dave touched the buckle of the belt turning the shiny, black device on. The result was a breathable atmosphere that formed thinly around his entire body. It also created a low powered force field to contain the air, as well as providing some minimal protection.

Dave and Xin entered the small room designed around the phaseway location, which isolated the ship’s portal from the rest of the interior. Xin told the Odyssey to seal off the room with a white wall that grew up from the floor. Next, the ship removed the air in the room to equalize

with the outside vacuum. Finally, the phaseway was slowly opened, and the internal artificial gravity was turned off.

Dave's laced, black boots no longer touched the floor, as he now floated weightless in the middle of the makeshift air hatch. "How do I move around, Xin?" Dave verbalized.

The sound waves couldn't travel through the vacuum, but Xin understood him just the same. "You may speak if you wish, but it isn't necessary. Your cranial implant will transfer your thoughts to me and vice versa," Xin instructed.

"Yeah, right, in space they can't hear you scream, or talk, or fart," Dave joked.

Xin didn't find it at all funny, as the verbal version didn't translate well into thoughts that were then relayed via the chip implant. "Dave, I would highly recommend avoiding flatulence within the envirosuit. Anyway, to answer your question, the envirosuit has anti-grav movement capability, just focus on the device; then visualize the direction and speed you wish to go."

Dave had been using the implant for months, and had become expert with its use. He was using it to fly the Odyssey, access the Z'va Prime library; he even used it with his Mac laptop he had brought along. It took a bit of practice and patience at first, but he was now able to work with Photoshop and Illustrator by just thought alone.

So now, he thought about the one centimetre flat device strapped to his back, told it he wanted to go forward, and visualized the speed at about three kilometres per hour. Sure enough, he floated toward the portal at a slow walking speed. Stop, he thought, and he stopped abruptly, arms length from the phaseway portal. "No problem," Dave said, but Xin only received the thought that he was ready.

"Good, then let's go," Xin replied as she moved through the portal to lead the way. Dave followed right behind her.

The interior of the tunnel-like appendage was as wide as a football field. The variety of bones weren't packed thick, nor spread out evenly, so it was easy enough to maneuver through the open gaps. Dave ignored the tiniest bones, letting them reflected off the envirosuit's low force field. His ability to see in minimal light came in handy as he floated a wide zigzag pattern away from the Odyssey. The slightly curved floor, about a metre below his feet was a very dark (and in this light) undetermined colour.

"I see something on the side of this tunnel thing, around the bottom half." Dave's distance and night vision worked exceptionally well together, even beating Xin to the discovery this time. "Let's check it out."

As they approached the side of the tunnel, a new part of the puzzle emerged – cages, row upon row of cages along the bottom of the high, curving wall. The wall had a bumpy texture, reminiscent of egg carton bottoms, but looked more organic than fabricated due to the randomness in size and placement of the bumps. The cages were set directly into the wall. Again, there was randomness about it, as there were various sizes from the very small to huge, and everything in between. The huge cages were about ten metres square. The smaller ones were stacked in random patterns of various sizes, but grouped, ending up at exactly the same height as the huge ones.

"I think I know where all those bones came from now." Dave sent the thought to Xin.

Xin was thinking the same thing.

"Was this some sort of alien zoo?" Dave puzzled.

"Possibly," Xin responded. "However, I am curious about what caused the damage to some of these cages."

Dave examined several of them more closely. Even in the dim light, he could see that although many had their bared doors swung open, the few that were still shut had bent and mangled bars.

“Well, whatever happened here, happened a long time ago,” Dave commented. “Let’s follow this wall. It probably leads to the centre of the ship; maybe there are some answers there.”

“Agreed,” Xin confirmed as she set off, keeping the dark-purple, glowing wall to her right.

There seemed to be no end to the cages as they travelled the length of the wall. They had past hundreds, if not thousands of cages, and there were cages on the opposite wall, as well as four more of these tunnel-like sections to the ship. What’s with all the animals? Dave was mystified. He kept coming back to the zoo idea, but it just didn’t sit right.

The long tunnel finally opened up into a huge, cavern-like opening. Two other large, tunnel openings could be seen on the left and right of what was the centre of this space hulk – a large, domed structure. The structure appeared to have the same dark-purple colour and organic-like texture of the tunnels. There was nothing different about it except for...

“Doors!” exclaimed Dave.

There were five half circle-shaped openings, each one facing their respective tunnel. They were about three metres high, and were simply a hole by which to gain access into the central structure.

“This could be the primary control location,” Xin guessed as she floated toward the opening directly ahead, followed quickly behind by Dave. He matched Xin’s speed so perfectly, it seemed as if the small probe was pulling him along.

Inside the structure, the light from the outer glowing walls was absent. Even Dave had trouble making things out in the almost total blackness, until Xin’s outer shell illuminated the immediate area with a moderately bright, white light.

In the centre of the round, giant room there was a large, waist-high table. It appeared to be made out of a clear, glass-like material with primary coloured shapes, black alien lettering, and a complex series of lines. To Dave, it looked more like an enormous, round piece of abstract art reminiscent of Joan Miró perhaps.

Xin moved to the centre of the great table to stop and hover over it. “This is it, I suspect.” Xin scanned the ship’s central controls beneath her. “This appears to be in working order, but it needs some electrical current to power it.” No sooner had she made her mechanical prognosis than an electrical streamer came off her outer shell, and went directly into the centre of the translucent table. The table produced a low to high hum as it lit up like a garish, neon sign. Now she needed to access the machine, learn its language and workings.

It took less than five minutes before she made her assessment. “Although there is some minor damage to the ship and its systems, the main problem is that the ship’s power core has long been depleted. I could transfer some of my energy directly into this ship’s reactor.”

“Xin, I don’t want to rain on your parade, but you do know that this ship is like a million times bigger than you?” Dave pointed out smugly.

“I assume you are exaggerating to bolster your point. However, dimension doesn’t always equate proportionately with power,” Xin informed.

“Huh?”

“Size doesn’t always matter,” Xin simplified as she phased through the table, then the floor beneath, and continued heading down toward the central power core.

“So what am I supposed to do?” Dave said glumly.

“Wait,” came back the reply.

“Fine.” Dave crossed his arms and mumbled, “I guess size doesn’t matter, when matter thinks big.”

Xin was still in communication range. “That’s catchy, you should write that down.”

“Fine.”

A few minutes later, Xin was back, hovering over the control table once again, but now she was able to power up systems.

The room they were in lit up as bright as daylight. Next came the sound of rushing air from unseen vents. Dave’s ears told him it was coming from the sides of some of the bumps that decorated the entire interior of this colossal ship. And finally, the pièce de résistance – gravity, and Dave fell down to the hard, metallic floor.

“Ouch! Man, it’s a good thing my head is even harder than before.” Dave rubbed the back of his head, feeling for a bump that wasn’t there.

“I am unable to find any ship’s logs to enlighten us as to what has happened here,” Xin stated. “Ship’s logs were either not customary by the captain of this vessel, or they have been deleted – very odd. However, I was able to locate some information about this ship and its destination. This ship was designed to transport a wide variety of creatures from one planet to another.”

“It’s an ark!” Dave exclaimed with a sudden realization.

“It would appear that their homeworld’s sun was on the verge of going supernova,” Xin continued. “Their destination was the second planet of the nearby solar system. Obviously, something went terribly wrong.”

“Obviously,” Dave echoed.

“After transferring energy to this ship’s reactor, I am down to twenty percent power. I need to recharge at the nearby star, then, I will meet you back at this location, and we can explore the second planet together.”

“Sounds good,” Dave said. “You go ahead. I’m going to walk back to the Odyssey, examine some of those bones, and maybe pick up a couple of souvenir skulls.”

“Very well. When you’re finished, phase the Odyssey out of this ship, and wait for me please,” Xin instructed. “You can turn off your envirosuit now. The atmosphere and temperature are now at an optimal life sustaining level. I adjusted the interior air and heating systems to be more suitable to your specific biological needs. The default air composition settings of this ship are very similar to Earth’s, but the temperatures for each of the five tunnels were set at various levels, ranging from zero to forty degrees Celsius. I set the entire ship to a comfortable 24 degrees. The other occupants of this ship will no longer need their specific temperatures.”

“That’s for sure,” Dave agreed turning off his envirosuit as he walked out of the brightly lit domed structure.

Outside the central dome, Dave was disappointed to find the huge cavern and the five tunnels were just as dimly lit as before. Perhaps the purplish glow given off by the walls had been much brighter at one time. Maybe the passage of time had all but depleted whatever it was that created the fluorescent effect. It was just a thought. There was a change, however. The dark, curved floor of the immense ark was now littered with countless bones, the most pronounced being the rib cages of the whale sized creatures. It truly was a vast animal graveyard that disappeared into the gloomy distance – a visual dreamlike reality.

“I’ll meet you outside this vessel in approximately one cycle or 68 of your minutes,” Xin said as she quickly levitated upward. She then phased through the ceiling of the huge, cavernous dome, and back out into the cold blackness of space. Unlike most sentients, Xin felt very

comfortable and at home in space, and was quite glad to leave the confines of the mysterious ship far behind.

Dave started to walk toward the *Odyssey*, which was located near the end of the long, tunnel-like appendage. It was night-light dim, but he could clearly see the bones at his feet, so it was an easy matter to avoid stepping on any. Unfortunately, Xin had adjusted the artificial gravity to suit his higher gravitational needs, making the walk back, just that. No superhuman leaps this time. What was the point of being super if you couldn't be? It was like being Spiderman with his web slinging ability, but to find everything coated with a non-stick surface.

Now, let's look for a nice sample, Dave thought as he began examining the strange variety of skulls on his way back.

The gigantic ship had many dark, hidden from view places – access tunnels, ventilation systems. The cocoon-like things were well concealed in these secluded, dead end locations. They were shiny, brown-red in colour, about the size of a refrigerator, and with a worm-like surface texture. Each one was surrounded at their base by a large pile of bones. These bones were thinly covered and penetrated by a root-like system of thin, brown tubes that disappeared into the bottom half of each cocoon. Many cocoons had perished, but a few of the hardiest had survived the unnaturally long, hibernation-like state. The warm air lightly touched their surfaces, signaling the extensive drought of vacuum and cold were finally at an end. The process of reanimation rapidly began.

Upon closer inspection, Dave noticed that many of the bones had signs of trauma, breaks and even deep cut marks on their surfaces. One large skull had an obvious sign of three deep cuts running parallel to each other across its entire side. What had happened here? Some creatures, and nasty ones at that, had gotten loose and went amuck? Then he thought about the bars of the cages.... They were bent inward, not outward.... Something had broken into those cages! Well, whatever happened here, happened a long time ago, he again reminded himself. Still, he decided to forget about the souvenirs, and make his way back to the *Odyssey* a.s.a.p.

Their antennae twitched with excitement when the smell of Dave wafted on the recycled air, and all seven of the gigantic arachnids immediately headed in the direction of the fresh food.

Dave was halfway to the *Odyssey* when his sensitive hearing picked up multiple clicking sounds coming from behind him. He turned around, and for a moment, froze when he saw the horror that was about fifty metres away, and approaching fast. A group of dark-red, scorpion-like things were heading straight for him. They swished their tails back and forth, and at their tips Dave could see three deadly looking barbs. The three deep cuts in the skull became all too clear to him now.

Dave instinctively picked up a large pelvic bone at his feet, and flung it with all his might at the centre of the group. The Frisbee from hell hit the alien scorpion leading the group, smashing through its tough exoskeleton like an eggshell, and sending an explosion of green bug juice flying in all directions. The four giant bugs directly behind their swatted leader, piled up into a tangle of legs, snapping pincers, and flailing tails. The two that had been on either side, had avoided the collision, and kept coming without losing a beat.

Even though Dave could run much faster after his enhancements, he didn't think he could outrun these things. He turned to his left and started running toward the side wall, and the

possible temporary safety of the cages. He looked over his shoulder to see two of them gaining on him. Two? What happened to the other four?

Making it inside one of the larger cages, he slammed the door shut with only a second to spare. Two monster bugs crashed side by side into the dark, metal bars, their giant pincers straining between the bars making loud, snapping sounds as they attacked the air wildly. Dave quickly backed away from the bars, putting as much distance between him and those deadly claws.

Once the creatures realized that Dave wasn't about to walk into their crushing claws, they concentrated on the bars instead. Dave could see, and even hear the metal bars bend under the mangling pressure of those huge pincers. It was only a matter of minutes, perhaps seconds before they would rip their way through. It felt like he was in a can; they were the can opener, and he was the meat inside. He had to do something, and quick.

Dave looked around the floor of the large, square cage for something else to throw at these things, and spotted a large jawbone. Its size and appearance was reminiscent of a horse's except for the sharp, carnivorous teeth.

"Let's play fetch." He picked it up, aimed, and threw the curved bone overhead, sending it like a boomerang between two bars, and directly at the centre of one hideous bug. This resulted in a satisfyingly loud crushing sound. The force of the lethal, spinning projectile knocked the creature onto its back, and several metres away from the bars. "Nice catch!"

Dead or dying, it flailed its six legs and two claws frantically, while its barbed tail snaked wildly on the ground. The second alien thing immediately fell upon the doomed one, and began tearing at it with its vise-like mandibles.

Dave took advantage of the distraction to squeeze through the bars, and made a run for the Odyssey. Dave assumed that this bug, like the first four, would rather consume an easy meal than deal with food that could fight back, but he was not completely correct. After running for less than a minute, he again heard the now familiar clicking sounds on the deck plating. The last remaining monster had left his still quivering ex-partner (now meal) behind and was quickly gaining on him. His tactic had only bought him a few seconds. Were these things smarter than he had given them credit for?

He knew he couldn't outrun it, so the only option was to stand and fight. He frantically looked around for more bone weapons. While doing so, he made a mental note to have Xin make him a ray gun, phaser, AK-47, or whatever; just something better than bone chunks to hurl at alien terrors that see him as a meal on two legs.

He picked up a large, elongated skull in his left hand, gripped it in an eye socket, and held it up like a shield. For his weapon, he snatched up a thick femur almost two metres long, and held it like a club in his right. "OK, I'm ready, come on you bastard!" he shouted to bolster his courage.

The monster slowed down when it saw Dave standing his ground with the bone-club high in the air, ready to strike. It was now only five metres away, and began approaching him very cautiously. Did his two kills of its own kind result in this less reckless advance? It held its claws far apart from each other. Its giant pincers opened wide for the opportunity to crush Dave, which it was quite capable of doing. Then the monster started to move sideways like a crab, as if looking for an opening, and/or a way to avoid the threatening club. Dave turned with it, not giving the alien creature the chance it sought.

When it realized this maneuver wasn't working, its deadly barbed tail came up and over its back, and pointed toward Dave. The tail was thicker than one of Dave's legs and had a reach

beyond its body. It attacked by swiftly moving forward as its tail snapped three lethal spikes directly at Dave's chest.

Dave countered by meeting it with his makeshift shield. The barbs impacted on the bone surface, and luckily, one of the curved, dagger-size barbs somehow became caught on the skull. Taking immediate advantage of the situation, he brought the bone-club down on the tail with all his might. So fast and powerful was the blow that it literally severed the tail, resulting in the thing letting out a loud, unnerving screech. The super-sized bug instantly became more aggressive and reckless as it lunged forward with its snapping pincers.

Dave dropped the now useless barb tangled skull, and grabbed the bone-club with both hands like a baseball bat. Relying on his incredible agility, he managed to avoid both snapping pincers, followed by his club coming down lethally hard on what Dave guessed was its head. A gratifying crunch of bone through shell resulted in the splatter of thick, alien blood, with some landing on his face. The thing flopped around wildly in its death throes as Dave hit it again and again, more from adrenaline than to make sure the thing was positively dead. He finally stopped more from fatigue than its lack of movement. He glared down at the broken thing, primed to hit it some more, but the only motion it made now was an occasional twitch of a leg or quiver of an antenna.

When his heart rate started coming back down to normal, he dropped the once white club (now green with syrupy fluid). He then noticed that the alien bug had drawn blood as well – his own! Dave's grey jumpsuit had a large tear on the left leg, and a great deal of blood was oozing from a large gash on the side of his calf. He remembered that during the fight, one of its claws had swiped him there, and although it hurt, he had assumed it was just a glancing blow. In reality, it was a powerful blow that would have broken a normal human limb in two.

Trying to ignore the pain, and much to his dismay, Dave found himself limping back to the Odyssey. He had been walking for a few minutes when he heard the distinctive clicking sounds once again. He looked over his shoulder to see the remaining four giant arachnids rushing toward him.

The ship was close now. Not wasting any time, he picked up the pace to a painful jog. He visualized their distance and speed, then, his distance and speed from the Odyssey, and sent the question to the implant in his head. The answer came back; it was possible. He ignored the increasing pain, forcing his protesting leg to keep moving. He relied on his hearing to judge how close they were. He couldn't afford to waste any time by turning around.

The Odyssey was now just ten metres away. The alien bugs were maybe twenty metres and closing. Dave signaled the ship to open the portal, the phaseway expanded to maximum, and Dave jog-limped through. The portal quickly closed behind him, shortly followed by the impact of the bugs causing a series of loud, muffled thuds that vibrated the ship briefly.

The frustrated monster bugs climbed up the side of the ship, and attacked the Odyssey with their claws in a futile attempt to break through the hull to get at the food inside.

To Dave's surprise, the Odyssey's AI sent a message to his cranial implant, which then relayed the message to his brain. The ship was asking him what he wanted to do. Had there been actual danger to the ship, the Odyssey's AI would have responded with what it considered appropriate action for self-preservation. But this was just an annoyance to the ship, and it was inquiring if something should be done, if anything at all.

Dave was tempted to have the Odyssey super heat its hull, but changed his mind. These creatures, no matter how horrific from Dave's perspective, were nothing more than a bunch of bugs just trying to survive, and were doing what came naturally. There was no evil or malice

behind their actions. No, any retribution shouldn't be wasted on them. However, whoever was responsible for these creatures getting loose or on board this ship, well, that was a different matter.

Dave ran to the bridge, he strapped in, told the Odyssey to hover up fifteen metres, and turn upside down. This resulted in the creatures dropping harmlessly onto the space ark's deck. Their single mindedness continued without delay as their pincers stretched up snapping the air frantically. To someone with a strange sense of humour, it might have looked as if the bugs were waving goodbye, a situation that didn't go to waste on Dave.

"Bye-bye, you ugly, #@%ing bugs," Dave mocked as he waved imitating their pincers with his thumb and fingers.

Dave left them behind in this agitated state as he turned the Odyssey 180 degrees around, and headed out and away from this insanity. Once phased through the hull of the alien ark, Dave made it a point to put several kilometres between the two ships, and waited for Xin's return, which should be very soon.

Now he had time to look at that nasty wound on his leg that he all but forgot about in the excitement. He opened the torn flight suit, but to his surprise, there was no wound! The blood had soaked into the suit and caked his leg, but the large gash that had been there was gone! He knew it must have been the MBRUs, plus his improved metabolism at work, but he had no idea he would heal so quickly. What had it been? Fifteen minutes since the injury? Maybe less.

Xin made the rendezvous a few minutes later with her Z'va reactor core fully recharged with star power. Dave told her about his horrifying adventure, followed by her profuse apology for leaving him alone.

"Forget it, Xin, it all worked out OK," Dave concluded as he downplayed the event, knowing it was partly his fault. "Now, let's go check out the planet this space ark was heading toward."

The sky reminded Dave of a beautiful summer day on Earth. Large, fluffy clouds lazily moved overhead, and a golden sun that felt nicely warm on his face. For a few minutes, he lost himself in the cloud shapes. One resembled a crocodile, an image of a creature foreign to this planet. He didn't realize how much he missed these simple things. It had been months since leaving Earth.

From his vantage point atop the foothills, the vast jungle landscape below reminded him of somewhere in South America, or perhaps, a jungle that existed long before man had even walked the Earth.

