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THE CARETAKERS



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Chapter One

The Awakenings

Waking up was like being born. At first there was no memory, only awareness. It was dark. It was cold. Light, breaking through the darkness, expanded overhead, much like the journey from the womb. The primal sense of sight and hearing alerted him to a simple fact: he was alive, but frightened and very cold. Warm air now blew over him, as he was extracted. He was, in the second stage of cognition, in a strange, unfamiliar place in which a face, which meant nothing in his present state, loomed overhead. Like an infant, fearful of the experience, he gasped his first breath of air and screamed in terror, as he was unhooked from the life support system and monitors inside his chamber, raised up out of the chamber, shivering from the cold, and exposed to a flood of light.

“There-there, Captain Drexel,” the attendant murmured. “I’ll get you warmed up. You’ve been asleep for seventeen years. You’re memory will return.”

As his vision cleared, he could make out, to his horror, the features of his mid-wife: a creature with two orbs on each side of a protuberance with a vibrating slit below that uttered gibberish as it jerked him about. Of course, in his current state of awareness, he was unfamiliar with humans. Dragged out by his attendant, almost naked, he was hauled by his armpits across the floor limply at first, his legs too numb to move. As he began thrashing about weakly under the attendants’ control, he was strapped onto stool. A spray of warm water cascaded suddenly from above. Inside this second, translucent chamber, full cognition came slowly for him as he was thawed out from the intense cold. The comforting spray triggered his first reflection: he had been in an awful place; now he was safe. Flashes of memory—people, places, and events, blinked off and on in his head. The attendant poked her head in now to check on him, smiled, then shut the door. With sudden insight, he recognized what she was. She no longer frightened him. He had seen such creatures before. On the other side of this door to this room, the shadow of a second specter, similar to the first, rapped on the door.

“This is Doctor Max Rodgers,” he called cheerily, “Calm down captain; we all go through it. It’s cold, dark, and scary at first. Sandra and Woody, our android medics, pulled me out too, and dragged me to the other shower. Nicole, my assistant’s in that one now. Like you I was a blank sheet at first. I didn’t remember a thing. Then it all came back...”

For the ‘newborn,’ it sounded like gibberish once more. He was, as Doctor Rodgers explained, a blank sheet, unable to comprehend or communicate. The English language he had grown up with was no more intelligible to him than Sanskrit or Chinese. Cognition came sluggishly. Without familiar reference points, for that matter, his emotions were basic and his reactions instinctual.

“His strength’s returning,” he heard the attendant say on the other side of the door. “He can’t understand you, Doctor Rodgers, but this man is strong. He’ll come around soon. You took a full hour.”

“You’re right, Sandra!” The doctor sighed. “I scarcely remember that ordeal. I’m still remembering things. It doesn’t come all at once. We’ll let him sit it out awhile; he’ll come to. We’ve got nine more to go.”

All of this, of course, remained gibberish to the captain. While the doctor checked on his assistant Nicole, the android called Sandra looked in on him again. Something stirred in him

then—a primal urge all animals have. The android, a beautiful face and shapely body stood in the doorway. Reminiscent of a twentieth century Barbie doll, with a shapely body but devoid of facial expression, except a perfect smile, the creature known as Sandra, moving expeditiously, reached through the cascading water to check his pulse and look into his eyes, then extracted herself just as quickly from the shower. The being, identified as Captain Abraham Drexel, still restrained on the stool, wept inexplicably. Still too weak to attempt an escape, he continued to thrash about, then, as the warm, soothing water sprayed his body, fragments of memory, these pieces more important than the others, finally surface in his mind, coming together like pieces to a puzzle. Moving forward, in front of his life experiences, was a fact that came passively at this stage. The two specters had called him Captain Abraham Drexel. After hearing him called this, he understood the words, realizing that this must be true... But captain of what? What did this mean? Though comprehension of words was returning to him, the name sounded alien to him, as if it belonged to someone else. Floating around this piece to the puzzle, the other fragments fell into place, like icebergs on a dark sea ...Unicorp...Triton...Captain Drexel...What did they mean?

Startled by the sudden shriek of another other ‘newborns,’ somewhere on the ship, he tugged at the restraints on his wrists and lap. He could hear the person the doctor called Nicole crying in the next shower. So who were those people? He wondered. Where was he? Why was he placed in restraints? Looking down, he noticed a pair of briefs covering his genitals and rear. The name Unicorp was stenciled on the waste band. It meant nothing to him yet. Jogging his memory was the tattoo on his arm—a heart, which he vaguely understood now, and the name Rosalie inside. Again, the name meant nothing, but he knew these reference points were important. One of the voices, high pitched and awful, unnerved him greatly. It was familiar...a woman, like Rosalie. It wasn’t the one called Nicole. She was quiet now. It was someone in the next compartment. Why was she screaming like that? Already his primal memories—birth, fear, and confusion—were fading. In their place, an urgency filled him, almost intuitively, based upon the training drilled into him back on Earth but also upon the few pieces to the mental puzzle already put into place. After a while, a second screaming voice, deep and hoarse, which made it more unsettling than the first, jarred his mind further. Like the other woman, the voice was familiar. In a wave of cognition, triggered by his understanding so far, more pieces fell together, less haphazardly. First came early recollections—family, childhood, high school, and a cherub-faced woman, he recognized as Rosalie. Next, more significantly, he realized, were those most current pieces—Unicorp... Neptune... Triton ... and an awareness of other crew members (whose names returned sluggishly) on the ship. Though groggy from years of suspended animation, Captain Abraham Drexel called out loudly, “Doc. This is Abe. Report to the ship showers. We have to talk.”

Soon, Doctor Max Rodgers and a second android, this one a male, Abe recognized as Woody, arrived. Reaching in to turn off the shower, Woody apologized, unfastened his fetters, and helped him to his feet. A robe was handed to him, which Woody helped him slip into, while the doctor checked his vital signs with a scanner. Standing before the doctor and the android, listening to the remainder of the ship awaken fitfully from its long sleep, Captain Abraham Drexel took command of his ship.

The puzzle was almost complete. Captain Abraham Drexel, or Abe he preferred being called, commanded Unicorp’s Phoenix, an advanced, exploratory ship, for an internationally

sponsored mission to Triton, Neptune's largest moon. The name Unicorp, he recalled, was an abbreviation of 'United Nations International Mining Corporation', minus the m, a corporate body of friendly nations, with a common interest: mining the outer reaches of the solar system. Since the Asteroid belt's mineral resources would be played out within a generation, and the Lunar, Martian, and European potential had proved to be scientifically important but commercially disappointing enterprises, Unicorp was looking ahead for a new sector of the solar system to begin mining operations, with a secondary mission of scientific exploration. From the first, because of the long range results implied, the urgency of the enterprise seemed exaggerated to Captain Drexel and his crew. Considering the present tensions on Earth caused by the dearth in mineral resources and fuel, it might, in addition to being an exploration for minerals and fuel, be seen as a symbolic action to galvanize the friendly nations and divert public attention from the problems in the world. This possibility was discussed by crewmembers before take off. "Why all the secrecy?" they asked the captain, who didn't know anymore than them. "What was the hurry?" they asked the androids, their caretakers, as they were placed in hibernation as soon as the ship was in space.

Abe, who was prepped for cryogenic sleep and quickly stuck into his chamber just like them, felt helpless when he couldn't answer his crew's questions. None of them realized that they would have to suffer hibernation so soon. Among thousands of candidates for the Phoenix Mission, they had felt honored to be selected—the captain most of all, but the glamour of being a stellarnaut, as they were called by the media, wore off almost completely when reality set in. One moment, as a select crowd of dignitaries cheered them as they entered the Phoenix, they were heroes and heroines; and the next moment, inside the ship and in space they were confronted with seventeen years of forced hibernation—in the thinking of Carla Mendoza, the atmospheric scientist and meteorologist, guinea pigs, testing out the effects of hibernation in space. Was Carla right? Where we merely a scientific experiment? wondered the captain now.

For those moments, during his personal ordeal, he felt naïve and foolish, emotions he was certain all of them felt. Not one of them, including himself, who, as a seasoned military man should know better, had asked enough questions. The original tour of the vessel days before takeoff was intended to acquaint them with the main features of the Phoenix, including the spectacular window before the ship's controls, the captain's table, the kitchen and galley, and, in the centripetal portion of the ship's compartments, the building materials for Triton, equipment, and living quarters of crewmembers when the ship was circling Neptune's moon. It had all been exciting for them. Just think of it! They marveled as they looked ahead to takeoff. They were a new breed of explorers, not astronauts or rocketeers of old but stellarnauts, reaching the farthest reaches of the solar system—Triton, Neptune's dark, mysterious moon.

Now, as Abe thought about it, he had second thoughts. He was certain his crew did too. It all seemed like a leap of faith. The purpose of exploring a distant moon for resources that couldn't be realized for a generation had been accepted without argument by the Phoenix's crew. They had trusted the scientists and their trainers. No one thought it necessary to ask questions about the one compartment the flight team had glossed over: the cryogenic chambers. It was something they just had to do. As the crew shared their experiences of going in and then, after seventeen years, out of the hibernation chambers, they expressed the same reflections as the captain. In the words of Hans Rucker, the German zoologist, they had walked like lambs to the slaughter. All of them were worried about the what lie ahead: the great unknown beyond takeoff. Now that the captain thought about it, he realized they were all too self-conscious to act like cowards. The honor and glory had blinded them. Everyone wanted to be brave, especially

the captain, and yet the mission had been cloaked in mystery from the beginning. The top secret nature of the enterprise should have implied another purpose for the enterprise other than merely the exploration of Triton. The very name Phoenix, the legendary bird rising from the dead, had an ominous ring to it. Why hadn't the good scientists named it a more appropriate name, such as the Triton, since that was its destination or given it a traditional title in honor of previous ships such as the Vanguard II, the previous combination space ship and space station sent to Europa, Jupiter's Earth-like moon. All of the questions the crewmembers should have asked before they entered hibernation had vanished from their minds for seventeen years. Now, after cognition returned, they had flooded back—all boiling down to one question: what came next?

"The android caretakers are acting strangely," Abe noted warily.

"Something isn't right!" Carla Mendoza muttered aloud.

The remaining crewmembers nodded in agreement. What they remembered now was a suspicion they shared before sleep, which ebbed back slowly as would a murky dream. It was not just the questions they should have asked or the fear of the unknown now. It was a feeling, Ingrid, the Canadian geologist, explained to the botanist from China, Ling Soon: that tingling at the back of the neck or chill up the spine. Ingrid's fear, Abe realized, mirrored his own. All of his crew had been through a traumatic ordeal. They reminded him of frightened children more than stellarnauts. Trying to shake off his own fears and ignore the suspicions shared by his crew, Abe faced the current reality. Aboard Unicorp's Phoenix, piloted and attended by androids, as the humans had remained in hibernation (also called cryogenic sleep⁰, the stellarnauts destined for the outer rim of the solar system, were close to their destination. They had slept almost the entire journey, over seventeen years, in a dreamless condition resembling a coma. Now, Captain Drexel recalled light-headedly, they were close to the beginning of the Triton project. Because of the state of the world, a dark undertone to mission had plagued him, but it was time to take control of the ship in both thought and deed. Right now he was concerned about his crew. On board, still suffering rebirth after space travel, his shipmates, which included both scientists and his staff, had groped as he had done, as sleepwalkers in this pageant, gradually becoming aware of who they were, why they were here, and the importance of their mission for Unicorp and Earth.

While dressing themselves with Woody or Sandy's help after their showers, they had, when they came to, barely recalled the previous ordeal. According to Doctor Max Rodgers, there would be no memories of the sleep, itself, and only snatches of recall from the awakening, which would disappear, as newborn's first memories, almost entirely as the days progressed. In his sleek, body-fitting jump suit with the Unicorp log over a pocket and matching sneakers, except for the eagle on his shoulders that indicated his rank, Captain Drexel's attire resembled the other crewmembers assembled in the conference room. Now that Phoenix had begun circling Triton, they had been awakened for their mission. Woody and Sandra withdrew into the background to await service, while Skip, the android captain, and Rusty, the pilot, stood close-by, until Captain Drexel and Lieutenant Sheila Livingston, respectively, their human counterparts, were up to the task. When the captain called them to his table, it was expected by their creators, that the other two androids, Sandra and Woody, would emerge from their pods, like proverbial vampires, as servants to the humans, but with the advanced artificial intelligence built into them, their pods were never used. Unwittingly, the robotologists had made the androids their masters.

Before exploration, the four caretakers understood that all twelve members of the crew would have to be mentally and physically ready. Their only function was to preserve their

human cargo and direct the mission while they were asleep, which was most of the time. Now the humans were awake. Captain Abraham Drexel must, from this point on, oversee all divisions of the ship—a task that struck him as overwhelming in his current state of mind. Gandy Supra, the ship’s engineer, who would be in charge of the hyper-drive of the vessel and Mbuto Sawala, the electronics expert in charge both the computers and electronic circuitry of the Phoenix, looked around in child-like wonderment at the surrounding command center, as if they couldn’t comprehend where they were. Second-in-command, Abe recalled, was Lieutenant Sheila Livingston, one of the shrieking voices he heard upon awakening, now sitting in a befuddled daze beside him. The others, all scientists—Hans Rucker (the second panic-stricken voice heard) and Ling Soon—the ship’s zoologist and botanist, respectively, Ingrid Westfall—geologist, Carla Mendoza (atmospheric meteorologist), Elroy Simpson (habitat architect and project representative), and last but not least Said Rammal, the robotologist overseeing the androids and robotic controls of the ship, were also badly hung over. Of all the crewmembers, Sheila and Nicole were the worst of the lot. Doctor Rodgers assistant Nicole, in fact, who sat in the shower next to Abe, had been too far-gone to help Max resuscitate the crew. Everyone, including himself had only vague reflections of their ordeal. In various stages of giddiness, shock, and discomfort they knew only that the long, journey from Earth to Neptune’s mysterious moon, in which they had lain in a dreadful, dreamless state, was over.

The adventure, they understood, was about to begin. No one wanted think about their return to Earth when they would have to repeat the state of cryogenic sleep. Such a state, they had been warned during training but managed to sublimate when boarding the Phoenix, was not really sleep at all but rather deepest hibernation in which the entire body is frozen cryogenically in a chamber, fed and monitored intravenously throughout the ordeal, and checked constantly by attendants during the period of hibernation or suspended animation—a state resembling deepest anesthesia used in surgery—an almost comatose condition which can’t be recalled upon awakening. A month, a year, or, the stellarnauts cases, seventeen years, seemed like a mere moment in time. Despite the lack of recall of the experience and difficulty remembering anything until cognition set in, a feeling of great anxiety similar to infants yanked from the birth canal, which the designers could not have foreseen, now left everyone in a pitiful state. As a result afterwards, a dulled expectation took hold of Phoenix’s men and women for what lie ahead. The greatest emotion shared by the crewmembers was relief. Something dreadful lay behind them—a dark period, followed by violent movements, shadows, and screams.

Captain Drexel, with his full faculties, used an archaic form of address: “Ladies and gentleman of the Phoenix, welcome back to the Triton Project. We’ve passed a most important milestone: 4.3 billion kilometers of interstellar space—seventeen years. Your memories are coming back to you, some more, some less. Nevertheless, let me remind you that you are, as the French would say, the *crème de la crème*—the very best in your fields and technology. Having climbed aboard the Phoenix and placed immediately into your chambers, however, you were like babes experiencing infancy. Doctor Rodgers explained it to me. Now, having remembered how to talk and comprehend, your heads are filled with data—at this point rather muddled and confusing, but you’re humans again! Be patient; your training will all come back to you. Only the engineer, communications expert, my lieutenant, and myself are familiar with the controls and machinery of our ship, but even our minds are dulled by the sleep. Though trained back on Earth, none of us have had practical experience in space.” “Ho-ho,” he tried making light of it, “that’s why we have the andies. Well Skip, Rusty, Sandra, and Woody, we’re awake now. We’re taking control. We’ve got a job to do!

“First things first, though,” he added, seeing the discomfort of members of the group. “Some of you have queasy tummies from all those chemicals pumped into your veins during sleep. Most of you are anxious for your first dinner in seventeen years. While you slept, your bodies remained in limbo. You needed very little nourishment. Strangely enough, you might not even be hungry, but it’s important that you eat. You’ll also have to exercise awhile and brush up on your specialties and understanding of the ship. The andies will guide us. Before we go any further Woody and Sandra will serve us all with prepared dinners and drink. I have no idea what that is.” “Sheila,” he ordered the droopy-eyed lieutenant and executive office, “go with Sandra and Woody and check the kitchen. It should be up and running. Make sure it goes smoothly. Let’s bring out the menus. Not everyone’s ready for solid food.”

Directing his voice to the scientific portion of the crew, Abe’s words failed to rouse them from their lethargy and shock: “Carla, Hans, Ling, and Ingrid when your up to snuff you can start mapping out your strategies.”

“What strategies?” muttered Hans. “Triton’s a dead world. What are Ling and I supposed to do?”

“Come on doctor Rucker,” Abe chided him. “Even I, who flunked biology in college, know this: as research scientists, you and Ling will hunt for alien microbes suspected on Triton. Don’t you remember? You two specialized in this research.”

“Elroy,” he directed his voice at the traumatized architect, “you will have the biggest job on Triton. I assume those pre-fabricated building and the construction equipment are easily handled. I can’t believe they didn’t send assistants along.”

“Uh huh.” Elroy grunted.

“Down there, as project leader,” Abe reminded him, “you’ll be in control. I hope you’re up to that!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Elroy waved impatiently.

They were a sorry lot, Abe decided. He was in no mood, himself, to stand before them, delivering welcoming and encouraging speeches.

“Phew!” he said, plopping down into his chair, “I’m sure this was how newborns felt after arrival. “Just think, folks, we have to do it again—on the way back. Some fun, huh?”

“It was awful,” Nicole exclaimed. “I scarcely remember it. It’s like awakening from a nightmare and forgetting the plot—a big black hole in my mind.”

“Yes, indeed!” Mbuto nodded. “I understand why it’s called the dark sleep. I don’t relish doing that again!”

“It was awful.” Ingrid stared reflectively into space. “I wonder if hell is like this. I said a prayer before Sandra stuck that needle in me, one my mother taught me in England: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

“How ridiculous!” Carla sneered. “That awfulness had nothing to do with God!”

“I am thinking,” Gandy said, scratching his bristly chin, “of the time I had a tooth pulled in Bombay and woke up like this.” “No memory.” He snapped his fingers. “Poof!”

“The dark sleep is more than birth,” Said Rammal, the robotologist, reflected. “It’s like resurrection. Being raised from the dead.”

“Now-now.” Doctor Rodgers chortled, shaking his head. “Let’s not be sacrilegious.”

“Right!” Ingrid frowned at Carla and Said. “Have some respect!”

Abe’s efforts had failed to perk up Said, Elroy, Mbuto, Gandy, and the silent, deadpan-faced scientists slouched around the table. Ingrid, as was her nature, put a religious spin on their

experience, but only the stouthearted Max Rodgers, the first crewmember awakened from sleep, was in fine spirits this hour. Looking down at them, as Sheila shuffled in with the androids bearing their food, he thought of something else he might say, but decided against it. What did you say to people who had gone through such an ordeal? His speech, which seemed appropriate enough, had been a pep talk, essentially welcoming them back to consciousness and their roles as stellarnauts on the ship, but nothing could have prepared them for what they had gone through or enliven their spirits quite yet for the exploration ahead. It was still too early. As the captain, he had to be upbeat. He was thankful that Max, the ship's doctor, tried to be cheerful too. Everyone else, however, were still in aftershock, the direct result of cryogenically induced hibernation—a feeling that wouldn't wear off completely for several hours. The artificial gravity of the ship, caused by the centripetal wheel circling the vessel and the paragravity on the bridge, barely half that of Earth, should have made them feel light and buoyant, but instead they felt heavy-lidded and thick tongued. Their bodies and minds were weighted down after years of idleness. He felt the same way himself, and it took all his energy not to plop down like a rag doll and, like the others, stare into space. To his credit, Max was making the same effort he was too.

In spite of their collective shock and the after-effects of the dark sleep, as Mbuto and Said had called their experience, he noted a spark of resolve appearing in many of their eyes, as if to say, "it's over. We're ready. Let's get on with it!" A few, Ingrid and Ling, had smiles on their faces now, as if happy just to be alive.

With these thoughts in mind, Abe decided to say a few more words, this time about their experience in the cryogenic chambers. "We all know why we're here." He looked around the table. "What we have done during our voyage to Triton and will do on its surface far surpasses all previous missions. It's a feat that was a great milestone for science, in general, as well as the Triton Project. We proved that it could be done. But this is a long range goal. By the time we return to Earth we'll all be senior citizens. We are the first stellarnauts—men and women placed in cold storage chambers in what is called hibernation, suspended animation, cryogenic slumber," "or," he gave Mbuto a nod, "the dark sleep. Such a comatose sleep saved our physical bodies and minds from destruction, as it will for stellarnauts in the future. You emerged intact, but not without some psychological effects. Some of you are feeling exhausted, as if you hadn't slept in months. Others are still disoriented. All of us suffer the aftershock of that cold darkness and jolt of rebirth. Like you, my memory's coming back." "As a matter of fact," he added with a chuckle, "something popped into my head: the warning from our training that less than one percent of crewmembers may experience a degree of psychosis. That seems pretty low. The odds favor us. But in accordance with the mission plan, our good doctor Max Rodgers, also a psychologist, will test each one of us. It's a simple test. No one goes onto the surface who's not ready. Everyone must be fit. This goes for everyone—both the scientific and operational crew."

That moment, Sheila, Sandra, and Woody returned with trays of pre-packaged meals, each package set before each crewmember, along with a packaged mug of juice. In the compartments on the plastic plates were items Abe recognized as meat, vegetables, and a dessert. Straws protruded from the bags of juice. The meat could be almost anything—pork, beef, chicken, but he recognized cream corn, string beans, and a slightly overdone brownie. In the future, he explained to his crew, the androids would prepare more elaborate meals. What they had in front of them conformed to the light dinner required for people emerging from hibernation—nothing too excessive, exotic, or spicy. Not knowing the long term effects of such a state, Max explained to them, their benefactors were being on the safe side. The reaction was mixed among the crew. Some of them were disappointed at the meager dinner, while a few, Hans and

Gandy, weren't hungry at all. Most of the crew, however jumped right in, without complaint, just happy to be fed.

Carla Mendoza was one of the disappointed ones. "Is this supposed to be breakfast, lunch, or supper?" she studied her meal. "In space all we have is a twenty-four clock. According to my watch, it's eighteen hundred or six o'clock in the evening Earth reckoning—supper time. I didn't expect ribs or filet mignon, but they might at least have made it look attractive. What is this meat anyhow?"

"I think it's Salisbury steak," Ingrid said through a mouthful of food. "It's not so bad. Try the string beans and cream corn."

"The veggies are good!" Nicole agreed.

"I say!" Elroy grumbled, stabbing it with a plastic fork. "This brownie's as hard as a rock!"

"Ach." Hans made a face. "It don't matter to me. After seventeen years, I should could eat horse, but I'm not hungry."

"I'm not so hungry either." Sheila made a face. "I'm thinking of maybe soup or Jell-O. I don't like the looks of this. It looks like hospital food."

"I agree." Gandy nodded. "I remember my experience after I had my operation. Ugh, no appetite, and I was unconscious then for only a couple of hours!"

"This will pass shortly," Max reassured them. "Our benefactors were afraid of this. You folks must try to eat. Eat what you can. But if you think it's going to make you sick, by all means eat later. Your appetites will return shortly. At least hydrate yourselves." "I'm encouraged that most of you still have appetites." He looked around approvingly at the others. "Tomorrow, when you're your old selves, we'll begin getting you in shape—physically and mentally. Triton can wait!"

After making it through their first meal after intravenous feeding for seventeen years, the scientists and operational crew followed the captain on a guided tour and refresher course of the Phoenix. The basic physical energies returned slowly to them as they scanned the ship's structure and controls, and yet recollection came quickly to them as they listened to the captain's voice. Hearing the background hum of the vessel and murmur of their crewmates, their long-shuttered eyes were greeted with the computers, readout screens, and blinking lights of the flight deck, scientific lab, engine room, and docking area where the landing craft (rovers) were stored. The Phoenix, they were reminded was both a ship and space station. A centripetal sphere—the space station portion, which created artificial gravity—circled the ship. Interconnecting corridors connected the sphere with the vessel, which was divided into the ship's control center forward and the starboard and port propulsion system on each side of the ship. In the compartments of the centripetal sphere there were sleeping quarters to be used during their work on Triton, a modest kitchen and mess hall, recreation and exercise room, medical room, science lab, and the building materials and equipment area—the largest number of compartments on the ship. As the scientists and operating crew were re-introduced to their duty stations, which had only been shown to them during their training back on Earth, they recalled their special jobs as stellarnauts. As they would soon discover, there was much about the Phoenix they didn't know. For the scientists and medical team, their education and experience also surfaced, as they fingered their equipment, stared quizzically into their monitors, and tried making sense out of their decision to cut themselves off from the human race.