"What do you think those are?" Dave pointed at three large, cone-shaped structures far off in the distance. Each grey structure was the size of a small volcano, and looked unnaturally out of place.

"Those are atmospheric processors, Dave. This planet was perhaps much like your planet Mars, but has been transformed to this. A planet designed to sustain the specific life forms on the space ark."

"Strange," Dave whispered.

"Strange? How do you mean?"

"Listen," Dave instructed as he tilted his ear toward the rain forest.

"I do not hear any wildlife."

"Yes, no birds, no animals, just the wind and the rustling of leaves. How very strange. What do you think happened?"

Xin didn't know, but she knew that when Dave asked a question such as this one, he was only looking for an opinion, even if it wasn't close to the truth. "Something happened on that space ark, whether it was an accident or sabotage, I cannot say. Those automated atmospheric processors completed their task more than 200 years ago, a task that took decades to complete. There should have been many ships scheduled to arrive at this planet. Yet, for some reason, this race did not claim the planet that so much time and effort was expended on. This is very strange, as you say. I fear that something went terribly wrong, or perhaps something more sinister is involved here."

"It's a mystery all right," Dave added, deep in thought.

"We should continue with our search for a race to upload the Z'va Prime library to. I think I will go back to the Z'va Prime history records as a guide," Xin resolved.

"Agreed," Dave comment. "We did come closer with that approach than following this signal. Let's get back to the ship."

Back on the Odyssey, Xin consulted the great library, but this time, plotted a new course for a planet with a younger race in hopes of avoiding the previous disappointments.

The strangely quiet planet world quickly shrank behind the Odyssey. Dave moved the ship to an optimal position, away from any gravitational forces, for the first of a series of space folds. The space directly ahead of the Odyssey became a swirling mass of black and dark grey. The ship quickly vanished into its black centre, and the fold's aperture swiftly closed behind it.

A small scout ship phased back into the present space and time. It was matte-black with a multi-faceted surface over its entire triangular shaped fuselage.

"They are gone," updated the high, whiny voice from within the craft.

"Your report," the multiple whispers demanded. The low, distorted voices came from a small audio speaker, but seemed to come from every direction on the tiny bridge.

"A Z'va Prime science ship and probe, and a biological life form of unknown origin," the small form in shadows replied.

"Not possible!" the unison voices murmured. "Z'va Prime is a long dead world. All ships and probes were tracked down and destroyed. Send us your data."

"Transmitting," confirmed the spy.

"We will study and decide. Now, destroy the ship. The experiment is finished. Use the device we gave you," the whispers ordered as their last word echoed into silence.

"Yes, Masters," the spy uttered obediently.

A bright-white, pulsating missile shot from the scout ship, hitting the gigantic space ark dead centre. The brightness of the impact quickly spread over the entire derelict, consuming it in a pulsating, white glow. With every pulse, the great ship gradually dissolve until the stars it had been blocking could now be seen. When the pulsations weakened and finally stopped, all that remained was a small amount of smoky dust in the faint shape of a giant starfish. And the last ship of that dead, ancient race joined the fate of the seventeen other worlds.

Chapter 8
Stone choir

After completing the last space fold, the *Odyssey* headed at near the speed of light toward the fifth planet of this latest destination system. It was another guesstimate by Xin to locate an advanced civilization. The world had been visited by another Z'va probe more than twenty million years ago. At the time, it had a diverse wildlife, as well as primates according to the outdated files in the Z'va Prime library. Also, Xin had detected radio transmissions coming from this system, but unfortunately, these signals were hundreds of years old due to the great distances involved.

It was another long shot, but Xin and Dave knew that sooner or later this detection strategy would pay off. It was just a question of statistics. It might take ten or more such treks before a civilization is even located, and possibly a hundred or more before the right civilization is found to entrust with the great library. Knowledge so advanced in the sciences and technologies that Z'va Prime probes and ships would self-destruct rather than have it fall into unscrupulous hands.

"Xin, the *Odyssey* informs me that eleven ships are leaving orbit around the fifth planet, and are headed on a course that will take them out of the system." Dave relayed the message.

Xin hovered down the hall to stop next to Dave, who was seated on the bridge. "I received the same message," she replied. "Plot an intercept course, please. I will access their data files and learn their language when in range."

"Will do."

The ships were a ragtag bunch of various sizes and states of repair. Some looked new, others looked like they shouldn't even be allowed to orbit a planet, let alone head out into deep space.

"Greetings," Xin began in their language and on their communication frequency. "My name is Xin. I am originally from the planet Z'va Prime. We are on a peaceful mission, and wish only to communicate with you."

A few seconds later, a three dimensional image was projected in front of them via the *Odyssey's* communications system. It was so real, that had Dave not seen it form, he would have thought the alien was actually standing in front of him. It was humanoid in appearance, shorter than Dave by a head, with hairless, peach coloured skin, and very large eyes. Those bulbous eyes reminded him of a Japanese manga cartoon come to life. The alien was quite naked, and Dave could tell right away it was male in gender. No science fiction TV show episode could have ever prepared him for such a meeting.

"Greetings," began the alien in a high pitch, almost childlike voice. "I do not know of this Z'va Prime you speak of. Am I addressing the bipedal being or the black sphere?"

"You are speaking with the black sphere; although synthetic, I am a sentient being," Xin clarified. "I understand your confusion."

Dave understood everything they were saying to each other, even though the language sounded totally foreign to his ears. Xin had updated the implant in his head with the new language, and it was translating the meanings of the strange sounding words directly to his brain. He couldn't speak the language to save his life. This he would have to learn on his own time, but at least he understood it.

"My apologies. I was not sure if you were a translation device used by the bipedal being," the alien explained. His large eyes blinked, and then he studied Dave. "Neither of you are members of the League of Worlds."

"We are from the other side of the Galaxy," Xin explained. "We are looking for a technologically advanced, but peaceful civilization with which to share our knowledge."

"To join the League of Worlds, a world must be peaceful, and have space travel capability. However, even within the League, not all things are as they appear.... You should speak with the

oracle of Mysaep's Moon. He will know and guide you to what you seek. We are all on a pilgrimage to Mysaep's Moon to give homage to Sygoss. It is not a certainty, but on rare occasions, it is rumoured he speaks with a chosen few."

"Where is this Mysaep's Moon located, please?" Xin asked.

"It is the largest of the three satellites orbiting the third planet in the system nearest to ours," came back the general, but adequate directions. "It will take us two months for the journey. We were about to enter our cryotubes when you contacted us. There is a starportal just outside our system. It will take us 27 days to reach it, but you are welcome to join us if you wish."

"No, thank you," Xin replied. "We appreciate the kind offer, but we are capable of traveling great distances without the use of a starportal."

"Faster than light travel without a starportal!" The alien was astonished. "Few League members are capable of that, and only with ships much larger than yours."

Xin chatted a little longer, and then exchanged goodbyes with the pilgrim fleet's leader. It was apparent that this world was not advanced enough to entrust with Z'va Prime's library.

Xin and Dave watched the space caravan disappear from visual range as they headed out of the system, crawling away at a tiny fraction of light speed. They plodded toward the starportal that would create a 'shortcut' through space-time, colloquially known as folding space. But this term was not accurate, as nothing was folded, nor were distances even shortened. The starportals didn't cheat or fool space, but created a gateway to another dimension, a place without time and mass.

Xin had ascertained that the starportals were constructed by the more advanced League of World members for the ease of system-to-system travel by all. Each member world of the League had their own starportal just outside their system, and could be used to travel to any other starportal. If a member of the League became aggressive toward any other world, the starportal would literally be turned off, and thus, contain the aggressor within their home system. It was a simple, yet very effective method to enforce the peace.

Xin was beginning to like this League of Worlds already. Perhaps the world they sought was among them. If the journey to see the oracle wasn't helpful, she would return to this sector of space, and investigate some of the members of the League. Xin plotted a course for the nearby system.

To Dave, the whole thing sounded like a holy pilgrimage to worship an imaginary god, and he unsuccessfully argued with Xin that they not waste their time. Xin, on the other hand, wasn't so sure. She had seen things in her travels, things that taught her to investigate myths, rumours, or gods first hand, and only after doing so, to make a determination of fact or fiction. It was the word 'oracle' that she thought was interesting. The term suggested that whoever or whatever was on that moon, actually spoke to those of the pilgrimages. It was worth looking into.

The Odyssey completed the space fold just outside the destination system. Xin plotted a direct course at close to light speed toward the largest, natural satellite of the third planet – Mysaep's Moon.

Dave was sitting on his familiar blue denim couch, and playing his classical guitar in the living room area he had designed for himself. He was playing through a piece of music he had recently learned. The minor harmonies of the old Celtic tune drifted through the air of the small room. To Dave's sensitive ears, playing guitar in this sparse room sounded almost as good as the bathroom, but sitting on the toilet wasn't near as comfortable. Back in college, Dave discovered

(as many did before him) that bathrooms and stairwells were great places to play music. It was something about the acoustics due to the lack of carpeting, furniture, etc.

But as he continued playing, losing himself in the melody, harmonies, and bass lines, he felt as if someone was watching him. Was it one or more of his heightened and/or newly acquired senses that made him become aware of an alien presence in the room? He stopped playing. A second later, the sense of someone with him vanished abruptly. Perhaps it was nothing. He was still getting comfortable with his new abilities after all. Or maybe, unknowingly, his implant had connected with one of the ship's many systems. Yes, that must have been it.

Mysaep's Moon had a breathable atmosphere, but the rare thing called life had not touched its meteor beaten surface, except for the pilgrimages that arrived a few times a year. The League of Worlds had studied this moon with interest, not because of the rumours of the oracle/god that some believed had spoken to them, but because of the atmosphere. There shouldn't be an atmosphere on this world, let alone one that was perfectly suitable for many of the air-breathing members of the League. This world should be as airless as the other two satellites orbiting the gas giant. It was and still is a perplexing puzzle with no solution for the League's planetologists and geologists.

The moon's surface was reddish-brown in colour. It was mostly desolate except for a few small mountains that mixed in with the strange rock formations that dotted the landscape as far as the eye could see. These large, ancient formations, sculpted by the constant winds had withstood the test of time. Hundreds stood as if to guard this otherwise insignificant, small world. Many were simple pillars of rock, some were oddly shaped, and a few were bizarre in form, twisted and deformed into grotesque statues. The sky was violet in colour, and to human eyes, would have appeared to be twilight, even though it was actually mid-day. The temperature was neither too hot nor too cold for many of its visitors. It was another baffling mystery that had been the subject of much discussion and argument by the League's scientists and even religious scholars.

Dave stepped through the Odyssey's phase way portal and onto the hard, red-brown ground. He immediately knew the gravity was lighter than the Earth's, but didn't give into the self-gratifying urge to see how high he could jump, even though every fiber in his being told him to go for it. Xin floated right behind him as they headed for the only being-made structure on the small, lifeless world. It was the location described by the pilgrimage's leader, the place where the oracle would speak, if he did at all. The wind picked up and Dave could discern almost musical, whistling sounds created by the wind as it blew through the rock formations.

The structure, about the size of a small house, was carved from the same reddish-brown rock. It was shaped as a three-sided pyramid with stairs going up one side to its triangular, flat top. Xin and Dave stopped at the base of the stairs, while Xin scanned and analyzed this only aberration of form on the entire world.

"This structure is thousands of years old, and I suspect it was not built by those who directed us here," she concluded. "There are hieroglyphs on each sandstone step, however, I am unable to discern the meanings without a frame of reference."

Dave walked up the thirty or more steps with Xin in tow. He walked to the middle of the triangular shaped top that could've only held half a dozen humans comfortably. He looked out over the sparse, repetitive landscape with his unique eyes, but he saw nothing out of place or out of the ordinary. It was just kilometre after kilometre of reddish-brown dirt, and hundreds of the sedimentary rock formations. To Dave, it almost looked like endless formations of chess pieces

that disappeared into the colour-faded horizon in all directions – chess pieces carved by a mad sculptor. His eyes revealed nothing new to investigate, but his ears.... He wasn't sure, but there was something unnatural about the sounds coming from the weathered rocks when the wind blew through them. It was almost like the random sounds of a wind chime. Strange.

“HELLO!” Dave shouted at the top of his powerful lungs. “IS ANYONE HERE?” Dave looked at Xin. “See, this oracle or god is just a religious myth.” Dave said the words, but he didn't fully believe them. There it was again, that feeling of being watched! A chill went down his spine.

“Perhaps you are correct or perhaps you are not saying anything the oracle wishes to hear,” Xin commented with a hint of pretend smugness. An attempt at humour missed by Dave.

Dave moved closer to Xin and whispered. “It feels like there is something here. Can you scan anything?”

“My scans do not register any life form in any direction up to a diameter of 3,076 kilometres, which is the size of this moon.”

“O-K... but how do you scan for a god?” Dave queried.

Xin knew he had a point. In all her travels, she had never documented an omnipotent being. “I scanned for biological as well as energy, but I do not know how to scan for the metaphysical. I would have to conclude that my scans are inconclusive.”

“Perhaps we need something else to wake the sleeping giant.” Dave smiled. “I'll be back in a couple of minutes.”

“What are you going to do, Dave?”

“You'll see.” And with that, Dave headed back to the *Odyssey* with only two jumps, each of which would have decimated both Olympic records in the long jump and pole vault.

When Dave came back, he had his electric guitar and a battery-powered amplifier. “It's not a stack of Marshall amps, but the volume does go up to eleven,” he joked as he raised the tiny guitar amp next to his head. He set up on top of the pyramid, his guitar slung down to his waist with a thick, brown strap, and the little amp at his feet.

Xin hovered down at the base, and continued to scan the area for signs of anything out of the ordinary. “I don't understand,” Xin puzzled. “You are going to communicate with music?”

“Yes, exactly. On the way to this world, and now on this moon, I kept getting a feeling of someone watching us. Also, I had a sense of this ‘something’ having an interested in the music I was playing back on the ship. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think if there is a god here, we need to get his attention with something more than words. Anyway, isn't music the universal language?” Dave concluded as he went into what he assumed to be a rocker's stance.

“LET'S ROCK!” Dave shouted and began to play the intro to *Voodoo Child*, a Jimmy Hendrix rock classic. He played the Stevie Ray Vaughan version of the song. Something he was unable to master until Xin had enhanced his muscle memory to superhuman levels. The tiny amp blasted out the sounds far louder than its small size would have indicated. The power chord riffs projected out to the rock formations on the overdriven amp. The rhythmic pulse of the chords was accented with flourishes of short, distorted lead lines. Dave hoped that this song would make the god aware of their presence – it would surely wake the dead.

Xin had seen and heard many things in her travels, but this was one of the most unusual on both counts. She was beginning to question if she had made the right choice with picking Dave.

Dave played for less than a minute, and then stopped, letting the last major chord fade away.

They waited.... Nothing. The only reply was the eerie, quasi-musical sounds coming from the wind blowing through the rock formations.

“Well, it was worth a shot,” Dave admitted in disappointment.

“Yes,” Xin agreed, “but it was a good hypothesis, and analytically arrived at. It would have been even more impressive had it worked.” She created a full colour image of a giant, pouting mouth on her black exterior to express herself visually to Dave.

“OK, now that’s definitely a twelve on the creepy metre, assuming the metre only goes up to ten, but I appreciate the thought,” Dave admitted as he pointed at the red lipstick lips. “Where did you get the mouth image from? It looks like Marilyn Mon... No, never mind. I don’t want to know.”

Then something happened, something totally unexpected. The wind died down and everything around them became a wall of silence; a quiet so complete that it exerted a strange pressure on Dave’s inner ears. Suddenly, a faint sound came from the nearest rock formation. It sounded far away, somewhat like a ships’ foghorn, but higher and much more beautiful in tone. It grew louder as several other sounds from other rocks harmonized under the first. The rock formations closest to them began to play a strange but lovely music! Yes, it was music. Whether it was in a small jazz club in Toronto, the chanting of monks in Tibet, or rocks on a dead world on the other side of the Galaxy, Dave understood what he was hearing.

The music was now all around them, coming from dozens of rock formations. It was the most alien music Dave had ever heard, and yet also the most beautiful. He could feel the emotions behind the choir-like sound wash around and through him. It was only the third time in his life he actually found himself crying from listening to music; so beautiful and emotional was the experience. The stone choir played for perhaps four or five minutes, and then slowly faded away with one last ethereal harmonization. The dead silence, in stark contrast, replaced the impromptu alien concert.

“Be not fearful,” came the low, odd sounding voice from all around them. “Moving atmosphere to speech often frightens those unaware. This one communicates now with the two sentient beings simultaneously in your prime languages, directing waves to individuals. Language is learned, thought manipulates air, air transfers meaning to auditory receptors. This one rarely communicates with fleeting beings, but the organized sounds amused. Perhaps dialogue will prove of some interest also.”

“We are on a peaceful mission, and wish only to communicate with you,” Xin quickly responded. She had already scanned the sound waves, and had confirmed that what the sentient being said was true. There was no physical source. They started at one point in the air between Dave and herself, and projected into two directions, exactly as the being had said.

“This one knows,” the unnatural voice said with certainty. “Have observed and studied the two conscious beings from point of contact with others traveling to this place. The light absorbing, synthetic sphere, this one has familiarity of. The biological life form is unknown.”

Dave felt like the Cowardly Lion when confronted by the Wizard of Oz, but still managed to get out a few words, hiding his fear behind humour. “Hello, my name is Dave, the biological one, and this is Xin.” Dave pointed to the science probe. “And your name is?”

“Name?” There was puzzlement in the disembodied voice. “Name.... The ones who travel here identify this one as Sygoss. Have been called many names, over countless millennia, but names fade away into the past, as do civilizations that utter them. All are dust, those that now are, will be as well. Everything changes; everything remains the same. This one is the rare constant in the Universe. Born when the Universe inhaled for the first time, but will also fade into the great blackness on its final exhale. Even Sygoss does not know what is beyond Universe end. But you are not here to reflect upon the end of all things. Ask your question.”

Xin responded with the one and only question she came here to ask. “In this Galaxy we seek the most technologically advanced civilization that is also very peaceful in nature.”

“Peaceful? Nature? A conflict in the pairing of concepts, but Sygoss understands your meaning nonetheless. You seek the Utayatu. It is the second choice of Sygoss. It is the only choice remaining. The Galaxy has rotated only a small fraction since the elimination of the first choice.”

“Elimination?” Dave latched onto the word that screamed for his next question. “What happened?”

“This Galaxy was once harmonious and in balance, but a discordant, sentient species from outside was introduced. Sygoss sensed their new presence here, stretched out mind to location, and at location, beheld their noise.”

“When did this begin?” Xin asked the question, but suspected and feared the answer.

“When the first choice was eliminated, when all life on their homeworld was destroyed – your homeworld.”

“Crap!” Dave interjected. “So these warmongering aliens decided to invade our Galaxy to conquer it?”

“No, it was not their choice to invade. They do not seek conquest. They originated from a satellite star grouping orbiting this primary one. Exiled from their star grouping of origin, they do what is in their nature. They do what they believe necessitates survival – to terminate those deemed a threat. Sygoss disagrees with this misguided thought process and methods, but it is sometimes the way of things. The Universe is in constant motion, change, conflict, chaos, order, and even peace for brief periods. Time will create balance once again.”

“So, you won’t do anything? You’re just going to wait and see what happens?” Dave’s voice went up about half an octave. A fact that didn’t go unnoticed by Sygoss.

“Yes,” came back the unemotional reply to both questions.

“Are you capable of stopping the Veiled?” Xin now jumped into the conversation using the name of those that had destroyed her homeworld so long ago.

“Yes.”

“But you won’t.” Dave finished the setup.

“Yes.” Each single word reply sounded more final than the last. “It is not this one’s place to influence change, nor necessary. The Universe will always find equilibrium.”