After addressing the crew, Abe asked Skip if he had notified Mission Control at Triton Project Headquarter about their successful awakenings and the satisfactory physical and mental status of the scientists, medical personnel, and operational crew. It was a perfunctory question since he knew very well Skip had done just that. After a short pause, Skip responded, after a few seconds of hesitation, with a simple nod. It would, of course, Abe understood, take four hours to reach Earth and then four hours for a reply from Mission Control. He assumed that Skip had just performed this function. He didn't know, of course, about the report given by Thomas Wayland, Mission Control Director. It was obvious, however, by Skip's hesitation, that he was holding something back. With forced calm, Abe turned his attention to acclimatizing the men and women to their new home, chatting with each of them, as though he hadn't a care in the world. Despite his reassuring smile and chitchat with crewmembers, though, he thought about Skip's delayed reaction now. What did it mean? he wondered, as he watched Skip return to his place on the bridge as though he was still in control. Though he had felt certain of a reply from Earth, Abe shared his misgivings with the operational crew. Why weren't the androids more talkative now? Before they left Earth, they were fountains of information about the ship, its potential, and the mission ahead. Now they said little. Said, whose role as robotic specialist, understood the nuances of androids best, watched everything they did at this point. It was that feeling one had, Mbuto explained to Abe, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The time since Abe asked Skip about the message, which was not clear to him, seemed to drag on forever. Much could have happened during their long voyage, he confessed to Max. Max, as both physician and psychiatrist, was his closest confidant on the ship. Earth was seventeen years older. Science, itself, could have changed significantly since their odyssey began. The sacrifice they made had been heroic, but time had passed them by. The people they had known on earth had aged seventeen years, while they, in their dark sleep hadn't age at all. When they finally returned, their family and friends would be, at least physically, over thirty-four years older than them, while they, thanks to cryogenic preservation, would be no less for the wear. Far more important was a thought that all of the crew tried to suppress. Abe knew it was on all of their minds. When they had left the earth, the threat of military conflict was still serious. What if the final conflict everyone feared had finally occurred?

"If it occurred," Max replied thoughtfully, "it likely happened years ago and Skip's afraid of the reaction it will have with the crew. There'll be no reply forthcoming if that's the case. You said he nodded and didn't say anything. That was an acknowledgment that he contacted Earth. He might be hiding the truth. I hope that's not the case."

"Yeah." Abe heaved a sigh. "I'm worried about the crew. If he drops a bombshell on me, I don't want them to hear it yet. These androids are rather direct!"

As Abe finished his re-acquaintance tour on the ship, he felt a sudden, inexplicable distrust for Skip and his co-pilot, Rusty, especially after they returned to the command console to take control. Sheila, now her old self, having seen him crook his finger at her, rose up to join him. When they reached the captains chair and pilots chair, respectively, facing a panoramic window of space, including the growing bluish outline of Triton below, Abe turned to Skip and Rusty, the androids on duty, who had acted as captain and pilot of the ship as he and Sheila had slept. In spite of being the most advanced generation of androids, they retained that same expressionless demeanor of robots as they went about their business, until this moment, thought the captain. Skip was actually frowning, concern registering faintly on his perfect face. Abe, of course, hadn't expected a response from earth for about eight hours. What the captain expected to find in the database, though, was a record of their journey during the seventeen years of

hibernation, which included questions from Earth and answers from Skip directly on the status of the ship and crew. Almost immediately before moving Skip aside and taking the captain's chair, he sensed something terribly wrong. Noticing the frown on the captain's face and what followed, Sheila uttered a startled gasp. Reaching down to the seated captain, Skip gripped his wrist firmly and spoke.

"Captain," he began gently, "there's something wrong.... I couldn't wake you and the others. What good what it do? While you were all sleeping, Earth stopped transmitting."

"What do you mean *stopped transmitting*?" Abraham looked down at his screen. Exhaling deeply, he ran his hand through his hair. Skip moved Sheila politely aside, taking the pilot's seat, tapping the keyboard a moment until finding the ship's log. By then, however, Abe had found the log on his own. It was evident, he soon discovered, that entries in the log had stopped right after the three year milestone in space. Data showing chatter during and directly after the launch and Skip's report about the cryogenic enclosures being safely secured was continued until that point, stopping suddenly, and followed by repeated efforts by the android captain to make further contact, but there were no further replies from Earth, only line after line of the same message: Phoenix to Earth.... Phoenix to Earth..." After these entries, as Abraham would have done himself, Skip tried to contact the Mars colony and Europa Space Station in order to solve the mystery and, to the captains dismay, they too were silent. Though the effort was futile, Abe studied the data again frantically, hoping Skip had missed something. For Mars and Europa, however, as was the case with Earth, Skip's communications lead to a dead end.

By now it was all Sheila could do not to panic.

"This is all a mistake!" sputtered Abe. "It has to be. No Transmission? There must be a glitch. Something's wrong on our side; it has to be." "Why didn't you tell me?" He whispered accusingly, looking back at the crewmembers wandering innocently through the ship.

"According to the log, transmission stopped fourteen years ago—only three years after we left!"

"I'm telling you *now*, sir, and there's no mistake," Skip said calmly. "I followed Mission Control's instructions. We've conducted tests—Rusty and I. I've personally checked everything that could have caused the break in communications. We couldn't awaken you during cryogenic sleep. After each four interval after sending my message, I received no response. What good what it be to awaken you and frighten the crew?" "I was given clear instructions by Mission Control," he added motioning to the screen: "Under no circumstances awaken the crew until reaching our destination.... The fact is, for whatever reason, Earth, the colony, and the space station simply aren't responding."

"Dear God!" The captain groaned. "This can't be.... It just can't!"

"What does this mean?... What does this mean?" muttered Sheila.

"I'm sorry sir." The android seemed to sigh. "The continual lack of transmission means we're cut off from Earth!"

After thinking a moment, Abe replied, "It has to be a malfunction somewhere. The fact that all three communications—Earth, Mars, and Europa—are non-responsive implies a problem on our side. Surely one of the three should have sent us a message—."

"Captain, listen," Skip interrupted, patting his arm. "There's something else I must tell you. The problems I had with Mars and Europa preceded Earth's last transmission. They are all somehow connected. Without explanation, Mission Control told me that the colonists and team on the space station were called back to Earth. This was before the point when Earth stopped transmitting. After three years of communicating with our people, everything went silent!"

“You didn’t hear anything else?” Abraham looked at him in disbelief. “What was the big mystery? If the colonists and those people on Europa’s pace station were called back, something dreadful must have happened!”

Skip nodded. Biting his lip, Abraham shuddered at the implications.

As the crewmembers wandered about, Abraham and Skip reviewed the messages from the ship and the responses from Mission Control again, this time only those on days right before the break in communications. As he had for the preceding three years, Skip had reported in without garnishments, giving details about the twelve crewmembers in their cryogenic chambers and the integrity of the ship and four hours later Mission Control responded cordially, at times, asking the android captain to make certain tests, which he reported back in a timely matter. There was nothing peculiar in the conversations with Mission Control. Also checking the recorded chatter between Mars and Europa to Earth, Abe found nothing in the dialogue overheard to indicate a problem looming. Finally, after checking the log one more time, he reached that point three years after takeoff once more when, following shortly after Mars and Europa stopped transmitting, all communication from Earth ended.

After the latest mental thunderclaps, he murmured, with great trepidation, “What about those problems back home—the looming conflict? Was there any chatter about this from Earth?”

“Only what we heard before takeoff,” Skip answered promptly. “You heard it all for yourself then.” “I must say sir,” he added hesitantly, “.... It’s troubling.”

“Troubling?” Abraham laughed hysterically. “That’s the understatement for a lifetime, Skip.” “You know what this probably means?” He sat staring out the window at Triton.

Skip’s voice grew faint then rose suddenly, exclaiming in a serene tone, “Yes, I know. I wasn’t told what happened, but, with the silence from Earth, it seemed obvious to me. Nevertheless, I was ordered by Mission Control not to alarm the crew. The Director of Mission Control, himself, Thomas Waverly, gave the order before we boarded the Phoenix: ‘No matter what happens,’ he said to me, ‘don’t awaken them until they reach Triton.’ We’re on our own captain!”

Abe now considered two simple alternatives: the android was lying for some inexplicable reason or, just as inexplicably, he was telling the truth. Nevertheless, he sensed, there was something else he wasn’t telling him. He was hiding something. It struck Abe as suspicious, even apocalyptic, that Thomas Waverly gave Skip such instructions, as if the director sensed or knew for certain that something was going to occur.

Giving Skip a jaundiced look, he tried to sublimate this suspicion as he had his darkest fear, which was now an unthinkable fact. It was enough for him to grapple with Earth’s destruction than worrying about whether Skip was telling the truth.

“Skip,” he kept his voice low, “before I break the news to the crew, lets go over the log one last time. I can’t wrap my mind around this. I know you had orders not to disturb our hibernation and you can’t show human emotion, but this isn’t a trifling matter. Sheila, my second-in-command, is already half out of her wits right now. Look at her! I don’t know how she passed the psych exam. That goes for some of the others. We can’t just drop this on them, until we’re absolutely sure.”

For several hours, after Abe sent one last message to Earth, the ship’s company, still in a befuddled state, continued checking out their duty stations as children at an amusement park and chattered light-heartedly about their experience. Abe ordered Sheila to get a hold of herself. “Mums the word!” He wrung his finger at her. “Tell no one yet about this!” In muted whispers,

he, Skip, and Rusty went over the ship's log, readouts, and controls—testing and re-testing the computers and equipment and searching the backup data base for signs of a electrical malfunction or some form of communication crash. A few of the crew looked over idly a few times then but were given ambiguous reasons by Abe for what they were doing and scooted off the bridge. When the captain was truly certain that the communications between Earth and the Phoenix had ceased three years after they began their odyssey in space, he felt a wrenching sense of helplessness, and yet, as stunned and perplexed as he was, recoiled at the thought of giving up. If it was true, they were, as Skip had said, alone now.

After an hour of going over everything he could think of, he knew there was no way he could hide the facts. Already, the awakened sleepers were curious to hear and see belated message from relatives and friends back on earth, something they had been promised years ago when the time came when they were awake. It was, Abe and Skip agreed, time to break the news.

Several of the crewmembers stood back near the captains table, sensing something was afoot. Sandra, the first android face Captain Drexel had seen upon awakening, was sent to gather the others still wandering around the space station. A certain, fleeting fondness for the Barbie-like android, lingered in Abe's mind. Her blond hair and blue eyes reminded him of Rosalie, the girl he left back on Earth, except that Sandra was too perfect. She didn't even blink. Rosalie had freckles, as did Rusty, the android pilot, whose cold, unflinching actions belied his Howdy-Doody face. Woody, Abe noted, was aptly named, since his Pinocchio stare and shiny face, in fact, looked wooden. Skip, of course, was Sandra's counterpart, the Ken doll of the group: dark brown hair, dead-fish brown eyes, and, contrasting these robot-like features, the only one of the four androids who seemed able to frown and smile.

Skip returned that moment to the captains chair, as Abraham stood, arms folded behind his back, studying the Phoenix compliment of Generation Eight androids. He wondered if the robotologists who created them had a sense of humor. It seemed doubtful to him that any of the crewmembers had ever heard of Barbie and Ken dolls or the Howdy-Doody or Pinocchio marionettes. Had his father not inherited a collection of twentieth century dolls and puppets from grandma Drexel, he wouldn't have made the connections, himself. Why hadn't they at least made them resemble current movie stars or singers. The features of Rusty and Woody, in particular, were slightly spooky, Woody especially, who looked the least human of them all. Why, for that matter, had they given them such silly, twentieth century names?

Abe realized begrudgingly that the androids, though lacking human personality traits, were, as their caretakers in space, superior in almost every way. Still bristling at the automatic gesture performed by Skip in reclaiming the captain's chair, he gazed reflectively out at Neptune's dark moon. "What does this all mean?" He muttered under his breath. We can't survive without the home planet! A puzzle, sinister at first, began forming in his mind. Piece by piece it surfaced, as he contemplated their dilemma.... The grand send-off given to the twelve stellarnauts, which ignored the chaos in the rest of the planet, the takeoff, which was far ahead of schedule as if they were escaping potential disaster, and the spaceship's docking at the station circling the planet, followed only days later by the crewmembers installment into twelve cryogenic chambers all seemed to fit a pattern. There was a contingency plan created by their benefactors in case global war broke out on Earth. There had to be! Abe told himself, as he considered the facts. The mission to Triton, which had been planned for years, was now replaced by the alternate plan.

Abe sensed that he was on to something. He didn't know yet how close he was to the truth. All he had now were suspicions, some of which were about Skip, the android captain, who had kept a secret from them. He sensed that there were greater secrets on the Phoenix. Skip's action of remaining on the bridge with his co-pilot was telling in itself.... There would be no change of command now, Abe realized. The image of Triton below him reflected a lost dream.

The panorama Neptune's dark moon, glowing in the great window, became an ominous backdrop to Abe's thoughts. As if he was in command now, Skip walked down the aisle separating the passenger seats of the ship toward the conference table, as Sandra, Woody, and Rusty ushered, by polite motions, the crewmembers to take their seats. This was, Abe realized quickly, an order he hadn't given. Taken back momentarily as the other men and women returned obediently to the table, Abe glanced with dismay as Skip stood at the head of the table, the symbolism again plain. These brazen acts by members of the non-human crew to escort the crew in, at Skip's bidding, and Skip's recent revelation, triggered an alarm in captain's mind.... Another piece to the puzzle it appeared, surfaced in Abe's brain, causing him to gasp. Was something more than a communication transmission problem afoot?

Once more, forced to hide his emotions to avoid panic among the crew, he looked protectively around at the men and women seated trustingly at the table. Taking note of their moods, Abe wondered if space psychosis would effect some of them. Most of them were still suffering from cryogenic shock that registered in various degrees, depending upon the previous mental strength of the one-time sleeper, and yet all of them were in much better spirits after wandering around the ship. This all changed when they were seated and realized that something was wrong. As they had suspected when Abe and Skip spent so much time pouring over the ship's database, something was afoot.

For the military-oriented Captain Drexel, disaster was always possible—on Earth and in space. So far, Gandy Supra, the ship's engineer and Mbuto Sawala, the communication officer, were holding it together. Doc Rodgers, while comforting his nervous assistant, was also trying to be calm. Though they must have shared the apprehension of the others after being recalled to the conference table, the three men were, he recalled, veterans. Looking expectantly at him that moment, though, Gandy and Mbuto signaled to Abe the same wide-eyed expression of the others, whispering back and forth, frowning, raising their eyebrows, and shaking their heads with alarm. With the exception of the geologist Ingrid Westfall, who was praying quietly to herself, the scientists sat in fearful silence. This was true for Sheila Livingston, the executive officer of the ship, who set a poor example to the others, and Said Rammal, the robotics expert on the ship, the most anxious member of the ship's company, who, Abe surmised, was shocked like himself by the androids presumptions and the fact that they stood at the four corners of the table as if standing guard, instead of being about their tasks. Before Skip announced the bad news in his cold indifferent way, Abe stood up and took control

“Ladies and gentleman,” he called out, raising a hand, “something has come up.”

“Why are Skip, Rusty, Sandra, and Woody at our meeting?” Said mumbled to himself.

“What is it? Tell us what?” croaked Sheila and Nicole.

“Skip and I have been at the console, checking the data base and conducting tests,” Abe continued, trying to divulge it delicately. “There's no easy way to tell you this.... Our log shows that transmission to Earth stopped three years after takeoff.... There have been no messages from Mission Control since then.”

A collective gasp rose up as Abe framed his words. “...You're all aware of the problems on Earth. I'm hoping that there isn't a connection. We'll keep on trying.... But I want you

people to remember who you are. Some of you are showing signs of hysteria. There's no point in falling to pieces. We're 2.7 billion miles from Earth!"

A second collective gasp now arose in the room. Nicole broke down into tears.

"I knew something was wrong!" cried Elroy. "It's happened! We're marooned in space!"

"Is this true captain?" Carla looked up at him. "Give it to us straight. What happened back on Earth. Did the Russians and Chinese let us have it? Was it global war?"

"I don't know." Abe shrugged helplessly. "I told you all I know."

"Gott im Himmel!" Hans shouted in German. "Das ist das Ende!"

"Not necessarily." Mbuto said hopefully, wiping his brow. "It could be an electrical glitch." "Right captain? Tell them, Abe: this is a complicated ship. Anything could go wrong!"

"Well, it's possible," Abe sighed, glancing at Skip. "Something *obviously* went wrong!"

"Really, captain?" Sheila clutched his wrist. "You don't sound certain. You mean something went wrong on Earth, don't you?"

"He's *not* certain!" Said gripped his forehead. "Earth is done for. The robots are now in control!"

"Stop it, Sheila." Abe looked down at the lieutenant. "You men get a hold of yourselves too!" "People!" He addressed everyone in his crew. "There's no point in panicking! We'll solve this together!" "This isn't the end!" He looked around at Elroy, Hans, and Said. "No more of that kind of talk!"

"I'm sorry, captain," Elroy's voice trembled. "That's simply not enough! Is this a temporary or permanent situation, captain? Or are we permanent castaways in space?"

"I mean what I said." Abe said hoarsely. "We've lost all communication—period! What part of the word *I don't know* don't you understand?"

"We're doomed!" Ling wrung her small hands. "My family on Earth is dead!"

With no more information to give his crew, Abe played for time, hoping that in due course they would somehow rectify this problem before most of the men and women had mental breakdowns or went mad.

"The Phoenix is still in good shape," he reasoned thoughtfully. "There's nothing wrong with our mission. We have a communication problem. That's all. The mechanical and electrical systems are functioning perfectly. We reached our destination. The very fact you survived hibernation in good order and we've gone this far proves we're not in trouble on the ship."

"Yeah, but there's big problem with Earth!" spat Hans.

"We're marooned, castaways, adrift," Elroy muttered, rotating his head. "Without a home planet, we're doomed!"

"Shut up!" Abe wrung his fist at them. "All of you!" He spread his arms. "Go to your quarters in the station, lie down, get some more rest while we sort this out. No more doomsday forecasting Elroy and Hans. We've had enough of that!"

Gandy stood up shakily now, his expression belying his words. "Yes, people. Listen to our captain. I am thinking that Mbuto is correct. Yes, in deed, it's a malfunction. Don't panic. There could be a technical issue here, nothing more!" "Oh, Vishnu, the protector," he mumbled to himself, "I'm too young to die!"

"Yea thou I walk through the shadow of death I shall fear no evil..." Ingrid now prayed aloud.

As Ingrid quoted the Twenty-third Psalm, no one moved from the space ship. For a moment, Abe felt as if a mutiny was brewing. Max was shaking his head in dismay and patting Nicole's wrist consolingly. Ignoring Abe's demand that she shape up, Sheila rocked back and

forth hugging herself in despair. While Ingrid continued to pray feverishly, Said, he noted with concern, seemed more fearful of the androids' assertive behavior, watching their every move. Elroy, inconsolable, gripped his head hysterically and cursed his fate, Hans pounded his head in despair, and Carla, who seemed more angry than anything else, clinched her fist and gnashed her teeth, a wild, trapped look in her eyes. That one percent ratio of space psychosis they had read in their mission handbooks appeared to be wrong. Right now, it occurred to Abe, almost the entire crew was going mad.

Chapter Two

Hidden Agenda

A silence settled over crewmembers. Inexplicably, instead of sitting at the conference table, most of them sat down in their designated flights seats on each side of the aisle in back of the bridge. With the backdrop of Ingrid's prayer ceasing, the sudden quiet seemed more terrible than the noise. Unlike takeoff and their trip to the space station, there were no smiles and looks of expectation in the group, only dull defeatist looks, as their last shreds of sanity seemed to slip away. No one was immune to panic. Gandy, Mbuto, and Max, who had grimly accepted providence, were also plunged into despair, and even Captain Drexel felt the tendrils of fear. In the beginning, when they embarked upon their voyage to Triton, they were certain where they were going. A great adventure lie before them and they were confident that one day they would return home.... Now, without a home planet, they were at a point of no return, on course for the unknown.

Still anchored at the four corners of the table, the androids waited patiently for their moment, their composure contrasting the behavior of the humans in the room. As Max attempted unsuccessfully to comfort Nicole, Gandy and Mbuto shuffled up the aisle, taking seats on the bridge, as if waiting for their captain to prove his mettle and take command. Because of the androids' manners, Said, whose hysteria was tempered by distrust, appeared ready to make his move. For Abe, who had been watching the little Arab, this was unacceptable. Without a verbal command this time, he jerked his thumb, as if to say, "Don't even think about it!" Said just stood there near the table, though, his arms folded, tapping his foot, as if biding his time.

Walking up between the passenger compartment, Abe glanced with mounting alarm at crewmembers on each side of the aisle.

"People," He misspoke, "this isn't the end of the world!" "What I meant," he corrected himself, "is we're not going to give up. We have a trained crew and four Generation Eight androids. Surely, if we put our heads together, we can think of something."

"Lies!" someone rasped.

"Who said that?" He looked down into the compartment. "Was that you Elroy? It's not lies... It's hope. We have to be positive! We have to be strong!"

"It's lies, I tell you!" insisted the Englishmen. "We can never go home!"

"Perhaps," Abe thought quickly, "some day when matters die down we can. What we have to concentrate on is what we'll do *now*. We'll troubleshoot the ship. While we're sorting this out, we might back-track to the Mars colony and temporarily make it our home."

It was an absurd of him to float such a notion. At least they were talking again, which implied they all still had their wits. Skip, however, took issue almost immediately at his ill-conceived words.

"No," Abe heard him disagree politely, "Mars is played out by now. Europa was always a dead end. Regardless of what happened on Earth, those colonists were ready to come home. You have everything you need on this ship!"

"What the hell does *he* know?" Said snarled. "If the colony's played out and Europa's a dead end, we're gonna die out here—period, exclamation point, finis!"

"Yes" Nicole said, staring into space. "We'll probably starve on this ship!"

“The colonists, space station folks, and peoples of Earth are all dead!” Sheila summarized dully. “We’re all by ourselves out here. This was a one-way trip!”

“Das ist das ende!” Hans lamented. “We are kaput!”

“Captain Drexel,” Skip called out again from the conference table. “Take control of our ship!”

“I beg your pardon,” Abe replied irritably. “I *am* captain of the Phoenix!”

“Then take charge of it,” snapped Skip. “Matters are slipping away!”

“I’ve taken charge.” Abe grew angry. “I’m going to look for answers. What more do you expect?”

“There are no answers in the ship’s computer.” Skip said sternly. “These people are behaving like children. The captain of a starship is a father figure; they need a commanding presence. Take control.”

“Come on captain,” shouted Said. “He’s a glorified robot. I should know. I helped design androids back on earth. Don’t let him order you around! He’s not in charge! You are!”

Murmurs of agreement rang from the passenger compartment. The other crewmembers needed a scapegoat to focus their frustrations on. What better one than their android captain, whom many of them irrationally blamed for their dilemma. There was grumbling and cursing in the compartment, which were healthy signs for sane minds, but also indicators of rebellion from the crew. Mutiny now seemed to be in the air.

As Abe sat down shakily with Gandy and Mbuto on the bridge, both men offered to help with the research.

“Let’s go over the blue prints, schematics, and data,” suggested Mbuto. “It might be a problem of computer and engine links or a simple problem in hardware circuitry.”

“Yes, captain,” Gandy said, rubbing his hands and glancing nervously in the direction of the androids, “Said is right: you must take control. We’ll pull up the data, sort this out, and go over everything with a fine tooth comb!”

“All right,” Abe nodded light-headedly. “Skip and I found nothing wrong with the Phoenix, but it won’t hurt to try.” In a louder voice, aimed at the crewmembers in the compartment, he pressed the point: “Please—all of you, get a hold of yourselves. Stop blaming our caretakers. We must pull together. I never said this problem is permanent. There has to be a reason for what happened. We’ll work as a team and solve this mystery together.”

“This a waste of time,” Skip exclaimed, stepping onto the bridge. “You’re giving them false hope!”

“How dare you speak to him that way!” Said shrieked, running up the passenger aisle.

Quickly to void a situation, Abe jumped up to confront him. “Said!” He held up his hand. “Shut-the-hell-up!”

“Don’t you see what’s happening here?” cried the robotologist. “You’ve lost control!”

“Sit down, Said!” Abe pointed to the front row seats. “I want no more outbursts!”

There were boos fired off from the audience now. While Said continued egging Abe on to put the android in his place, Elroy and Hans were openly cursing him for not confronting Skip, Ling had lapsed into Chinese, with something sounding like a curse, and Ingrid began reciting the Lord’s Prayer.

“... I knew we’d get clobbered,” muttered Carla. “We got soft, just like Europe, and bam—they let us have it!”

“Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come and thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven...”

Abe lurched forward, as Ingrid prayed, to muffle Said's mouth. "S'hut up, you fool!" he whispered into this ear.

"Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us. But lead us not into temptation..."

"Excuse me!" an unexpected voice came from the non-humans. "Doctor Westfall, please be quiet!" she commanded softly "May I have your attention." She held up her hands.

Sandra, a medical android, stepped onto the bridge now. Her classic twentieth century Barbie doll features—golden hair surrounding a pretty face and a perfect hour-glass figure—now belied her steely expression and the forcefulness of her words. What she said to the entire crew was essentially what Skip said to Abe in private.

"There is a reason for this problem." She looked calmly around the bridge and passenger compartment. "As some of you suspect, it has nothing to do with the ship. It happened on Earth. Before you were all placed in your cryogenic chambers, even before you were trained for your tasks, we, among the best of the Generation Eight Androids, were given the task of assisting and protecting the crew and scientists of the earth's last mission. Unfortunately, something dreadful happened three years after we left our planet. Before takeoff, we were instructed by Thomas Wayland, the mission director, not to awaken the sleepers. What good what it do? Apparently, when disaster was overtaking the earth, Mission Control made a fateful decision. Because of what was happening there, the colonists on Mars and scientists and operational crew on the Europa Space Station were called home. This was obviously an unfortunate decision to make, because now we're alone. But we were not told what had happened. The link to Earth was simply broken. Skip tried everything to make contact after the break in communications and nothing came of it. This isn't anyone's fault on the Phoenix. Getting upset and angry just won't help!