“So, you don’t care what happens to us,” Dave said with frustration. “But we amuse you sometimes?” There came no reply to this question.

After an uncomfortably long pause, the voice without a mouth spoke, ignoring the last question, and taking the conversation in a new direction – an explanation of sorts. “Understand that perception of the passage of time varies based on species, life span, and accumulated experience. You think of Sygoss as immortal, but this is a misguided belief. You view this from your perspective. You compare your length of existence to other life forms around you, but the perception of the passage of time is viewed from each individual’s perspective. Contemplate on the seemingly brief life of the insect that lives only one planetary rotation. How does it view the passage of time? Perhaps it views its life span as long, its seconds seeming like your days. Do you gain understanding?”

Xin understood what Sygoss was explaining, but being synthetic with an internal clock, she didn’t experience the phenomenon. She was able to literally turn herself off for long periods of time. Before she could convey this to Sygoss, Dave spoke up.

“I think I understand. When I was a child, I remember that time seemed to pass very slowly. Summer holidays felt like a year. Now, at 26, it feels like time is passing by quicker. Also, I remember my grandmother saying how much faster time seemed to pass by, especially in her later years.”

“Yes. Good. You have the seed of understanding,” Sygoss replied with satisfaction. “Then understand that millennia pass like your hours to Sygoss. The presence of each species is fleeting. The discordant ones are fleeting, and the Universe will soon find balance.”

“Yes, from your perception, but not from ours,” Xin observed.

“Understood, and empathy is felt by Sygoss, but I will not disturb the flow of space-time by acts of violence upon weaker...”

“Yeah, we understand, the Universe will always find balance, blah, blah, blah.” Dave was getting frustrated.

“Please Dave, he is willing to help us with so much already,” Xin interjected. “Apologies, Sygoss, my friend is very passionate about this. Please, tell us where to locate the Utayatu and we will be on our way.”

Over the next few minutes, Sygoss explained to Xin and Dave where to find the hidden homeworld of the Utayatu, one of the oldest and most advanced civilizations in the known Galaxy. He explained their strong belief in peace, so strong that they went into hiding rather than confront the Veiled. He further explained that this action shouldn't be misunderstood as cowardice. He emphasized with almost envy, as they would have sacrificed themselves if they thought it would have prevented the seventeen other worlds from falling.

It was obvious that Sygoss probably knew more about the Galaxy and the Universe than any other being. Both Xin and Dave wanted to ask countless more questions, but as soon as the matter of the Utayatu was concluded, Sygoss wished them well, and left them as quickly as he had appeared.

Both of them were still on top of the small, stone pyramid, when the wind picked up, and the random musical sounds began, as if nothing had happened. Dave didn't realize it at the time, but Sygoss had stopped the wind from blowing while he had been with them. Was it Sygoss who controlled the wind, and perhaps everything else on this odd world? At any rate, he only noticed its absence when it now returned, bringing some familiarity back to the surreal experience of speaking with... a God?

Back on the Odyssey, Dave sat on his pilot's chair with a puzzled look on his face. “Xin, how long will I live? I mean, when you made all these changes to me, did it effect my lifespan?”

“I'm sorry Dave, I meant to tell you sooner. I thought it best to wait till you felt more comfortable with all the other adjustments.”

“How long?” Dave asked impatiently.

“It's difficult to say exactly, there are so many unknown factors.”

“Take a wild guess.”

“About 953 years, but this is based on your present health, and not factoring in any outside modifiers such as accidents, disease, radiation exposure, and so on.”

Once again, Xin had surprised him. He had suspected that his genetically engineered body, plus the MBRUs would have increased his life span past the average human life expectancy. He had no idea that it would have been by that much!

“Wow,” was all Dave could say as he stared forward, not focusing on anything in particular. He didn’t even hear Xin when she asked him to set course for the Utayatu’s homeworld. The location of which was known only by the two of them, now the Odyssey and of course Sygoss.

Chapter 9 Lava mask

After several space folds, the Odyssey arrived at the Utayatu’s homeworld system. It was a surprising disappointment considering it was the planetary system of one of the most advanced civilizations in the Galaxy. Perhaps this somewhat small, less than uninteresting system was to this civilization’s advantage. After all, they had remained hidden here for countless millennia.

Xin scanned the system, then floated from the hexagon shaped main control, and down the hall toward Dave who was seated on the bridge. She stopped to hover next to him as she gave him her findings. “A yellow star that is slightly smaller than Earth’s Sun, five planets, all of them appear to be extremely inhospitable to life. There is a gas giant, one is a frozen world, another appears volcanic, and the last two are barren wastelands that are not even viable for mining purposes. There is an asteroid field; probably the remains of a sixth planet.” Xin tried to keep the details simple.

She had come to the realization that Dave was not interested in details. No more diameters to the nearest kilometre, temperatures to the nearest degree Celsius, mineral composition percentages, etc. Why he didn’t want detailed information was beyond her. His enhanced brain could surely retain the information for future reference. No, he would rather access the information directly from the Odyssey’s main computer through his implant, and only when needed.

“I’m not surprised they’ve been able to stay hidden for so long,” Dave commented. “There appears to be nothing in this system anyone would want.” Dave examined the rotating, 3D image of the volcanic world that the Odyssey had created directly in front of him. “So, their homeworld is supposed to be the second planet from the sun? The volcanic one?”

“Yes, it is a remarkable deception. My scans only confirm what we expect to find based on our visual observations. The technology to achieve such a feat is truly amazing!”

“Yeah, assuming that it isn’t really a world of fire and brimstone. If there’s such a place as Hell, I’m sure this would be the postcard picture for it – ‘wish you were here’, hah-hah. I know at least three guys I met at a sports bar I’d love to send the postcard to.”

Dave wasn’t so sure that there actually was a lush, green world beneath the horrific mask of lava. The world appeared to have a multitude of volcanoes that spewed out massive amounts of toxic fumes and molten rock. The temperature was close to the boiling point of water, and that was on the dark side of the planet! No wonder the world had been kept secret for so long. No one dared to set foot on this seemingly apparent deathtrap. “How do you suppose it’s done?”

“Unsure, it is far more than a three-dimensional image projection, and it has completely fooled my sensors. Somehow, the planet is projecting information on multiple levels, and in very complex detail.” Xin was about to give a more detailed account when she abruptly stopped in mid-sentence.

“Xin, what’s happening?”

Xin ignored Dave's concern. "Sygoss? Incoming transfer... Utayatu's prime language... Sorry Dave, Sygoss unexpectedly communicated with me. I had to take the transfer of information or lose the opportunity."

"We're 30,000 light years from Mysaep's Moon!" Dave exclaimed.

"Yes, remarkable. It would seem that Sygoss is somewhat concerned about us fleeting species after all." Xin smiled by creating a huge image of Marilyn Monroe's lips on her spherical, black exterior.

"Will you PLEASE stop doing that!"

"Sorry, don't be angry Dave. Let's kiss and make up." She puckered the bright, red lips.

Dave tried to continue pretending that he was angry, but instead, broke down laughing. For a machine, Xin had a better sense of humour than most humans he knew, and he wouldn't have it any other way. She knew he was faking anger, and she called his bluff. He loved it. He loved her. He loved her?

The giant, red lips faded back to black as Xin got back to business. "Dave, please plot a course to the second planet, and put us in a high orbit. I cannot penetrate their projective cover with my scans to access their data storage devices. If I had not received Sygoss' information, I would have had to send binary code, or you would have had to play something on the guitar again." She smiled internally (Dave sensed her smile through his implant). "I am sending a friendship message to the planet using the Utayatu's own unique language, thanks to Sygoss. Hopefully, something on the surface of their planetary disguise will detect our message."

A few minutes later, the Odyssey was in orbit around the slightly larger than Earth sized world. "Orbit established," Dave confirmed by looking down past his feet, and through the transparent floor to the fiery nightmare far below. "Now what?"

"We wait for a reply."

More than five hours later, they were still waiting for a reply. Dave had fallen asleep in his chair on the bridge, his head flopped back, his mouth open, and snoring loudly.

Dave woke up abruptly. "Sorry, Xin, did you just ask me something?"

"No Dave, I think you must have been dreaming."

"Wow, yeah, that was a weird dream... I was back on Earth in my apartment, lying on my bed. I couldn't move, and this whispering voice was asking me all sorts of questions. I didn't want to answer any of them, and at that point I must've woke up. Speaking of answering questions... I wish the Utayatuians would say something, anything. What exactly did you say to them in your message?"

"I told them that I am the only survivor from Z'va Prime, that Sygoss has sent us, and that I have the Z'va Prime library that I wish to upload to them. If their history files were maintained all this time, they should know of its importance, as they were familiar with Z'va Prime before the Veiled came."

"Man, they really don't want to blow their cover, do they?" Dave commented. "I mean, you offered to give them the acquired knowledge of hundreds of worlds, but they'd rather stay hidden and hope we go away."

"Assuming they received the message, that would seem to be the case," Xin agreed.

"My guess is that they've been hiding for so many years, they don't know anything else. Kinda like old man McGuinty at Halloween." Dave began to reminisce. "He used to turn off all the lights and pretend he wasn't home when us kids would come by trick or treating... Well, let's

go down and knock on the door.” And with that, Dave told the Odyssey to approach the planet for a landing.

“Dave, what are you doing?”

“Going to see if we can get a treat. The trick is starting to get old. About twenty million years too old.” He grinned as he further instructed the Odyssey to avoid landing on any lava if at all possible.

The Odyssey swooped down toward the grey rock and orange lava surface in a trajectory the ship had calculated for an optimum safe landing on the blistering, hot surface. Four silver legs grew from the bottom of the small craft as it prepared to gently land on the harsh surface. But instead of the expected contact of metal on rock, there was nothing. The Odyssey kept sinking down into the planetary disguise like a ship into a fog bank.

Dave had left the bridge transparent to get a visual idea of what was happening, as no information was coming in through any of the scan modes. At first, it appeared as if they were moving through solid, grey rock; this went on for hundreds of metres. It then became increasingly darker until they entered a void of total blackness. The transition from absolute dark to pure light was instantaneous as the Odyssey popped out of the dark void into something very familiar.

“I think we’re in a cloud!” Dave observed with excitement. He was forced to squint until his eyes adjusted to the drastic shift in light.

“Yes, you are correct.” Xin was now in her element. “All scan modes are now receiving data.... Readings coming in....”

The Odyssey continued dropping through the mist until it cleared into the sunlight of a bright, noon day. The sky was a beautiful, royal blue, fading into a light cyan near the horizon. The sky was full of billowy cumulus clouds that moved ever so slowly across the expansive backdrop of gradient blues. Looking down through the transparent floor of the ship, Dave could see the lush greenery of a planet that looked virtually untouched by the hands of civilization. Only here and there could he discern the hint of a structure, or the reflected flash of a metallic surface hidden within the thick trees.

“WARNING!” the inaudible alert came to his implant from the Odyssey as the ship’s self-preservation AI immediately went into effect. Dave almost lost his synthesized breakfast as the ship spiraled down at a g-force that would have crushed the life out of any other human. A split second later, a bright, pulsating light shot into view. It stopped in mid-air where the Odyssey had been, and then instantly change course to follow the ship at an incredible speed.”

“We need to avoid that,” Xin said calmly.

“Ya-think!” Dave exclaimed, swallowing a bit of bile that had managed to work its way up. Dave’s mind took control of the Odyssey. He instantly changed the ship’s heading ninety degrees from the present downward direction, taking the ship into a parallel course with the planet’s surface. He punched up the speed to 12,000 kilometres per hour, or almost ten times the speed of sound. The deadly light of energy followed with the identical maneuver.

“The weapon is composed of pure antimatter,” Xin informed, as if giving a casual lecture.

“OK, good safety tip. I’ll try not to let it touch us!” Dave tried to say this with equal calmness, but it came off sounding more like tense desperation. He increased the speed to 25,000 kilometres per hour, pushing his body’s g-force resistance to the limit. The dense forest canopy, a thousand metres below, was now just a dark-green blur as the Odyssey sped on faster than impossible.

“It is still gaining on us,” Xin observed. “The Odyssey can go faster, but you cannot.” The trickle of blood running down from Dave’s nose confirmed her fear. “I’ll take care of it,” she said as she swiftly floated up and phased through the Odyssey’s hull.

Xin hovered motionless in the air as she faced down the lethal missile. A pencil thin, white beam shot out of her neutronium hull, hitting the oncoming energy missile dead centre. A blinding explosion was followed by a sound like rolling thunder; the result of matter making contact with antimatter. A few seconds later, the sky was serene once again with no sign of what had just transpired.

No sooner had Xin re-entered the now stationary Odyssey than Dave shouted, “I think we have a welcoming committee on the way!” Sure enough, three identical small ships were heading toward the Odyssey. The roughly elliptical shaped aircrafts looked more like they had been hatched than fabricated. They were less than half the size of the Odyssey, and each was a shiny, emerald green in colour. “They look more like insects than interceptors,” Dave observed when they got closer.

“Scanning...” Xin went to work. “You are partly correct, Dave. Those ships are an example of some form of biological engineering – they are very much alive. I have never seen this before firsthand, but the Z’va Prime library does document a few civilizations that had acquired this level of genetic fabrication.”

Xin and Dave were on the bridge when a three-dimensional image was projected in front of them via the Odyssey’s communications system. A very tall, slender humanoid appeared before them. He had hairless, pale aqua coloured skin, and clothing that could best be described as a black jumpsuit that was virtually shrink-wrapped onto his lanky body. Large, almond shaped eyes framed cat-like, green pupils. The alien’s elongated, egg-shaped head had no nose, but instead, had two small oval holes, and his ears were small, featureless semi-circles that seemed to move independently of one another.

The Utayatuian held up his right hand to warn or halt the trespassers. Dave was surprised to see a hand that had two thumbs, one on each side, with three fingers in the middle! The alien began communicating through an almost lipless mouth, with sounds less like speech and more like singing. “Do not take any further action or be destroyed!”

Xin sang back in their language. “We are on a peaceful mission, and do not wish confrontation. Sygoss would not have entrusted us with your secret if it was not of the utmost importance.” She combined the words with their various pitches of a seven-note scale. This not only made for a huge vocabulary, but a subtlety of communication and inflection. To Dave’s untrained ears, it sounded a bit like a bad, foreign musical.

“Sygoss does not interfere with the comings and goings of any sentient race,” the Utayatuian replied. “Sygoss is the only being in this Galaxy that knows of us. However, you are the only ones in all these millions of years who did not happen upon our hidden planet by accident. Is it possible that the great Sygoss has broken his own rule of non-interference? We thought you to be Veiled spies using a deception to breach our own deception. We must investigate this further; prepare for our data sweep.”

A flat, wide, blue beam fanned out from the middle craft, and swept through the Odyssey from bow to stern. It was over in less than a minute. When the beam was turned off, it appeared to be instantly sucked back into the beetle-like ship.

“We regret our violent actions toward you, but we thought it necessary to keep this world secret from those that would wish its destruction,” the Utayatuian apologized. “When you avoided and then destroyed our weapon so easily, we decided to investigate you further. I am

now glad we did not continue toward your ultimate destruction. Our historic records indicate that everything of Z'va Prime origin had been destroyed down to the last spacecraft and probe wherever they had been in the Galaxy. Somehow, you managed to remain unknown to them. Our scans indicate that your ship is of Z'va Prime origin, but you do not match any Z'va probes in our files, and the biological occupant is a complete mystery to us. Is it your pet? Please explain.”

With machine precision, and at her best diplomatic behaviour, Xin ignored the stare of displeasure from Dave, and explained. “I am a much older Z'va probe model, and for the past 65 million years, I was accidentally buried under layers of sedimentary rock on a distant planet, long before the Veiled came to this Galaxy. This is most probably the reason the Veiled could not track me down. As for our ship, it too was hidden, and was completely shut down deep within a glacier for the past twenty million years. I can only assume that the Veiled were unable to locate this ship due to its utter inactivity. The severe cold had lowered its hull signature further by slowing down the molecular movement of all the ship's structures.”

“Finally, this biological occupant is not my pet, but a being from a planet called Earth. The same planet I was gathering information on, and then trapped within for most of my existence. His name is Dave, he is my friend and travel partner.”

The Utayatuian smiled for the first time, and no longer showed any signs of uneasiness. “Welcome, Xin and Dave! You are the first visitors to our homeworld in over twenty million years. Well, not the first to visit,” he quickly corrected himself, “but the first we did not destroy.... Welcome! My name is Kaibiak. I am the elected steward of the Utayatuian homeworld. Please, honour us by following these escort vessels down to the planet's surface. We will then speak in person and at length.”

Dave wasn't completely sure if he should trust Kaibiak, but this was the end of their mission, the reason they had zigzagged all over the Galaxy in the first place. Anyway, if this Kaibiak had wanted to destroy them, he would have continued the attack instead of stopping and having this nice little chat. Or was it a sing-along? Still, he was a little apprehensive.

Dave piloted the Odyssey, and followed the shiny, green ships down toward the dense, boreal forests. The three escorts were skimming only about a hundred metres above the treetops as he continued to shadow their every move. The thick, massive evergreens below were a testament to Utayatuian respect for nature. Every so often, openings appeared between the tall, ancient trees, and he had brief glimpses of silver, domed structures, and parks with white, stone fountains. Utayatuians leisurely walked about, children played, all the things that made Dave homesick. Some of it looked so Earth-like, but the whole of it did not. It was the Earth that should have been, that could have been. Perhaps like an alternate future of the Native Americans if Columbus hadn't sailed the ocean blue.

After going about ninety kilometres, the escort ships slowed and came to a stop, hovering over a large clearing. It was roughly circular in shape, no more than a couple of hundred metres wide, and covered by various grasses, shrubs, and other smaller indigenous plants. Dave saw a brief blue flash from the middle ship. In response came the sounds of great machinery in motion, and the clearing sank down several metres, followed by a loud thud and echo. Next, like a huge pendulum, the clearing swung aside to reveal a cavernous, dark hole that seemed bottomless.

“Please follow,” Kaibiak urged. From their hovering positions, the three escorts dropped slowly down, and disappeared into the centre of the great, gaping hole.

Dave looked at Xin with a look that required no interpretation.

“It’s OK, Dave, please follow them,” she assured. “I doubt this is a trap and if it is, well, they may have scanned the Odyssey, but they only surface scanned me. I am far more than the older science probe I once was, and can use my new upgrades to our advantage if necessary.”

Dave nodded and sent the thought to follow to the Odyssey, but left its self-preservation AI on automatic and on full alert. The Odyssey followed the three ships into the darkness.

Within the shadows of the nearby asteroid field, a familiar scout ship became visible as it phased back into present space-time. The small, matte-black ship was specifically designed for optimum stealth capability – colour, shape, and surface faceting all played their part.

A small, silhouetted figure sat on the dark bridge. Minimal light came off the green view screens that encircled his gangly, dark-grey form. “Masters, I have followed the Z’va Prime ship to an uncharted system,” informed the high, nervous voice. “I am sending you the coordinates... now.”

“Why do you annoy us with this?” the multiple voices almost threatened.

“Please, please, I was just about to explain.... First, the Z’va probe sent a message directed at the second planet it was in orbit around. The language used in the communication was unknown to me, and there never came a reply. Then, much later, the ship assumed a landing trajectory, but instead of landing, it disappeared completely from my sensors. I am sending their message and the motion imaging... now,” the spy said firmly as his small, stubby finger touched a lime-green, pixilated button on the screen.

“Also, I didn’t even attempt to gain access to the Z’va probe’s data storage, nor the science ship’s. A cursory stealth scan indicated too many safeguards that could not be bypassed. However, I was able to briefly mind-scan the biological life form during its odd sleep cycle. Surprisingly, it has a strong, well-organized mind, and my attempt was cut off almost immediately, but not before I managed to find out its place of origin. It is probably of little importance, but I have sent the coordinates to you as well.”