"You didn't think to ask any more questions?" Gandy asked in disbelief.

Gandy's question, though it ignored what had already been explained, brought forth more protest.

"Why didn't you wake us?" Nicole cried belatedly from her seat. "We could've returned to Earth too!"

"Yes, yes!" Sheila wrung her hands. "Now we're marooned in space!"

"We're doomed! Kaput!" came Hans' refrain.

"Were you people listening?" Skip appeared to frown. "We had already traveled three years into space. Whatever happened was over. It would have been pointless, futile, and fatal to return!"

"The fact is," Sandra replied coolly, "*we couldn't return!* We were ordered to proceed at all costs and let you sleep. Please understand this, folks. Much has happened on Earth in the past seventeen years. To return might mean certain death."

"Certain death?" Elroy jumped up from his seat like a jack-o-lantern. "What's the story, Sandra? You're holding something back." "Tell us the truth!" He looked over at Captain Drexel. "What happened back home?"

"Yes captain." Said pointed at Sandra. "I don't want to hear it from her either. I want to hear it from you. What happened on Earth?"

"We don't know for certain." Abe shrugged.

"We don't know *at all!*" Skip corrected.

Studying the android's enigmatic expression, Abe continued hesitantly, "All I know is that the communication has ceased. There are no more messages from Earth.... There has to be

more than this..." "What else is there for us to know" he now challenged Skip. "There's something more isn't there?"

Skip was silent a brief moment. "We all know what happened on Earth:" he said softly. "It's basic logic. We just don't know the details.... It was the final war. What you haven't been told is a secret mission for our ship. We, your caretakers were sworn to uphold that secret. The ship's very name should have given you a hint: the Phoenix. In the event things went wrong at home, you would carry humanity to a safe harbor."

"You mean this is an ark, like in the Bible," Captain said intuitively.

"Yes, that's accurate enough," replied Skip. "I have information on that." He blinked his eyes. "Noah's ark. There were only a handful then too."

"Impossible!" Hans made a face. "Dat is inbreeding."

"Yes, Skip," Gandy agreed. "I have read your people's Bible. Did not the flood destroy mankind? The sons of Noah and their wives did in fact inbreed, but out here in space we're no children of God. Half of us are atheists or agnostics. We have no resource of humanity to breed in—only black space."

"What does it matter?" Mbuto frowned. "There are no Earth-like planets in our solar system to settle on. Such planets are rare and faraway in the universe, filled with alien, not human life."

"The point is," Elroy piped, "even if we had hundreds of other humans on our ship, there's the matter of compatibility. You can't force civilized humans into forced breeding. Some of stellarnauts might be gay. Because of an accident in youth, I'm sterile."

Carla, an avowed lesbian, made a face. "Yuck! Men are pigs!"

"Not to worry," chimed Woody, his unblinking eyes flashing. "We've taken care of this for you."

"What does that mean?" Ling Soon challenged him.

"Yes, Woody, what does that mean?" Ingrid Westfall seconded. "I'm a Christian woman. I'll not have promiscuous sex!"

"What Woody means." Sandra stepped forward again. "Noah didn't have a clone bank as we do on the Phoenix. Your whole crew could be sterile or gay and it wouldn't matter."

"Are you listening to this?" Sheila turned in shock to face the captain.

Blinking several times as if he had been asleep, Abe looked at their caretakers with renewed suspicion, this time with a touch of horror, yet held his tongue. He knew very well the potential of the androids. Though he found the notion of cloning to be distasteful and an unacceptable action ordered by the scientists at Mission Control, it wasn't nearly as chilling as what he sensed now. It seemed clear to him that there was much more to the mystery unveiling. What else were the androids holding back?

"All right Skip," he addressed the android captain, "you're in charge of this foursome. Tell me the truth. First, explain to me where this cloned material came from."

"It came from you!" He motioned widely to the group. "While you slept, Sandra and Woody took cells from your bodies and placed them in hibernation too."

Nicole Bennett slapped her forehead and exclaimed, "Without our permission. That's dreadful!"

"Shut up!" Max whispered harshly. "Once and for all, get a grip on yourself!"

"That goes for you too." Abe glared at Sheila.

"Who cares what they took," Elroy muttered glumly. "The nearest Earth-like planet is light years away. We're doomed!"

“No we’re not!” Skip shook his head. “... There’s more.”

“Ah hah!” Abe uttered a bitter laugh. “Now comes the second part of the secret.” “Tell us, Skip, just exactly what kind of ship is this? What else did the good scientists at Mission Control keep from the crew?”

“All right.” Skip straightened his shoulders and looked around the room. “We—my associates Rusty, Sandra, and Woody—have followed orders and, as Doctor Said Rammal suspects, are far more advanced than what you humans imagined. Though we have initial programming, which is much like the primal makeup of your human brains, we have been forced to make decisions on our own. We decided, though the transmission was cutoff completely, to assume the worst on Earth and follow the alternate plan given to us for such a contingency. Part of that plan was to extract cloning material and place it in cryogenic hibernation. Part of it was to utilize the potential of the Phoenix in order to find a new home.”

“How is that possible?” The captain looked at him in astonishment. “This ship can travel only so fast. Even if we lived to be a thousand as we suffered cryogenic sleep, we’d run out of fuel.”

“This is no ordinary vessel.” Skip turned to face the window. “Unknown to our enemies on Earth, our friendly governments discovered an old scientific dream: hyper-drive.”

“That’s science fiction!” Mbutu’s eyes widened in disbelief. “It’s impossible.”

“No, it’s not,” Rusty seemed to snicker. “You’ve heard of wormholes—another fantastic notion. Yet there are billions of them waiting for hyper-drive systems. Each one shortens distances by light-years. All they require is the right fuel.”

“How does it work?” Max gave him an incredulous look.

Skip replied quickly, “The ship moves through space as it does in old propulsion systems but has been modified so that a massive fuel intake makes it go infinitely faster: faster than the speed of light. At such an acceleration, a window is opened in space, which are called wormholes or star-gates—”

“All right,” Abe cut in impatiently, “I remember reading about this possibility. I’ll have to accept what you say, but where does all the fuel come from? From what I understand there’s mostly empty space out there.”

“Not so.” Rusty held up a hand. “...Dark matter. Thanks to the fuel extractor on our ship, we use it for propulsion. As you might also have read, dark matter is everywhere in the cosmos, making up ninety percent of the universe.”

“I’m still not clear,” Max shook his head. “Are you saying we have limitless fuel?”

“Yes, exactly,” Rusty’s Howdy-Doody face beamed vacantly. “Our propulsion systems scoop up dark matter and also interstellar gas continually, so that theoretically the Phoenix could travel forever.”

Again popping up from his chair, Elroy wrung his hands. “You tricked us. All we have is Gandy, an engineer to do repairs on our ship. I wondered why there were no real specialists on the Phoenix—men who might understand such a modification. I’m a habitat architect. Even I’m baffled by this. I thought this was a scientific mission to explore Triton’s mineral resources. Why would they need zoologists like Hans or botanists like Ling on a dead moon such as Triton. It all fits! This has all been a subterfuge, an experiment by desperate men. We’re alone now—that’s the truth of it. We’ll be forced to live in hibernation until you find an Earth-like world, something that might never happen at all.”

“Sit down Elroy,” Abe interrupted finally. “We know that. You don’t have to remind us. We can’t survive without hibernation. Our bodies can’t last long in space. We have no choice now; we have to trust Skip and Rusty. They must find us a new world!”

“We have created Frankenstein’s monsters!” Said glared at the androids.

“Das ist das ende!” groaned Hans.

The other androids shared a telling glance, nodding in agreement. The compartment was plunged into despair after these words. Everyone understood what all this meant. The androids, who had been in charge from the very beginning of their mission, would remain so indefinitely it seemed. The thought of extended hibernation over the eons was greeted with horror. This was, of course, they also understood, better than death. While they slept the dark sleep, the androids, who needed no sleep or sustenance, would remain awake as their caretakers. Most of the crewmembers, filled with great dread, accepted this as a fait accompli, and yet, for some of them, the androids were somehow suspect in this crisis.

“How do we know this is what happened?” Elroy asked the group. “Why have they been so secretive. Perhaps they’ve tinkered with the ship’s database and log, and this their way of taking control. I don’t trust them!”

“I don’t either!” Hans said with a shudder. “Ache! Dat last time in chambers is enough for me. Now we go back, maybe for all time!”

“Shut up—both you two!” Abe scolded. “You’re just making it worse!”

“It’s true.” Said bobbed his head. “It’s my job to oversee the androids. My title is robotics engineer, but I didn’t create these fellows. My work was done on Generation Six and Sevens, not these Frankenstein’s monsters. We must take back the ship!”

Determined to make a stand at this point, Said did something very foolish now. From their training before takeoff, the humans had learned little about their caretakers, but Said knew just enough to act stupidly. There was a hidden control panel on the back of the Generation Six and Seven androids that was intended for override if, for some inexplicable reason, one of them ran amuck. When he made a move on Skip, who was the accepted leader of the androids, however, Skip whirled around and stared coldly at the scientist.

“Oh, we can’t turn you off, huh?” Said defensively.

“No, Doctor Rammal,” replied Skip calmly. “You, of all people, should know that!”

“As a matter of fact,” Said withdrew to a safe distance. “I didn’t. There’s a lot of stuff about you Generation Eights I didn’t know about. From the very first, I didn’t agree with unlimited artificial intelligence. As a robotics engineer, I believe you fellows should be our servants and not be given so much control. I wanted robotic assistants, programmed, not with attitudes set loose by their creators to run amuck!”

“Our mission doesn’t require your service,” Skip replied coldly. “Your function is better served to maintain and repair the computers on the ship. I can’t explain how Mission Control thought, but you can’t destroy us Doctor Rammal. As you can see, we don’t need an overseer. The creators knew this. You need us more than we need you!”

That was the final straw for Said. Promising he would find away of de-activating the androids no matter what it took, he had to be muffled and physically restrained as he was hustled off the bridge.

“Stop it, you damn fool!” Mbuto growled in his ear. “Skip won’t tolerate you doing such a thing!”

“Indeed, you silly man,” chided Gandy. “Go back to your compartment. Compose yourself. Things are bad enough, without you making idle threats!”

“They’re not idle,” Said replied discreetly, glancing back at the bridge. “I might be able to disable those bastards. There’s a compartment in back of each of them. On the Gen Sixes and Eights there was an on/off switch!”

“Are you serious?” Mbuto looked at him amazement, as they ushered him toward the station. “Why in heaven’s name would you do that? Like it or not, we goners without them. Don’t bring that up again!”

“It must be space psychosis,” Gandy decided, as they led him over the threshold of the slowly turning wheel and into the corridor. “I heard those androids are very strong. Skip would crush him like a bug!”

Despite the gesture made, neither Mbuto or Gandy could keep Said away. As soon as they returned to the ship’s compartment and bridge, the little Arab was slinking back to the ship, determination on his face. As the African and Indian joined Abe and Max on the bridge, the androids had retired to the conference table, where half of the crewmembers had returned. With Skip at the head of the table, a place were a human captain would normally be, Rusty at the other end, and Sandra and Woody centrally located on each side, the symbolism seemed complete.

Joining the four members of the operational crew now, were Carla and Ingrid, the least emotionally effected of the scientists on the ship. Avoiding the seemingly hopeless issue of the lost communication with Earth, the humans sat for awhile, discussing whether or not the androids really had an agenda. According to Gandy, there was no possible reason why they would want to sabotage the communication link, which would maroon them in space, too. More likely, replied Mbuto, they were, in fact, following orders and were looking out for both theirs and the crews’ best interest. On these points they were all in agreement, and yet there was still a smoldering resentment for the secrecy of the mission. Even if the androids didn’t have selfish motives for taking over the Phoenix, they agreed that it was deceitful for the mission control director and his team to have a hidden plan. That the androids were complicit in this deceit still made them suspect, regardless of their good intentions. What reinforced this feeling for them was the cold, methodical, and insensitive manner in which their keepers exercised their control.

One thing was for certain, upon which they all agreed: the Phoenix and its crew were on their own now. Both Gandy and Mbuto scanned the database and log for their own peace of mind, but there was no sabotage or unexplained system error shown. There was nothing wrong with the Phoenix. What had struck them as another great subterfuge by mission control was the advanced controls and propulsion of the ship which hadn’t been covered during their training. Because the ship, the portion of the system they were familiar with, was operated under normal propulsion and they were soon placed into their chambers, they were unfamiliar with the thruster units located on the docking area of the space station. Those modifications explained quickly to them by Skip, which struck the ship’s engineer as the greatest understatement, were not evident in the ship’s database and its controls. Why this, too, was kept from them, would remain a mystery throughout the Phoenix’s epoch journey. With only a dim picture of what lie ahead, the crew were at their caretakers’ mercy. Without the androids, they would go insane and die of old age before the Phoenix found the right planet.

“It’s not what they’re hiding that bothers me,” the captain concluded, looking down at Triton. “It’s what they don’t know. The cataclysmic events on Earth aren’t their faults. Now, using the star map, and the technology of this ship, they must navigate the Phoenix—to where, is anyone’s guess. In spite of their vast knowledge, they don’t have a clue.”

Mbuto looked back down at the screen. “Dear God!.... Are you sure?”

Abe shrugged his shoulders. “Yes, it seems obvious. If they knew what lie ahead, they’d want to reassure us with some concrete facts. Though ordered to hold back information from us by the mission control director, they wouldn’t lie about this. They simply don’t know. I’m afraid it’s going to be a waiting game—who knows for how long?”

“This is dreadful.” Max lost his composure and grew pale.

“It’s a nightmare in which we might not awaken.” Gandy swallowed and gripped his brow.

Gandy was referring to the dark sleep. Carla and Ingrid, who had been silent, gasped. Carla whispered, “Son of a bitch!” (he favorite swear words) and Ingrid once again prayed.

“People, I need your strength.” Abe gripped the women’s wrists. “Especially you Doc, since you’re a shrink too. I don’t know *anything* for certain. Those andies are more human than we might like. I just feel it when I look into their faces. They’re not suppose to show emotion, but I swear I saw fear, especially in Skip’s face. While Sandra and Woody keep us alive, he must captain the ship, and Rusty steer us to another world. They have a god-like control and responsibility. I don’t envy them.”

After a disappointing performance, Sheila, Abe’s second-in-command, shuffled onto the bridge, apologizing for her behavior.

“I’m sorry captain,” she exhaled, her eyes fluttering as if she was trying to clear her head. “I heard what you just said. You’re right. Sandra and Woody were very gentle to me when I suffered cognition. I just don’t relish going through it for the next ten thousand years.”

“Enough!” The captain placed a finger on her lip. “You’re eyes belie your words. I know you’re afraid, Sheila, and I don’t blame you, but remember your training. You must, from this point on, be strong. Those people are terrified. We’re all afraid, but we can’t do this by ourselves. Get a grip on yourself. Wipe that deer-in-the-headlights look off your face!”

“Yes, of course.” She nodded jerkily. “Yes-yes. I have to set an example.”

It now appeared to Abe that at least six of his people were trying to hold it together. This was half of his crew. Despite her effort at being contrite, he wasn’t sure about Sheila, and Nicole Max’s assistant was a mental wreck. The remaining crewmembers seemed to be in various stages of hysteria. Everyone dreaded prolonged hibernation, an unnatural condition that, to some, felt like a form of death. At this point, now that it was certain that they must return to this state, space psychosis was a definite threat. Gandy, Mbuto, Carla, and Ingrid were not immune. Only the strongest could put up a front, steeling their nerves for the experience. It seemed to Abe that only Max Rodgers, the ship’s medic and psychiatrist, was least likely to go mad, and even he was showing the signs.

A phenomena that had deepened Said Rammal’s suspicions of the androids was when the four androids separated themselves from the humans, standing in conference with each other awhile before positioning themselves at the four corners of the table, as if plotting what to do. When Abe, Sheila, Max, Gandy, Mbuto, Carla, and Ingrid returned to the table, the androids pulled their chairs back politely so they could be seated. It was a gesture by the androids meant to convey cordiality and team spirit, but Said wasn’t fooled. Skip standing behind Abe after he took his seat at the head of the table, Rusty standing the other end behind Sheila, and the remaining two androids stationed behind crewmembers on each side of the table, intimidated everyone, especially Said.

“You humans have lost your grip on reality,” Skip declared in a pontifical voice. “Disaster stares you in the face and many of you cower at the thought of what you must do. There is no return trip to Earth. There is no more Earth. I’m sorry but the emotional link you have with your kind is broken. It’s not your fault, and it’s not ours. This isn’t a conspiracy, as some of you believe. We didn’t plan this. That would mean our own destruction, too. We will continue to watch over you and protect you from your foolishness, because you are the last hope of mankind. Thanks to the good doctors’ instructions to us and Sandra and Woody’s clone specimens, future generations will be spawned. We are your caretakers. Because of this crisis, we must take over. Our duties have been programmed into our brains, but we must, using our own intelligence, care for you and find you a new home. You can’t blame us for that.” “But mark my word.” He raised a finger. “We’ll find you a new Earth. Time is irrelevant to us. Without external attack or self-destruction, and in normal circumstances, we are immortal... You are too, if you experience hibernation. There’s something you must understand about this ship: it is immortal too. It is built to be self-sustaining. With the recycled food, water, air, and infinite energy, we could travel for eternity if needed. All you need to do for now, however, is keep your wits. The old mission to Triton to find mineral resources and new sources of energy is dead.... The mission now is for you to *survive!*”

“Ach, den it’s true!” Hans blurted stubbornly, a snarl playing on his face. “Doctor Rammal is right. Robots now take control!”

“You’re wrong, Doctor Rucker.” Skip’s eyes flashed. “Said, a robotologist, more than any of you, should know better. Our only purpose is to serve mankind. You are mankind now. The earth that you once knew doesn’t exist anymore and you humans won’t survive outside of your chambers until we find you a new home. We are built for this emergency. We don’t need sleep. We don’t need food. Unlike humans, we won’t lose our tempers and we won’t go insane. You are susceptible to physical ailments and the rigors of endless travels and require cryogenic sleep to survive. Your fragile minds need hibernation, too. While you’re safely in your chambers, we’ll continue to man the ship, watch over and protect you, and search for an Earth-like world. All you have to do is to sleep, until you’re awakened. Your destiny is our destiny. Your end would be our end. We have no other purpose than the mission. Now that the mission has changed to survival, we must be explorers. Our very solar system, including our planet and its interstellar bases, are irrelevant now. Rusty and I will chart our course. With hyper-drive, the entire Milky Way is our source. There are countless distant planets in our galaxy that might support life.

“My database was filled with earth’s long history. Recall the story about your god and a man named Noah. Because God was going to destroy the world, he allowed Noah to gather animals to replenish the earth. With his small family, he supposedly replenished the people on that world. With such a tiny number of humans it would take God to perform such a feat. Your ship lacks earth’s animals, and yet you have a resource of clones—future humans, men and women like yourselves. On a distant world you’ll replenish your species and find new species of animals and plants to rule over. The thought is intriguing, perhaps slightly mad.... But what other choice do you have? You face extinction. Humans can’t survive what we have in mind. You either climb into your chambers or go insane and die!”

“So.” Abe smiled grimly. “This was the alternate plan all along. You knew about this on the day we launched.”

“That’s correct, captain.” Skip gave a nod. “While you slept, specimens were taken from you and your crew. When we lost contact with the world, considering the war-like footing of

governments and nations, the old mission was discarded and the new mission began. That cataclysmic event decided everything. Planning ahead for just such a catastrophe, the builders of the Phoenix gave this ship unlimited potential, with the surety that your species would not become extinct. In a very real sense, because of specimens taken by Sandra and Woody, the Phoenix, a super spaceship, is also an ark, carrying the remnant of mankind. Had we turned back or not left at all, you would suffer the same fate as all earthlings. As it is, we have done our duty. We have protected you, ran the ship, and we are now returning to our duties as caretakers of the ship.” “You must—all of you—return to hibernation. If you can’t do this or won’t do this on your own, we will force you into your chambers for your own good... How it happens is up to you!”

Chapter Three

The Dark Sleep

Skip withdrew once again from the humans, this time motioning Sandra and Woody to join he and Rusty on the bridge. As the androids waited for the humans to respond, Abe turned to Max, who now, because of Sheila's continued lack of resolve, was, at least in spirit, second-in-command. Max had given up trying to reason with Nicole, his assistant, and the other faint-hearted members of the crew. While Said's dark mood was difficult to fathom, Elroy, Hans, and Ling were easy to read. They had, Max detected, the classic symptoms of paranoia and borderline psychosis. Nicole was jabbering incoherently to Sheila, who jumped up and ran to her quarters as if she might escape. Carla was cursing under her breath again, as Ingrid prayed. Each of the four women dealt with their emotions in their own way. Motioning for Gandy, Mbuto, Carla, and Ingrid, who were trying very hard to be brave, Abe took them aside with Max and himself to give them his final thoughts.

"Well, it's come down to this." He sighed raggedly. "Like everyone else, I'm devastated by this turn of events. Now I just feel tired. If the others decide to mutiny, I can't control them. They'll face the consequences. Our caretakers mean business. They're much stronger than us. Said, more than anyone else, understands this. We were warned of space psychosis, but the calculations were wrong. They claimed that the chances for it to occur after cryogenic sleep was infinitesimal (a one percent chance), and it looks like even I'm feeling its effects. All we can do folks, is hide it from the others."

"I agree." Max exhaled wearily. "What else can we do? But how do we talk them into returning willingly to their chambers and the dark sleep, this time for perhaps centuries. Look at their faces: it's as if they're facing a death sentence. I heard Elroy threaten to slit his wrists rather than go on indefinitely."

Abe shrugged. "Given the facts, let's hope most of them come around. Those that don't will have to be drugged. I'm certain Nicole and Sheila will have to be sedated. Elroy and Hans might put up a fight. Said will probably have to be dragged bodily to his fate. If they don't do it willingly, there's no other way."

With that said, Abe gathered the ship's company together. While the androids looked on quietly from the bridge, the captain once again stated the case that Skip had presented so well, but in a more paternal way. In addition to the hopelessness of their situation and the foolishness of staying awake, he explained, he added his own estimation of their caretakers, which caused outbursts in the group.

"I've thought about this a lot," he began thoughtfully. "... What is motivating the andies? I couldn't understand why they didn't warn us. As soon as we lost communications, they could've awakened at least the captain. But to what good would this have been? Skip and his group, though there weren't details of the event, understood immediately what had happened. For years it had been building up: the final conflict. The sudden break in communication meant only one thing. After checking the database countless times, myself, I know for a fact there's no record whatsoever of communication with Earth after December 20th of the third year. There

never will be either. The people of Earth suffered a catastrophic even three years after launch. Because the colonists and members of the space station were called back to Earth shortly before this catastrophe, they were wiped out too. We might hope that our friends and relatives survived the holocaust, but we'll never know." "... And so my friends," his tone softened. "I'm asking all of you to be reasonable, sensible, and brave, and return, without incident, to your chambers. Some of you must set good examples for other crewmembers. For those who fight the process, you will be physically forced and drugged, if necessary, to return to hibernation. Please don't fight it. You've gone through it before. You can do it again. The fact is, considering the crisis, you have no choice!"

"No," shrieked Nicole, "it's bad enough to hibernate for seventeen years. This might be forever. The dark sleep's like death—sleep without dreams!"

"Yes, oh yes," Sheila, who had returned reluctantly from her quarters, muttered inconsolably, "... it's darkness and death. Forever is a long time. What if they never find us a home? It'll be like dying if we don't wake up."

"Stop it! Stop it!" scolded Abe. "You want to be manhandled and drugged before processing? Our caretakers mean business. You don't want that!"

"Uh huh!" Nicole nodded hysterically. "I do! I do!"

"No you don't," Abe frowned at her. Looking at Sheila with contempt, he chided her severely now "What kind of officer are you? You're crewmates don't want to see this? You're supposed to be my executive officer, Sheila. Show some backbone! Set an example for the crew!"

"I'm sorry!" Sheila looked pitifully up at him. "Your right, I'll do just that. I'll set an example." "... Just so I wake up!" she added in a small voice.

Nicole rocked back and forth again, clutching herself. As Abe stood contemplating his co-pilot and second-in-command, Sheila dropped her face into her hands and bawled. Said, he noticed, looked up at the bridge that moment, contemplating the androids, Elroy and Hans stared silently into space, and Ling Soon also wept. As he had hoped, however, Gandy, Mbutu, Carla, and Ingrid sat calmly in their seats, as though they had accepted their fate.

"Captain, let's wait awhile," Elroy spoke up finally. "Maybe it is a malfunction of some kind and things aren't so bad on Earth. Said's right. I don't trust those andies. They just want to take over the ship."

"Ya, I agree," Hans nodded vigorously. "This is big risk—stupid gamble. When sleeping, what will happen? Nothing but unconsciousness—endless sleep. The nearest likely worlds are light years away, with no proof of oxygen on any of them. I'm telling you, captain. This is long shot. Phoenix might travel *forever!*"

"Shut up—both of you!" Abe lost his temper. "Get it through your thick skulls; there's nothing else we can do!"

Looking up at him, half of the crew, began wringing their hands, shaking their heads, and mumbling under their breaths in despair. With the exception of Carla, the other crewmembers seemed to be following Ingrid's example and praying. Even Max closed his eyes now and cringed at the thought. Abe didn't know what else to say to those crewmembers in such a panicked state. Considering the mental strain this was having on everyone, what would immediately save his crewmembers and himself was, in fact, hibernation. Space psychosis, already in its early stages for many of them, could prove disastrous, even deadly on the ship, until they were all back in cryogenic slumber once more.