“And finally, as you had instructed, I have followed them since the destruction of the abandoned planetary relocation transport, and am sending all the coordinates of their stops and space folds along the way. Their location before this present one was very curious. The locals call it... let me see... ah, here it is – Mysaep’s Moon. Perhaps they are insane, for on this moon they appeared to be conversing with no one.” He grinned, revealing rotting, yellow, piranha-like teeth. “Perhaps there is a connection between both these things we are not allowed to see. I realize that this so called League of Worlds are far inferior, and individually, pose no threat, but maybe there is an organized plot against my masters. If so, they could prove to be an irritation at the very least.”

“Interesting,” the unison whispers mused. “Yes, you were correct in contacting us at this time. You will wait, stay hidden, and observe. Contact us if anything transpires. We will study and consider your findings.”

“Yes, of course, anything you wish,” the spy replied eagerly. Like an apparition, the black ship faded away, to linger silently within the space rubble once again.

The darkness was brief as the Odyssey followed the three escort ships into a brightly lit underground installation of gigantic proportions. The cavernous installation was circular in shape, but much wider than it was high. Hundreds of small buildings covered most of the cavern floor. It was an underground city made up of square, white structures stacked upon each other,

reminiscent of the adobe structures of Earth. Everything about it had a complex yet symmetrical look, a balanced intricacy.

“Please land your vessel near the escort ships,” Kaibiak instructed. The three insect-like ships set down on a light-grey, circular surface that was obviously reserved for them. Dave landed the Odyssey close to the trio, and met with Xin near the phaseway.

“The atmosphere is a little richer in oxygen than you are accustomed too,” Xin simplified, “but it shouldn’t be a problem for you. Just don’t inhale too deeply.”

“Understood,” Dave responded as he opened the phaseway, and stepped out into the brightness that seemed to have no source. The light simulated natural daylight; he felt the warmth of it on his skin. Three tall Utayatuians were waiting for them in the centre of the round landing pad. All were about the same height, and were more than a head taller than Dave. The one in the middle was Kaibiak. The other two were perhaps for his security, judging by the shiny, silver weapons attached to each of their right forearms.

When Xin and Dave were within a comfortable talking distance, Kaibiak held up his right hand in greeting, his palm outward, but unlike before, this time, his fingers and two thumbs fanned out in separation. “Again, welcome!” he said melodically.

“Thank you for receiving us,” Xin sang back. “I fully understand your need for secrecy, and I too have a great secret which must not fall into the hands of the Veiled.”

“Yes, it is this that unites us. I was unsure of what to do when you first entered the atmosphere. Now I am certain. We should NOT have tried to destroy you,” Kaibiak sang firmly.

“Well, thank you,” Dave said sarcastically in English. He understood the Utayatuian language thanks to his implant, but wasn’t yet able to speak-sing it. This complex language would take quite a long time to learn even with his enhanced mind and implant.

Xin translated for Dave. “He thanks you for your wisdom in this matter.”

Kaibiak nodded, smiled and continued with his train of thought. “It is my understanding that Sygoss has only interfered with us lesser beings two times. The first was when he warned Utayatu, Z’va Prime, and the other, older worlds of these Veiled invaders. The second, and most recent was when he informed you of our very existence. This I cannot underestimate.”

“He had warned Z’va Prime?” Xin was surprised.

“Yes, but unlike Z’va Prime, we decided to hide ourselves, and study this Veiled threat before deciding what action to take. The few leaders on Z’va Prime who knew about the threat, did not share the knowledge with the rest of their world. We believe it was their own hubris that was their downfall.”

“These Veiled are a frightening combination of power and madness, but they were not any more powerful than Z’va Prime. However, they were willing to do things that most advanced civilizations would not consider. Our history files indicate that they had bypassed all of Z’va Prime’s colonized planets and outposts, and struck Z’va Prime first with an entire stealth fleet. It became apparent to us that they have done this many times before. Destroying civilizations had become an art form to them. They truly are a lost race. Fortunately for us, the destruction of Z’va Prime was so swift and complete there was no recorded evidence of our existence that survived. Perhaps their insanity was to our advantage.”

“Yes, how fortunate,” Dave repeated sadly, deep in thought, and with only a hint of sarcasm added this time.

Kaibiak ignored the strange, monotone comment. He didn’t understand it anyway, and continued with his story. “After a few decades, the Veiled had greatly reduced their initial destructive behaviour.” (Both Xin and Dave noted the obvious euphemisms. In reality, it was

unrestrained genocide.) “We believe they were not interested in conquest. A pattern had emerged, and our ancestors believed then, as we do now, that they see all technologically advanced civilizations as a threat.”

“Back then, my people were not as advanced as we are now, but we too would have been eliminated. We are a peaceful race, and did not have the machines of war to oppose them, so to our shame, we remained in hiding. All these years we have watched them, we learned, we made preparations, but the Veiled kept to their sector of the Galaxy, so we did what we do best – nothing.” Kaibiak smiled a sad smile. “But enough of my pathetic tale of our self exiled existence. You came to bring us an amazing gift, and in return, we tried to destroy you without thought. Please forgive us for our pitiful lack of social graces.”

“I understand,” Xin empathized. “As I have mentioned, within me is the great library of Z’va Prime. I could not bear to see it fade into nothingness. I wish to give it to the Utayatuian people.”

“We are honoured that you would share it with us,” Kaibiak replied with great reverence. “It will be quite safe in our keeping.” He bowed slightly while placing his right hand on his chest.

Xin told Kaibiak the story of how the library had come into her possession. They discussed the Veiled further. Xin shared what little information she had learned from the Taelrok ship’s data scan. It quickly became apparent to Xin, that Kaibiak had no intention of confronting the Veiled. He was far more interested in exploring the Z’va Prime library with its vast sections on music, art, and ancient planet histories. Xin was just glad the library had found a home with a serene race that respected and appreciated its extensive wealth of knowledge. It was possibly the safest place in the Galaxy for the upload. Even so, she decided to keep the library within her archive data storage device as well. The science ship and the library were all she had left of Z’va Prime.

Talking further with Kaibiak, it was decided that Xin and Dave were welcome to make Utayatu their home if they wished. Xin thanked them for this generous offer, and would seriously consider it at a future date. Now, however, the Veiled were heavy on her mind. She wanted to learn more about them before she decided on any course of action to take, if any. Perhaps Sygoss was right. Perhaps nothing should be done at this time. After all, the Veiled have not expanded their territory for thousands of years, and they only attacked those they deemed a threat. As long as the Utayatuians stay hidden, they would be safe, and so would the library. Her logic programming told her to do nothing, but she had a feeling it wasn’t quite that simple.

After uploading her planet’s library directly into Utayatu’s central library archive, Xin thanked Kaibiak, and told him that she would return someday. The Odyssey left the same way it came. Once again passing through the black zone of the planet’s disguise, and back into the cold solitude of space. Whether she found a new world to call home or not, her first home would always be the unimaginable expanse that was space, with the stars her sustenance.

With her primary mission completed, Xin decided to accompany Dave back to Earth for that vacation he was longing for. Beyond this she had no course of action planned, and had decided to discuss any future plans with Dave. Maybe he had enough of adventuring. At some point, she was planning on coming back to Utayatu, for this would probably be her new homeworld. She had left a big part of herself here, and therefore, she now had a vested interest in this world. Perhaps her abilities would prove useful to this world in the future. The possibility of being useful, the feeling of belonging to something again gave her a brief wave of joy through her subsystems.

“Masters, the Z’va ship has just left the planet!” the spy informed with what little self-pride he had left. “I suspected there was more to this world than meets the eye, or my sensors!”

“Yes, good,” the whispers echoed back. “We have studied all that you have previously sent us, and now with this.... We believe there is a civilization hidden from our view beneath a molten world disguise. The technology to hide an entire planet is a remarkable achievement, but disturbs us greatly. You will penetrate the planet’s disguise; send us any and all information that will confirm our theory.”

“Yes, I will do so as soon as the Z’va scum are out of sensor range. This system, as you are aware, is very far from your sector. You will need a suitable planet at a midway point if a Taelrok fleet is to be sent to this hidden world.” The little creature strategized, trying to appease those that could destroy his homeworld on a whim. “I have found you such a world – it has a suitable temperature, breathable atmosphere, and water – all the things the Taelroks would require. I am sending you the coordinates... now.”

“Good. It is a valued servant that anticipates our needs,” all the Veiled replied. “Report back upon confirmation. If our suspicions are correct, a planetary acquisition fleet will be sent to the midway coordinates, and from this base of operations, we will lay waste to these would-be plotters in hiding. We leave you now.”

The spy nervously turned off his communicator, and watched the Z’va science ship as it slowly headed away from the molten, disguised world. He hated establishing communications while enemies were present in the same system. It compromised his stealth signature. And why is that ship moving so slowly?

“PROXIMITY ALERT!” the digitized voice shouted, and the red warning light flashed just before the spy ship exploded in an orange ball of fiery silence.

As if thrown from the force of the explosion, Xin flew through and out of the scattered remains of the black ship. Her outer shell turned from blinding white, back to light absorbing black. “Dave, before I destroyed it, I managed to listen in on their communications, and it’s worse than I feared. They suspect a technologically advanced civilization to be in hiding here, and the Veiled will be sending a Taelrok fleet. We have only a few days before they attack!”

“Damn, they were probably following us this whole time! We will need to warn Utayatu immediately.” Dave stated the obvious. “Now they will finally have to do something.”

“We will warn them of course, but this will not be the Taelrok’s first stop.” Xin would have felt sick to her stomach if she had one.

“I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry, Dave. The Taelrok fleet’s final destination will be Utayatu, but first they’re coming straight for... EARTH.”

Chapter 10 Target Earth

The dogs of war waited at their master’s feet.

The dark-blue flagship was one of the largest ships in the assembled Taelrok fleet. Like the other battle cruisers, and most of the various other ships, it was basically shaped like an elongated cone. The cruiser was covered with multiple gun ports, missile launchers, and various other devices for offense and defense. The fleet totaled 32 ships of various sizes and groupings.

Each group had their own specific function. Some were designed for ship-to-ship battle, others, for planetary bombardment, and still others were designed to transport thousands of heavily armed troops. But as a unified force, and when under the orders of the Veiled, they all had one thing in common – the ultimate destruction of a species.

Most of the time, the Taelroks could do as they wished with the dominated systems in their sector, but the deal was cast millennia ago; their service to the Veiled in exchange for military technologies superior to their neighbours in space. The deal had been bartered so long ago, the details were now vague, but that was the essence of it. So now, this fleet had been ordered to assemble and wait just outside the Taelrok's home system.

Admiral Kraug postured back in his heavily padded command chair on the expansive bridge, like an ancient king on a golden throne. Although Taelroks were brutish and ape-like in form, he was quite successful with the females of his species in his younger, more handsome days. Now, in his middle years, he had let himself go, was more portly, and thus, even more massive than all his younger officers. His large, thumb-like fingers tapped impatiently on his tactical console as he waited for orders. His tiny, solid-black eyes wandered between his console, the communications officer, and the main screen for any indication of contact by the Veiled.

Tired of sitting, he stood up and stretched his seven foot tall, 400 pound frame. His muscular, long arms ended well below his short-legged knees. From his neck down he wore the traditional black, plastisteel armour of the Taelrok warrior class. Around his waist he wore a belt that displayed his many brightly coloured medals; the only colour on the dimly lit bridge, save for the lights on the multitude of various display screens.

The silence was broken by the communications officer. "Transmission coming in, Admiral – priority one."

"On the main speaker." Kraug wanted the fifteen bridge crewmembers to hear it. The Veiled never used any of the possible methods of visual communication that often augmented the audio. Instead, with them, it was always, audio only. He had never seen the Veiled; he had no idea what they looked like. Sure, he had heard the strange stories and crazy theories, but no Taelrok living could bear witness to their actual appearance. They surrounded themselves with a shiny, black fabric, which hovered around them by some unknown means. This much was true, but everything else were just conjectures from the possible to the ridiculous.

"Admiral," all the Veiled echoed in unison. "We have called you to our service for the first of two missions. First, you will take this fleet to the coordinates we are now sending."

The admiral looked at the communications officer who looked at his screen and nodded back in confirmation.

"You will acquire this planet to be used as a base of operations. You will hold this planet at all costs, and await the arrival of the other two Taelrok fleets. When all fleets are assembled and refueled at this designated planet, we will come and personally oversee the second mission. You may need our assistance."

"What is this second mission?" the admiral asked humbly, and in a tone of voice none of the bridge officers had ever heard.

"You will be told when necessary," was the reply with an almost threatening tone.

"Yes, of course." The admiral wasn't about to stand up to the Veiled. As a matter of fact, he found himself sitting back down. Was that a subconscious physical sign of submission? No, it wasn't that. He just didn't want to stand anymore he lied to himself.

"We will leave you to your task. Contact us when the planet has been secured."

“Yes, thank you.” Why did he thank them? In their presence, he felt like a schoolboy again. It was bordering on humiliation. And why would he need their help? True, they were far more powerful than the Taelrok race, never having shared all their military technologies with them. It made strategic sense though. The Taelroks were more powerful than any single race, except for the Veiled, and maybe... whoever was at the receiving end of mission number two. That’s it! A new threat had been discovered; a race powerful enough to intimidate even the Veiled. He had only read of such things in the history files. How long had it been? Two hundred years?

He smiled with self-satisfaction over figuring out what the Veiled would not tell him. He was on the cusp of making the history files himself. Soon, everyone would be reading about the great Admiral Kraug, and how he did whatever he was about to do. He confidently assumed his kingly pose once again. He had all but forgotten his brief indignity in front of the bridge crew.

“Communications, send an order to the entire fleet – we are leaving.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

The fleet formed into a single long line with the fold-ship on point. Although each ship in the fleet was capable of creating its own space fold, the fold-ship had the power to create a fold large enough, and (for a period of time) long enough to allow the entire fleet safe passage. It guaranteed that the fleet would arrive at their destination at relatively the same time, and had tactically proven itself in many past campaigns.

The space ahead of the fold-ship became a large, swirling mass of black and dark-grey, looking almost like a miniature, negative galaxy. The fold-ship was sucked through first, followed by the thirty-one others, each in turn as they moved slowly forward in line. The admiral’s flagship was the seventeenth to go through; one of the troop transports was the last. The swirling gateway to another dimension remained for several minutes; then gradually shrank into nothingness.

The dogs were unleashed, and headed for their prey.

Humans, we fancy our own importance in the scheme of things. Our science fiction stories are filled with other worldly beings that invade us for our life-rich world, to enslave us into menial service, or even turn us into a gourmet recipe for their cookbooks. But the truth is far stranger and more sobering than any fiction. In actuality, the Earth is about halfway between two civilizations soon to be at war. We are seen as nothing more than a future base of operations. The battle for Earth will be for the reason of expedience due to our location. We are in the wrong place at the wrong time and space. It is as simple, impersonal, and ego deflating as that.

The people of Earth went about their daily lives, totally oblivious of the ultimate upheaval on its way. A young account coordinator working for an advertising agency puts in an all-nighter. She just has to get those rush quotes on the boss’ desk first thing in the morning. A grossly obese man goes back for his third rack of ribs at an all-you-can-eat buffet. He just had to get his money’s worth, and then some. A 12-year-old boy amuses himself far too much by dissecting a live frog with his favourite penknife. In time, he would become the most infamous serial killer of the 21st century. But everything that seemed so terribly important from each individual’s perspective wouldn’t really matter one microscopic scrap in a few days time.

Dave was on his way back to Earth alone. Things didn’t look good, so he wanted to spend what little time that may be left with friends and family before the Taelroks arrived. What was it

that Xin had told him? ‘There are not many hostile space-faring sentients.’ Well, some of the few that are extremely hostile will be visiting Earth very soon – imagine that.

Xin had remained on Utayatu, but would be coming to Earth soon, and long before the Taelrok fleet was estimated by Kaibiak to arrive. Utayatu had studied the Veiled discreetly from afar, and had a good idea on their timetable during their military operations. Xin had decided to stay to help organize the Utayatuian defense, and to try to convince Kaibiak to send a fleet of ships to defend Earth. This had been undecided at the time of Dave’s departure from the hidden planet.

There had also been discussions of contacting the League of Worlds for assistance, but this didn’t look like a possibility. They were on the opposite side of the Galaxy, far from the Veiled, and weren’t even considered a threat to them. There would be no reason for the League to help, and if they did, they would only be putting themselves in harms way. No, Dave thought, they would need a reason to fight; that reason was just not there. Why would a group of planets wage war on a far superior race to defend another planet? Especially when that planet had done nothing to prevent seventeen other worlds from falling. And then there was Earth... No, we are on our own. A torrent of negativity swept over him.

The final space fold opened up, and the Odyssey slipped through it to arrive just outside Earth’s solar system. At this distance, the Sun looked like the brightest star amongst a sparkling backdrop of all the rest. Dave thought what he wanted to do next, and the Odyssey responded to him by approaching the speed of light, and headed straight for Earth.

Before leaving Utayatu, Dave, Xin and Kaibiak had discussed warning the Earth of the Taelrok invasion fleet. They all agreed that there really was no point. There was nothing the Earth could do to prepare for such an even, and there just wasn’t any time. The invasion fleet would arrive long before Xin and Dave had even convinced the leaders of Earth there was a threat. Not to mention the resulting panic if they actually believed them. Hell, they even needed to convince the Earth that Xin was an alien, that other civilizations were out there in space, and what the Taelroks wanted with Earth. It always came back to one thing – time. Besides, against the Taelroks, the Earth would be like ants trying to defend their anthill from a crushing boot.

A few hours later, the Odyssey entered Earth’s atmosphere, and arrived at the same location the ship had been once before in Drumheller. The ship soundlessly landed, and as before, was hidden from view by the surrounding hills and rock formations.

It was late and a moonless night, so Dave decided to run or jump back to Calgary, whichever would work best. He didn’t really know; it was something he hadn’t tried. Not bothering to keep his lease, his rented apartment was long gone, so he would stay at a hotel. He still had enough money in his bank account, and his credit card was still good. He changed out of his grey flight suit, and into a white t-shirt, blue jeans, jogging shoes, and a black leather jacket.

He stepped through the phaseway and onto the firm desert surface. The cool breeze licked his face as he stood looking up at the star-filled night sky, locating where he had been. He much preferred the smell of a forest after a rainstorm, or a freshly mowed lawn, but this desert air smelled like home just the same. He now understood why dogs loved sticking their heads out of moving cars. His enhanced sense of smell picked up so much more.

It was May 23rd. He had been gone for a good part of a year, and he was so glad to be back on Earth. There’s no place like home, he thought and smiled. But this wasn’t Kansas.

He smelled them before he saw them. He got a whiff of human body odour traveling on the breeze from the west. He looked west into the blackness and made out several human forms

trying to move quietly, but he heard the military issued boots as they made contact with the hard earth.

Something stung him on the neck! What the hell! He turned and started to run away from the dark forms. Two more darts hit him in the back. Now he felt their effect. He stopped running, and was only able to walk in a drunk-like stagger. He heard the boots running toward him.

“Shoot him again!” shouted a voice from the darkness.

Two more tranquilizer darts hit him in the back. Dave took a few more steps, but was too dizzy to stand, and collapsed on the hard ground, sending up a small cloud of dusty-dirt where he fell. He couldn't move. His vision was becoming increasingly blurrier. He heard a dozen or more boots coming close to him, they surrounded him, and he heard a couple of men's voices just before he blacked out.

“That was enough to knock out a bear, but his eyes are still open a bit!” exclaimed one.

“Yeah, but he ain't goin' nowhere,” said another. “I seen this before. He's probably high on somethin'. Makes it harder to take 'em down.”

“Damn, will you look at that thing! That's the real f@#%ing deal!”

“How'd he know... here... Maybe... UFO freak... or maybe... nutjob...”

Eleven hours later.

“He's waking up,” someone said who seemed far away, but was actually very close by.

Dave woke up to a throbbing headache worse than any hangover. Everything was blurry, but he could make out a man in a white lab coat standing near him, and another in a black suit seated a few feet away behind a desk with his back to the wall.

“He should've been out for a week with that amount of tranquilizer in his system,” commented the man behind the desk.

“Actually, he should be dead,” corrected the one in the lab coat. “Probably those damn things in his blood.”

“Those idiots.” He shook his head, then looked down to study papers in a folder on his desk.

Things gradually came back into focus. Dave was sitting on a heavy-duty, stainless steel chair. Correction, he was attached to the chair with thick, metal clamps at his wrists and ankles!

“What's going on?” Dave tried hard not to yell it.

“I just want to ask you a few questions,” came the firm voice from the man behind the desk. “Do you think you can do that for me?” He was middle age, with a thinning hairline, and wore reading glasses, which had slid down his nose and was now looking over them at Dave.

“Maybe, but first, who are you and what's going on?” Dave looked at the suited man, and then glanced at the lab coated one, who walked away to stand beside the desk. The grey haired man in the lab coat was much older. Dave thought him to be an MD, scientist, or something along those lines.

“Leave us,” ordered the man behind the desk. The lab coated one left through an electronic security door, the only exit of the small, rectangular room. The walls were concrete blocks that had been painted white; there was nothing else in the room or on the walls. It was a room designed for interrogation, further confirmed by the small camera in the corner of the room, near the ceiling, next to the door.

“David Van Bercham, you can just call me agent... Jones. Yes, we know who you claim to be,” he nodded. “We found your driver's license in your pocket. Anyway, you are our... guest at this government facility. At first, we thought you were just an innocent bystander in this whole

affair, but soon, our men in the field knew otherwise. It took eight men and two doubled-up stretchers to get you to their vehicle. We had you in quarantine for a few hours, ran some tests, and now you are here.” Agent ‘Jones’ gave Dave an intense stare. “Mr. Van Bercham, were you born here? And when I say ‘here’, I am referring to the planet Earth.”

“You think I’m an alien?”

“You tell me, Mr. Van Bercham.”

“No, of course not!”

“Well, if you’re not, then you are a very unique human to say the least.”

“I can’t help it if I’m big boned.”

“Big, boned.... Yes, very amusing, Mr. Van Bercham,” he lied – he wasn’t smiling. He looked down at his notes. “Besides your ‘weight issue’, we had some blood tests run and well, the results were very interesting. I’ll read from the lab report: *Although the blood appears human, there are foreign bodies throughout the entire circulatory system estimated to run into the trillions. They are synthetic, not identifiable on the periodic table, spermatozoa in appearance, but with a shorter axial filament or tail, which facilitates movement at an exceptional speed. Our best guess at this time; they are some form of nanorobotics or nanites.*”

He stopped reading from the notes and looked back at Dave. “I also understand that it took the good Doctor three attempts before he could extract your blood. Seems that your skin is tougher than tanned cowhide. The lab boys are taking a closer look at these ‘nanites’ as we speak, and we’ll be running many more tests, I can assure you.” The last comment sounded more like a threat.

“Who are you people? I want a lawyer. I’m a Canadian citizen!”

“Very well, I’ll answer some of your questions if you answer ours, and in good faith, I’ll start. We are a government-funded organization dating back to the Reagan administration. Our name is classified, sorry. You won’t need a lawyer, as this is not technically a legal matter, and if you haven’t already figured it out, you are no longer in Canada.” He flashed a fake smile. “Now, Mr. Van Bercham, if you are human, or perhaps more accurately, WERE human, please explain why you are so... special. I’m sure you must have a very interesting story to tell.” His voice had become even more monotone than before. It was a poor attempt to disguise his corrupt personality.

Dave didn’t answer, but looked at the corner camera.

“Yes, this is being recorded.” He adjusted his glasses and looked down at his folder.

“I’m not saying anything until I have my lawyer present.”

“Well, lets change the subject for now. If you don’t want to talk about yourself, let’s talk about the space ship.” Agent Jones’ training noted Dave’s subtle facial reaction when he mentioned the ship.

“What space ship?” Dave tried to act dumb.

“The space ship my men found you near, deep in the desert, and in the middle of the night; the space ship that’s locked away in this installation, and is being examined at this very moment. This is the same craft that was orbiting the Moon last year, wasn’t it? No, you don’t have to answer. I can see it on your face. You’re probably wondering how we found you. Let’s just say it was a combination of last year’s satellite images, plus hundreds of man-hours.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. My car ran out of gas and I was walking...”

“Mr. Van Bercham,” the agent interrupted, “we found no car or even any tire tracks out there for miles. You’ll have to lie better than that. Listen, maybe you’re still a bit groggy. I’ll leave

you here for a bit to clear your head, perhaps hone your lying skills. You really aren't very good at it. I'll be back in a while and we'll try this again."

Agent Jones stood up, walked over to the door, and pressed a five-digit code on a small panel. The door swung open, and he left leaving Dave alone with only the hum of the bright, fluorescent lights for company.

Xin was on her way to Earth as fast as she possibly could. Utayatu was assembling a fleet, hopefully, destined for Earth. Kaibiak understood that by preventing a Taelrok foothold on Earth, the attack on Utayatu would be greatly delayed, or at the very least, made more difficult. Unfortunately, by Xin's estimation, the fleet would arrive after the Taelroks had already secured Earth. This was acceptable to Kaibiak, but not to Xin. To make matters worse, and as feared, the League of Worlds showed no interest in a confrontation with the Veiled for reasons they had assumed. The talks broke down almost as soon as they had begun. They would get no help from the League, so there was no reason to stay on Utayatu any longer. Earth and Dave needed her more, and she was determined to take on the entire Taelrok fleet if necessary.

She was confident that she could take on a single battle cruiser, maybe even two or three, but not an entire fleet. She needed a strategy, a tactic, something that gave her a fighting chance. Xin consulted the great library once again. She studied the historic battles of dozens of worlds – the military strategies and tactics from the greatest military minds in the Galaxy – but she couldn't find a specific solution that could be applied to her situation. She needed to come up with a new tactic, possibly something that had never been done before. If her military studies taught her anything, it was to know the enemy, how they operate, and to predict what they might do in any given situation. She would use her strengths against their weaknesses.

Utayatu had studied the Veiled and the Taelrok's military actions for countless years. Xin had uploaded that information from their central library archive, and would now use it to help formulate her own plan. Hopefully, she would have something before she reached Earth. She went to work on the problem as she navigated the series of space folds to get her back to Earth. She opened her second space fold, and disappeared into the timeless/massless dimension.

The hum of the fluorescent lights was really starting to get on Dave's nerves. He had tried to muscle his way out of the chair, but it was just too strong for him. These guys weren't taking any chances. They didn't know how strong he was, but they must have suspected something based on his much heavier weight and density.

"Dave? Are you there, Dave?" It was the Odyssey making silent contact through his implant.

The Odyssey's AI had come a long way, ever since Dave started conversing with it from the very beginning. Its AI had learned, and was now able to simulate a sentient being, but Dave knew that it was just a complex deception. Unlike Xin, it really wasn't self-aware, it had no emotion programming, just a series of algorithms, and it didn't always get it right.

"Yes," Dave thought back, fully aware of the camera that was recording his every move and sound.

"Dave, I was beginning to get worried. I have been trying to contact you for 9.75 hours. Are you all right?"

"Yes. Are you OK?"

"Yes. I am in a large, domed structure. They have been trying to gain access to my interior, but they will not succeed. They have already tried using a blowtorch, and are now about to break their third diamond drill on my outer hull. I will only open my phaseway for you, Dave."

“Is that supposed to be a joke?”

“Yes.”

Dave smiled. “Why did you let them capture you?”

“I was in no danger. You were in danger.”

“Yeah, right, your programming didn’t allow you to take violent action against other living beings, unless they’d do harm to you directly.”

“Dave, are you ready to leave?”

“Huh? Sure.” Dave was stunned as how matter-of-factly the Odyssey asked the question.

“How do I do this?” Dave asked as he tested the strength of the clamps around his wrists again.

“This installation is mostly controlled by crude computer technology. They appear to be under the impression that this makes this installation more secure, but it actually makes things far easier. I have overwritten the mainframe upon our arrival, and now have complete control over all computer controlled functions.”

With loud metallic snaps, all four clamps popped open, releasing Dave from the metal chair. Next, five digital tones sounded in sequence, and the only door in the corner of the small room swung silently open.

“Can you turn off all the lights?” Dave asked.

“Yes.”

The room went black, but the emergency lights came on in the hall.

“The emergency lights too.”

The hall went pitch black.

Dave walked out into the hall, at which point an alarm began sounding.

“Kill it.”

The alarm stopped.

“Which way?”

“Turn right, walk to the end of the hall, and then right again.”

Dave’s cat-like eyes made the hall appear as if lit by only a two watt bulb, or half the illumination of a nightlight, but it was enough. For anyone else, they might as well have been blind. He heard frustrated yelling far behind him as he made it to the end of the hall. He turned right and went down a second hall, passing several people who were hugging the walls, obviously trying to find an exit. He ran down to the end of the second hall. “Now where?”

“Through the doors directly in front of you, Dave. I’ve already unlocked them.”

Dave found himself in a small airplane hangar. The Odyssey was in the centre, surrounded by various machines, computers, and other scientific paraphernalia. Several men and women were walking blindly, arms outstretched, trying to find their way to one of the four walls without tripping over the many obstacles in their path.

“What the hell’s going on?” one shouted.

“I thought the emergency lights were supposed to kick in,” added another in disappointment.

Dave walked up to the Odyssey, the phaseway opened, he entered, and it quickly closed behind him. “Let’s get out of here.”

The Odyssey hovered up several metres; then fired a white energy beam from its bow. The beam hit the hangar’s curved, metal roof with a bright flash, followed by a sizzling sound. The result was a wide, circular hole, which glowed white-hot at its edges.

Now, the disoriented wanderers had enough light from the afternoon Sun to see what was happening. They stood dumbfounded as the Odyssey zipped through the new larger exit, and was gone even before one of them could say...”

“S#&t!”

The inside of the space fold was the blackest of black. It was a dimension of nothingness. The large, swirling exit in the distance was the only thing visible to the Taelrok fleet, and in this strange world, the laws of physics no longer applied. The fleet crawled toward the exit as if in extreme slow motion. It would take hours to reach it. Every 100 intangible metres took them at least one solid light-year closer to their destination.

“Navigation,” Kraug snapped at the officer directly in front and below him. “Based on the destination system’s configuration, will it be possible to open an exit fold within the system itself?”

“Admiral, even with optimum planetary alignments, the maneuver is risky at best!”

“But, can, it, be, done?”

“Yes, Sir.”

The admiral thought out loud. “This will be one for the history files! We will get there hours before schedule, appear where not expected, and have the planet secured in no time. They will sing songs about this for a millennium, maybe longer.”

“Yes, Admiral,” the navigator purposely said with as little emotion as possible, and with a hint of boredom thrown in for good measure.

Xin had exited her last space fold, and was now just outside of Earth’s system. She hadn’t been able to formulate a strategy or tactic that would miraculously turn the tides of the upcoming battle. She knew it was a long shot. After all, she was just a science probe. Xin began to doubt that even the greatest military mind in galactic history could conceive a battle strategy that would see a data gathering probe defeat an entire battle-hardened fleet. Her only plan was to delay. She would delay the fleet as long as she could.

On her way to Earth, she had created a considerably more powerful device inside herself that was capable of constructing, or for her need, deconstructing a space fold. She would wait outside the system at a location that the fleet would most probably materialize. She would then try to close the space fold on her side. Xin knew that upon seeing this, the Taelroks would try to keep it open on their side, resulting in a tug-of-war of sorts. Xin didn’t know how long she would be able to keep this up, but had decided to destroy the first ship that was able to exit. She would then make a run for the Sun to get recharged for the hopeless battle ahead.

She hoped this delay tactic would give the Utayatu fleet more time to arrive, and before Earth was taken. But she knew her plan was one of desperation, and that she would need to delay the fleet for many hours, even a day or more. She would run out of power long before then.

Xin headed toward the Sun at near the speed of light. She needed to charge her reactor to maximum for what lay ahead. She had the storage capacity of a Z’va battle class star cruiser, but even that wasn’t going to be enough. It would take a great deal of power to destroy even one Taelrok ship. Based on her previous skirmish with the Taelroks, Xin estimated she could take out two, maybe three large ships before having to replenish her reactor. Her limited power storage ability would be her undoing.

“To all ships of the fleet,” Admiral Kraug’s deep voice boomed through the ship-wide communications system. “The first ship will be exiting the space fold in fifty micro-durations.” The digital voice countdown was heard through every speaker, on every ship in the fleet.”

“50, 49, 48....”

“I want a clean exit, quick dispersal, and efficient formation.”

“45, 44, 43....”

“Let’s do it by the manual.”

“41, 40, 39....”

“We will be forming near the target planet.”

“36, 35, 34....”

“Our first target will be the smallest continent.”

“31, 30, 29....”

“Fighter-carriers and battle cruisers will be going in first.”

“26, 25, 24....”

“Followed by the bio-weapon ships.”

“22, 21, 20....”

“We don’t expect much opposition; this race barely has space flight capability.” He smiled as he thought about how easy this was going to be compared to his last campaign.

“15, 14, 13....”

It will be like grabbing a sugar stick from an infant.

Xin had finished charging her reactor, and was nearing the Earth when her cursory scanning mode picked up the space anomaly forming halfway between the Earth and the Moon – a space fold! No! It was too soon, and in the wrong location! It should have been hours from now, and outside the system. If she actually had a heart, it would have sank.

“Xin, are you seeing this?” Dave exclaimed.

“Dave, where are you?”

“I’ve been orbiting the Moon for hours. I must have been on the opposite side when you passed by the first time.”

“Listen, Dave, the Taelrok fleet will be coming through that space fold in a few seconds, but all I can do is slow them down.”

“It’s too bad their navigation system is so accurate, or are they just lucky,” Dave observed. “I know enough about space folding not to do it within the system. If off by the slightest, one could find themselves exiting directly into the Sun, for example.”

“That’s it!” Xin didn’t know why she hadn’t thought of it seconds earlier. She would use the most powerful weapon in the solar system – the Sun.

“What’s it?”

“Instead of trying to keep the space fold from opening, I can move it! It will take most of my power, but the space fold is close enough now for me to move it near the Sun. I dare not move it into the Sun. That would just destroy the fold’s exit, and a new one could be created elsewhere. I have just one chance at this.”

Xin was less than a kilometre from the swirling black-grey mass as she powered up her newest device. A metre wide, dark-blue beam streamed out of her outer shell, and hit the growing space fold dead centre. Its clockwise rotation slowed gradually at first, then stopped its rotation entirely for a few seconds, and then started a slow counterclockwise rotation. Xin applied even more power, and the fold shrank to a fraction of its size. Her power reserves were now down to sixty percent. Would she have enough? With all the power she had left, she focused it at a point near the photosphere of the Sun. There was no room for error. It couldn’t be too close to destroy the fold’s exit, but close enough for the desired result. The space fold vanished

and then re-materialized as a small, clockwise swirling shape at the new location. It gradually grew in size until it was once again a large, fleet-size exit.

Xin headed back to the Sun where a fleet would materialize any minute. Her reactor was now so depleted she barely had enough power to get back to the Sun.

“Admiral, the fold’s exit has somehow changed location!” the navigator yelled.

“Impossible!” The admiral jumped out of his chair.

“We’re right on top of their star!” the science officer screamed, as only a sane man who sees his immanent destruction can.

“Nether-abys!” Kraug swore, and turned on the fleet-wide communications system. “All ships, emergency stop! Close that fold!”

“It’s too late! The fleet is already exiting!” the navigator shouted as his fingers danced over his display in a desperate attempt to stop their forward inertia. “Reverse thrusters – on full!”

Half the fleet had exited the space fold and were instantly caught in the Sun’s massive gravitational field. The deadly radiations promptly made most of their sensitive equipment all but inoperable, and the ships heavily armoured hulls only delayed the crew’s excruciating deaths by a few seconds. Six battle cruisers, six fighter-carriers, and four bio-weapon ships silently exploded. Under different circumstances, this would have been a spectacular pyrotechnic display, but it was overshadowed by the constant, incredible power of the combusting Sun. The result was like firecrackers going off in front of a nuclear explosion.

“Close, that, fold!” Admiral Kraug spit out the words, each one getting louder than the last.

“Closing the space fold’s exit,” the calmer voice of the fold-ship’s captain came in on the main speaker.

“How many!” The admiral glared at the navigator.

“Sixteen.”

“Half the fleet!” He stood there stunned for a short while, then leaned over his tactical display for a moment in thought, and flopped back into his chair. “Remaining ships? Status?”

“One fold-ship, two bio-weapon ships, two battle cruisers, and eleven troop transports. Only minor hull damage to transports seven and eight resulting from a collision.” The communications officer read the details like an obituary.

“Gods...” was all Kraug could mutter under his breath. Only two battle cruisers left, but he still had two bio-weapon ships, and all the troop transports. It was far from optimal, but he could still make it work. He HAD to make it work. He didn’t know if this disaster was the result of a space anomaly, Taelrok error, or an unknown defending force. The two battle cruisers would have to deal with any opposition. At a pinch, the troop transports could help in a space-to-space battle, but all the transports firepower combined would barely equal that of one battle cruiser.

“To all ships, this is Admiral Kraug. We will exit through individual ship folds just outside this system. We will then form up and plot a new course to the third planet. The fighter-carriers are gone, so the battle cruisers and troop transports will do their best to provide support for the bio-weapon ships. This mission is still in effect.”

Xin’s Z’va reactor was now fully recharged once again by the Sun’s energies, and she was heading back toward Earth. That which sustained her, had the complete opposite effect on the Taelrok ships. On her way toward the Sun, she had seen the ships explode near its surface, followed by the closing of the single, large space fold. She knew they weren’t all destroyed; someone had closed that hole in space. Would they try again, and if so, where? The wait wasn’t

long. Her long-range scanner was now picking up multiple space folds forming just outside Earth's solar system, as she had expected.

"That was incredible, Xin!" Dave had witnessed everything, and had been on an intercept course to his friend for the past few minutes. "I'm coming to help."

"Please, Dave, stay out of this. The Odyssey wasn't designed for battle."

"You're right, but then neither were you. Anyway, this is one tough, little ship. Maybe I can at least distract them while you do what you do."

"I'm not going to be able to talk you out of this, am I?"

"Nope."

A couple of minutes later, the Odyssey and the Z'va probe joined up, and traveled as close to light speed as possible to confront the Taelrok fleet before they made it to target Earth.

"Odyssey?" Dave's mind via his implant made contact with the AI of the science ship.

"Yes, Dave?"

"Are you able to do what I asked you to look into?"

"Yes, Dave. It is quite feasible."

"When we are half way to the Taelrok fleet, patch into the Earth's communications satellites, as we discussed. Keep the feed going no matter what happens. Let's show them our version of reality TV."

"Yes, Dave."

Bob Johnson and his wife were watching TV in their living room when Emily, their nine-year-old daughter, ran in. (She was the same little girl that had seen the 'sparkly thing' about a year ago orbiting the Moon.) "Mommy, Daddy, something is happening on the TV. I can't watch any of my cartoon shows any more!"

Bob picked up the TV remote and automatically switched to BLN just in time to see his favourite newsman recapping his report.

"This is Walter Murrow, again, we are interrupting the scheduled program for this special Bottom Line News report. Television networks around the globe are receiving a signal coming from within our solar system! From Australia to Austria, from China to Chile, the signal is exactly the same. My guest to my left is professor Schmidt, the world-renowned astrophysicist who is here to help the rest of us make sense of what we will be seeing. Professor?"