At this point, seeing half of the crew reaching that dangerous point, the androids took what Abe's military mind saw as a pre-emptive strike. In an effort to prevent a case of space psychosis and also set an example, the androids took the step Skip had warned them about. Upon a silent signal to the android medics, a mere nod from Skip, Sandra and Woody stepped forward, to remove the person among them closest to a psychotic lapse. Seeing the medics approach, Nicole shook her head, chanting, "No! No! No!" The medics stood there before her, as if waiting for her to go peaceably, then, when she refused, her legs going limp in protest, they lifted her up by her armpits and dragged her from the ship.

"We're sorry!" Sandra apologized. "This is for her own good!"

As they carried her to the space station, Max almost broke down when he heard her shrieks. As a death row inmate of the twentieth century being escorted forcibly to execution, Nicole was certain this was the end. Then suddenly, after she was given the sedative, silence returned to the corridor of the space station. Sensing that they might be next, Elroy and Hans jumped up and raced toward the staircase to the docking area, but were quickly cut-off at the entrance by Skip. As Rusty restrained Ling, Sheila managed to stay put under Abe's restraining hand. Upon hearing, the commotion of Ling and the cornered men, however, Sheila rolled up into a fetal position on the deck and sobbed.

Though Nicole's treatment seemed cruel, she would have gone insane if the medics hadn't intervened. As Abe explained this simple fact and attempted again to console the crew, Elroy, Hans, and Ling were under guard. Skip and Rusty stood, arms folded, until Sandra and Woody returned, ready to restrain them if they so much as budged. While Ingrid uttered an eloquent prayer that sounded almost like the Last Rites, Carla sat there stoically, as did Gandy, Mbuto, and Max. Sheila, who remained curled up on the deck, was simply ignored. When Sandra and Woody returned finally from the cryogenic chambers, Woody explained in a business-like tone, that Nicole, using special equipment, had been purged of her stomach and colon contents while she was unconscious—a process the others could only imagine. Rather than being knocked out with drugs, Elroy, Hans, and Ling were given one more chance to go peaceably. The thought of Nicole's ordeal and what was in store for his crew shook Abe as he looked down at his crew.

"... My shipmates," his voice broke, as he gathered his thoughts, "after a little prick in the arm, you'll go asleep and before you know it you'll be awake again. That's how it is with hibernation. Time is irrelevant. A day, a year, or a hundred years are like the blink of an eye. Stop fighting it. You heard poor Nicole. Is that how you want to be processed and enter your chambers, kicking and screaming like children?" "You're stellarnauts—act like it!" He raised his arms and looked around the table. "Before you know it, you'll be awake again, setting at the table, ready to explore a new world!"

For many, his words fell on deaf ears. They had seen what happened to Nicole. No one else wanted to be prematurely ushered into hibernation. Yet, despite the threat, it was difficult for some of them to control their emotions. Hysteria and paranoia, the first stages before psychosis seemed impossible to dispel. When the atmosphere remained thick with gloominess, despair, and foreboding, Abe was cut short by Sandra. As she placed her arm around his back, her flashing eyes and gentle movements seemed to offset her blank Barbie doll expression. Briefly, her touch was almost maternal as it must have had been when he was awakened that first time. What he vaguely recalled about those moments when cognition set in, was how much she reminded him of Rosalie, the girl he left behind on Earth. Like the others, he was going under again, and he was afraid. When he awakened once more, he would look up and see that lovely

face again and remember only her resemblance to Rosalie. Now, as he looked into Sandra's face, he could almost picture that moment of wakefulness that was, as Max put it, like being born. This creature had been his midwife, the one who extracted him from the womb, a function she would perform again. Unlike before, when he cringed at the thought of his extraction from his chamber, it gave him comfort that she would be there again. How was it possible, he wondered now, that science had created such a perfect machine? Inexplicably, though it seemed impossible, her skin and breath were warm, the twinkle in her blue eyes was real, and a vague Mona Lisa smile was, at this moment, fixed on her glowing face. She was to all appearances and touch, a woman, and yet she had, according to the Stellarnaut's Handbook, the strength of three men. With these thoughts in mind, his voice faltered. He could think of nothing more to say. As Sandra gently interrupted his speech, her presence and purring voice, was like a warm blanket on his soul.

"Listen to your captain," she called sweetly to the crew. "You're holding onto the last shred of consciousness as if your never going to awaken. That's so absurd. Our whole purpose was the mission. As Skip told you, now it's survival. Please accept the fact that we're your protectors, not your jailers. Would you rather go insane and, in stages, age, and finally die. Do you remember those words in your handbooks: 'Prolonged periods outside the chamber, without normal gravity, hastens the aging process of humans.' When you're dead, we, Generation Eight, will be all that's left of the human race. How sad that would be." "... It's a byproduct of this crisis," she added after a pause, "but we offer you immortality. Is that so bad?"

Abe stifled a sob, and yet several listeners in the audience seemed unmoved. Not satisfied with the reaction that either Abe or herself had on the faint-hearted members of the crew, Sandra's maternal tone turned suddenly harsh. The transition, which was typical of androids, caught Abe by surprise. Hearing her use this tact broke him from his reverie. Instead of weeping, a hysterical laugh escaped his throat.

"Get it through your human brains once and for all!" She looked squarely at Said. "You really have two choices: life or death. In truth, of course, you have *no choice*, at all. We won't let you commit suicide. Your mental state requires immediate action. There'll no more dragging of the feet by some of you. The sooner you're all in your chambers, the sooner we'll find you a home and you'll awake up on a new world. Once again, those of you who don't go willingly into cyber-sleep will be forced to comply." "Please," she implored, looking round the table, "you who are stronger set an example for the weak among you. You saw what happened to Nicole. In a drugged state she was forcibly purged, top and bottom. Believe me, like your last experience, this is something you want to do yourself. Don't force our hands!"

Abe tried not breaking into hysterical giggles. Sandra's forcefulness belied her Barbie features. Rosalie, it occurred to him, had been spirited too, but then Rosalie didn't have the strength of three men. Skip, the leader of the androids, said nothing this time, yet, by hand signals, directed the remaining two non-humans, Rusty and Woody, to stations themselves aft and forward of the captain's table, as if once again standing guard. After he nodded to Sandra, she ordered the humans to have their last meal (an ominous note in itself) then, not long afterwards, purge their colons and stomachs as they had before takeoff, so that within the next few hours or as long as it takes, be ready for hibernation. To avoid any more mental stress, Skip wanted it taken care of this in the most timely manner. As it had before, Abe recalled grimly, such a process depended on when they had their last meal, when their food settled, and how long it took each of them to manage the purge. The process of purging, Sandra reminded them, began with purgatives and laxatives, followed, if necessary by self-induced vomiting and self-

performed enemas. At least for an indeterminate period, they had time to achieve the desired results.

Even before the medics delivered their dinner, the oral laxatives had been administered to them. It was, Abe and Max agreed, the worst meal of their lives. Not having vomit reflexes or a sense of smell, made Sandra and Woody excellent nurses and medics but poor waiters. Ingrid, the most cheerful member of the group, added religious significance to it when she gave a benediction before their meal. Carla cursed her effort and, until forced to do so, Hans refused to eat, but most of the others joined in politely as Ingrid prayed. It didn't matter how much they ate, Woody explained, they would be fed intravenously when asleep. Though such a statement was expected from the least human of the androids, such callous words during their last supper, as Ingrid thought of it, was especially tactless. Already, because of their state of minds, it was difficult to enjoy the special dinner offered to them (something resembling steak, mash potatoes, and peas). Said, who continued to glare at their caretakers, demanded to know what, in his words "This shit is!" Or, as Elroy summed it up for the crew, "At least make it look more appetizing!" Abe forced himself to eat as much as possible, as did many of the diners. The one reassuring thing about the meal and attitude at the dinner table for Abe's peace of mind was the participants somber acceptance of their fate. It appeared as though space psychosis might have been averted.

To this end, Ingrid's comparison of their last meal to the Lord's Last Supper had helped. Normally, her prayers and words of encouragement rubbed the atheists and agnostics in the group wrong, but her spirit, at this dark hour, caused unexpected mirth.

"You compare this to the Last Supper?" Carla snickered. "Who at this table is Jesus: Abe, our captain."

"Oh, I'm no Jesus," Abe snickered, "maybe Noah or Moses."

"We're like the Twelve Apostles," murmured Sheila.

"No," Ingrid shook her head, "this has nothing to do with Jesus and his apostles. That would be sacrilegious. Noah and Moses were holy men." "But we're serving God's purpose," she informed them. "This is our last supper until we find a new home. You heard what the andies said about the clones: we carry mankind on the ship!"

"Listen to you people?" Carla looked around in disbelief. "For Christ's sakes, this is the twenty fifth century!"

"It got damn nonsense!" exclaimed Hans. "One big joke!"

"Isn't it strange," Ingrid posed the question. "that atheists, who don't believe, use the Lord's name in vain?"

"That's true," Gandy smiled at her. "They do in deed, Ingrid. You don't hear them say Vishnu damn it! Or Allah damn it! It's always God damn it! or Jesus Christ! I never liked those words."

"Well, I appreciate Ingrid's prayers." Mbuto reached over to pat her wrist. "We need all the help we can get!"

"I am not atheist." Ling muttered belatedly. "I am Buddhist."

Carla laughed sourly. "When have you ever given that fat guy a thought? I've known plenty of Buddhists. Face it Madam Butterfly, you're an atheist like me." "Except our resident nun here," she added, pointing to Ingrid, "all of you, if you're honest, are atheists. You don't believe that crap!"

"Oh, I believe some of it!" Sheila nodded.

"Me too!" Mbuto insisted.

“No you don’t!” Carla scowled. “Not genuinely. Fear of death, makes you *want* to believe. It’s called the air raid syndrome. When there’s a threat overhead, everyone prays. When there’s no threat, its back to normal. It’s hypocrisy!”

“That’s quite enough!” Max cut her off. “You said your piece. I agree with them. As a psychologist as well as doctor, I’ve found faith an excellent balm for human fears. We’re under constant threat, Carla. This is the new normal. Nothing will be the same anymore!”

“Frankly, Carla” Gandy jumped in, shaking his head. “I find your language and attitude appalling. Why are you so bitter? I was a practicing Hindu until I became a scientist. We Hindus have high regard for the Christian god and his son. What did Jesus ever do to you? Why are you giving Ingrid such a hard time?”

“I’m cool with Jesus.” Carla shrugged her shoulders. “I just don’t like hypocrisy. Ingrid’s praying gets on my nerves!”

“That’s too bad!” Elroy glared at her. “We like it. Your logic doesn’t make sense. What do you think of when you face the dark? That black void is a terrible end!”

“Nothing,” she confessed dubiously, a frown playing on her face. “... Nothing at all!”

“I will pray for you.” Ingrid sighed. “I will pray for all of you until I fall asleep.”

“Hah! Fall asleep?” spat Hans. “You mean go like blank sheet into coma. If there is God, where was He on Earth. Where is he now?”

“All right folks!” Abe slammed the table with his mug. “This has been edifying, but let’s change the subject. We have a short while as our food digests before the procedures begin. Do any of you have anymore questions? I don’t mind answering them again. As we’ve been told, time’s irrelevant during hibernation. It will seem like a few moments at the most, when your cognition sets in after you awaken again. In such a timeless hour, you’ll be sitting here again chatting as if you just had a brief nap.”

“Our captain is an optimist to the last!” exclaimed Max.

“Here’s to Captain Abraham Drexel!” Mbuto raised up his mug.

“Here-Here!” Gandy joined the toast.

Going down the Phoenix’s duty roster, Sandra held a roll call to make sure everyone was accountable on the ship and not hiding in the docking area below or somewhere in the station. The action intensified most of the humans resentment for the androids, making them feel like children back in grade school. Captain Drexel, as Max, the ship’s doctor, however, understood that it was necessary. As they demonstrated by their treatment of Nicole, the androids had to be tough with this group. Unless they went into hibernation, space psychosis would claim them long before physical degeneration occurred. For Carla, who put up a hard front, Elroy and Hans, who were trying desperately to be brave, and Sheila, who had found strength joining Ingrid in prayer, the threat of space psychosis seemed to have momentarily passed. In agreement, with some reservation, with Abe and Max, were Gandy and Mbuto, but Said would hold onto his resentment until the last.

“They make it sound like such a trifling matter,” he grumbled. “Like we’re children taking a nap!”

“More like bears hibernating in winter.” Gandy managed a smile.

“Yes, a long winter nap,” Elroy murmured sadly, “in which we might not wake up!”

The English geologist, whom no one heard that moment, had seemed to make peace with himself. This, Abe thought he understood, was true for everyone else, including Carla, who’s

mental defense was a hard crust which no one could penetrate even now. Unfortunately, the period of preparation, would rattle the crew again.

During the waiting period, the crewmembers were finally ordered to purge their stomachs by the purgative handed to them by Woody and, if this was not quite adequate, finish the job by cramming two fingers down their throats. For those whose laxatives were taking too much time, they were forced to use enemas, which were almost as distasteful to them as making themselves vomit. These preparations, conducted in a special compartment in the space station, in fact, were dreaded almost as much as the cryogenic chambers themselves. When they were finished, all eleven of the crewmembers returned to the conference table to be called for enclosure in the chambers. Nicole, who had been processed while in a drugged state, had been the first, now Ingrid, who, because Skip considered her to be the bravest member of the crew, would set an example for the others.

“Have faith!” she called over her shoulder. “Remember what I told you and the prayers I taught you. There is no death, only eternal life. Believe and you’ll be saved!”

With great patience now, noted Abe, Sandra, the mid-wife, waited patiently and politely to allow Ingrid to quote verses from the Twenty-Third Psalm:

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil, and my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.”

At first her words seemed to have made an impact on the crew. There was absolute silence in the ship. As Sandra led her to the station entrance, Ingrid called out, with a trace of fear in her voice, “My friends, it doesn’t matter what words come into your head; just pray. Make your last thoughts spiritual, not worldly concerns. Go into hibernation for the glory of God!”

“We’re not dying, bitch!” Carla growled.

“No, not dying,” Said sneered. “Just taking a snooze—permanently!”

“Yes, sleep,” Ingrid responded quickly, “but not permanent. Sleep in which, if things go wrong, you’ll awaken in paradise!”

“Nothing’s going wrong!” yelled Carla. “We’re going into hibernation, for Christ’s sake! *Shut that woman up!*”

“Das est das ende!” Han lapsed back into German.

“The End!” Elroy gave a wounded cry.

“What is this?” Abe frowned. “I thought we settled this issue. We don’t need this kind of talk. Come on Hans and Elroy, you were doing great. We talked about this. This is no different than the first time. It’ll be over soon, and, before you know it, we’ll be looking down at a new world.”

““Over soon’ are the operative words!” Elroy stared vacantly, rocking back and forth. There will be no other world, alien or otherwise. This the end!”

“Yes, there’s another world waiting,” promised Ingrid, her voice trailing into the distance, “... a glorious one, greater than Earth!” “Oh, you faint-hearted,” her words were punctuated with sobs. “... Look at me, I’m not afraid, because I have Jesus. Pray, reach out, and believe!”

“Zhè jiùshì jiéjú!” Ling translated Elroy’s last sentence into Chinese.

Skip and Rusty, having taken over the bridge again, now looked on with concern. Hans and Ling were in the panic mode. Sheila was close to it, too. Elroy had appeared calm on the surface, but was, Abe could see, on the verge of hysteria. Like Nicole, they might very well explode. Though they had no visible symptoms of panic, everyone, including himself, were filled with foreboding and dread.

“Shape up, men and women!” he used a different tact. “You’re stellarnauts—emissaries of Earth. Go into your chambers willingly, with your heads held high. Don’t make them manhandle you like Nicole!”

Gandy inspired by Ingrid, put a different spin on her message: “Ling, Hans, Elroy.” Gandy. Listen to Ingrid. My people, the Hindus, also believe that life doesn’t end. We are reborn, in an endless cycle of reincarnation. She’s right, there is no death!”

“I’m Buddhist, not Christian or Hindu,” Ling replied in a quivering voice. “I never understood that stuff. Buddhist say there’s no soul, no heaven, only nothingness—what bullshit is that?”

“It doesn’t matter what you call yourselves!” shouted Ingrid. “Believe and you’re saved!”

“Yes, yes....” Sheila looked around fearfully. “.... We must believe.... We must believe!”

“La-la-la! La-la-la!” Carla uttered, her fingers stuffed in her ears.

At that point, Max whispered anxiously, “They have to go under, Abe. Considering their mood, the sooner the better. The worst thing that could happen now isn’t forced hibernation. It’s space psychosis. That condition is permanent. You don’t want crewmembers going mad!”

Soon, Hans, and Elroy were clutching themselves tightly and rocking to and fro, as Sheila assumed a fetal position on the floor. Watching them lapse into deeper levels of hysteria and borderline psychosis, Abe nodded at Max, swallowing hard.

“Captain!” Mbuto poked him gently. “Do something. This is getting out of hand!”

Clearly, by their wide-eyed expressions, Max, Mbuto, Carla, and Said, were trying desperately to hold it together as the others fall apart. Torn with emotions for his crew and their mutual dread, Abe gathered his composure, rose up, and shouted at the bridge, “Skip, you told me to take command of the ship. Okay, you’re in charge now. You need to crank this process up a notch before this gets out of hand!”

It was, he realized, a serious understatement. Matters were already out of hand. Responding calmly now, Skip gave Abe a nod, called Woody up to the bridge, and whispered into his ear. As Ingrid continued to spout off in the distance, Sandra spoke firmly to her, “That’s enough Doctor Westfall, they get the point! They can pray for themselves.” Nodding to Skip, Woody, the enforcer, stepped down from the bridge and, in a loud voice, threatened the panic stricken crew: If you don’t calm down, I’ll sedate you. You’ll be forced into your chambers like Nicole!”

His words and the look on that cold wooden-like face evidently instilled terror in the fainthearted crewmembers. Suddenly, there was silence again at the table. No more doomsday forecasters dared speak. Even Said, who had been the boldest critics of the androids kept his peace. Almost unheard now were the trembling words of Sheila Livingston, who, rising up into a sitting position, quoted Ingrid’s childhood prayer: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul shall take.”

Ling clamped her mouth shut with both hands, Elroy and Hans stuffed their fists into their mouths, and Carla laughed hysterically to herself, as Sheila repeated the prayer. Satisfied

that matters were under control, Woody stood back, his hands on his hips, watching their every move.

After a period of less an hour, which seemed like half the day, Sandra returned to fetch another warm body. As Abe had hoped, he was the next one on the list. One-by-one, they would all suffer the final procedure of enclosure as Ingrid had. Abe heaved a sigh, turned, and smiled bravely at the remaining crew, and tried comforting them one last time. His comforting words had not helped very much, and yet he repeated them almost verbatim. It seemed questionable to him, considering the other scientists' frame of mind, that they really believed Ingrid's words, but it appeared that Gandy, Mbuto, and Sheila had found some comfort in them. Wishing desperately that he could discard his own agnosticism now, he thought about Ingrid's words. How was it possible, he wondered, that a geologist of her standing, had hidden this side of her until awakening from the dark sleep? If she could believe, and if Gandy and Mbuto made the effort, why couldn't he make the attempt?

What was it? he murmured to himself: "Yea, thou I walk through the Valley of the Shadow Death?... What comes after that?"

Try, as he may, as was led by Sandra into the space station, he couldn't remember India's prayers, not even that simple prayer, he had learned in childhood, himself. His head was muddled with so many thoughts that would soon be put indefinitely on hold.

As she helped him undress, Sandra, to his surprise and delight, finished the Twenty-Third Psalm for him. "I will fear no evil:" she purred, pulling the jump suit over his head, "for thou art with me, and thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

Resisting the urge to kiss her, he exclaimed, "That was lovely. You remembered it perfectly!"

Sandra, however, had spoken the words without emotion. The vision of seeing a Generation Eight android again transformed into the caring mid-wife was too much for him. Thankful that his crew didn't see him, Abe allowed himself the cleansing luxury of breaking down in tears. Sandra continued to prepare him for hibernation. It happened so quickly and expertly, before he realized it he was in his chamber, ready for hook-up and cryogenic sleep.

Following Ingrid and then Captain Drexel's example, the crew would suffer the final procedure of enclosure. Each shipmate would be scanned to make sure his stomach and colon were clear. If not, they would have to force themselves to vomit and, if necessary, also suffer an enema douche. As before when their course had been set for Triton, they would then be stripped down and given a brief garment to hide their private parts, and once again climb into their chambers, receive anesthesia, and while unconscious be prepared for cyber sleep.

Sandra talked to some of the crew as she would to children, reminding them of why they must do it, coaxing them in each step of the way, and, in several cases, with Woody's assistance, forcing them into their cryogenic chamber against their will. The anesthesia knocked them out quickly. Life-support tubes were then attached to the unconscious humans, and the temperature lowered until, with the lid shut, the body remained frozen in suspended animation until awakened one day when Skip had found them a new world. Time, was irrelevant Sandra reminded each of the humans, as they were tended to one-by-one. In the dark sleep, a thousand

years was no longer than a minute. The worst part was waking up. It would be uncomfortable, and traumatic, and yet, as before, they wouldn't remember this procedure. Now during the hours that Phoenix's crew were ushered into hibernation, all they would experience after the initial discomforts of the bodily purge of food and liquids earlier, was a painless shot as they lie in their chambers... then darkness. The dark sleep had begun and wouldn't end until a likely home was found. While they slept, it would be the caretakers who suffered the boredom of space.

Of the crewmembers, Sheila, for all her praying, like Elroy, Hans, and Ling had to be forced into her chamber and given the needle quickly to shut her up. Said, though silent and presenting a fearless facade was, because he struck Woody in the face with his fist, sedated while he was being undressed and then dragged unconscious to his chambers. For everyone, regardless of their behavior at this time, the anesthesia administered knocked them out quickly. After this point, the hook-up, which included the intravenous food tube, heart and brain monitors, and what Said called the zombie drug, would not be felt. At one point, while they were under normal unconsciousness caused by anesthesia, they would fall into the dark sleep and, as Said characterized, become zombies once again.

Doctor Max Rodgers, who followed Abe, though terrified himself, presented a brave front for everyone. Gandy, Mbuto, and, in the end, Carla Mendoza, also proved to be stoic and resolved. The most influential force for compliance was, of course, Woody, who would allow no dissent. Abe's last thoughts, which he would not recall, were strangely calm. He had done all he could for his crew. If there was a God, he hoped He could read his thoughts. A mantra filled his brain when it became his turn to be anesthetized and then frozen cryogenically: "Find us a home! ... Find us a home!"

For Captain Abe Drexel, who, that last moment, looked up searchingly at Sandra's synthetic face, a feeling of loneliness, more than fear, had overtaken him. The long-held dread that mankind would be dominated by its machines had been, for this small remnant of humanity, realized. The Phoenix and its android crew were in control of their lives. If they failed, this state of unconsciousness would be permanent. Yet, before the drug was administered, he found himself tranquil and at peace. He realized he had lived a long, eventful life. So had the other men and women on this journey. He had, as the other humans, felt great sadness for Earth, but that was behind them. Now, there was hope for the future. He had to believe this. What Skip told him about the break in communication with mission control had been born out by his own investigation. There was no question in his mind that the problems on Earth before takeoff had mushroomed into a cataclysmic event. As for the reassurances by the android captain that they would find a new home, he took that on faith, not reason. There was no proof whatsoever given by Skip and Rusty that such an Earth-like planet could be found nor was he totally confident of the self-sustaining features of the ship's fuel and food, disclosed by Skip. These were facts drawn from the android's database. Everything told to them was, in the end, a leap of faith over many light years in space. That the androids might be lying to them, as Said, Elroy, and Hans suspected, had been put to rest in his mind. There was no logical reason for them to lie. They were, in a manner of speaking, all in the same boat... When Sandra approached him with the needle, it made no difference.

It was apparent that there was nothing behind them... Earth was history. All that remained was the odyssey ahead. The motives of the androids, whether it was really to protect them or for their own self-preservation as they languish in their chambers, was almost a moot

point when weighed against the problems of space psychoses and physical degeneration. If nothing else, he reassured himself, that was averted. Captain Abraham Drexel had never wanted immortality and yet the thought intrigued him.... He had, for the first time in his life, prayed to his distant god. Then it happened to him, too. Remembering the tale of Rip Van Winkle, the man who went to sleep and awakened many years later with a long, gray beard, he laughed softly when he felt the needle, and was plunged into darkness. Sandra checked his vital signs to make sure they were functioning, hooked him up to his intravenous feeding tube, life support lines, and cryogenic drug, turned down the temperature, and then, glancing once more at Abe's sleeping face, shut the lid. For Captain Abraham Drexel and the crew of the Phoenix who followed, the dark sleep had begun.

When the last lid was shut, Sandra and Woody inspected all twelve of the cryogenic chambers meticulously. Faithfully, as Skip navigated and Rusty piloted the Phoenix, they would watch over the crew, making sure that the intravenous food tubes, life support lines, and cryogenic feed readings were correct and the temperature inside the chambers remained unchanged. The men and women of the Triton Project's aborted effort to explore Neptune's dark moon, lie peacefully in their enclosures, eyes shut, hands folded on their chests as if in caskets ready for burial. What separated them from the dead were the life-support monitors on each chamber, all indicating normal readouts. What kept them alive were the tubes connected to their bodies which fed and hydrated them, the temperature which preserved them, the cryogenic drug that kept them in a deep, comatose state, and a special tube for bodily waste and urine which emptied into containers in back of the chambers and was dumped each day. It was a never ending task for the medics, who, unlike their human charges, never complained and never had a moment's rest.