"Thank you, Mr. Murrow." The seventy something professor had unkempt, grey hair, a bushy beard, and an Eastern European accent one couldn't quite put their finger on. "Yes, well, the signal is being received via the Earth's communications satellites, and is obviously intended for television viewing. Simply put, we believe someone wants us to see something."

"Someone? Who?" Walter came in right on cue.

"Well, a few minutes ago, the signal was coming from a distance of about three billion kilometres from Earth."

"I'm sorry, professor, but can you put that into terms my viewers and I could understand?"

"Ah, well, you see, it is about the average distance from here to the planet Uranus, give or take a few million kilometres."

"What have we seen so far; has anything changed?"

"One thing I should mention is that the point of view from this broadcast is coming from the perspective of a possible spacecraft, much like a mounted camera on a race car, for example. I am a big fan of the Indianapolis 500. I went last year, and when those cars go by, well, they sound like a swarm of little bees. Very noisy little bees, mind you. I wear ear plugs for the..."

“Professor?”

“Yes? Oh, sorry. Yes, well, where was I?”

“The camera angle.”

“Ah, yes. What we have seen so far is a spacecraft traveling at an incredible speed, on a course that will take it outside of our solar system. In essence, we are seeing things through its eyes, so to speak. We have seen stars in the distance, of course, but nothing has changed thus far.”

“A spacecraft! One of ours?” Walter already knew the answer to his question, directed for the viewers benefit.

“No, it can’t be one of ours. This ALIEN space ship – there, I said it. We believe this ALIEN ship is traveling at close to the speed of light. This is far beyond what we are able to do. It would be like comparing the speed of a racecar to a snail. We would be the snail, by the way.”

“I assumed that.” Walter paused, placed his right hand over his ear, and listened intently to his earpiece. “Wait! My producer has informed me that something is happening. We will now broadcast this feed from space, live to the viewers at home. Professor, would you please give us any impressions or commentary you may have as you view what is now coming up on your monitor for our viewers.”

“Yes, of course.... Let me see.... Hmm.... I see something in the distance.... Yes. It looks like a dozen or more... asteroids? No, they are... SPACE SHIPS – oh my goodness!”

Xin didn’t waste any time, she was already powered up, bright white, and outshining even the Sun, which could be seen far behind her. She targeted the nearest battle cruiser as soon as she was in range. She released forty percent of the Sun’s stored energies into a white, metre wide beam projected from her outer shell. The beam melted through the massive ship from bow to stern, igniting their unstable antimatter reserves, resulting in a blinding explosion with a single, enormous pulsation. Twice Xin had used the same tactic, and both times it had worked. Did the Taelroks not learn from their last encounter with her? Or didn’t they know of the other Taelrok ship she had destroyed in the Z’va Prime system many months ago? She considered this result very fortunate as she headed toward the next battle cruiser. She had just enough power to take out a second lethal ship, but she needed a few seconds to power up.

Admiral Kraug had never witnessed such power in all his years of service. “This is Admiral Kraug to all captains of the troop transports. If this battle cruiser goes down, then what’s left of the fleet will become easy prey. That being said, I need you to form a blocking maneuver immediately – assume formation T-4.”

Now, whether the admiral was a brilliant tactician, or a sniveling coward is up for debate, but the logic was solid, and would stand up in a military court. The remaining ships formed a tube shape with Kraug’s battle cruiser in its centre, making it much harder to target the famous flagship of the Taelrok fleet.

“Navigator, keep a transport between this ship and the enemy at all times. Make course corrections as needed.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“All ships, target and fire on the enemy!” Admiral Kraug loudly ordered through the fleet-wide communications system.

The troop transports were armed with relatively light firepower, designed mostly for defense against smaller ships such as fighters. Still, once almost a hundred light proton cannons’

firepower had been combined, they created a withering assault that even a battle class cruiser could not have withstood for long.

Fortunately, Xin was much smaller, and far more maneuverable than a cruiser, so many of the proton beams missed. The few that did hit could not penetrate her thick, neutronium outer shell, and her hull was always able to repair itself before the next beam hit. Now, once again, Xin was bright white and primed with offensive power. She targeted the troop transport blocking for the battle cruiser and fired, slicing through the hapless transport, hitting Kraug's flagship on its centre port side.

"Damage report!" Kraug barked.

"Hull breach on deck seven on the port side, and deck nine on the starboard side – it went clear through the ship!" The chief engineer was in awe and almost disbelief.

"Get a grip!" The admiral yelled, snapping him out of his daze.

"Yes, Sir.... There is decompression on decks seven, eight and nine. Ninety estimated casualties. I am sending repair crews to both breaches. No critical systems effected. We're hurt, but all primary systems are still functional – engines, weapons, life support."

"Very well." Kraug turned his attention to his tactical monitor. "To all ships. Continue toward the third planet. Continue firing on the enemy. Lay down suppressing fire. I'll be damned if a tiny, black ball stops the pride of the Taelrok fleet!"

Xin had all but depleted her reactor with the two massive attacks, and now needed to replenish her power once again. To stay and absorb the power from the proton beam hits wasn't going to be enough.

"Almost out of power?" Dave had been a few hundred metres behind her the whole time, and now closed the gap as he moved the Odyssey up next to her. Its hull was equally unaffected by the beam weapon attacks. The Odyssey had been monitoring Xin's power levels, among other things, and keeping Dave informed.

"I cannot stop them," Xin admitted. "By the time I have recharged at your Sun, they will have already reached Earth."

"I've given this some thought, and I might have an idea," Dave said. "I'd like to know what you think."

Dave and Xin discussed his plan briefly. Both crafts then separated, each taking a different course toward the rear of the armada, and both simultaneously phased into invisibility.

Admiral Kraug noticed the two enemy blips had disappeared from his tactical display.

"Weapons control, where are those enemy vessels?"

"They have vanished from my scanners, Sir," the weapons officer replied nervously. "One moment they were there, the next, gone."

"I know that, fool! FIND THEM!"

"Yes, Sir."

"Walter Murrow here, and if you've been following along with us here at BLN, then you know we are witnessing history in the making. The Star War is real. I repeat, the Star War is real, and it's happening within our solar system as we speak. Professor Schmidt, could you sum up for our viewers what we have seen taking place so far?"

"Yes, well, first, I would like to give my personal observation of something, I feel, is more important than this Star War business. We now know that we are not alone in the Universe. As a

scientist, I have always felt that this was a strong possibility, but now we have proof positive. This is indeed an amazing day in human history, it will change the way we view ourselves, and our place in the Cosmos. Now, about this possible battle in space.... I have been on the phone with some of my colleagues, and from their observations and calculations, it has been determined that there are now fifteen spacecrafts on a trajectory directly toward Earth.”

“What about those explosions, professor?”

“Well, it appears that one spacecraft was destroyed, and two others have been damaged. We all saw the white beams of some type of energy strike those ships, but we could not see the ship that did the attacking. Perhaps they have a stealth capability of some kind, or the ship is very small, but that would be impossible considering the power output required.”

“Sorry, professor, I’m going to have to interrupt you, something is happening. Once again, we will broadcast this feed from space, live to the viewers at home – let’s watch.”

Xin and the Odyssey re-materialized side-by-side at the back of the column of ships, and just behind one of the troop transports that had been bringing up the rear of the fleet.

“Phasing through – now!” Dave synchronized. The two phased through the stern of the troop transport, and re-appeared inside its large antimatter engine room.

The Odyssey immediately hovered toward the engine and fuel reserves that Xin had located, and started its super-heating process. The few engineering crew evacuated the room when they saw what was happening. An alarm started to sound throughout the ship, which was timed with blinking red lights. The engineering crew were soon replaced by a dozen black armour clad Taelrok warriors who began firing on Xin and the Odyssey with their auto-beam rifles, but to no damaging effect. Both just absorbed the relatively small amount of energy. The Odyssey was now white hot and getting even hotter. For a split second, the Odyssey flashed blindingly bright, the housing that contained the antimatter melted. Xin and Dave became the centre of a tremendous, orange explosion that totally disintegrated the transport.

A few seconds later, only Xin and the Odyssey remained at the centre of the blast – protected by their incredibly tough hulls – hulls designed to withstand even the photosphere of a star.

“Was that good for you?” Dave asked, half jokingly.

“Yes, Dave. The resulting explosion created a very high release of energy. My reactor is fully recharged, thank you. That was a very impressive idea. Now, to take out the battle cruiser and the two bio-weapon ships; without them their mission cannot succeed.”

“Admiral!” the navigator yelled, as he looked up from his display screen wide-eyed with fear. “Troop transport eight is gone, and the small, sphere-shaped ship is powering up for another attack – I think it’s targeting us next!”

For a moment, Kraug froze in startled thought. “Get us out of here!” Kraug shouted back. He leaned forward over his display, and selected the ship-wide communications option. “To all ships of the fleet. Emergency retreat. We are leaving immediately to my specified coordinates. Use individual space folds.”

It was over. He had done his best, but he wasn’t going to die like this. May the demon gods from the bowls of the Nether-abyss pull him down, but not like this.

And the dogs of war ran back to their unforgiving masters.

Chapter 11

Crimes beyond penalty

Location: Planet Akoch (League of Worlds member).

Nautglum was in the central public garden with his wife and 27 offspring. He and his wife had decided it was such a beautiful, sunny day that they shouldn't let it go to waste. The choaka trees were in bloom with their fragrant, white flowers, the cloudless sky was a deep cerulean blue. He sucked the crisp air into his four lungs, and laid back in the shade of an old choaka tree, out of the sun's warm rays. His peach coloured skin burned easily, but he hated wearing even a stitch of clothing unless it was absolutely necessary, and it wasn't.

His wife and the older children were taking charge of the younger ones. They were all playing a game of catch with several large, multi-coloured balls. Nautglum's eyes were closed, but he could hear the littlest ones with their gleeful screams and high-pitched laughs. They were having such fun, he thought and smiled. Too bad his brother wasn't here; he was missing some incredible weather. But it would be months before he would be back from that Mysaep's Moon pilgrimage. His younger brother believed there was a god on that dung-ball of a world – how silly. Well, his loss.

Even in the shade, and with his eyes closed, Nautglum could tell it had gotten much darker and very quickly. He sat up and opened his overly large, bulbous eyes to see his entire family staring up into the sky. It was as dark as the darkest of stormy days, he thought, as his eyes focused on what his family was transfixed on. Whatever it was, it was massive and blocked out the sun like an eclipse. He needed his peripheral vision to see the whole of it.

His first thought was that it was a spacecraft from one of the League members, but he had never seen one so enormous, or so unusual in form. It had a dull, slate-grey colour, and was roughly spherical in shape. It had many dozens of spine-like protrusions coming out of its central core, but they weren't all the same length. Some were only half the length of the longest, giving the thing a chaotic, disquieting look. Its core was small in comparison to the diameter of its spines, and gave off a pulsating red glow, almost heart-like in manifestation.

On occasion, like lightning, long electrical sparks traveled along and between the spines to disappear at the sharper tips. It was just static electricity, but on a tremendous scale. He heard the thunder from the discharges many seconds after he saw them; the thing was that far away. They were the only sounds it made.

But the strangest thing of all was that it didn't even look real. Hovering, the horror seemed to vibrate all over, and every couple of seconds, it would slightly shift from one position to another – left, right, forward, back. At first, Nautglum thought he was having problems with his eyes. He blinked, closed his eyes, rubbed them, and stared at it again, but the thing didn't look any clearer.

"What is that?" his wife said with a slight tremble in her voice.

Nautglum just shrugged. He had no idea what it was, who they were, or what was going on, but he instinctively knew this wasn't good. He picked up his hand-held media-net, turned it on to nothing but static – this was getting worse. His wife and children walked over and surrounded him. He put his arm around his wife who was shaking with fear. Comforting her made him feel a little less useless.

After it hovered there in place for several long minutes, something started to happen. Thousands of small grey objects shot out of the long spines, and under their own power, fanned out in every direction above the planet's surface. When they had disappeared from sight,

thousands more were released, and they too disappeared over the horizon. This repeated several times.

All was quiet now. Even the sound of thunder from the ship monster had stopped. Nautglum could only hear the cool breeze blowing through the choaka leaves. If he didn't look up, he would have thought there were dark clouds above, and a violent storm was on its way.

The 50,000 drones had deposited their concentrated chemical gas into the entire atmosphere of the lush, green world. The Veiled ship rose slowly up out of the atmosphere and into a low orbit. Just under the great ship, a white ball of energy materialized, and slowly fell down toward the planet's surface, stopping at the atmosphere's midway point. It crackled with energy as blue-white bolts randomly wrapped around its unstable surface. It hovered for a few seconds, quickly shrank into nothingness, and then exploded releasing unimaginable power.

The atmosphere instantly combusted becoming waves of intense fire, which rippled out in a circular pattern that would eventually encompass the entire globe. A tsunami of extreme heat tore through the forests, boiled the oceans into steam, and incinerated every living thing on, above, and below the planet's surface. Even the topsoil was burned off, and all oxygen was consumed, turning the planet into a burned-out cinder, as dead as any dust-covered moon.

The gigantic ship left orbit and set course for its second target. All those that they even suspected of conspiring against them would be destroyed. Starting with those that had contact with the Z'va probe, and ending with the complete destruction of the hidden world. The military disaster at the midway planet had so angered the Veiled they now lashed out with blind hate. A rage so intense they would personally deliver that hate in generous and deadly portions.

Members of the Utayatu spy-craft made Kaibiak aware of the holocaust soon after it happened, and long before the members of the League of Worlds would even hear the rumours.

Utayatuians were the masters of disguise and stealth. They had turned hiding into a high-tech art form, but they were also the lords of intelligence. One of their data gathering stealth probes stationed in the League of Worlds' sector had picked up the Veiled mother ship on its long range scanner. It had followed the ship, and recorded the extermination from a safe distance.

Kaibiak, the elected steward of Utayatu, sat at the huge, round table along with the 24 ministers of his world. Most notable among them were the Ministers of Defense, Intelligence, and Concealment. The odd being out was Admiral Quarauq, who was in charge of the entire Utayatu fleet. All eyes were focused on the centre of the white table as the last few seconds of a dying planet played out in 3D motion imagery.

"Ministers and Admiral," Kaibiak began. "Here is further proof of the Veiled's intentions. They now know where we are. They have made an attempt at establishing a midway base of operations, an attempt that failed due to the creative tactics of the Z'va probe and the Human. Now they lash out at a helpless world, for no reason that our spies can surmise. We have stayed hidden for too long. We have watched as world after world were destroyed, and we did nothing. We have been planning for this day, and that day is here, now."

"How do we know they are aware we are here?" the Minister of Concealment asked. "Perhaps this attack on an innocent world was designed to force our move, and thus give them proof positive."

"No," Kaibiak responded. "The Z'va probe had intercepted a transmission from one of the Veiled's spies. The Veiled don't know exactly what they will find here, but they are paranoid enough to attack us blindly, and they will be coming with everything they have. But I am not asking you to wait here until they arrive. I am urging you to take aggressive action. We must

send our fleet to the Human's system, and stop them THERE, before they can surround us HERE. We must also send Star Hammer to the Veiled's homeworld. Destroy it, and we destroy their support from beneath them."

"Star Hammer!" shouted the Minister of Defense. "That is rather drastic and aggressive, isn't it?"

"These are fast becoming desperate times." The admiral spoke up for the first time. "Drastic measures are needed. We won't get a second chance. I agree with Steward Kaibiak. We must strike now and hard, and maybe we will have a chance. If we don't, Utayatu will join the other doomed worlds, and I'd rather go down taking as many of them with me as possible!"

"Admiral, please, you are becoming so aggressive and agitated," the Minister of Agriculture commented. He raised both hands as if in surrender.

"Apologies, but I have never felt so strongly about anything."

"A show of hands then." Kaibiak took advantage of this optimum opportunity. "How many in favour of sending our fleet to the Earth system?"

"20 to 6 in favour."

"How many in favour of using Star Hammer?"

"15 to 11 in favour – it is done. I will also contact the leaders of the League of Worlds. I have a feeling they might want to help now that the war has come to them. Admiral?"

Kaibiak and Admiral Quarauq got up and walked out of the white, domed conference room, leaving the planet's ministers to further argue and discuss the ramifications of the meeting's decisions. Together they went to the centre of operations to put in their security codes to release Star Hammer.

The third planet of Utayatu's system was a gas giant, not unlike Jupiter but slightly smaller. Orbiting around it were three moons, but it was the largest of the natural satellites that was not exactly what it appeared to be. Like their homeworld, it too had its own mask. The secret codes were input to Utayatu's central computer and Star Hammer was activated.

The disguise of a barren, cratered moon faded slowly away like grey mist, revealing a shiny, black, metallic globe beneath. A number of equally black, cone-shaped communication towers dotted its surface, making the thing look like the head of an ancient mace from Earth's Middle Ages. A comparison not far removed from its function. It was a doomsday device, and it had only one terrible purpose. A million years ago, the mere thought of such a device by a Utayatuian would have been considered blasphemy. Now, it had become a necessity.

Utayatu had long studied their enemy, they knew their strengths, but more importantly, they knew their few weaknesses. Starting with the natural moon, it had been twisted into this thing of destruction. The moon had been transformed into a colossal wrecking ball, designed only to make it to its target. The enormous negrav drive was deep in its core, and its thick layer of neutronium skin would protect its inner rocky mass from premature destruction. Simply, it was a missile – a monstrous, unstoppable, virtually indestructible missile.

Star Hammer left its orbit around the gas giant and headed out of Utayatu's system at a speed remarkable for its great mass. Completely automated, it had no conscience, no empathy to give it pause, and no moral centre to question its directive. Once outside the system, it would create a series of moon-size space folds that would eventually take it to the target.

Kaibiak looked at the old admiral, his long-time friend, and began reciting a piece from something he had read as a boy. "I do what must be done, even though it pains me greatly. I do

as they do, for to destroy them, I must now become them.”

“So be it,” confirmed the admiral with reverence.

And so, Star Hammer, on its maiden voyage, shrank into the blackness of space, christened with a childhood poem.

Time: One Earth day later.

The leaders of the League of Worlds had been sent all the data collected on the Veiled, as well as the motion imagery of the holocaust that had eliminated one of their member planets. Kaibiak didn't know the details of their discussions in closed emergency meetings, but when they finally contacted him, their resolve was evident. Five of the more advanced worlds would each send a small fleet to the Earth's system. The various ships would total somewhere around sixty. On a tactical display this looked good, but most were smaller and less advanced than the Taelrok ships. Even combined with the 36 highly advanced Utayatu ships, they were still outgunned two to one when the Veiled mother ship was added into the equation.

The Veiled had no fleet that he was aware of. They relied on the Taelroks, and to a far lesser degree, a few other worlds that had been 'convinced' by the Taelroks to join their cause. The problem was the Veiled mother ship. It was a space fortress capable of taking on the ir own Taelrok fleet if necessary, and winning. The Veiled trusted no one, not even their minions; always making sure those that served them were less powerful. This was their weakness, Kaibiak concluded. If there was only someway to destroy that one Veiled ship without losing too many of their own, the odds would be more even.

After the battle with the Taelrok fleet, Xin and Dave had decided to stay in Dave's home system. Xin was uncertain that the Taelroks had left the vicinity of the system. Perhaps they were just waiting nearby to strike as soon as the two of them left. They were both inside the Odyssey, and once again in orbit around the Moon. They knew the Earth would see them, but it didn't much matter at this point. They could have just floated around anywhere in the system, but Dave liked orbiting Earth's only satellite, and it gave him something interesting to look at.

Kaibiak had contacted them personally, updated them on everything that had transpired, including the launch of Star Hammer. They were now on the bridge watching the final moments of a once lush, green world turned into a lifeless ball. The same footage the Ministers of Utayatu had witnessed a day earlier.