Satisfied with their efforts today, Sandra and Woody returned to the conference room where Skip and Rusty waited. Unable to show human emotion, except for perfunctory gestures and tones, they nevertheless resembled their human counterparts in their speech and mannerisms.

"The humans are asleep," Woody announced, standing at attention. "The chambers indicate normal readings. They will be monitored each hour."

"Many of them believe they won't wake up," Sandra reminded their leader.

"Yes." Skip nodded. "It's not whether they will awaken, but *when*." "Come," he motioned to the two. "While you were at your tasks, something happened. Rusty and I have already watched the message."

As they stood around the captain's console, Skip pointed to the computer. In the black background of the screen, was a message listed from earth. Pressing the video recorded communication, the unshaven face of Thomas Wayland, the director of the Triton Project, appeared against a background of hollow-eyed bedraggled men and women, standing silently as he delivered his message. Listening and watching the pre-recorded broadcast, Sandra and Woody stood in respectful silence displaying little emotion, and yet a frown seemed frozen on Skip's face.

"When you get this transmission," the director began solemnly, "I might be dead. Hopefully, with the androids help, you will one day be standing on the bridge alive, ready to land on a new world. Because of the electromagnetic blackout here, I was unable to send a message until today. In the Southern Hemisphere, where our convoy moves southward, I've been able to do just that. But there's little time. Finally, the powers that be have done it. The earth that you

once knew is finished. In the event of such a cataclysmic even, I instructed the androids not to awaken you. Because of the bombs, which caused a world-wide blackout, we couldn't communicate with the Phoenix, but now there is a brief window in the Southern Hemisphere. On the side of the road, near a grove of hardwood trees, I've found a meadow where unpolluted water still flows through. Frankly, at this point, I don't even know where we are. This is the first and might be the last transmission. Attempting to enter the earth's atmosphere would be suicide now. My final orders to you all is *do not to return!*"

Thomas Wayland now paused, fighting back tears. The once smartly dressed, clean-shaven, and dapper director that the androids remembered so well was now, along with members of his staff, a mere shell of himself, a fugitive from a nuclear apocalypse, trying to escape the radioactive clouds drifting from the north. Drawing close to the camera capturing this moment, he called out the Generation Eight androids' names: "Skip, Rusty, Sandra, and Woody." "This message is for you," his voice broke, "You are the caretakers of mankind.... When the Phoenix reaches it's destination—a safe harbor to begin anew, you may waken the crew and break the news to them. They have countless worlds to pick from. Since you, the caretakers, are seeing this message first, I leave with you this communication—the last from planet earth. Take care of this remnant of mankind. Their fate is in your hands. The clone specimens you were instructed to take from the crew are humanity's last hope!"

"That message is only eight hours old, sir," Rusty announced. "Shall we reply?"

"Yes." Skip placed a hand on his shoulder. "Inform the director that everything's in order: the crew are asleep and the Phoenix will begin its search. Tell him we're sorry for Earth's misfortune, but the humans are in good hands. With the specimens taken earlier, the human race is safe. Because of conditions in Earth's atmosphere, the message to the director may or may not be received, but it doesn't matter. It's up to us now. Mankind's fate is in our hands. Following our directives and the star-map, we'll search until we find an Earth-like world."

His hands clasped behind his back, Skip, the android captain of the Phoenix, looked out of the great window that moment. Sitting down in the captain's chair finally, he once again took command of the ship. While they searched the cosmos, Sandra and Woody would continue monitoring the sleeping humans. While they kept watch over their charges, and the captain and pilot navigated the ship, the Phoenix headed away from Neptune into the unknown.

In a monotone voice, Skip spoke into the computer's database, "Space Log, 2100 hours, October 17th 2458. The ship's company are safe and secure. All indicators are normal except the link with Earth. Our last communication came in belatedly from the dying world from Director Thomas Wayland. We can't go back now, only forward. We're on our own!"

"Where to sir?" Rusty beamed. "We have a list of possible destinations. Should I pick the first one on the list?"

"Perhaps." Skip seemed to sigh. "We have plenty of time to decide—centuries, perhaps millenniums. For now, Rusty, it's just *out*. Take us into deep space!"

Chapter Four:

Proxima: The Angry World

The Generation Eight android, unlike previous versions of this human-like robot, had genuine artificial intelligence, restrained only by programming fail-safes that depended on circumstances such as that faced by the Phoenix, now totally on its own. In the case of the androids on this ship, the special circumstance clause, amounting to an override of the original fail-safes, gave Skip, Rusty, Sandra, and Woody virtual freedom to choose what was best for the human crew. This meant that they acted on entirely their own initiative. Not only did the lives of the humans entombed in cryogenic chambers depend upon the android captain and his crew, but the ship itself, which was hurling at hyper-speed through the galaxy, required the captain's expertise. While his mind must prove to be wise and far-reaching, his pilot Rusty's hands at the ship's controls must be decisive and quick. For that matter, Sandra and Woody, the medics, had responsibilities much greater than any human. If they failed in their duties to protect the sleeping humans, the current mission would be pointless. What purpose would there be for the Phoenix then?

With these thoughts in mind, Skip and Rusty, made the critical decisions on which planets to visit, each time, through a wormhole or, as Skip preferred, a window, as the Phoenix coursed through space. Unlike before, as they looked out into space, there wasn't a canopy of stars ahead, only a dizzying kaleidoscope of lights streaking past. After finding a selected path, they entered a window, and, as if entering a cosmic drain, hurled down a psychedelic tunnel leading to the other side. One slip up, Skip knew very well, would be a staggering miscalculation.

Upon emerging from the first window, they had traveled nearly four light-years. Inexplicably, the tunnel had ended abruptly, leaving them a long way to go. Once again they were traveling at the Phoenix's normal stellar speed. Without a window, hyper-drive was useless. They were still a long way from the first Earth-like planet on their list: Proxima Centauri. The remaining .2 light-years would take over four thousand years, unless they found another window. For over a century, as Sandra and Woody tended to the crew, Skip and Rusty calculated their path, until finally, after entering a smaller window and spiraling down its tunnel, they reached the star. For a brief period, they approached the red dwarf star Proxima Centauri, which Skip's database described as providing a planet with almost the mass of Earth. The spectroscopic analysis supported the optimism of cosmologists in the past, but it was necessary to gain a closer look to make sure. From a distance, after great magnification, the captain and his pilot could see that it was, like Earth, a rocky world. On each side of the continents, there were oceans. There was even what looked very much like polar caps on top of the planet and cloud masses circling portions of this world. It looked so promising, Skip immediately ordered Sandra and Woody to awaken the human crew.

Once again, the humans were stirred from the dark sleep. The method of awakening them was not complex, and yet, if it was done incorrectly could harm them, even become fatal. Unlike meat quick-thawed from the freezer, the process was slow and painstaking. To insure

that there were no slip-ups, which was even possible for Generation Eight androids if they were in too big a hurry, each human was unhooked and thawed out slowly and meticulously. Because Doctor Max Rodgers could assist the android medics, he would, as before, be the first sleeper awakened, and then Captain Abe Drexel, the human captain of the ship, followed by Nicole, Doctor Rodgers assistance, and then Lieutenant Sheila Livingston, the executive officer of the ship. Though the two woman had not behaved admirably during the crisis, Nicole was suppose to, at least according to pre-flight instructions, assist the doctor, and Sheila was, after all, second-in-command. Because there were only two cryogenic showers, only two were chosen at a time. The thawing, unhooking, extraction, and shower for each crewmember was therefore done in pairs.

A row of twelve cryogenic chambers sat like coffins in the hibernation compartment, the frozen humans within unaware that a century had passed them by. Sandra and Woody began the procedure in a precise, unhurried manner. Much could go wrong at this point. The first step was to set temperature control for each of the chambers for a gradual withdrawal from -320.8 F ($-196\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$) down to room temperature. During this procedure, warm oxygen was administered to enclosure to facilitate thawing. When room temperature was reached and before revival, the lids of two of the chambers Sandra and Woody had each selected were opened. The tubes, life support monitor wiring, and cryogenic drug hook-up from chambers were removed and a shot was administered the unconscious patients to revive them from cryogenic sleep. The signal for extraction from the chamber came when their eyes had opened. Because Woody was the least personable of the androids, he stood back now to allow Sandra to greet each patient. When she felt they were ready, they would extract the patient from the cryogenic womb. From this stage, in a befuddled state of mind, as cognition began, they were dragged into the shower room (some of them in a greatly agitated condition), were they were plopped on a stool beneath a warm spray of water intended to assist cognition and calm them down. Throughout the birth period, as many of them now thought of it, cognition came for each of them at different rates. Sandra and Woody repeated the procedure for each succeeding pair, with equal success but varying reactions from their patients, ranging from weepy disorientation to screaming panic. Much as wet nurses of old, though, the medics went about their work, serenely and thoughtfully until all twelve crewmembers had been processed, dressed, and escorted to the conference table where Skip would give them the good news.

Though precognition and early cognition in the post-hibernation cycle was not at the same rate for the crewmembers, when full cognition came for them the previous ordeal faded from their memories like a fleeting dream. They were all grateful just to be back. After sitting at the table a while, numb, slack-jawed, and glassy-eyed from the experience, most of them were alert enough to begin chattering excitedly amongst themselves. While a chorus of voices asked Skip if he had found them a new home, Captain Abe Drexel, rose up finally and shushed them.

“Ladies and gentleman,” he shouted, “let Skip speak.”

“This better be good,” Elroy grumbled. “I don’t want to go though this again.”

“My friends,” Skip used his most cordial tone, “you have been asleep for over a century, and yet it was as if you had just nodded off and jerked awake.”

“I agree.” Sheila looked around at the others. “That’s exactly how it felt!”

“How does *he* know?” Said whispered to Hans. “He’s not human. He’s a robot!”

“Ach!” Hans made a face. “Dem andies don’t sleep. Dey don’t eat, drink or shit. I cannot imagine being awake for a hundred years!”

“I feel sorry for them.” Nicole sighed.

“Me too!” Gandy nodded.

“Well?” Carla looked up expectantly at the android. “Tell us about our new home. We’ve waited a century for good news!”

“Of course.” Skip seemed to smile. “The planet below us is in the Proxima Centauri star system.”

That moment everyone at the table jumped up from their seats and charged toward the window.

“I have dubbed this world simply Proxima,” he continued, as they looked down at the planet with awe. “You can call it Earth II or anything you wish.”

“How did you do it?” asked Captain Drexel, shaking his head. “I understand the basics of advanced propulsion and space ship design, but what our benefactors in Triton Project didn’t tell us was that it was built into our ship. My mind’s still locked into the older form of propulsion for ships, traveling at 56,000 kilometers an hour. You and Rusty explained this to us, but I still don’t understand how the Phoenix works!”

“Simply restated,” Skip replied, his hands folded behind his back, “our method of travel—hyper-drive, at over the speed of light, allowed us to find holes in space and shrink thousands of years of travel to a mere century.”

“Dear God!” Ingrid’s mouth dropped.

“An entire century?” murmured Carla in disbelief. “It felt like I just dozed off.”

“Remember,” Skip reminded them, “time is relative.”

Looking down at Proxima, as they crowded onto the bridge, his hands on his hips, he looked every bit the commander of the Phoenix. With their faces pressed against the window, the crewmembers marveled at the new world, as he summed up what he knew. “Look carefully at its topography,” he instructed, “and compare it to Earth. Does it not look very similar, at least from space, to Earth. It has almost the same mass. It’s a rocky planet like Earth, with mountain chains crisscrossing its continents. On each side of continents are oceans with cloud masses overhead—all signs that we have found an Earth-like world.”

“Those are very good signs indeed!” Max clasped his hands.

“Yes, you’ve done well!” Abe agreed, giving Skip’s shoulder a pat.

“When do we go?” Mbutu was the first to ask.

“When you’re all ready.” Skip explained. “You’ve been in suspended animation for a hundred years. There’s really no immediate hurry.” “Proxima isn’t going anywhere.” He motioned to the planet below. “Rest up people. Strangely enough, hibernation has taken much of your bodies’ energy. Get some real sleep now, exercise your limbs, get some proper nourishment, and plan your exploration to the new world.”

“Oh, this will be fun!” Nicole clapped her small hands.

Snickers erupted at the table. Max gave her a tolerant smile, and Carla gave her a look of scorn. Before their last enclosure, this same woman had to be forced kicking and screaming into hibernation. Now, as Said observed, “It was full steam ahead!”

“Ach!” Han chortled. “Such short memory fräulein. Before dark sleep, you went bananas!”

“We were all afraid!” Sheila said magnanimously. “I most of all. This is a new beginning for us all.”

“I can’t wait!” Ingrid exclaimed.

What Skip had suggested that they do was similar to the regimen following the last awakening with the exception of the planning of their mission. The last time the humans found themselves at the captain's table, they had been given news which changed everything for them. The earth they once knew was no more. There was therefore no mission to Triton, Neptune's moon. Today, a hundred years past that cataclysmic event, everyone they had known back home, if not killed in the world war, itself, were nevertheless long since dead. After awakening from hibernation, this dark memory seemed remote and irrelevant to them now. The fact that they had slept a hundred years, though unsettling at first, was accepted as a cold hard fact.

Looking at the map Skip and his pilot Rusty had drawn from the ship's computer and beamed onto the table, the twelve humans, with the four androids standing by for assistance, discussed the exploration ahead in a much calmer mood than when they congregated after the last period of sleep. Excitement animated some of the crewmembers, but a lethargy, from a century of cerebral inaction, made most of them feel drained, which caused them to have a feeling of exhaustion, which Skip had warned them about. Despite this byproduct of cryogenic sleep, virtually all members of the Phoenix were happy that Skip and Rusty had found them a world.

The magnification that the map showed was still not great enough to discern small details. Much of their observation was based on guesswork on what they could see. It was obvious that it was, in many respects, an Earth-like planet. It had water, clouds, and familiar landmasses, but, at a similar distance from Earth as its satellites circled, the Phoenix's powerful scope couldn't pick up signs of life on Proxima as Earth's satellites could from space. There were no alien herds and flying creatures discerned. They couldn't even be sure there were plants on the new world. As Abe pointed out with concern, as he stood over the image and pointed here and there, there was no sign of forests or even green areas. Skip suggested that this wasn't a cause for alarm since there were, in fact, specks of dark in various sectors that might indicate alien flora. Moreover the presence of oceans meant that sea life was possible, and numerous clusters of clouds indicated rainfall, which should certainly nurture life on land. So far, Abe was cautiously optimistic and the rest of the crew somewhat upbeat by what they saw. Though Proxima didn't look like Earth from space, neither did it resemble the cold, lifeless planets of the solar system. More importantly, Abe and Max agreed, there was no telling when and if Skip would find another world. Considering the greater distances and limited number of Earth-like worlds in the galaxy, Proxima was their best bet so far.

Not that it would change their plans, a poll was taken by Abe to make sure everyone agreed. With unanimity and camaraderie, filled with hope and excitement, the crew would rest up for a few days, eat the food required for 'newborns' until their stomachs were ready, get plenty of sleep, and spend time on the treadmills in the exercise room.

During the three days preceding exploration of the new world, there was, after the first day of relaxation and readjustment to functioning as thinking human beings and walking on two legs, efforts made by the captain, ship's doctor, engineer, and communication technician when they felt up to it, to prepare the rover for operation. For two days, as the other crewmembers relaxed, exercised, and played shipboard games, these four men overcame their own lethargy to make sure that Phoenix One was ready for exploration. This not only meant adequate fuel, but the required equipment and medical supplies for the undertaking. On the day before landfall, the crew allowed themselves a complete rest, except for a meeting of the operational crew, who went over the general plan for tomorrow's exploration, the list of equipment everyone needed, and a

discussion with Skip on problems he might foresee. Skip remained upbeat, as did Mbuto and Gandy. Mbuto sent digital copies of the planet's topography to everyone's personal database, and before everyone turned in for the evening, the captain assembled the crew and, after giving them a tour of Phoenix One, gave them a pep talk about the mornings muster and take off from the mother ship. This was, he counseled them, an unknown world that they had seen only from space and through magnification of the ship's scope. Skip believed that it was an oxygenated world, but they would, until tests were taken of the air there, wear life-support systems similar but lighter than the ones worn by explorers on Mars and Europa. This caused groans to erupt among the crewmembers, and yet no one disagreed with him. Everyone knew and appreciated the protection of the suits. Each one carried its own limited supply of oxygen that would have to be replenished after several hours of being on the surface of the planet, so it was hoped that the tests conducted by Carla Mendoza, the atmospheric meteorologist, would prove that Proxima, in fact, had breathable air.

On the morning of the takeoff, the crew was once more assembled for a light breakfast and coffee (herbal tea for Ingrid and Elroy), given last minute instructions by the captain, and, filing down the aft ladder to the rover hangar, boarded the craft. It was the most exciting moment in their stellarnaut careers—the reason they had joined the Triton Project program in the first place. Now here they were embarking upon an adventure on a distant world, far surpassing the achievements of the explorers on Mars and Europa. Seated in the passenger compartment of Phoenix One, with Captain Abraham Drexel and Sheila Livingston, his pilot and second-in-command, at the controls, most of the crew seemed unafraid of the trip down to the surface and the subsequent exit into an unknown world, but in the faces of the more fainthearted crewmembers there was that glassy stare and hysterical smile reminiscent of those moments before hibernation. No one, the captain included, not even the super-intelligent android captain and pilot, knew what to expect below.

Upon landing upon a likely spot on Proxima, the crew rose up with anticipation, were guided to the aft portion of the rover where they entered an airlock separated from the oxygenated portion of the craft and were assisted by veteran space traveler, Captain Abe Drexel, into their life support suits. After suiting himself up, the captain shepherded his crew out of the hatch one-by-one, ordering them to halt outside the craft. With their suits to protect them from harmful gasses and the ultra-violet rays that dwarf stars such as Proxima Centauri often radiated, they fit the text book example of spacemen from another world. Now that their mission had drastically changed, the logo on their chests and packs, The Triton Project, seemed sad and ludicrous. It had been suggested last night that they call their Mission Earth II, but right now it was enough just to be here on Proxima and not in the dark sleep.

Leading his crewmembers much as a twenty-first century scout master would lead his troop over Proxima's strange landscape, Captain Drexel walked ahead of them a moment, scanning the landscape around them, a gloved hand shielding his eyes from the great looming red star in the sky. Looking up at the Proxima Centauri, the explorers gasped. At first, it was a frightening specter, for the star covered nearly half of the sky. Much cooler than Earth's sun, as a red dwarf, it radiated the equivalent amount of heat and radiation of the sun on a temperate portion of the globe. This first piece of information, which Abe read from his database, impressed the crew very much, but the most important matter in their collective minds was Proxima's air. As they strolled along, therefore, the first test performed on the planet was whether or not it had breathable air, which, if the test proved otherwise, would be a non-starter. Everyone held their breaths. A few of them prayed. What Carla Mendoza, the atmospheric

climatologist, discovered was a safe blend of oxygen and other gasses, which, translated for the crew, meant that they could take off their helmets, but just to be safe from ultra-violet rays, remain in both their helmets and suits, until she also tested the atmosphere for the rays. Once again, though there was a slightly higher level of ultraviolet rays on the planet, the test showed a safe level for the explorers. A cheer went up when the captain gave them permission to return to rover and remove their clunky suits and move about in their normal wear.

What the captain insisted upon now, though, was that they put on gloves to protect them from toxic elements on the ground and possible poisonous forms of life. At this point, as they approached the dark, blue ocean, Captain Drexel pointed excitedly at rocks near the water. “Lo and behold there it is!” he exclaimed. What they had suspected after seeing the magnification of dark splotches near the ocean was a moss-like form of life growing on the rocks near the shore. The sea, which lapped gently on the volcanic sand where they ventured, was, in fact fresh water. When this discovery was made, it struck everyone as odd. This was not a good sign Ingrid, the geologist, confessed to the captain. Such an ocean, she added with a sigh, was what explorers on Earth would discover if they traveled back in time three billion years before the oceans became salt water. This discovery, they knew trumped the good news about the air and lack of harmful ultraviolet rays. When the moss was tested, it proved inconclusive as a future form of food like algae on Earth. In fact, the botanist in the crew, Ling Soon, saw no similarity between the moss-like life form and its counterpart on Earth. To synthesize food from this life form, she explained with disappointment, would require a manufacturing process not available on the ship. The most serious problem as far as sustenance on the planet, however, was the lack of creatures in the ocean. According to the zoologist Hans Rucker, after he took a sample of the water and tested it, there were only minute primitive rope-like organisms resembling bacteria and larger globs that looked like amoebas in the water. Unless they had diving suits and explored the depths of the ocean, which appeared to be more like a great, shallow lake, they wouldn’t know absolutely for sure. It might, however, Hans said, shaking his head be a complete waste of time. The scanning equipment he used to sound out the body of water and its floor showed no movement whatsoever. Except for the sparse patches of moss on the rocks, this, the scientists concluded was an unpromising place for colonization.

Strangely enough, the scientist noted, there were no sedimentary rock where they took samples to indicate the possible geological history of the planet. The stone was a form of metamorphic rock, which contained common minerals of the universe, including iron, carbon, zinc, and the expected trace elements found on Earth but no sodium, iodine, or chlorine, which is found in salt and sea water. This was, in spite of being a promising planet initially, a dead world that offered little more than the solar system’s Mars, Europa, and Earth’s moon for human habitation.

“This isn’t good—any of it,” the captain turned to his crew. “This is an Earth-like world, but one existing during the first billion years of its evolution.”

“Does this mean we have we return to hibernation?” Nicole was the first one to ask.

“Gott in himmel!” groaned Hans.

Suddenly, the excited and happy attitude the captain heard when the first tests for air and ultraviolet rays proved negative turned to despair.

“The dark sleep?” Elroy muttered. “Not that again. Surely, we can eke out an existence here.”

“I don’t think so.” The captain looked at him sympathetically. “This planet is far more inhabitable than Europa, but its nothing like Earth. It’s, for all practical purposes, a dead-end.”

Five members of the crew—Max, Gandy, Mbuto, Ingrid, and Carla—agreed with the captain. The other six members—Elroy, Hans, Nicole, Said, Ling Soon, and Sheila—balked at the notion of giving up. Elroy had summed up their opinion that they stick it out. What decided the issue for them now, though, was something that hadn't been visible from the bridge or the digital map. There was no test for this unexpected danger. Suddenly, as they stood there deliberating a moment, the great red sun seemed to blink. It was an awful sight. One corner of it sent out a great flare that, fortunately for them, arced toward a distant point in the horizon. For the captain, who understood this phenomena very well, it meant one thing.

“Quick! Into the rover!” he shouted at the crew.

This time, after seeing this terrifying sight, there was no argument. Everyone scrambled into the craft and buckled themselves into their seats. Abe had already fired up the propulsion unit and Sheila had the craft hovering over the ground when another great arc that resembled a massive lightning strike again struck the planet, this time closer in the horizon. Once again, as fortune would have it for the rover and mother ship, the flare was still hundreds of kilometers away.

“What was that?” Gandy turned to Carla.

“It was like a solar flare from Earth's sun,” she answered, watching it from the overhead screen. “If I took a reading now for rays, it would be off the chart. We're lucky it didn't hit us. We would've been fried!”

At this point, Carla explained to Gandy and some of the others ignorant of red dwarf behavior, that some of these small stars were more volatile than others. An inactive red dwarf, she informed the captain, should be a requirement for an Earth-like world. Skip must understand this before selecting another planet! Before the rover had even docked on the mother ship, the Phoenix was poised for takeoff from the planet. No sooner had the docking area been secured and the crewmembers were fastened into their passenger seats below the bridge, than the Phoenix was back in space, hurling at 56,000 kilometers an hour from the scene.

When gravity was restored and they were a safe distance from Proxima, they gathered on the bridge around the captain's table, with sullen expressions. The six crewmembers who had complained about leaving Proxima were upset but not nearly as upset as the captain had feared. They had dodged certain destruction, a realization that tempered their dread of returning to hibernation.

Refreshments were brought to them by Sandra and Woody, who, when not acting as medics overseeing prepping and monitoring of sleeping humans acted much like airline stewardesses of old. Despite the crewmembers disappointment, everyone was hungry and enjoyed their sandwiches and the alcoholic beverages offered on this special occasion. It was all right to get tipsy, Sandra reassured them. After being purged it mattered little what they put into their stomachs. After this grim reminder of their destinies, everyone, even the captain arrived at various levels of intoxication, some of whom, like Said and Nicole, becoming thoroughly drunk. While they enjoyed their last evening together before hibernation, the scientists discussed more light-heartedly this time, what they had found.

Clearly, everyone agreed, the red dwarf's flare was an inhibitor of life and would have destroyed the explorers and their ship if they had stayed. The examples of life-forms could only exist at the whim of such a sun. A toast was made to Proxima, the angry world.

“Perhaps,” Hans suggested clinking cups with Carla and Ingrid, “in a billion years or so Proxima might be more like Earth.”

“I dunno,” Carla replied, looking into her cup, “it has a red dwarf for a sun. That star system is really quite old. It should have quieted down by now.” “Did you know,” she added, glancing around the table, “red dwarfs can live ten times as long as our sun. Unfortunately, some of them are unstable like Proxima. Since almost all of the earth-like planets I’ve read about are red dwarfs, that’s not very encouraging!”

Skip looked down at Carla and appeared to frown. “That doesn’t mean all of them are that way,” he said thoughtfully. “It’s very hard to tell which of them are or aren’t, but information in my database shows a preponderance of quiet worlds.”

“Quied?” Said replied with a drunken slur. “Ish thad whad you call’em? Thad somebitch back there wuzn’t quied?”

“Your smashed.” Max frowned.

“So am I!” Nicole grinned foolishly.

“All right, Mbuto” Abe looked at the communication technician now. “What else did we conclude?”

“We have to find an inhabitable planet soon,” he now spoke everyone’s mind. “I looked in my database captain. The next Earth-like planet is Ross 128. It’s over twice as far as our original distance!”

“Exactly how far?” The captain looked questionably up at Skip.

“Over eleven light-years,” admitted the android. “But in cryogenic sleep distance is irrelevant!”

“Irrelevant to you maybe.” Elroy gave him a surly look. “You don’t sleep.”

“The don’t eat or take a crap either.” Hans snarled.

“I doan trusd them... I doan trusd them,” Said muttered, the classic drunk crying in his beer.

Captain Drexel, the least tipsy of the crew, stood up and took Skip aside.

“Damn it, Skip!” he looked squarely into the android’s unflinching, expressionless face. “It’s a good thing most of those people are drunk.” “Eleven light years?” he gnashed his teeth. “Jeezus, Skip. That’s over twice as far as Proxima. Are you certain you can find us a stable world this time?”

“I’m fairly certain.” Skip replied. “Rose 128b, as its called, circles a quiet sun. I know nothing more about its surface other than its stability and the fact its listed in my databases as being a planet similar to Earth.”

“Will, I hope your right!” Abe grumbled.

Skip’s unwavering stare and slight frown were suddenly intimidating. For a moment, as he tapped the androids chest to make his point, he remembered how Said almost lost control with him before regaining his wits and backing away. Despite his level of inebriation, the thought came to Abe that moment androids aren’t supposed to frown! Why was he frowning? There were times like these that Skip seemed almost human. Generation Eight Androids, he recalled, as Said must of done, were three times as strong as humans. Realizing how tipsy he had become, he laughed foolishly, backed away with a silly grin, and returned to the table. Attempting to control the slur to his voice, he reminded his crew that they would repeat the cryogenic procedure during the next day, so they might as well enjoy themselves thoroughly tonight. “Get drunk, eat as much as you want, and party all night!” he instructed them. “It will make no difference before the purge!”

On that note, Abe joined wholeheartedly in the merriment, and became as Max accused Said earlier, of becoming thoroughly smashed. While they drank to oblivion, their caretakers stood back, with arms folded, staring tolerantly at their human charges.

“Look at them.” Rusty shook his head. “When they’re intoxicated, they behave like children!”

“Yes.” Woody seemed to frown. “It’s hard to believe they’re our masters. Even the captain is drunk!”

“Technically they rule us,” Sandra clarified, “but they need constant tending. Without Woody and I, they’d all be dead.”

“It’s our duty to serve them,” Skip said thoughtfully. “They require constant guidance. We’re their caretakers. When they’re awake, we stand aside.... But they’re our masters only when they’re awake. Until we find a planet suitable for them, *we’re in control!*”

Chapter Five

Ross 128b: The Savage Planet

The process that humans must endure for hibernation was based upon an earlier attempt of cold storage. After experimenting with some success with laboratory rats, human volunteers placed in cryogenic chambers were frozen by nitrogen gas, left for periods of days, then revived. Unfortunately, all ten men and women in the experiment either died during the experience or suffered serious brain damage and eventual death. Looking ahead to traveling deep into space, it was necessary for scientists to get it right. Human cryogenics had to be an exact science. The method of cold storage, using nitrogen and extreme temperatures, was refined with greater success, until finally, inside the chamber under refrigeration, the subjects survived for several weeks. After the success of these experiments, which didn't harm or prove fatal to the volunteers, longer periods of preservation were possible, until, theoretically someone could live forever in such a state.

Scientists called this method of cryogenic preservation suspended animation, hibernation, or cryogenic sleep, none of which seemed entirely accurate in describing such a state. All three implied that the subject was slumbering, at most in deep sleep, like hibernating mammals, not the condition humans are in during an operations or a comatose state. Nevertheless, these terms were used interchangeably by scientists, for without recall upon awakening a description of it was almost impossible. In such a condition, even the brain waves are marginal, making the very nature of it unknown. For this reason the stellarnauts, who experienced the longest period in this state, now called it the dark sleep—the lowest level of metabolism for humans, reaching almost to the threshold of death.

For this apparently dreamless condition (dreamless being an adjective still unproven by empirical evidence), the twelve men and women had been understandably fearful. It was, many of them stubbornly believed, too much like being dead. Their fear was, however, counterbalanced this time by fatalism and resignation. They either slept in hibernation or they aged quickly and died. They had, for that matter, escaped a more immediate and terrible death on Proxima, which made it much easier to accept their fate. Their future remained securely in the hands of the androids who had taken care of them this far. This time, for most of them, therefore, there was greater trust for their caretakers than before. As Captain Drexel reassured them, there was no reason for the androids to sabotage the new mission by letting them sleep for forever when a likely planet was found. Proxima might not have been the right choice, but it had breathable air and at least one plant-like growth. It appeared that Skip had their best interest at heart. During their final moments of cognition this time, they had looked ahead to the next world promised by Skip, with hope and, for some of them, prayer.

Encased in their chambers at temperatures which would normally kill humans and most forms of life, imprisoned for centuries in dark sleep as their medics Sandra and Woody tended to them, Skip navigated the Phoenix toward the next world.

While the humans slept, the Phoenix found another window in space, jumping across the galaxy to the next coordinates selected on the star map. With a stoic patience humans could

never fathom, the four androids continued their regimen: Skip, the captain, navigating the ship and Rusty, the pilot, steering it through a window in space and then, after jumping to a sector light years away, traveling over billions of more miles at normal speed until reaching the new world; and Sandra and Woody, the medics and stewards, watching over the sleeping humans, constantly moving from chamber to chamber to insure their patients' well-being—four Generation Eight models, the last and most perfect androids designed by science.

When they reached the star system Ross 128 (named after twentieth century astronomer Frank Elmore Ross), they hovered above its Earth-like planet, Ross 128b, trapped in its gravity, studying its surface awhile. Already, Skip and Rusty were encouraged by what they saw. The outline of continents, oceans, and clouds, which they had seen on Proxima, were more distinct on the new world. Without even looking through the scope, they were impressed by how similar the continents resembled Earth. A more thorough spectroscopic analysis of the planet's red dwarf star also recommended it for colonization: the corners of the star were stable and there were no flares streaking off its surface. If the surface of its planet was as promising as they expected, with abundant plant and animal life, this would prove that Ross 128 was a quiet star. Upon closer inspection, however, with the image of the planet projected onto the table, Skip and Rusty grew concerned by what they saw. On the one hand the world below was teeming with plant and animal life. On the other, the landscape was one continuous tangle of forests, rivers, lakes, and clearings. With greatest magnification, they detected bizarre-looking denizens with long, willowy necks, squat monsters with multiple legs roaming about, countless smaller inhabitants skirting the jungle, and a sky teeming with all manner of flying creatures, some of which were gigantic, while others, flying every which way, reminded the androids of Earth's insects by their movements, though they were as large as terrestrial eagles flittering in the sky.

"What do you think Rusty?" Skip turned to the pilot.

"... Well, captain." Rusty thought a moment. "It might have a quiet sun, but it's not a *quiet world*. Unfortunately, we don't know what's ahead of us. It might be the only Earth-like planet found for a long time."

"That's true." Skip nodded. "They'll just have to be careful. Let's let them decide."

"That look pretty scary." Rusty studied the projection. "Should I turn off the scope?"

"Good point. It might startle them. For the time being," suggested Skip, "place it back on the original setting. Let's not show them those details all at once. It might startle them."

"Woody, Sandy," he beckoned on his intercom. "Time to waken the humans again. Be more gentle this time. It's been centuries since the last ports-a-call."

Once again, with the medics assistance, the humans were brought back from the dark sleep, dragged out of their chambers, and allowed to recover from the experience in the showers. As before, cognition came at different rates for each of them, but this time, with memories of what happened on Proxima returning to each of them, their last periods in the chamber didn't seem as bad. They were thankful just to be alive. The fatalism and resignation they felt before their last hibernation returned. They were much more mellow. Proxima, a great disappointment, had been, in the words of Hans Rucker, an angry planet. They felt very fortunate that Skip had taken them back into deep space. Now, as they sat at the conference table, with the new planet looming below them, excitement for the unknown, always an emotional elixir, stirred their dulled brains. As the last time—their second period of hibernation, when they awakened, looking forward to a new home, they wanted information immediately. There was skepticism as before and even sarcasm in some of their voices, but this time, after having the experience of bonafide explorers under their belts, most of them had high expectations.

“Well, tell us!” Sheila bounced up and down in her seat. “What did you find?”

“Yes, out with it!” Said snapped his fingers. “No more drama!”

“It’s there below you.” Skip pointed to the table. “The new world!”

“Ach,” Hans made a face, “dat gives me headache. Everything shimmers like old time movie!”

“Just tell us first,” Captain Drexel ordered impatiently. “That last map didn’t help.”

“This time the detail will be greater,” Skip insisted. “You’ll be greatly surprised. The name of the star system is Ross 128 and its habitable planet is called Ross 128b.”

At the current projection, rather than the magnification that gave details of the monsters, crewmembers were able see that it was a green, well-watered world. After giving them this introduction, Skip instructed Rusty to make adjustments to the image, then stood there, with his arms folded, waiting for reactions from the group. The details came gradually, as Rusty made the adjustments. Though taken back by the android’s assertiveness, Abe was impressed by what he saw. Skip was correct when he said they would be surprised: this planet was much different than Proxima. The landscape for Ross 128b on the map, magnified progressively by Rusty, showed a world with continents, oceans, and cloud masses. As the magnification was increased and the map was focused by the pilot, the details were amazing and, as it was enlarged even more, somewhat disturbing. A collective gasp, followed by sighs, filled the bridge. It was a green world, they discovered, with rivers as well as seas, and, when the magnification reached its limit, the tiny images of walking, crawling, and flying creatures could be seen in meadows and jungle clearings. It was plan for all to see that this world was alive and thriving. It was also plain to see that, by human standards, the creatures on Ross 128b were monsters, nothing like animals on Earth.

“What a nightmarish hodgepodge of creatures!” Sheila’s hand flew to her mouth.

“Well,” Max scratched his head, “it’s certainly green. It reminds me of the Amazon or Congo. There’s wildlife everywhere.”

“When have you seen monsters like that back home?” Nicole looked down in horror.

“Never.” Elroy pointed excitedly. “There’s a limitless food source there, though. I wish I had my laser rifle. I’d bag one of those four footed things.”

“Some of them have six or eight legs,” marveled Carla. “And what about those fliers—they look like giant moths.

“I dunno.” Hans drew back and rubbed his eyes. “This give me big headache.”

Gauging this mixed reaction, Skip took on a paternal tone. “Listen,” he said, looking at Sheila and Nicole. “It might be the only close-match for Earth. That’s why I selected it. Who knows what those creatures are capable of. They could just be mindless brutes. You must at least give this world a chance.”

“We don’t have weapons!” The captain frowned at Skip. “How do we protect ourselves if they attack?”

“Oh, you have weapons.” Skip said slyly. “Have you forgotten? The blasters intended for surface mining and the laser-cutters for sampling will make fine guns!”

“Yes, I remember.” The captain sighed. “The fact is people,” he thought a moment. “... Skip is right. We don’t know what’s in store for us in the future. We don’t want to wander around for eternity. The next group of potential Earth-like worlds might all be duds.”

In a sudden almost pontifical manner, as if to bolster the human’s spirits, Skip, gave a short speech:

“You are the seeds of mankind. You mustn’t fail. In this ship’s database is all the combined knowledge of Earth—its history, science, and cultural heritages. In your DNA also is the fate of Earth II when, thanks to the specimens from you bodies, you populate a new world and make it your own. I have read your Bible. You are the chosen people now. The Phoenix is the new ark and your destiny, through the clone bank, is no different than the legendary Noah and his mission to replenish his world. Your goal is to find a home where you can live safely and propagate the human race!”

That the Phoenix carried the wisdom and science of Earth was a sobering fact, but more important was the responsibility of propagating the species. Once again, this time in a grand manner, the ultimate goal of the new mission—propagation—was voiced. It placed a great burden upon the humans. Because it was understood by some crewmembers that the androids would continue harvesting and manufacturing clones when they settled on the selected planet, it seemed evident that at least two of the androids—Sandra and Woody would always be necessary to fulfill this mission. For that matter, with Skip and Rusty’s vast knowledge, it was difficult to see themselves colonizing a planet without their help.

“That’s the bottom line, isn’t it?” murmured Mbuto, “we’re the clone source: the great-great grandparents of the human race.”

“Oh yes,” Gandy whispered back, “Skip’s right. We mustn’t fail. Without our caretakers, mankind is doomed!”

Captain now stifled the question in his mind, “When will we be free of you?”, and decided once and for all to give Skip the benefit of the doubt. “The question is,” he asked him instead, was, “Where’s a good place to land?”

“There is large meadow here.” Skip pointed to one spot. “It looks like you might be safe, especially with your weapons, but I think that Carla should go out in her life support suit first to test the air. Stay close to the rover this time until you’re sure of the surroundings. The last time you had to run for your lives!”

Once again, Skip was talking like the ship’s captain, and once again Abe let it slide. Thanks to the policy of the Triton Project, crewmembers entered the Phoenix ignorant of so many things. Not only was the ship far more advanced than what they were led to believe, containing a wealth of knowledge from Earth, with hyper-drive as well normal propulsion system and a self-sustaining food and air system, but its androids were far more advanced than what they were told. They were the masters now. The reminder by Skip of the Phoenix’s hidden agenda—the clone base, made the future of the humans on Earth II forever dependent on their caretakers. With this realization in mind, Abe kept himself positive and focused on the exploration ahead.

“When do we start?” He studied the android captain. “These folks are raring to go!”

“Lets let them rest up as they did before visiting Proxima.” Skip glanced around the table. “They need nourishment, normal sleep, and exercise to prepare for the task. The rover must be charged and ready. That’s an active world below, Captain Drexel. You must be especially careful this time!”

That said, the crew ate the prescribed meals for cryogenic risers, and, experiencing normal sleep or attempting to do so, remained safely aboard the mother ship until Ross 128b’s morning commenced. From the bridge, they took the opportunity this time to study the red dwarf mother star. As Proxima, it boggled their imagination, but this time it seemed even more

awesome, as viewed from outer space. Ross 128b sat as close to it the mother star as Mercury sat next to Earth's sun, and yet, explained Skip, unlike Mercury, it didn't burn up, because Ross 128 was a stable and quiet star, much cooler than the sun.

With a vision of the planet and its mother planet stamped on their imaginations, the twelve stellarnauts prepared themselves for the exploration ahead. The morning exercise included walks around the centripetal wheel and on the equipment provided in the exercise room adjacent to the galley. Though this short period of time would hardly make up for the centuries they had slept, all of the crewmembers took the regimen of rest, healthy food, and exercise seriously. No one was shocked when Skip finally admitted how long they had been in hibernation, which, because of a longer time traveling at normal speed, was nearly five hundred years. As it was pointed out again, time was irrelevant when you were in hibernation and left with no memory of this experience. It was enough just to concentrate on tomorrow. Because of the cataclysm on Earth, the crew of the Phoenix were forward thinking, focusing on the future, not past events. Even the experience of Proxima and its horrors was blotted out by what the new adventure might bring. With their minds filled with the terrifying and wondrous scenes from Ross 128b, many of the crewmembers required chemical assistance to fall asleep. No one got a full night's sleep. On the morning of takeoff in Phoenix One, everyone took one last look at the mother star looming beside the planet. Except for the great sun, Ross 128b, without magnification, looked almost inviting from space.

After a subdued breakfast and a respectful farewell from the androids and more words of encouragement from Skip, the twelve humans boarded Phoenix One, and, without further delay, broke away from the mother ship, drifting down swiftly to the planet below.

Ross 128b's morning, as seen up close, was unlike anything they had ever seen. After the landing craft had left the Phoenix and descended lower and lower to a clearing in the forest below, the alien sun grew larger and larger until it almost filled the sky. It was a surreal and overwhelming sight. Before the Phoenix One had even landed, as the crew looked out through the portholes and up at the overhead screen, they were greatly intimidated. The disparity between its red dwarf sun and the planet below was even more awesome than when they first looked down from the bridge. Despite the reassurances given to them that Ross 128 was a quiet star and the new planet was much more Earth-like than the one selected before, nothing in their imaginations had prepared them for the star and its busy, overpopulated world. Though it was understood by crewmembers that red dwarfs were much cooler than Earth's sun, which made this nearness possible, the star loomed unsettlingly close to them this time, making some of them not want to leave the craft.

After peering out awhile in wonder at the sky and jungle beyond the clearing, Captain Drexel ordered them to get ready. Before the crew exited Phoenix One, Carla Mendoza, the atmospheric climatologist, first tested the air in her life support system as Skip suggested, finding it humid but breathable. After this with their packs attached to their backs and weapons in hand, they lined up, much as passengers exiting an airship. Then, when Carla had unsuited and joined her associates, Captain Drexel was the second explorer to step onto the new world. Following like nervous children on a field trip as before, each crewmember, holding a laser-cutter or blaster in their hands, now emerged from the craft, their backpacks filled with testing equipment, water, and medical supplies, as the captain lead the way.

The forest stirred with eerie grunts, whistles, and screeching noises. The sky below Ross 128 was filled with all manner of the flying creatures they had seen magnified on the bridge, now larger than life, dark shadows against the crimson sky and great red sun. Almost immediately straight ahead, the twelve humans were challenged by a denizen from the jungle: a creature that looked like a huge spider but with hundreds of undulating legs. The movement of the creature or some organ in its small body caused it to emit a noise similar to the sound of giant, buzzing bee. Some of the men and women screamed, while others found their vocal chords frozen in terror. Keeping his head somehow, Abe fired at the creature with his blaster, but the thing kept on coming at them, until all twelve guns, blasting wildly, brought him down. Smoldering in a smelly, ghastly mass, the spider-like denizen appeared, upon inspection, to be much more primitive than a terrestrial spider. It had no apparent head or body. Innumerable legs that connected at a point much like upside hydra continued to writhe, causing the humans to fire more shots. Fearful they would run out of energy for the blasters and cutters, however, the captain ordered them to stop. Several of the crewmembers wretched. A few vomited onto the ground.

Standing there and looking into the dense jungle, after this dreadful reception, the humans wondered if they should go on. Recovering from his own shock and dismay, Captain Drexel tried sounding calm.

“I have an idea,” he found his voice. “Let’s wait it out and see if anything else comes to greet us.”

Everyone nodded eagerly. No one else spoke. Everyone was tempted to flee. For the longest time, they stood there huddled together, until sure enough a flock of flying creatures descended finally from the sky. All twelve blasters and laser guns now fired at once.

“Gott in himmel!” Hans shrieked. “What are dem things?”

“Giant moths!” Elroy gasped. “Moths with an attitude!”

Upon closer inspection, however, though they had moth-like wings, they had faces like bats, were covered with scales like reptiles, and made a hissing, snake-like noise. On their heads insect-like antennas vibrated. Several claw-like appendages dangled wasp-like from their bellies and a tale much like a scorpion’s curled up behind their wings.

Firing hysterically at these hideous fliers, their free hands swatting at their targets, the humans backed away toward the rover, killing as many as they could. Dozens of the beasties lie dead in the field, and yet they continued to dive bomb them, until there were hundreds of the little creatures twitching or lying motionless on the ground. Then, suddenly, after repeated shots from the humans’ weapons, the attackers suddenly dispersed. Hovering overhead a moment as if they might just attack again, reminiscent by their rapid, collective, movement of giant gnats or flies more than bats or birds, they disappeared finally into the jungle whence they came. For awhile, the humans were left alone in the clearing. In the near distance, however, and on each side of the clearing there was movement—rustling, scratching, and thumping noises. Bleats, honks, hisses, and all manner or sounds filled the air.

“I’ve never heard such racket,” Abe exclaimed. “At least we know when they’re coming.”

“Let’s go back to the rover,” Nicole pleaded. “Better yet, let’s return to the ship. This is an unfriendly world!”

“We might try a different location,” he met her half-way. “It’s either that or hibernation again. I’d like staying awake for awhile!”

“Yes,” Max agreed. “Maybe Skip can find us a friendlier place to land.”

With no other option except hibernation, most of them agreed with the captain and ship doctor. Shepherded back into the rover, Abe sat at the controls beside Sheila as crewmembers strapped themselves in. Rising up quickly from the clearing, the rover was already kilometers away from the clearing when Abe called the mother ship.

“Skip, come in,” he called impatiently. “That was a nightmare. Find us a better spot. Far away from the jungle—a large field, even a desert area, not a jungle clearing.”

“There’s an extinct volcano not far from your location.” Skip replied quickly. “Do you see it Captain Drexel?”

“Yes,” the captain squinted, “... I see it. Looks like ones I’ve seen on Earth. What next?”

“Beyond the volcano is a great meadow near a lake. In the distance is a heard of beetle-like creatures, munching on the grass. They look harmless. I don’t see any large creatures close by, at least not yet.”

“A lake you say?” the captain tried to sound cheerful. “We might find fish or something resembling fish in them. Who knows how tasty those giant beetles might be!”

“Yuck!” Sheila made a face.

Upon finding the meadow and lake, which were skirted by a distant patch of forest, Phoenix One hovered over the ground a few moments as Captain Drexel and Sheila Livingston sat behind the controls, staring out the window at the distant herds.

“You think those creatures are really safe?” Sheila whispered into his ear.

“Skip thinks so,” murmured Abe. “They’re like herbivores on Earth, only they have six or eight legs. I can’t tell from here.”

“There’s twelve.” Sheila shuddered. “Alien buffaloes—thousands of them stretching to the horizon. It gives me the creeps!”

“Ladies and gentleman,” the captain announced with forced calm. “Stay seated, until we set down and kill the thrusters. This looks harmless enough—free of predators. There’s a nice big lake nearby too. I’ll lead the way.”

After touching down finally, crewmembers rose up shakily, muttering quietly to each other. Not wasting anymore time, Abe led his pilot and the others out the rover. After Hans tested the water discovering small, furtive swimmers in the lake, he gathered specimens of the eyeless, eel-like swimmers, and Ling Soon, sampled the soil, the earth-like grass, and clippings from plants that looked like cactuses and succulents on Earth. Ingrid placed rock samples into her pack but also assisted the other scientists in gathering their samples, while Carla took temperature readings of the air. For a short while, after they filled their packs with the samples and glanced around at the landscape, they behaved like tourists, some of them taking pictures of the surrounding landscape and the massive sun.

Then once again, out of nowhere, more fliers attacked, this time as small creatures resembling humming birds with multiple eyes and tentacles instead of claws. Tragically, before their weapons drove them off and countless of the creatures lie scorched on the ground, one of the men was scratched by one of the fliers.

“There’s no telling what diseases those little monsters carry!” Elroy cried.

“Quick, doc,” Abraham motioned the stunned medic. “That looks bad.”

“It tingles.” Elroy groaned. “Now it burns like fire!”

Receiving frantic attention from Doctor Rodgers and his assistant Nicole, who cauterized the wound after taking samples of blood, the man whimpered awhile, comforted mostly by the

women members of the crew. Everyone expected the medical attention to suffice until they returned to the ship, their minds still wrapped around the latest attack.

“Well, what do you think?” Gandy looked around at the meadow.

“If we decide to stay here,” replied the captain, “this is as good a place as any.”

“Really, captain?” Said looked around uncertainly. “... I’m not so sure!”

“At least we have a lake nearby.” Mbuto replied anxiously. “It might have fish or fish-like critters. It’s better than fighting off those bat-like things.”

“Your mad!” shouted Elroy, holding his bandaged arm. “We’re all mad for agreeing to this trip!”

“We are, to quote Moses,” Captain Drexel pontificated with an edge of humor, “‘strangers in a strange land.’ Considering the odds against finding another suitable planet, we must give it a try.”

“Give it a try?” Nicole groaned. “We’re surrounded by a forest of crawling and flying monsters!”

“Ach!” Hans agreed. “We never be safe!”

After awhile of listening to crewmembers’ complaints, Elroy looked ghastly pale. The portion of his arm surrounding the bandage began turning blue. According to Max, who had seen a similar reactions on earth from a patient, the man was suffering a form a blood poisoning. After only a few more moments, in fact, after they rushed him into the rover and laid him on an emergency cot, the crew watched him die horribly from the bite. Using state of the art field equipment and the old fashioned method of checking his pulse and pupils, Max pronounced Elroy Simpson, the mission’s habitat architect and the Triton Project’s representative, dead—the first victim of their odyssey to find an Earth-like world. Making a quick decision now, the captain aborted their exploration on Ross 128b. No sooner had his crew entered the passenger compartment and fastened themselves into their seats and he and his pilot were manning the controls, than Phoenix One was aloft, escaping the savage world.

As the rover shuttled back to the mother ship, the remaining crewmembers sat in silence, staring straight ahead, shocked, saddened, and dismayed. “What big waste of time!” Hans summed it up under his breath. Elroy Simpson had just been unlucky, many of them believed. It could just as easily been one of them. Nicole wept silently, and Ingrid prayed. Sheila, who had much to make up after her cowardly performance before, refused to weep, but like Nicole and most of the men was still on the verge of tears.

After Phoenix One had docked and crewmembers filed in, four of the men reverently carrying Elroy on his cot, they laid the dead crewmember on the captain’s table and just stood there as the androids looked on. Though a few of them blamed Skip for not finding them a safe world, Abe knew better. He understood very well how difficult Skip, Rusty, Sandra, and Woody’s tasks were. How many centuries or millenniums would they have to stand vigil and pilot the sheep through the galaxy.