No sentient being witnessing this would not have been moved in some way. To Xin, it was like Z'va Prime being destroyed before her very sensors. It happened so long ago, but it must have looked a great deal like this. Her emotional algorithms were pushed to peak capacity; she had never felt such sadness. She recoiled from the horror, and as she shrank away from it, new connections in her artificial brain were being formed. She learned a new emotion – an emotion that was never part of her programming – an emotion that would have resulted in her immediate shut down on Z'va Prime. She HATED the Veiled with every synthetic fiber of her being.

Dave was beyond comment after witnessing the horror. He knew this was the same planet that the pilgrim fleet heading for Mysaep's Moon had originated from. They could still be alive. Those ships were probably still on their way to Mysaep's Moon, unaware of what had happened to their planet. Some of that race had probably survived. At least there was that.

Xin just hovered silently next to Dave as she tried to process the new emotions that were flooding through her.

“Xin, are you OK?”

“Yes, I think so, Dave.” She lied, so as not to upset him. This too was something new to her.

After the 3D motion image faded, Kaibiak’s form replaced it. “Now you see the powerful madness that we are dealing with. The Utayatu fleet is on its way, and we will arrive at your system soon, followed by the combined League’s fleets. Our spies and stealth probes have informed me that the Taelrok fleet appears to be almost ready for departure from their home system. We also had the Veiled ship followed, but lost it just outside the League of Worlds’ sector. We don’t know its intent, but strongly believe it will join with the Taelrok fleet at some point, if they follow past tactics.”

“Thank you, Kaibiak,” Xin said, showing no sign of her emotional struggle.

When Kaibiak signed off and the image of his slender form faded away, Xin rotated ninety degrees to look at Dave sitting in the ‘captain’s chair’ (as he liked to call it). “Dave?”

“Yes, Xin?”

“Is hate the opposite of love?”

“I’m not sure, sort of, I guess.”

“Then perhaps it would be possible to use one to cancel out the other. Like positives and negatives in an equation.”

“I don’t think it works like that.”

“Unfortunate.”

Location: Just outside the Taelrok home system.

Captain Slogmar couldn’t get comfortable in his command chair on the bridge of his battle cruiser. He could never relax when awaiting new orders. He thought about Admiral Kraug. He had been called for an audience with the Veiled. No one was ever called for a meeting with them, until now. He had never seen the old admiral so nervous as he was during their last communication. The admiral had left him in command of all three fleets until his return. Well, two complete fleets, what was left of the first one, and a dozen or so ships forced into service from various dominated worlds.

“Transmission coming in from the Veiled, Captain,” said the communications officer.

“On my personal speaker.”

“Captain Slogmar,” the multiple voices murmured. “You are the admiral now. We hope you do better than your predecessor. You will take all vessels to the midway system. You will accomplish what Admiral Kraug failed to do. We will join you before your encounter with the enemy forces. That is all. Now go.”

“Yes, right away.” Slogmar was a bit flustered. He had never spoken with the Veiled before, and it rattled him more than he would have suspected. “What about Admiral Kraug?” His bravery felt slightly redeemed by the question.

“Yes, you are awaiting his return. He mentioned that to us,” the voices in unison whispered. “We return him to you.”

“Communication terminated, Captain, I mean, Admiral,” corrected the equally unnerved communications officer.

“Admiral, something just materialized off our port bow!” the science officer exclaimed. “I wouldn’t have noticed it if it hadn’t triggered a third level proximity alert.”

“Have it retrieved. Bring it to me.” Slogmar had a bad feeling.

A short while later, a member of his engineering crew walked onto the bridge. He was still wearing his envirosuit, and cradling a heavy, glassy horror in front of him. It was the head of Admiral Kraug incased in a clear, glass ball. His eyes and open mouth were frozen in time, as if in severe pain. It was a not too subtle message from the Veiled. They even used glass, a cheap silica-based material – how insulting.

“Get rid of that, that thing.” He wasn’t going to let this get to him, especially not in front of the bridge crew. He was the admiral now, and he better start acting like one. “Let’s get out of here.”

Time: Nineteen Earth hours later.

Location: Just outside Earth’s solar system.

Dave was sitting on the transparent bridge of the Odyssey, and using his amazing eyesight to examine the last few ships that were arriving. For a moment they would float motionless in space, then form up, finding their place in the growing fleet. Most of the fleet was now assembled. These last few were the stragglers or last minute inductees. In a roundabout way, they were all here to defend Earth. At least that’s how Dave liked to look at it. That wasn’t exactly true.

The Utayatu fleet had been the first to arrive, being the closest to Earth’s system. Their ships were the largest and most organic looking of all, and easy to spot with their shiny, emerald green colourations. Most were battle cruiser size ships that looked almost squid-like in form, with their elongated oval shaped hulls, trailed by multiple wavy appendages. Their few smaller ships were a larger version of the interceptor ships that had ‘greeted’ Xin and Dave on Utayatu. They too were oval in shape, more beetle-like, and without any apparent attachments.

Originally, five members of the League of Worlds had contributed their small fleets for the battle, but two more worlds had sent ships at the last minute. To date, the League had contributed a total of 71 ships of various sizes, shapes, and colours. A few were almost as large as the Utayatu ships, but most were no larger than half that size, and some were not much larger than the Odyssey.

All these ships looked more fabricated than grown, making them seem more familiar to Dave’s spacecraft sense of design. Some looked like they could have been designed guided by human esthetics, but the ones that were most notable, did not. One group was constructed using the sphere and tube geometric forms in complex, asymmetrical combinations. Dave couldn’t help but think of a squat molecular model when he first caught site of these.

But no matter how strange some of the ship designs were, nothing could compare to the variety of the shapes and features of the beings that were at the controls. Earlier, Dave had observed a ship-wide 3D conference meeting between all the captains. Admiral Quarauq had headed that meeting from his battle cruiser, while he and Xin had observed from the comfort of the Odyssey’s bridge.

Representatives of each world were present, and although many of the beings were considered to be in the humanoid category, two of them were not. The lizard-like Ayaca looked more like a raptor out of Earth’s Jurassic period. Dave imagined that in hand-to-hand combat, the Ayaca would be deadly, and even with his abilities, he wouldn’t want to face one to find out. Then there was the even stranger looking Oxuu that were cyan coloured jellyfish-like water beings who occupied the odd looking silver, molecule-like ships.

It was only about five hours after the defending fleet had completely assembled that the enemy arrived. Utayatu's spy intelligence was correct to within an hour of the enemy fleet's arrival time, and ten million kilometres of the location. The beginnings of dozens of space folds were forming only fifty million kilometres from the defending fleet's present location.

"The time has arrived, Captains," Admiral Quarauq loudly announced through the ship-wide communications system. "Stay formed up and head toward my coordinates. Fortune is on our side. Because of their individual space folds, they will exit in random sequences. We will destroy each ship as it exits their individual fold. Lock on and concentrate firepower on the first ship to exit. We may be able to destroy several this way before too many start coming through."

Shortly, when the entire defending fleet arrived at the area, something didn't look right to the admiral. Xin realized it as well. The space folds were not growing larger, but remained at a size only suitable for smaller ships, far too small for anything near the size of a Taelrok battle cruiser. Also, there weren't as many as there should have been.

Xin scanned the entire system, and quickly located the beginnings of new space folds more than 200 million kilometres away. "Admiral, I believe the main enemy force is entering the system at the coordinates I am sending to you."

"Mother Utayatu!" Admiral Quarauq yelled. "It's a deception! The only things coming through these will be small support crafts, if anything at all. The main force will exit and be formed up before we can reach the new location. To all Captains, break off and head to these new coordinates. Regrettably, this old practitioner of tactical deception has been deceived."

"That was brilliant, Admiral Slogmar!" exclaimed the navigation officer.

Slogmar grunted back a response. Up till now, he had been somewhat apprehensive. His predecessor's campaigns had been required reading during his military school days, and this was a trick he had learned from his mentor. The fact that Admiral Kraug had been beaten here in this very system had given him pause. Now, his confidence was boosted with this acquired tactical advantage. He turned on the ship-wide communications system. "All ships, this is Admiral Slogmar. Form up into wedge formation, set course to my numbers. We will meet the enemy in open space."

The admiral noticed that all fifteen seated officers surrounding him were looking at him. He knew what they wanted and were waiting for, so he led them with his most spirited battle chant. "WHAT ARE WE?" he roared as he swept a look around the bridge.

"TAELOKS!" shouted back the bridge crew, and then pounded on their plastisteel covered chests with both fists – BOOM, BOOM.

"WHO'S OUR EQUAL IN BATTLE?"

"NO ONE!" – BOOM, BOOM.

"HOW DO WE LEAVE THE ENEMY?"

"DEAD!" – BOOM, BOOM....

So far, all had been going according to plan, Slogmar thought, except... Where was the Veiled mother ship? They had said they would be here. And almost as if the Veiled had heard his very thoughts, his question was answered.

"Sir, I'm getting a massive power spike coming three kilometres off our starboard bow!" exclaimed an overly excited science officer. "It's becoming visible. I think it's the Veiled ship."

"G-Gods!" the new admiral choked out as he witnessed the monster materialize on the main screen. It was a thing right from the deepest, darkest recesses of the Nether-abys. He had heard stories from the old, retired spacers. He assumed they had been greatly exaggerated to make

them more entertaining, but they weren't exaggerations. No words could have given justice to this horror. It phased into space-time like a colossal ghost ship right from old Taelrok folklore.

Slogmar had never seen a Veiled ship. They never showed themselves, or took part in anything unless absolutely necessary. This sighting was a confirmation of the seriousness of the present situation. This was history in the making on the grandest of scales.

"What's wrong with our displays? Are we getting some interference?"

"No, Sir, all my instruments are optimal," answered the science officer. "The distortions and shifting patterns are coming from the Veiled ship itself. My instruments can't get a positive lock on it. It seems to be shifting between dimensions."

The many voices of the Veiled came through every speaker, on every ship of the Taelrok fleet. The chorus of voices even came through the communication devices attached to the plastisteel helmets of the boarding troops. "Do not underestimate the larger, hidden world vessels of the enemy fleet. They are the reason we are here. They are the reason you will fail without our assistance. Now go, destroy the lesser ships, and we will deal with the larger ones that are beyond your capacity."

Slogmar's fifteen-member bridge crew had stopped what they were doing, and all thirty solid-black eyes were on him.

"Well, you heard them. Make the minor course corrections, and concentrate on the smaller ships of the enemy fleet." Damn, Slogmar thought, he was supposed to be the admiral in charge of the fleet, but now, he felt like he was slapped right back down to an ensign. He really started to strongly dislike the Veiled.

"Here they come!" Admiral Quarauq warned. "They are using a tight, wedge formation, and the Veiled ship is directly above their centre. Mother Utayatu, that ship is big!"

Dave thought that their translated word 'big' was an extreme understatement. "It looks like an ugly sea urchin on steroids, and what's with those badass vibrations?"

"It's in a constant phasial flux," Xin observed. "Conventional weapons would probably have little effect on it – it isn't solid. Somehow, they have achieved the ability to bridge between two dimensions, and to be in both simultaneously."

As the two fleets closed on one another, both fleets released their small fighter crafts. Like hornets coming out of their nests, hundreds of ships were expelled from the fighter-carriers of both sides. There were the dark-blue, semicircular Taelrok fighters, and the various designs of the defending fleet, led by the green, bug-like Utayatu fighters. These squadrons of fighters now moved in front of the larger ships of their respective fleets, creating a buffer zone, like pawns on a chessboard.

The pulsating red core of the Veiled ship glowed brighter. Several of the spine-like protrusions facing the defending fleet became luminous, and a form of white energy was released from each. A pulsating, white ball of energy formed, and although basically spherical, it appeared unstable due to its constant shape changes, from sphere to ellipse and back again. As soon as the energy ball ceased growing, it slowly moved away from the great ship, and built up speed quickly as it launched itself toward the oncoming fleet.

"Incoming missile, composition unknown!" Admiral Quarauq warned all ships of the fleet.

There was little time to react. The unstable sphere headed directly for one of the largest ships, a Utayatu battle cruiser. The cruiser managed to hit the deadly missile with one of its

larger beam cannons at less than half a kilometre away. Unfortunately, the odd missile didn't detonate in mid-space, as was hoped.

A split second later, it hit the cruiser head-on, but there was no explosion of orange flames or a blinding flash. Instead, the entire cruiser was consumed in a pulsating, white glow. With every pulse, the large ship gradually dissolved from shiny, emerald green to dull, transparent green, and finally to grey dust. The silhouette of the cruiser could still be seen; a faint, distorted shadow of what it once was.

Admiral Quarauq instinctively knew what he had to do. "To all ships. Change course to my coordinates and increase to double velocity immediately. We are going under them, putting the enemy fleet between us and that Veiled ship."

The tactic worked. The Veiled ship had been forming another pulsating sphere, but now it stopped in mid-creation. Both fleets continued closing on one another, and were almost in firing range. The hundreds of small fighters now met in a chaotic dogfight for space dominance. The darker Taelrok fighters mixed it up with the various shapes and colours of the defending fighters. Every few seconds, a small orange explosion indicated a fighter from one side or the other that wasn't fast enough, or lucky enough to avoid destruction within the mayhem.

A few seconds later, the bulk of both fleets were in range of one another. Both sides started firing various beam weapons, risking friendly fire casualties upon their own fighters.

Xin destroyed one of the Taelrok battle cruisers in her usual impressive way. Meanwhile, Dave, at the helm of the Odyssey, piloted the tough, little ship toward another nearby Taelrok battle cruiser to try his phase and super heat trick once again.

In all the chaos, no one noticed that the Veiled ship had moved out from behind the enemy fleet. It was once again in a position to start picking off individual ships, and its nearest target was the Odyssey.

The Odyssey's AI became aware of the incoming missile, but there was no time to communicate this to Dave. The ship's self-preservation programming kicked in. The ship took back control, and tried to evade the missile at the last possible second. The energy ball exploded directly next to the Odyssey with its lethal payload. The ship tried to absorb the unknown energy in hopes of neutralizing it, but was unable to handle the incredibly high surge of power in such a brief period.

Although the hull had withstood the blast, the proximity of the explosion had overloaded its systems. The interior of the small ship had become a deathtrap as the energy storage cells exploded, releasing deadly radiations. Dave was knocked unconscious before he knew what hit him. The Odyssey and occupant drifted lifelessly in space, moving slowly in the direction the blast had pushed them. The dead ship drifted back toward the many raging fighters as the enemy fleet continued moving forward, and toward it.

Upon seeing this, Admiral Quarauq changed tactics. "All cruisers and frigates, target the Veiled mother ship. It appears to become solid for a brief period during and after its attacks. Concentrate all your firepower on that ship."

Admiral Quarauq would not get a chance to test his theory. Shortly after his ship-wide command, a great distortion of space occurred. Wave upon wave of an unknown, powerful force buffeted all the ships taking part in the battle. The Veiled mother ship seemed to be in trouble for a brief moment, but then phased away into invisibility. The defending fleet came through the cosmic cyclone with only minor damage. However, the Taelrok ships didn't fare near as well, and it was most obvious on the larger ships of the fleet. Their sizeable dual engines, multiple

deck lights, and external lighting systems were all instantly snuffed out, as if someone had pulled their plug.

All the Taelrok ships, from the large cruisers to the small fighters, continued heading in their last programmed directions. It was as if all the navigators and pilots had just walked away from their control panels.

One fighter that had been traveling close toward its fleet, now crashed, skimming along a Taelrok cruiser's side, breaking into hundreds of pieces, and leaving in its wake an orange trail of flame.

Inertia kept the blacked-out Taelrok fleet moving as a group toward the area the fighters had been dogfighting. Many Taelrok fighters continued traveling dark and powerless in every direction away from the battle. Unfortunately (for them), one of those directions was directly toward their own fleet. Several similar crashes occurred when about twenty fighters met their larger counterparts. Many of them narrowly missed, some didn't. If anyone in the defending fleet needed further proof that the enemy was out of the fight, this was it.

With the Veiled ship gone, and the Taelrok fleet neutralized, the few remaining non-Taelrok enemy ships quickly and gladly retreated from the battle space.

Xin scanned the disabled ships, and soon realized there was no one on board any of them. She was completely at a loss for an explanation. The entire enemy fleet was no longer a threat, except for more possible collisions from the out of control ships. And as for the Veiled mother ship, it was out of scanning range, and probably retreating back to its homeworld.

"Be not fearful," said the low, strange voice in every language, on every ship, near every individual being. "Moving atmosphere to speech often frightens those unaware. This one communicates now with all fleeting, sentient beings, inside all life sustaining vessels. Sygoss did not wish to interfere with your private struggles. Intervention is distasteful. But it is done, and cannot be undone."

Earlier, the Veiled mother ship and several Taelrok battle cruisers had visited Mysaep's Moon. The surface of the small world had been destroyed, and the atmosphere burned off in a horrific display of destruction, equal only to the destruction of Akoch.

Upon viewing this atrocity, Sygoss had reached out with his mind in a blind rage. How dare they destroy his children! The stone instruments he had shaped so lovingly over these millions of years. Each one was unique. Each one shaped to perfection. The exquisite sounds they had made together. The serenity they had given him. All were now dust.

For a brief moment he had sent out a thought, a terrible thought, and in so doing, had committed a crime beyond penalty. Every Taelrok male, female, and child, no matter where they were in the Galaxy, had vanished, as if they had never existed.

After he realized what he had done, he stopped himself just short of destroying the Veiled with a second deadly thought. Their phasing ability had saved them the first time, but there was no dimension that Sygoss couldn't go, no place they would be safe had he decided to pursue them.

"This one will leave you now. Sygoss will go far away from any sentient beings. This can not happen again."

"Sygoss, wait!" Xin, now on board the Odyssey had quickly made repairs to contain the radiation leakage. She hovered over Dave's unconscious body, frantically trying to stabilize his condition. He had third degree burns to ninety percent of his body. Only his superhuman body

and the five trillion MBRUs were keeping him from dying, but the damage was too extensive, and time was not on his side. “Sygoss, please, can you help my friend?”

Meanwhile, just outside the Veiled’s homeworld system, Star Hammer came through its final, enormous space fold and headed straight for its target. The doomsday moon’s computers calculated its trajectory through the system for optimum impact to ground zero. There was no AI, no sentience, no emotion, just a machine programmed to reach its objective at any cost. The world destroyer would gradually build up speed until it reached its quarter of light speed maximum (or about 50,000 times faster than a bullet) and nothing short of a supernova was going to stop it.

Chapter 12

A boy with a spider

Star Hammer was more than half way through the Veiled’s system. It had reached its maximum speed of approximately 75,000 kilometres per second when the Veiled ship came through its final space fold that placed it near its homeworld.

The Veiled on the sixth planet were shocked when they saw the new addition to their system on long range scans. No one had ever dared to attack their homeworld. Yet, here was this black moon heading directly for their world. They were shocked by the audacity of it, but confidently unworried as they directed their great ship to position itself between their homeworld and the massive oncoming intruder.

The Veiled’s homeworld was a large, old world, the natural resources of which had been depleted long ago. It was mostly a cool-grey coloured globe with dark-blue, metallic accents of the structures and machines that covered the whole of its surface. Everything had to be imported to this ancient planet; its only two exports were control and death. This is where the Veiled felt secure, and was the seat of their power from which they ruled all the surrounding sectors of space. From here the Veiled controlled everything, including their mother ship. This fortress of a ship had never been physically occupied by the Veiled, or any other life form for that matter. It wasn’t necessary. They could easily control it from the safety of their homeworld.

The Veiled ship now headed toward the moon at near light-speed, its heart-like core pulsed flashes of bright red as it powered up for the attack. Upon reaching the enormous, dark sphere, it slowed to match the moon’s slower speed, keeping a few kilometres away. It fired off one of its pulsating orbs, which hit and encompassed the whole of the moon.