There was no vote taken or even dissent, as they accepted their fate. Elroy Simpson was given a stellarnaut’s burial in the cosmos. A brief ceremony in which the generally agnostic crew of the Phoenix stood on each side of a shroud—the Triton’s Phoenix-headed flag, good for nothing else now, Ingrid said a simple, tearful, prayer, the Captain added a few kindly words about their crewmate, they all touched the flag to give him a silent send-off, and the shroud-covered corpse was jettisoned from the garbage chute into the cold, vacuum of space.

It was a heartbreaking experience for the more tender-hearted members of the crew and a grim reminder of what all of them faced. After the close call they had with Proxima Centauri solar flashes and then Ross 128b's monsters, they realized how dangerous the search would continue to be.

The androids gave their charges awhile to recuperate, this time a full week, before it was time to eat a last meal, sleep one last night of normal sleep, and then suffer the prepping for hibernation, the prick of the needle, and then a dark, dreamless sleep. While they remained in their lonely chambers, Sandra and Woody monitored each of their vitals signs, and, as Rusty piloted the ship, Skip glanced continually at the star map, searching for a possible home. There were only so many Earth-like worlds out there. Each succeeding world might offer more dangers worse than what came before. Yet, if they failed to find a suitable for habitation, the humans would remain forever in a death-like sleep. Judged this way, the caretakers had almost god-like powers.

Chapter Six

Wolf 1061c: The Quiet World

Fortunately for Skip, his calculations led to another window, but, after jumping to a distance across the galaxy, Rusty would be forced to pilot the Phoenix for billions of kilometers at normal speed. Proxima Centauri had been 4.22 light years, Ross 128b 11.03 light years, and now Wolf 1061c 13.8 light years from Earth, but with varying success at shortening the distance to selected worlds. There was, inexplicably, only one window between their current point in the galaxy to the next likely planet: Wolf 1061c. A thousand years had passed since the humans had been placed in cyber-sleep. And yet it seemed like a split second since their eyes had shut and they awakened as the Phoenix circled the new world.

Unlike the last time, after the usual trauma of being awakened and suffering cognition as the Phoenix was circling Ross 128b, when the humans appeared to have a degree of anxiousness and even hope after the near-disaster on Proxima before, there seemed to be merely grim resignation in most of them at first. “Here we go again!” was the unspoken attitude, and yet there was the feeling among them that once again they had escaped disaster. Because of Elroy’s death, the horrors they experienced on Ross 128b was given added meaning. Looking around the conference table as they were served their first breakfast in a thousand years, they counted eleven crewmembers now. This time no one asked Skip questions about the new world. Partly because they were afraid to ask and partly from the exhaustion resulting from hibernation, they looked up at the android captain with glassy eyes, as he gave them the good news, as he interpreted it.

The very name of the planet, ‘Wolf 1061c’, was not encouraging for many of them. Obviously named after the star system’s discoverer, it had significance, but as far as they were concerned right now it was just one more so-called Earth-like planet that might give them grief. Skip didn’t play up the new discovery yet. He merely announced its name and his preliminary guess that it might be habitable, before he brought down the ship’s scope. *Might*, everyone understood, was the operative word. As the ship’s telescope projected the area in question onto the table, there was little enthusiasm among most of the humans. Despite their sullen faces, Captain Drexel, Doc Rodgers, Carla Mendoza, Gandy Supra, and Mbuto Sawala tried putting a good face on matters. Ingrid thanked God that Skip had found them another world, and, at breakfast, uttered a prayer of thanksgiving.

As Rusty adjusted the projection, however, the remaining six stellanauts scrutinized the image, expecting more monsters to leap out of the forest.

“Aren’t we fortunate that Skip found us another world?” Max smiled at Nicole.

“Right!” Captain Drexel piped, giving Sheila’s shoulder a pat. “Who knows, folks.” He glanced around the table. “This time we might get lucky!”

“I’m back from the dark sleep,” Gandy laughed nervously, “that’s enough for me!”

“Hmm!” Mbuto nodded and folded his arms. “Look at it: continents, a rocky world like Earth, Proxima, and Ross 128b. That looks like water and there’s some clouds.”

“We saw that before,” Said frowned. “What’s it look like with full magnification?”

As it grew larger when Rusty increased magnification and focused the image, anticipation was thick on the ship. Showing little emotion himself, Skip waited silently as the image grew progressively and its details were refined.

“So far so good.” Abe rubbed his hands. “Two of the three failed us, but come on people—this one has to be good!”

“Let us hope so!” Carla murmured anxiously.

The more Rusty increased the size, the more difficult it was to clarify the details. It was clear at this point that it was a green world with other familiar Earth-like features. Encouraged by what they saw so far, Carla, Ingrid, Abe, and the operational crew nodded with approval. The other crewmembers, however, were not so optimistic.

“Ross 128b looked like that too!” Nicole grumbled. “Now Elroy’s dead. We came pretty close to being dead ourselves!”

“Yes, it true captain,” Ling Soon agreed. “We must be sure this time. You said we were safe before!”

“Shame on both of you!” scolded Max. “He promised no such thing. We were in dire straights when we heard the news about Earth. We’re all lucky just to be alive.”

“Yes,” Sheila said unsurely. “Our captain knows best. We must trust him...”

“Skip’s our captain during this search,” Abe reminded her. “Without him and the other caretakers we wouldn’t make it. Hibernation keeps us alive.”

“Ya, it is true,” Hans looked sadly up at Skip. “... The andies are masters now.”

As they ate breakfast and sipped their coffee, the action shown by most of the crew seemed perfunctory to the medics. There was little enthusiasm for the extra effort Sandra and Woody had put into making the powdered eggs, pancakes, and bacon look appealing. Even the specially brewed coffee failed to stir them. Excitement and trepidation was an incompatible blend.

What changed the attitudes of the five gloomy crewmembers was when, at the image’s maximum size, the details of Wolf 1061c were almost perfect. As before, there was a collective gasp at the table. For several moments, no one spoke a word. As they studied the thick jungle canopy, its clearings, and a nearby river running at the jungle’s edge, they could see that it was a green world, as Ross 128b had been, but this time there were no signs of animals. This, Rusty admitted, was why it had taken so long. The details he had been looking for had been signs of animal life, which were not apparent on this world. There were no walking, crawling, slithering, or flying creatures, which led Skip to suggest that animal life on Wolf 1061c might just be very small and not detectable until they studied it up close. Despite a slight hesitance in Skip’s voice when he made this suggestion, this information was welcomed by the humans, who had enough of monsters for awhile.

Hans, once the picture of gloom, summed up their feelings. “At last,” he cried, “you find quiet world!”

“You don’t know anything about this planet,” cautioned Skip. “Proxima looked innocent enough too!”

“Well,” Captain Drexel sighed. “It looks good so far to me: a quiet world beneath a quiet sun, with no dangerous creatures jumping out or attacking from the sky.”

“No *apparent* creatures detected,” Skip qualified. “There could be small, unseen ones. The last time you didn’t check for harmful microbes. Now that there doesn’t seem to be any

animals, I advise testing the air, water, and soil. A plant world might still be affected by microbes like an animal world. Have Carla check this out like she did before, but this time test for harmful equivalents to Earth's viruses and bacteria."

Once again Skip, the android captain, not the human captain, was giving the orders. Though he bristled at Skip's imperious tone, Captain Drexel hadn't thought of this himself. It was a good suggestion and might very well save their lives. Skip pointed to a likely place to set Phoenix One down on the sector of Wolf 1061c shown: a large clearing near the river that appeared to be a field of some sort. Though there was no equivalent forms of life on the new world like those of Earth, already the explorers were thinking of it as the 'Plant World.'

Because of what they knew so far about the Plant World, the humans were more enthusiastic than they had been for the previous two enterprises. As Said put it that hour, "What could be dangerous about a bunch of plants?"

Following the same regimen they had before visiting Proxima and Ross 128b, the humans rested up for three days, eating heartily, exercising, and getting plenty of normal sleep. When the exploration day finally arrived, all twelve of them were confident that they had finally found a habitable world. Climbing aboard Phoenix One this time was a light-hearted occasion. Skip, Rusty, Sandra, and Woody cast worried glances at the humans as they filed into the craft. By the explorers' smiles and chatter, it was as if they were on an exciting outing.

"The humans are like children," Rusty said dryly. "They remind me of something I found in my database.... Students going on a school outing."

"I remember something." Sandra thought a moment. "... Scouts going on a campout, with Captain Drexel as the scoutmaster."

"This is no outing or campout," Woody said grimly. "So badly do they want to believe they've found a new home, they might become careless."

"There are dangers in many disguises," replied Skip. "Proxima seemed quiet too at first. From space Ross 128b looked very much like a rain forest on Earth. Now, inexplicably, we've found them a jungle world without wildlife, which, if this so, is, in fact, quiet.... How very odd. I'll be glad when our search is over and our human charges are safe and sound. If, by definition, quiet, as the human uses this word, merely means silent, not safe from solar flares, then Wolf 1061c appears to be a quiet world, but it might not be safe. Microbes are silent, so were the poisonous plants and insects on Earth. The only really safe place for them so far is on the Phoenix, in their cryogenic chambers, until we've found them a secure home.... Let's hope this is the one!"

Upon landing in the field adjacent to the forest, the twelve human were eager to begin. From the window in front of the control console and through the portholes of the rover, the forest appeared peaceful and idyllic. As they waited for Carla to suit up and test for breathable air, evidence of harmful rays, and harmful airborne microbes, they studied the scene outside the craft within the safety of Phoenix One. It was indeed a quiet world, they agreed. Carla claimed that the silence was deafening, a stark contrast to what they heard on Ross 128b. When her tests showed breathable air, a negative reading for harmful rays, and no potentially hostile microbes, they were raring to go. The eleven earthlings couldn't wait to explore the new world.

When they emerged from Phoenix One, however, they were assailed by the heat and humidity of the plant world, a phenomena, the captain reminded them that was due to tropical temperature, exacerbated by their emergence from the air-conditioned craft. In her life support suit, Carla hadn't noticed this discomfort. The temperature now was significantly greater than Ross 128b's 90° F. To their dismay, the thermal indicators on their wrists registered at 120°.

"Let's put our life support systems on," suggested Nicole. "I'm ready to pass out."

Looking up at the sky at the great red sun, Carla mentally compared the tropical rain forests of Earth with Wolf 1061c and was perplexed.

"I've never seen anything like it," she confessed. "It's like we landed in the Jurassic Age on Earth. During that period most of the earth was also hot and humid but I don't think it was anything like this. A 120° F reading with this much humidity is unbelievable!"

"Ach! Dis is serious," Hans grumbled. "It's like sauna or Indian lodge!"

"Yes, exactly." She nodded. "Wolf 1061c has what we climatologists call the hothouse effect."

"Then lets go back!" Ling Soon pleaded. "I will die in this heat!"

"Yes, back into the loveliness of space!" implored Nicole.

"People!" Captain Drexel raised his hands. "If we build structures with air-conditioning, as we planned to do on Triton, we could survive here. This might be our only chance."

"Triton was far more inhospitable than this planet," Max reminded them.

"But we weren't going to live there," countered Said. "This would be permanent."

"There were numerous peoples in Earth's history who lived in hot temperatures and survived," Mbuto informed him. "The Arabs of Saudi Arabia and Native Americans in the Great Basin all managed in high temperatures."

"Yes, dat is true," Hans scoffed, "but not at high humidity." "What is humidity here?" He looked at Carla.

"Sixty-five percent." She frowned. "Which is very strange."

"With that kind of humidity, why isn't it raining?" asked Gandy. "In India it might be pouring now."

"Gott in himmel, we don't want that!" Hans wrung his hands.

As they stood there debating the issue, it appeared as though half of them were ready to return to the ship. Even Gandy shook his head in dismay. Despite the implications of returning to the mother ship now, present discomfort outweighed long range goals, until the captain reasoned with his crew.

"Let me ask you folks one question." He looked around the group. "Do you prefer the dark sleep to giving Wolf 1061c a chance?"

"Well...no." Hans shrugged.

"What's the point?" blurted Sheila. "We're not dinosaurs. I read about the hothouse effect. I was in Equatorial Africa during its hottest season. That was bad enough. But one long afternoon of endless heat? Isn't that asking too much, sir? What if it does in fact start raining as it does in rain forests on Earth? Dear God, what a nightmare *that* would be?"

"Listen folks." Captain Drexel shook his head. "We haven't set foot in the forest yet. I've been to the tropics. The temperature drops significantly, when you enter beneath the canopy." "Doc, Gandy, Carla, Mbuto, and I are going in. Those of you too fainthearted to join us, can stay in the rover."

Carla smiled bravely, as did Gandy, Mbuto, and Max, but Captain Drexel wasn't fooled. As he turned to forge ahead, they hesitated a moment, while the others began walking back to the

craft. Then, when the captain entered alone at the forest's edge, Max ran toward him. Following close behind him were Carla, Gandy, and Mbuto. Having said her prayers, Ingrid quickly caught up with them. Seeing her example, feeling guilty they hadn't supported their superiors, both Nicole and Sheila followed behind the geologist, as did Hans and Said, and, after some deliberation, Ling Soon.

Excited by this leap into the unknown, the eleven stellanauts chattered nervously amongst themselves. In quiet murmurs, Ingrid gave encouragement to Nicole and Ling Soon. The group had been too busy talking to each other to notice how deathly quiet it was in the meadow where they stood: not so much as a breeze stirred and even their footfall was muted by the grass below. As they followed the captain along the bank of a stream meandering through the forest, something was added to the ambience: instead of cooling off as the captain suggested, it grew hotter and the humidity was thicker, but that wasn't the ambience they detected nor was it the unsettling quiet normally heard in a jungle. Unlike the racket and constant movement they found on Ross, Wolf 1061c, all they could hear was their own breathing. Once more the unspoken question in all of their minds, as they looked around at the strange looking trees was "Where are the beasts?" In the dense foliage, they saw only more plants, a designation that, Ling, the botanist pointed out, was incorrect, since this wasn't Earth.

"Be that as it may be," Abe reminded her, "they look like plants. What else can they be?"

"Not plants," Ling Soon shook her head stubbornly.

"Then the beasts back on Ross 128b aren't animals," Said reasoned.

"That is correct," nodded Hans.

"Wait a blessed minute." Gandy raised an eyebrow. "Animal and plant are universal labels, like rock, bush, tree. This is true for microbes, viruses, and bacteria. "

"Not true," insisted Ling Soon. "Alien life must have different names. Technically, they are all life forms. We must instead say similar to plants, not plants."

"And similar to animals," Hans agreed. "Since viruses and bacteria are life forms on Earth, the same holds true for them."

"That's absurd!" Said grumbled. "You natural scientists are all the same!"

That moment, as Ling Soon, the botanist, and Hans, the zoologist, looked for specimens to study back on the space station, the two scientists made a shocking discovery. On the bushes near the stream bank, on leaf structures and grasses of the jungle, during their preliminary investigation, they found that the plants were barren of insect-like creatures found on Ross 128b and Earth. More obviously, the ground, which should also have evidence of small as well as larger creatures and in air, in which forests normally contained fliers among the trees and in the air buzzing and flapping to and fro, there was no animal life (which Ling Soon and Hans referred to as Earth-like organisms). There were no walking, crawling, or flying creatures, large or small to be seen anywhere. In the soil samples, Ingrid had been unable to find even microscopic forms of life.

Upon discovering the stream, the explorers heard the first tangible sounds on Wolf 1061c, which was somehow reassuring: the sound of running water. Since nothing unpleasant had happened to them yet in the jungle, a decision was made by the group to follow the stream, so as not to get lost, and explore more of the mysterious world.... This was their first mistake on Wolf 1061c.

It was, during their exploration, that the unnamed ambience was felt the strongest. It was as if there was a presence in the forest and something was watching them. No sooner had they

walked a ways along the stream, than a brand new horror none of them could have imagined occurred. It seemed as though some of the flowers sprouting along the riverbed came alive and turned toward them as they passed. Small sized, medium sized, and large plants quivered and swiveled on their stems. Abe and Max didn't mention this anomaly for fear of causing a panic, though it appeared as if the plants were sizing them up. Then suddenly it happened. One of the strange-looking sea-anemone-like creatures sitting on its spiny stalk bent over suddenly, grabbed a hold of the botanist, and closed its tentacles around the screaming woman. Ling Soon, who had been looking closely at the life-form, became the second victim during the odyssey to find a habitable world. In that ghastly moment, as the thing ingested the scientist, the remaining ten explorers tackled it, Captain Drexel firing his blaster to decapitate the anemone before he and the others tore at the tentacles with their gloved hands, until pulling her free. By then, however, the poor woman had suffocated. Lying beside the stream, a death-like stare on her infantile face and her mouth gaping wide, she was covered with a sticky slime that also covered her crewmate's gloves. Quickly retracing their steps, the men and women, lugged her corpse down the bank, in the frantic effort to return to Phoenix One. All possibilities of making Wolf 2061c their home vanished entirely, as they charged toward the rover. But, as they were nearly out of the forest, something even more frightening than the anemone, blocked their retreat. What had appeared, as they passed by, to be just one more of Wolf 1061c's strange, giant flowers, suddenly rose up—a thing resembling a giant Venus fly-trap on several stringy, wreathing legs, and, in a bizarre, fluttery movement, charged toward them.

This time the plant monster received the full force of the ten remaining guns and was immediately incinerated. Not to be discouraged, though, a second, third, and fourth member of this alien species, jumped out onto the stream bank, like demented ballet dancers, fluttering toward their victims in mindless frenzy. Before the crewmembers had a chance to completely obliterate their attackers, a third crewmember became a victim of aliens. This time Hans, the zoologist, was taken now, swallowed whole in one gulp by one of the trappers. Unfortunately, as the other two trappers attacked and were fired upon by the hysterical explorers, their cousin had his way with the man. Again, the blasters and cutters finally did the trick, killing the first trapper that had taken Hans and the second and third trapper as well, but not soon enough to save Han's life. Cutting out the hapless scientist with his knife, Captain Drexel did as the others witnessing this horror, and wretched. The poor man was even slimier than had been the botanist. As if anyone cared for titles at this point, there were no longer any natural scientists to study alien life.

Moving around the smoldering corpses of the trappers, both of the dead humans were gripped fiercely by their terrified crewmates and dragged frantically back to the rover. Thinking that they were safe now that they were in the meadow, they were stunned by the appearance of something at the far corner of madness: a giant plant monster galloped like a quadruped across the field, its trunk-like legs, tank-sized body, and long dragon-like head which sported a mouthful of bristling teeth, chomping mindlessly at the air. It looked hopeless at first, as they fired their guns at the monster. Though at close range, they could do serious damage, the blasters and cutters had been designed for utilitarian use, not as serious weapons. The distance, they discovered, was therefore too far and, even had they managed to hit it, the creature was large enough to absorb the blasts enough to attack them before severe damage was done. For a few moments, it looked as if they would die horribly, some of their number winding up in the monster's craw, until unexpected help appeared from the sky. Suddenly, the second rover, Phoenix Two, arrived on the scene. Skip had appeared just in time to save the day. Hovering long enough to distract the monster and allow the crewmembers to drag the corpses of Hans and

Ling into Phoenix One, Skip continued to buzz and distract creature, until the humans were safely aloft. Both rovers now rose up swiftly into sky, back to the mother ship, as the monster nipped mindlessly at the air.

Needless to say, the planet Wolf 1061c was crossed off their list.

Numb with sadness and exhaustion, the nine remaining crew members carried their fallen comrades from the dock to the bridge, unceremoniously flopping the corpses in make-shift shrouds of blankets from the rover onto the table. Skip, Rusty, Sandra, and Woody were there offering the wooden comfort of androids but expeditiously coaxing them to get on with it. The first order of business, after a short, gloomy period of standing there and looking down at the bodies, was to say a few words. Captain Drexel briefly recounted the dead crewmember's contributions to the Phoenix—Hans, as the zoologist and Ling Soon as the botanist, though neither of them would have a chance to use their expertise on a new world. After this brief speech, the other crewmembers stood their silently staring at the makeshift shrouds.

There was no Earth II yet, and it seemed very much to them all that there wouldn't be one for a very long time. Time, however, was, as Skip had pointed out repeatedly, irrelevant. Aside from the day trips during the three failed explorations, their great adventure might just as well have begun last week. There was scant mention of God this time in the send off given to the departed. Ingrid quoted Saint Paul's words from Corinthians, "Oh death, where is thy sting?" Oh grave, where is thy victory?", followed by a whispered prayer. Gandy, recalling his Hindu heritage, also whispered one to himself, but, for the other seven stellarnauts, there was no such reassurance for the deceased. What happened today was beyond words.

"Where are they now?" Nicole looked expectantly out from the bridge as their two colleagues were jettisoned into space.

"Where Elroy is," answered Sheila, a vacant look in her eyes. "... *They're dead!*"

"You don't know that!" Ingrid scolded. "It's not fashionable for scientists to believe, but I choose by leap of faith to believe. Out there in cold depths of space, God, whatever you want to call him, still reaches out. Our friends didn't go into nothingness." "How can you believe such a thing?" She frowned severely at Sheila and Nicole. "Good people don't simply cease to exist, like the dark sleep—forever. They just don't!"

"You're serious?" Sheila raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, I am," confessed Ingrid. "How many times have your heard me pray? I pray constantly for you people. I believe. I'll always believe. You're a damn fool if you don't!"

"I still can't wrap my head around this." Carla muttered in disbelief. "You, a geologist specializing in alien environments, believe in an afterlife?"

"Call it what you will." Ingrid waved a hand. "I don't care what you think, Carla. The rules don't apply out here. It gives me comfort!"

"I'd like to believe." Nicole reached out to touch window. "... I really would."

"No one's stopping you," Ingrid said, studying her a moment. "You might not dread hibernation so much if you did." "All of you." She looked around at the group. "What's the last thing you think of before they prick you with that needle? 'Is this it?' You ask yourselves. 'What if Skip can't find another world?' It's possible you know. We might wander the galaxy

forever looking for a home. I'm no longer afraid of the dark sleep. I will either awaken back on the Phoenix or, if I die, awaken in the next world."

"The next world?" Max pursed his lips. "You're not talking about a planet, are you?"

"Of course not." Ingrid tossed her head. "I'm talking about the *next life*!"

"It's true, I think," Gandy agreed light-heartedly. "There is no permanent death. No sir. Everything dies and is reborn again, my father used to say. Those monsters back on Wolf might come back as butterflies on Earth. Who knows what we'll become!"

"My uncle was a Christian," Mbuto joined the conversation. "He was a fine fellow, who believed in heaven and hell. If someone asked me what I thought hell was like I would tell them about that savage planet Ross and that planet Wolf in which plants ruled—that was even worse. I like your Hindu version best, Gandy. Often I thought I might come back as cat or dog. I've made many mistakes in life."

"Your being silly, both of you," Ingrid chided them. "No one knows what it's like. It's only important to me that it's *there*!"

"What's there?" Max seemed to toy with her.

Ingrid shrugged her shoulders. "Paradise, Valhalla, the Elysian fields—call it what you wish!"

"There is no afterlife," Carla scoffed at the notion, "reincarnation or otherwise. There's only now. Heaven, hell, God, Vishnu, Nirvana, have nothing to do with Proxima, Ross, and Wolf. Those are concepts of Earth to give people comfort. Out here in space, we have only each other and our destiny. The further we travel the more apparent it becomes that we aren't, as it is thought by clerics, alone. This is a crowded universe. Yet evolution has happened differently throughout the cosmos. Unless God was a madman, there's no point to it, no pattern. The universe is a random, mess of white, blue, orange, and red suns and countless varieties of life-bearing worlds. Where's God in that?"

"Where's God?" Ingrid looked at Carla with contempt. "You're kind are all the same. You think there's no pattern, eh? What about the Big Bang. How do you explain that? There's certainly a pattern to that. Who do you think started that? It all fits. You remember your basic cosmology: from a finite point—the moment of singularity, it began and—bang!—it exploded, and here we are. What a mess! Who do you think did that? Screw evolution, Carla. It explains nothing. Perhaps Ross or Wolf are where bad stellarnauts have go—two versions of hell. I don't care. I don't care about hell, but there's an afterlife. I believe it." "Just don't tell me that was the end." She pointed out the window of the bridge. "It's not on a star-map, but it's still there. That black void is not the end!"

"No... it's not." Abe placed his arm around her shoulders. "... Hold onto that thought, Ingrid." "All of you!" He looked around at the group. "Are we not, as Skip pointed out, the new Ark, once again holding the remnant of mankind? Perhaps, this is a divine plan of some sort. Who knows?... The point is Ingrid, this isn't God's country out here, not until we find our home. Until then, we are, like old Noah, a family—the family of mankind. Our cargo, the specimens, are precious as was the first cargo of beasts. Now that we have to return to the dark sleep, we once again take a leap of faith.... Hopefully next time will be the last time. We'll find our own Garden of Eden, as did Adam and Eve!"

Sensing he was making fun of her now, Ingrid shook her head. "You're trying to humor me now, but your mixing up stories: the Flood and Garden of Eden. Neither of them applies. They were written for Earth. We're many light years from Earth. There is no Earth now, captain. We must write our own story. God and his plan, we can't understand. Out here He is

an alien god. How could he be otherwise? The first time before entering the chamber, I thought to myself, ‘this is what death is like,’ so I prayed—a silly prayer my mother taught me: ‘Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray to the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I awake, I pray to the Lord, my soul he’ll take.’ Silly yes, but it works for me!” “That is not the end!” she repeated, pointing at the dark void of space. “If you’re smart, you’ll believe that too.”