On cruisers, this had been extremely effective, but on the massiveness of this unusual invader, it did nothing but mar its black surface, only managing to make it appear a little less shiny. The energy of their weapon was being spread far too thin, and after a second attempt, the Veiled realized that this was futile. They were not going to ‘dissolve’ the thing before it made it to their planet.

Although the Veiled mother ship was the largest vessel in the Galaxy, it was dwarfed in comparison to Star Hammer. It was like a bee trying to stop a baseball, but this bee was able to do far more than just sting. It tried a different approach. All of its spines began to glow brightly, and the giant ship began to spin slowly. Then, white beams of an unknown energy shot from a

group of spine tips facing the moon. Each time a new group of spines faced Star Hammer, they too released their beams of power in a Gatling gun-like precision.

The beams were focused on a specific location dead centre on the black moon, and this method yielded a better result. After a few volleys, a tiny section of the moon's neutronium skin had been disintegrated, and further volleys started digging deeply through rock and toward its core. Soon, they would reach that which moved the monstrous device, and end all this.

But Star Hammer's defense programming analyzed the attack, and took counter measures. It rotated the damaged spot 180 degrees away from the Veiled ship. The Veiled ship changed orbit around Star Hammer to continue the damage on that same spot, but the black moon just kept rotating, easily keeping the deadly beams away from the weakened location.

Time was running out for the Veiled as Star Hammer quickly closed the distance to the their homeworld. The Veiled knew it, and broke off the attack. Given enough time, the Veiled ship could have eventually destroyed the doomsday machine, but time was something they didn't have in abundance. The Utayatuians knew this when they had designed the monstrous device. Time is often an important, if not critical factor during a military engagement. Utayatu had created a situation that exploited that factor, and it had completely caught the Veiled off-guard. On some level, the Veiled were impressed by the bold and utterly imaginative method of attack.

Star Hammer was only a few minutes from impact when thousands of small shuttle vessels left the Veiled's homeworld. A great exodus was in progress as a multitude of grey, spiky ships left the surface of the doomed world. All of them headed straight toward the mother ship that had positioned itself like a small, spiny moon near the planet. The seemingly endless swarm of shuttles flowed toward the mother ship, to disappear through dozens of large openings in its red core.

Hundreds of evacuation ships were still leaving the planet when Star Hammer hit with a force rarely seen in the Galaxy. The Veiled ship quickly pulled away, leaving the doomed shuttles nearest the planet behind. The black moon shot through the cool-grey ball of a planet like a bullet through an apple. The planet exploded outward in every direction, as if in slow motion. Countless planetary pieces separated away from its core in silence. A couple were as large as an eighth of the original planet's size, and various other smaller sizes.

The hundreds of Veiled escape crafts caught in the cataclysm were quickly overtaken, and destroyed by the planet's shrapnel. The doomsday machine went clear through the planet, and exited the other side in a somewhat flattened state. Remarkably, it was still in one piece, held together by its tough, neutronium skin. The broken moon continued on a trajectory that would take it directly into the system's sun.

The Veiled ship, still pulling away from the devastation, continued receiving those shuttles lucky enough to have escaped. Several massive chunks of the planet headed in the general direction of the rescue mission. One fragment, the size of a large planetoid headed directly for the Veiled ship. The ship was forced to move out of its path with only a few seconds to spare, resulting in the destruction of dozens of escape crafts as they impacted on the planet chunk's surface. The last hundred or so small ships that were not in the planetoid's direct path, disappeared into the safety of the mother ship's red core.

If the Veiled had been furious before due to Admiral Kraug's incompetence, they were seeing red now. A rich, bloody red that burned brighter than the core of their fortress ship. That **THING** had destroyed their homeworld, and more than ninety percent of their population!

The system's yellow-orange sun created silhouettes of the moving planetary pieces behind the massive ship as it remained motionless for a few minutes. Then suddenly, without warning, it created a swirling space fold, and swiftly disappeared into its dark centre.

"Sygoss, are you there?" Xin called out a second time on all known frequencies. "If you are, please, I need your help!"

"This one has not left," came the reply in the archaic Z'va Prime language from nonexistent lips. "Sygoss knows. You wish this one's aid, but know that creation is far more challenging a task than that of destruction. Sygoss cannot bring back life from the dead, or near dead. Would undo what has been done if that were so."

"Can't you do anything to save him? Please... I... love him..."

"Love?" It was a word from a machine that astounded a god. "It is a powerful emotion for a synthetic being. But do you grasp its meaning? In purest of form, it can result in selfless acts of sacrifice."

"I would give up my very existence in exchange for his life."

Upon hearing this, Sygoss' tone changed from one of pessimism to optimism as his thoughts continued to translate into sound waves. "Yes.... It is a possibility.... A synthesis.... A biological based life force with a highly evolving synthetic. Curious.... Your makers gave you the ability to develop beyond your initial limits, but failed to see the missing element that was needed for your ultimate ascendancy."

"I don't understand your meaning."

"Understanding is not necessary. Only consent is required. Sygoss cannot create life from nonexistence, but can reshape existing life into new forms, or two forms into one."

"You want to combine me with Dave?"

"Yes, but know that your sentience will be lost to the life force of the biological. Its power is strong, its spirit, virtually limitless. You will attain the end of your evolutionary cycle, only to lose yourself in the process. Sygoss regrets this consequence."

Xin scanned Dave's blackened and broken body. He didn't have much time. Most of the MBRUs were within his skull and heart, keeping the most vital organs alive. The other organs were failing quickly. His brain had fared the best, being completely enclosed by bone that was closer to the density of steel.

"I consent," Xin confirmed with certainty. "Do whatever is necessary to save him, please."

"Very well. Consent is given, consent is accepted."

Sygoss focused thought toward matter. Dave was lying on his side in a slightly curled up position. His body was gently lifted up off the floor into a head up position and hovering a short distance above it. His unrecognizable, disfigured head began to glow as bright as a small, white sun. Still in a half fetal position, his body started a slow top-like rotation.

Xin felt an invisible force tug strongly on her. She instinctively increased her anti-gravity drive to compensate.

"Release yourself to it," Sygoss said firmly.

Xin did what she thought she would never do; give herself over to someone else's control. Without further thought, she turned off the power that gave her mobility. She could sense Sygoss' presence all around her as she was moved toward Dave. She was pressed up against his midsection, his blackened arms hung limply over her like a burnt marionette. The two distinctly contrasting forms now rotated together in this odd embrace. The rotations gradually increased in

speed until the two became a blur of one. The brightness spread down from Dave's head to rapidly encompass the whole of both forms.

Xin could feel herself slipping down into a blackness unlike anything she had ever experienced. Her synthetic mind flashed back to the first time she met Dave, she touched his mind briefly, he was with her, serenity flowed over her, and then she was gone.

A blinding flash of white light consumed the Odyssey's bridge accompanied by a staccato swoosh sound of deafening finality.

Time: Nine Earth hours later.

Location: Planet Utayatu.

The mother ship, carrying all that was left of the Veiled race, entered the atmosphere of Utayatu. The mammoth ship had used almost half of its power to make it to the hidden planet. It was something they knew to be rash, and defied their long experience of tactics and strategy, but here they were just the same.

As a group of combined minds, they had decided on this careless course of action. The minority had tried to dissuade against this decision, but the majority of Veiled minds had won out. Their pain was too great, their wounds, too fresh. Immediate retaliation had been the final conclusion. Destroy those that would destroy them. Time had been used against them; now, time would be used against their enemy. The hidden world's fleet wouldn't anticipate such a bold move. They would destroy the hidden world quickly, and be gone long before the enemy fleet made it through their final space fold.

The Veiled ship swiftly destroyed the fifty or so small interceptors that confronted them when they entered the planet's atmosphere. Without Utayatu's space fleet, the planet was virtually defenseless, as the Veiled had hoped. Now they would turn this lushest of all worlds into a burned up cinder like all the rest. Then they would leave, recharge to full power, and engage the hidden world's fleet at a space and time of their choosing. Once all enemy ships were destroyed, the midway planet would be destroyed or perhaps enslaved – they did need a new homeworld.

Together, the many minds of the Veiled ordered the planetary surface destruction sequence to begin. Thousands of drones shot out of the long spines, and fanned out in every direction above the planet's surface. But before they could release the second group of drones, the minds of the Veiled were confronted by a single, powerful mind. "Stop or be destroyed!" it screamed into the depths of their very souls.

Shaken, the Veiled scanned for the individual mind that was foolish enough to disrupt their multiple chain of thought, and soon found the intruder. A small, black silhouette of humanoid form hovered only a ship's length away from them. Why had they not been alerted to its presence? And what was this strange being? Their scans were unable to extract any useful information from it. Every type of detection wave sent toward it never returned; they all disappeared into its blackness.

Frustrated, all the Veiled survivors sent out a thought. "Who are you to interfere?"

"My name is David Van Bercham, and those living on this planet are my friends. Leave this planet and this Galaxy."

"We can not do that. We will not do that," the chorus of the Veiled's thoughts shouted back.

"Then find an uninhabited planet, and learn to live in peace. Stop this insanity."

"It is not our way," came back the unyielding reply.

Well, you can't say I didn't try, Dave thought.

For a moment, he paused, ignoring the Veiled ship to look at the absence of light that was once his hand. It was the exact shape of his flesh and bone hand, and when he turned it sideways, he could even make out the shape of his fingernails in detail. He formed a fist. Now it was less recognizable as a hand. But this wasn't energy absorbing neutronium skin. He wasn't a human version of Xin. This was something vastly different. There just wasn't anything there! Or was there? He hadn't noticed it when surrounded by the blackness of space, but here, in the blue sky of Utayatu, he had become very conspicuous, and it transfixed him.

This was all very new to him. His power was untested, but he somehow knew the Veiled were no longer a threat to him. They had become... insignificant.

So much had happened in the past few hours. One minute he was on the Odyssey's bridge heading toward a Taelrok cruiser, the next, everything went black. Then, his mind had joined with Xin's, and in that brief moment, he had become her. He knew everything she knew, had experienced everything she had, only to find himself alone once again. In contrast to the brief unity of minds, it was a painful separation that made him want to scream because of the loss. He had never felt so alone, and yet, she was still with him in his thoughts. That sampled female voice was forever silent now, but everything else was a part of him. She was a part of him.

Sygos had given him a rare gift, but it was also a curse that he would have refused if he had been able to. Xin was gone. She didn't have a soul. It was the missing piece that he had provided. Sygos had accomplished what the scientists of Z'va Prime had aspired to do – create the final stage of evolution.

The probable god had also given him some of his own power. Was he now a god? He didn't know. Before Sygos had left him and this Galaxy, he had mentioned that time, space and matter would no longer confine him. "But you are not without limits," Sygos had said.

Dave was so deep in thought he didn't even notice the white ball of energy until after it hit him. The pulsating, white glow completely surrounded him, and his human shadow was swallowed up into its centre. But unlike in the past, with every pulse, the undulating globe became less bright, until the silhouette that was Dave, reappeared like a black ink spot seeping through a white tablecloth. The Veiled had tried to destroy him, but only managed to get his attention, speeding them toward the inevitable. When he finished absorbing the last of its energy, Dave focused on the Veiled ship like a predator upon its prey.

Dave thrust out his right hand toward the monster ship that even now phased eerily between dimensions. I could crush you with a thought he contemplated with a brooding resolve as his shadowy fingers slowly formed into a fist. The ship's spine-like protrusions were thicker than the giant redwood trees of Earth, not unlike the massive evergreens down on this planet. The longer spines began to groan, then bend, and finally snap in half like twigs. Several broken spines fell like giant javelins, and crashed into the thick forests far below.

This isn't what he had expected. He had envisioned a desperate battle in space between the Veiled mother ship and himself – a duel between Titans. He imagined throwing a large asteroid at it, playing a cat and mouse game in a nebula, or tempting it to follow him into a black hole. They would follow, of course, because of their hubris. He would survive it, they wouldn't. No, the reality was too easy, and a bit frightening. He was a boy with a spider, pulling off its legs at his leisure.

"NO!" Dave opened his hand. "There is no doubt you deserve this for all the planets you've destroyed, but I'll be damned if you make a mass murderer out of me. I won't come down to your level."

He said the words, but deep down he was afraid, afraid of himself. Was it true? Would absolute power eventually corrupt him absolutely? Xin was a part of him now. He only hoped that her moral compass was now ingrained within him. Perhaps Sygoss, in his wisdom, knew this. Tempering his human emotions with a machine's logic, keeping his ego in check.

He stretched his mind out thousands of light-years through space and time. He viewed the satellite Galaxy that the Veiled had originated from so long ago. He knew the location; it had been documented in Utayatu's history files. Xin had accessed those files, and he now knew everything she knew, as well as the entire contents of the Z'va Prime library. On Earth it was known as the Sagittarius Dwarf Elliptical Galaxy, and it was relatively close to the Milky Way.

He concentrated on the monstrous ship. He visualized where he wanted it to be, and the Veiled ship instantly disappeared. There was no thunderous sound, or blinding flash, or any effect of any kind to announce its send-off. It was there, it was gone, it was simple, and it was over. He didn't need to understand quantum mechanics to achieve this feat any more than a child needed to understand the respiratory system in order to breath.

Dave didn't know what the Veiled would find there after all these millions of years. He didn't care. He followed the teleported ship with his final message to the Veiled. "Come back and I'll finish what you started." It wasn't a threat. He was far beyond threats; they knew it. It was a promise.

What now? Dave hadn't thought past this moment. Sygoss had left this Galaxy forever. All the space fleets would be heading back to their respective homeworlds. Admiral Quarauq would be returning back with his fleet to this world soon, and with the Odyssey in tow.

The Odyssey.... She was beyond repair, so he had given her to Utayatu. Besides, he now needed a ship as much as a bird needed a cage. Dave was happy to give the Odyssey to Utayatu. Kaibiak was glad to receive the small ship, and promised to have her put on display at their central museum. She was the last remaining artifact of Z'va Prime. The science ship would be greatly honoured for its role in the Veiled war, as would Xin and himself. That's what they were calling it already – the Veiled War – the galactic war to end all wars. He hoped this was correct.

So what now? The physical world was now too confining for him, and the concept of time had become nothing more than an illusion. Maybe he would do a little more exploring. After all, exploring the Galaxy was the reason he had come along with Xin in the first place, but now he could do it far more efficiently. His soul, spirit or whatever he had become could transport instantly through space-time, bypassing the need to travel at near light-speed. Even space folds were no longer necessary, and far too slow.

He teleported himself out of Utayatu's atmosphere to instantly reappeared just outside the Milky Way Galaxy, as easily as he had transported the Veiled ship. His mind reached out to the Galaxy below – exploring, observing, learning, and he began to understand.

There was still a great deal of life growing and evolving. There were a few races, even now, preparing to travel to the planets or stars nearest to them. The Veiled didn't effect as much change on this Galaxy as he had thought. Granted, some of the most advanced races had been eliminated, but for each one removed, two more would eventually take their place. The Galaxy would continue on, and find balance once again. It was like a living organism, and the Veiled had been an invading virus.

Had he not removed them, they would have eventually died out, or would have been destroyed by resident races. The Galaxy was just too big, far too big for even the Veiled to dominate it all. But they weren't trying to dominate it all, and that was the point. He understood that now. It all came down to the indefinite continued progress of existence and events, or

simply, time.

Dave looked beyond the Galaxy. His thoughts spread out in every direction. He observed a hundred galaxies, a thousand galaxies, a million galaxies, and still there was no end. The Universe seemed infinite, but he had been spreading himself to thin, sending his mind outward in all directions at once. This wasn't working. He needed to go in a straight line in only one of the infinite possible directions, and he needed to go personally.

He focus a single thought to a single point, and teleported himself trillions of light-years through the fabric of the cosmos. He was now much farther out than his thoughts had been, but it was still too slow. Dave concentrated harder, teleporting farther and faster, continuing on in the same bearing. Every jump through space seemed like a still image instantly replacing the last like a cosmic slide show. With every new jump there was a drastic shift of the galaxies and their positions – poof, poof, poof. Nothing much changed – poof, poof, poof. It was always blackness stippled with countless white spherical or elliptical dots that were the billions of galaxies.

He continued until there were no new galaxies appearing before him, only a vast sea of darkness. And still he continued on – poof, poof, poof. He stopped to look back at his starting point, and to his surprise, all the galaxies of his known Universe combined to form a dull, multi-coloured sphere surrounded by black. What was going on? This didn't make any sense.

Dave expanded his mind outward in all directions. It was then he realized something amazing. It wasn't the only Universe ball floating in the blackness. There were countless similar spheres, stuffed with galaxies, all around him in every direction, and possibly out to infinity. Each one was an individual Universe, and all of them looked like blurry, coloured marbles. The Universe was in reality, many Universes – it was a Multiverse! There wasn't just one Big Bang, there were many, and they were all at various stages of expansion. Some were duller and larger, expanding ever outward, others, smaller and brighter, in their earlier stages of creation.

He didn't know how or why, but his new acquired abilities could sense these subtle changes. Not only could he scan across incredible distances, he could also perceive the extremely small and fast, like the subatomic particles in the immeasurable darkness that surrounded him.

These multiple Universes were an astounding discovery, but it wasn't the ultimate answer he was looking for. He initially wanted to see what was beyond the Universe, but now the obstacle had been expanded to this Multiverse. It was like breaking through a locked door only to find a brick wall behind it.

Dave wanted to go on. He could still find his way back to his Galaxy, but if he continued on this reckless path of curiosity, he would eventually become lost. He somehow knew this. It was a feeling that intensified with each teleport outward. He so wanted to see what was beyond the beyond, but he didn't dare continue. He risked losing himself in the unimaginable vastness. Dave was like an H₂O molecule that wanted to explore the Pacific Ocean, but was only able to explore a pond. Or was it just a puddle?

It was all a cruel joke. Nothing much had really changed. He was still that man looking up at the stars in the night sky, and wondering what was out there. He thought he was a god, but he was just someone who could see a little farther. Sygoss had said that even he didn't know what was beyond the Universe. He now understood what he meant. He too was not without limits. Dave was still in the same boat as everyone else. He was to a human, as a human was to an ant, but the Multiverse still had the last laugh.

His recent explorations seemed to take only a few minutes, but on Earth, decades had passed. Earth... He smiled on the inside. In his mind's eye he saw Marilyn Monroe's lips forming into a broad smile, and thought about Xin.... He decided to end his travels for now. Dave focused on

his Universe, his Galaxy, his Earth, and went home.

It was the late 21st Century. A black silhouette of once human origin orbited the Earth. He was undetectable by any technologies from below. Dave focused, slowing his perception of the passage of time.

Earth, in its majestic expanse, slowly rotated beneath him. The deep blue of the Pacific Ocean was below him, and the many clouds above it looked like frost forming on its smooth, glassy surface. How beautiful the world looked from this distance. How much more beautiful it could be without the pollutants he detected in the atmosphere. It was a view every 'captain of industry' should experience. A view that would change the minds of all but the most corrupt. It still wasn't too late to save the planet, but it was ultimately up to them. He only hoped that reason would dominate over greed, and soon. Time, however illusionary, was running out.

He didn't want to interfere with the Earth. Like all the other races in this Galaxy, they needed to find their own way, even if their way ended in self-destruction. Sure, he would destroy that asteroid the size of Australia heading directly for Earth, but it wouldn't be here for hundreds of years.

Dave's thoughts reached out to all of Earth's communications satellites. Every media device was accessed – from holo-TVs to old tech radios, from phone implants to 3D readers. His approximated voice came through every device, in every country, and in every language. "You are a discordant, fleeting species. I will not interfere with your smaller noises. Perhaps, someday, the people of Earth will find harmony, but until that day... I SHALL KEEP WATCH."

THE END

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