Chapter Seven

The Headless Men of Gliese

Ingrid Westfall had given her fellow crewmembers food for thought. At the hour when it was her turn to be prepped for sleep, Nicole remembered the prayer she had told them. Like a mantra she muttered it aloud to herself, until just before the needle pricked her arm when she began praying in earnest. Both Gandy and Mbuto, as they waited for their turns, also recited the prayer silently to themselves, Gandy uncertain which god to pray to Vishnu or the Christian god. Most of her other crewmates, however, were annoyed by what Ingrid had wrought. The primal fear of death and the unknown, they realized, was nothing more than the question, “what comes next?”

As Captain Abe Drexel’s turn for prepping came, he tried to look at it all philosophically: he had lived a relatively long life and done what he had always wanted to do. There was no point in worrying about death. Life was hard enough to grasp. There were too many religions in the world to know who was right or wrong. Ingrid’s confession of faith, as ill-defined as it was, gave her comfort and lessened her fear for death and the unknown. If the next planet claimed his life as it claimed Elroy, Hans, and Ling Soon, he would find out.

While the captain and crew remained in the dark sleep, a fourth attempt to find the humans a home in the galaxy absorbed Skip and Rusty. While Sandra and Woody tirelessly and faithfully tended to their patients, a likely choice arrived finally, after centuries of window jumps interspersed with normal speed. Though the distance to the new planet from their last destination was less than it had been from Ross 128b to Wolf 1061c, it took them nearly two thousand years this time, a fact the humans need not know.

The cycle of chemical induced wakefulness, temporary amnesia, and basic cognition, always traumatic, was followed by recall of what came before hibernation and memories of their lives on Earth. After three unsuccessful attempts with disastrous results, the crew were becoming used to disappointment and a degree of fatalism had settled over the group. It was now quite clear to them that they would go to sleep and wake up then go to sleep and wake up until Skip had found them a home. Two of them, Gandy and Mbuto, with a dash of dark humor, now likened themselves to vampires, rising up from death, to parade around as living creatures awhile before returning to the crypt. Most of the risers, however, were in no mood for their effort at levity—not after once more suffering the dark sleep, and yet, as Captain Drexel saw it, Gandy’s and Mbuto’s attitudes were a positive sign. He and Doctor Max Rodgers found themselves laughing light-headedly at the jest. Another milestone had been reached with Ingrid taking Nicole under her wing. Nicole claimed she was no longer afraid with Jesus in the chamber with her. The group was growing stronger. A few members, he noted—Doc Rodgers, Carla Mendoza, and Ingrid (whose faith helped her cope) seemed naturally brave. This wasn’t true for Nicole and Sheila, who should never have been selected for the crew. Gandy and Mbuto, who managed to overcome their fear during crises, were, as the faint-hearted Nicole, attracted to Ingrid’s spirituality, and, though he wouldn’t admit it, Said was too. Though the deaths of their crewmates on Ross 128b and Wolf 1061c had been devastating, Ingrid didn’t believe there were still atheists among the crew. No one, who faced the dark sleep, she was

certain, was an atheist. This was true for Hans, Elroy, Ling Soon, and even Carla Mendoza, the most self-proclaimed atheist of them all.

As for himself, Abe would need both natural and spiritual strength for the adventure ahead. He was gratified to see his crew apparently coping after another wakeup call, but this was, Max reminded him in private, a fragile mental state. Only time, now measured in centuries and millenniums, would really tell. On the other hand, the possible physical dangers facing them was imminent. From space, as they hovered above the planet, even full magnification of the ship's telescope couldn't predict what waited for them below. In a very real sense, as Ingrid might see it, each exploration of a new world required a leap of faith.

Gliese 876d, the most recent planet chosen by Skip and his pilot, had oceans, clouds, and, most importantly, patches of greenery on its surface—all features of Earth-like worlds. But the humans had seen these features before on Proxima, Ross 128b, and Wolf 1061c. In the case of the latter two worlds, the indications had, at first, seemed much more promising than Gliese 876d. What was important to Skip was the lack of the forests, which had, so far, portended danger. Gliese looked very much like the Great Plains of America. So far the ship's telescope had seen no creatures walking or flying about. The desire had ceased with the exploration of Ross 128b to find advanced life forms for a food supply or to keep them company. They could, everyone agreed, all be vegetarians if need be, and they didn't need any furry pets.

In a tried and true routine, which they had completely memorized, the humans ate their first breakfast, spruced themselves up, dressed in permanent shipboard wear, and began a three day regimen of exercise, rest, and food—mundane actions they hadn't performed in two thousand years. No one knew it had been two millennia since the last cycle and, though they would be told much later, no one thought to ask. On the morning when the exploration would begin, the nine remaining stellarnauts, after seeing the positive signs shown on Gliese 876d, should have been more pumped up but, as Captain Drexel and Doc Rodgers noted, they appeared more resigned than excited. Abe felt the same way himself. Heard from both Nicole and Sheila was the refrain, "Here we go again!" Gandy and Mbuto followed Abe and Max's example and tried being cheerful, but the engineer and communication technician were not nearly as excited as they had been the first three times. As Phoenix One descended to the new world, the group were calm, silent, and unafraid, but they seemed prepared for more disappointment.

In her life support suit, as she made the required tests, Carla was protected from outside unpleasantness: temperature, humidity, and noxious smells. What they discovered, as a group, upon emerging from the rover, was a temperate, actually pleasant climate and fields of a spidery, willowy grass everywhere with a sparse variety of strange-looking cactus-like bushes among the grass, prickly-trunked trees with leafless branches, and a most bizarre form of tree or bush, jutting up from the field like upside down pineapples with fat spike-like leaves. Offsetting these unsettling peculiarities was an atmosphere that was relatively cool (72° F.) which lacked the high humidity in the previous two worlds. Despite the coolness, there was a desert-like quality to the landscape—clean air with a sage-like odor a few of them now noted.

After eagerly testing the water of the lake they had seen from the rover, they were disappointed to find only tiny lance-shaped fish and what looked like jelly fish down below. Sampling the grass was less disappointing, since one of the remaining scientist, Ingrid, though a geologist, believed it could be ground like wheat and made into a form of bread. It was also hoped that the giant pineapple, as they called it, might be edible. Perhaps they might find some form of fruit on this bleak world and even some alien game.

It had all the appearances of a desert world, with probably no intelligent forms of life. As before, the planet's great red sun took up much of the sky, but this time a bank of clouds covered much of the star. The immediate sky overhead was clear of fliers, and yet, in the distance, there were, in fact, flying creatures, reminiscent of vultures on Earth, circling over a carcass below. Except for the plant life, which was significant, it reminded most of them of the Southwest in the United States.

Recalling their lost world, Nicole was heard saying, "How sad... I remember a scene like this in the Mojave Desert, where my Dad and I hunted for fossils."

"You looked for fossils?" Ingrid was surprised. "Once I thought I might be an archeologist. During a visit to Stonehenge in Britain, I became inspired."

"I was interested in paleontology," Nicole said wistfully. "There's no civilizations here."

The other explorers listened idly, as the two women exchanged information. Gandy told them about his fieldtrip to the Indus Valley Civilization monument on the border of Pakistan and India and, not to be outdone, Max bragged about the great civilizations of Mesoamerica and the cliff dwellings of the Southwest.

"Many of the world's great civilizations are found in deserts," Ingrid informed Nicole. "Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Anasazi people of Arizona, are just a few." "And don't forget the Israelites." She raised a finger. "Nothing is more desolate than the Dead Sea, and yet not far away from it sprang up the greatest civilization of them all: Judah and Israel."

"I don't think this desert world produced anything like that." Nicole politely dissented. "This strikes me as more and more as a prairie, like I've seen in the Midwest. It's too cool to be a desert."

"Not really," Abe frowned. "A desert doesn't have to be hot. Mongolia is a desert and so is Antarctica a desert. What we've seen of this planet might be a little bit of both desert and prairie like Texas, Utah, and parts of North Africa."

After awhile their exploration seemed redundant, even boring, with a touch of melancholy. Portions of the land reminded them of parts of the Southwest and Africa: the grass, the sky, and the rock formations dotting the landscape, while the alien plant life, though strange, became common place. Then suddenly, as they continued to explore the surrounding countryside, they saw something through the captain's binoculars that looked like another rock formation from but had peculiarities which invited closer inspection. As they moved down a hillock, inching ever closer to the anomaly protruding from the field, they realized they were looking at a structure similar in form to a Pueblo house built by Native Americans in New Mexico and Arizona. Intrigued by this discovery, the captain halted his crew a safe distance away and reported this information to Skip, ordering him to scan the planet for more of these structures. Skip reported back that there were, in fact several in the vicinity. He also reported something that caused the explorers to freeze in their tracks: there were, upon closer inspection, aliens moving about.

"Where?" Abe looked again through his binoculars. "I don't see anyone. Where do you see such movement, Skip. Are they far away?"

"The stone hut is close," Skip explained calmly, "... A kilometer from the one near you."

“Thanks for the heads up!” Abe replied shakily. “What’re they doing this moment?” he asked, glancing back at his crew. “Are they coming our way? Do you think they know we’re here?”

“... It’s difficult to tell,” Skip hesitated. “I’ll bring up the magnification.”

Shielding their eyes from the great red sun, which peeked through the clouds, the crewmembers stared anxiously at their captain. Abe adjusted the communicator on his wrist so they could hear better. Despite the potential danger they faced, Skip remained calm... Too calm! thought the captain. He knew more than what he was saying. Once long ago, he recalled, a satellite carried a friendly message to potential aliens that, in essence, welcomed them to Earth. Now that they were the aliens on a new world the message seemed to carry an ominous ring. The age old question about whether intelligent beings such as themselves existed in the universe had been answered. They were not alone. The humans wished this moment that this wasn’t true.

“Do you think they’re friendly?” Max blared into the communicator.

“How many are there?” Gandy thought to ask.

“I have more detail now,” Skip paused, apparently startled by what he saw.

Abe tried not to panic, but he sensed something terribly wrong in Skip’s silence.

“Any time now, Skip,” prodded Abe. “Are they four-footed, multi-legged, flying about—what?”

“None of those, captain,” Skip said dryly. “They’re of the two-legged kind!”

“That’s good, isn’t it?” Nicole looked at Ingrid.

Not wanting to frighten the younger woman, Ingrid smiled bravely and took her trembling hand.

“Anything else?” Abe was almost afraid to ask. “Lots of creatures have two legs. What do they look like.”

“Well...” Skip displayed actual reticence—rare for an android. “Despite maximum magnification, its still hard to tell.”

“Try harder!” demanded Abe.

“Very well,” Skip proceeded. “They’re rather ugly.”

“Oh, that’s just great!” exclaimed Nicole.

Gandy, Mbuto, and Said gasped. Even Doc Rodgers was taken back.

“Sir,” Sheila muttered, her hand flying to her throat. what does that mean... Are we dealing with monsters again?”

“Hold it together, Sheila,” Abe said through clinched teeth. “Be more precise, Skip. Give it to us straight!”

Skip gave them as much information as he had. “I don’t see any heads, only arms and legs. They’re holding long pikes or spears. They dart around quickly like spiders. Wait—a new development! I see some exiting the dwelling near you. They’re looking in the direction of your hill.”

“Oh-my-gosh!” Gandy slapped his forehead. “Intelligent life. What does this mean?”

“It means we should go back to the rover!” Sheila clutched Abe’s sleeve.

“Calm down!” He removed her hand. “We have no choice. We need to make contact. Considering how they live, they’re a primitive people. We have our weapons. Let’s try to make friends.”

“But they’re not people,” Nicole murmured to Ingrid. “People have heads and don’t act like spiders.”

With their blasters and cutters drawn, the humans looked anything but friendly. Ordering them to keep their weapons at their sides and at least smile, Captain Drexel led his crew down the hill toward the dwelling. Darting back into their abode, the aliens gave them the impression they were timid. Abe reassured his people that this was a good sign. They mustn't antagonize their neighbors on the planet. Like the Plains Indians of the United States, suggested Max, sign language or gestures might come in handy now. There were, he recounted, several, such as the hand raised in greeting, a polite bow at the waste and, above all, a friendly face. His optimism was soon tested when, as they approached the structure, a biped reappeared from the dark interior, startling them all half to death. It was, even at a distance, quite frightening by human standards, resembling people of Earth only in the most basic form. He was a biped; that was it. His two arms and legs—long willowing limbs—were attached to a squat body. He had no apparent head, but they could see a large orb, likely an eye, staring at them from his chest. That moment a screech that sounded even worse than some of the denizens on Ross 128b filled the air, causing the humans to take flight. Though the captain attempted to halt their flight, they were half way to the rover before a group of the aliens could be seen circling their vessel. Because of their timeliness, they had obviously come from a different dwelling.

“Let's try to make friends!” the captain said lamely.

The Gliesians, as they were later dubbed, were, as Skip pointed out correctly, carrying sharp sticks or spears, which made the humans hoist their weapons and point them directly their way. For a moment, the creatures just stood their, their spidery limbs vibrating restlessly as they sized up the humans. Attempting to stop his panicked crew, the captain stood in front of them begging them to give the aliens a chance, but at that point, in a skillful moment of treachery, one of the aliens, hoisted his spear, hurled it forward, barely missed the back of the captain's head. Apparently ignorant of the dangers of the humans' weapons, the aliens then charged the humans. One of their lances now found the ship's engineer, who was caught squarely in the chest. Now that their numbers had dwindled to eight, the remaining humans—the captain included—fired their weapons with fury and desperation and didn't stop until they killed most of the headless creatures but then discovered to their horror that the blasters were running out of fuel. Red indicator lights now flashed on the emptied weapons. For a few moments only one of the blasters and three of the cutters had enough juice left to kill the remaining aliens, who, gathering their wits, turned tail and ran. At this point, from the nearby dwelling, the more timid aliens had arrived brandishing their spears.

Once again, out of the clear blue sky, Skip appeared, bringing Phoenix Two right over the scene as their foes charged up the hill, buzzing the headless aliens and scattering them over the field. This time wisely enough, the aliens gave way to primal fear and fled the scene. But it was too late for Gandy, the hapless engineer.

Mbuto, his friend and crewmate, wept openly, as did all of the women in the group, but there was no time for sentiment. “Captain! Captain!” Skip called from his rover. “From the Phoenix I saw more of the dwellings near and far emptying of occupants. A general alarm appears to have gone up. I'm sorry, but this isn't a friendly world!”

As in the case of the first three crewmembers, their dead crewmate was brought hastily into the rover, and, after they returned to the Phoenix, laid reverently onto the captain's table inside the ship. Gandy's courageous wit and constant support of his crewmates would be sorely

missed by all. This time, recalling the expeditious send-off given, Elroy, Ling, and Hans, Ingrid gave a long eulogy aloud for him, a long rambling account of Gandy's character, how much he meant to the crew, and how much he will be missed, followed by a prayer consigning his body to the stars—a stellarnaut to the last. Abe and Max then added a few words, and Mbuto gave his own tearful summary of Gandy's life and what his friendship meant to him. After being ejected into space, everyone stood on the bridge looking into the ejector scope, watching Gandy in his makeshift shroud float further and further away.

There was not even a discussion about their hasty exit from Gliese 876d. There was no way they could communicate with this alien race, before they were attacked again. To live safely on this world, Mbuto said with great bitterness, they would have to wipe them all out! No one argued that point. Unlike previous interludes when they relished the three days preceding 'lights out,' as Gandy once called it, the remaining humans were actually eager to get back into their chambers and, as Abe put it succinctly, "Get it over with!"

Chapter Eight

The Star Map

As the eight remaining crewmembers of the Phoenix lie peacefully in their cryogenic chambers, the androids were faced with a dilemma. There was, of course, good news for the longevity of the mission. Contrary to scientific theories about prolonged travel in space causing space psychosis, this hadn't occurred. Part of the reason for this failure of the theory was due to the fact the humans were never outside their chambers for more than three days (in the case of the period following Wolf 1061c barely a week). According to clinical studies space psychosis requires extended periods of wakefulness. Another factor playing against space psychosis was what twenty-third century psychologist Edith Shaw called the 'distraction/excitement factor.' Simply stated, Skip reminded his colleagues, a crew occupied with a task, such as the early Mars and Europa missions, were less likely to go stir-crazy or, using another archaic name, develop cabin fever. In other words, all they needed was something to do on ship or during exploration to keep them sane. Variety was essential but so was the element of surprise, even anxiety as in the case of the explorations of Proxima, Ross 128b, Wolf 1061c, and Gliese 876d, Skip pointed out. Unfortunately, Shaw and her fellow psychologists couldn't see the long term effects under actual conditions of hibernation, which spared the body but couldn't protect the mind. There wasn't a name for it yet. It wasn't even, strictly speaking, an illness. It was, the androids agreed, after seeing how eager the humans entered hibernation, a malaise of the spirit, almost as if they were accepting oblivion—a form of subconscious suicide the humans chose over constant disappointment for a hopeless cause.

Was it hopeless? wondered Skip as he continued his search. Rusty, his faithful pilot, suggested that no planet was safe for humans, if they couldn't deal with a primitive bunch of bipeds as they found on Gliese. Perhaps the humans should have wiped them out and then taken control of their world. Of course, this was the cold logic of androids. Humans don't operate that way, Skip reminded him. No, there were more Earth-like planets out there. Unfortunately, the distance was increasing between jumps, and between the jumps, at normal speed, the time in which the humans remained frozen had graduated from mere centuries and millennia, to many thousands of years.

The last command Captain Abe Drexel had given from his chamber was, "Find us a home Skip. This time get it right!" There was weariness and resignation in his voice and a touch of humor. All of the other crewmembers, however, said almost nothing during the prepping. With the greatest burden on his robotic shoulders, the android captain knew the next world he found must be their last.

As the crewmembers slept, Skip, Rusty, Sandra, and Woody worked together this time, pouring over the stellar map. After four failed missions, the list of potential planetary candidates for the humans was still immense, so the androids narrowed it down to a limited number of worlds that might be friendly to the human race. Even after narrowing them down, however, closer inspection, using spectroscopic analysis, showed most of these to be unacceptable. In the order of distance from their current location in the galaxy, Gliese 682b which was only one light

year from Gliese 876d, the previous exploration, was an angry planet like Proxima and was also likely toxic to the humans. Gliese 832c, also relatively close-by, was also bombarded by solar flares, as had been Proxima, from its red dwarf sun, and all of the other Gliese 581 star system's planets were either too hot or too cold. From here, the list of so-called habitable planets included fiery worlds, ice-aged worlds, and worlds that teemed with creatures that defied imagination and would certainly frighten the humans away. For a short spell of speculation, the Trappist system's worlds seemed to offer potential Earth-like planets, until spectroscopic and telescopic analysis showed that they, too, were inhospitable worlds that were bombarded by the red dwarf's sun by solar flares, making them totally unsuitable for exploration let alone colonization. So far, in their search, it looked bleak. With nowhere to go now, the hyper-drive of the Phoenix was temporarily useless. They needed jump points that showed more promise.

Finally, after three more planetary candidates (HD 40307b, c, and d)—frozen worlds, which should never have been on the list, Skip found a planet very similar to Earth: Kepler 186f. An immense expanse of space had been traversed through hyper-drive and normal speed to reach this world—557 light years. Even with the Phoenix's many jump points, the journey took them nearly 100,000 years. By now, Skip reminded the others, Earth, blackened by war, was but a memory. Though the androids were, by design, atheists, an abiding hope filled them that this was the one. Kepler 186f, upon close magnification, was a more complex planet than the previous worlds. As in the case of the previous four planets, an immense red dwarf sun sat uncomfortably close to the new world, about the distance of Mercury to Earth's sun. By now the humans were used to this sight. Below it's great sun, Kepler 186f had deserts, plains, alpine regions, and forested areas. There were two large oceans, like that on Earth, and countless rivers and lakes running every which way across the land. Despite possible unknown problems with its geography and a still untested atmosphere, the forms of life equivalent to Earth seemed harmless enough from a distance. There were groves of trees intersecting the barren areas, creatures resembling squirrels and monkeys darting through the forest, and what appeared to be packs or herds of four footed denizens in the grassland, but so far in their inspection nothing compared to Ross 128b's terrible beasts.

It seemed perfect at first. All of the desirable features necessary on a world necessary for colonization glowed invitingly from space. As they studied the planet more closely, however, they could make out a familiar geological phenomena seen on Earth. It's disturbing outline was unmistakable as the magnification was increased.

“Look, captain!” Sandra pointed. “A smoldering volcano. *It's huge!*”

“Yes, I see it,” Skip replied calmly. “It's a big one. If it was much closer, I'd be worried. Our selected zone's a safe distance away—about a hundred kilometers. Zero in on it, Rusty. Bring it up as close as you can.”

With some difficulty, Rusty made the adjustment. For a few more moments, the four androids studied the projection on the table. A trail of white smoke, indicating steam, rather than magma, filtered upwards, dissipating in the sky. There was a healthy growth of forest not far from the outer rim of the volcano, and even snow on the nearby mountain range, nothing to indicate a recent eruption. What was troubling to them was the dimensions of the caldera. Nothing on Earth, as the androids searched their databases, equaled its immense size and elevation.

“Well.” Rusty shrugged. “At least it's not erupting. It's just letting off steam. Proxima had solar flares!”

“Yes,” agreed Woody. “It’s better than giant spiders and man-eating plants. Don’t forget those headless men on Gliese. Kepler 128f looks promising, captain. It’s our best bet so far!”

“So it seems.” Skip nodded at his crew. “I’m greatly encouraged, but that monstrous volcano might frighten the crew. With maximum magnification, they’ll spot it at once. Kepler 128f is obviously a geologically active planet, so it’s quite likely it has more volcanoes. We’ll keep an eye on this one. If this proves to be a safe world, there’s much exploration to be done. Our selected zone might not even be the best location. We’ll let the humans decide!”

“All right.” Sandra nodded, turning to Woody. “It’s time to wake them up!”

Upon being chemically awakened for the fifth time in their careers as stellarnauts, the humans returned from the dark sleep slowly once more, as if, in gothic terms, rising from their crypts. This time there were no jokes made about it, and yet the medics saw similarities to their stiff-legged and jerky arm movements and glassy stare reminiscent of ancient black and white movies. By now, almost by instinct it seemed since they were supposed to have no memory of the experience, they appeared to have grown used to the process. After they were extracted from their chambers, placed in the shower, dressed, and, as cognition continued to set in, directed toward the conference table, they sat there staring blankly straight ahead, as if not comprehending where they were.

“It’s true,” Woody murmured to Sandra, “the dark sleep is affecting their minds.”

“They’re just weary,” she whispered back. “No one knows how many times human can endure episodes of hibernation. Let’s hope this is the last time!”

“I’ve never seen them this drained,” observed Rusty.

Studying the eight humans a moment more, Skip clapped his hands. “Crew of the Phoenix.” He looked around the table. “... Abe Drexel, Sheila Livingston, Max Rodgers, Nicole Bennett, Mbuto Sawala, Carla Mendoza, Ingrid Westfall, and Said Rammal—You, representatives of Earth, are back! We’ve found you a new world—the best one of them all!”

Jolted by his voice, the eight humans blinked their eyes and frowned but said nothing. After a signal given to Rusty, the selected zone of Kepler 186f, which had been turned off temporarily, appeared suddenly on the table. Mugs of coffee and tea were brought out by the medics, as crewmembers looked down at the image. Below them on the table was the most Earth-like world they had seen so far. Stirred by this reminder of their mission, the humans gradually took an interest in the image, yet offered no comment at first. Even the massive volcano north of the image failed to phase them.

Looking across the table at Captain Drexel, Skip grew worried. One feature he wished would have been incorporated into his android brain was telepathy, an anomaly still unproven by science. Abe had suffered for his crew. Told nothing about Phoenix’s great potential, and never allowed to run the ship, he had done the best he could for his people. Though it wasn’t his fault, he had failed them. Now here he was alive and well, with his crew reduced to eight, probably feeling guilty and useless. Purpose—the one necessary factor in human personalities was lacking for all of them because of the endless cycle of cyber-sleep, awakening, exploration, failure, more sleep.... For the human captain it was much more difficult to take.

For a few moments, Skip ignored the imposing map below them. “Sir!” he addressed Abe formally. “Please take command of the ship!”

“What?” Abe blinked again. “Command... Yes, we’re back.” “What do you have for us, Skip?” he asked in a dull voice.

“A world filled with all the geography of Earth... Friendly skies, waterways at every turn. A green, fertile world filled with promise... A new Eden waiting for the chosen. Your world!” Skip’s hands swept over the map.

“I’m not the captain of the Phoenix,” Abe mumbled forlornly. “If this turns out to be another dead end, we’ll be back in hibernation and you’ll be in charge.”

With the mention of hibernation, the crew awakened from their torpor.

“Ross and Wolf looked like that,” observed Said. “What’s wrong with *this* planet, Skip? Are there fire-breathing dragons this time? Will we be struck dead by solar flares?” “I can see a big volcano down there.” He pointed disapprovingly. “Where are the animals? Is this another world with monster plants?”

“Look more closely.” Rusty frowned at him. “There’s animals down there. We don’t know if they’re dangerous. That’s why you have guns. Though fire breathing dragons are fairy tales, there were also dangerous animals on Earth. It had storms, earthquakes, and volcanoes too.”

“We need to be sure.” Sheila shook her head. “... No more disappointments.”

“I can’t take hibernation again.” Nicole said to Ingrid. “Let the Lord take me—no more dark sleep!”

Just that moment, to Skip’s dismay, the caldera let out a great bellow of steam.

“Son of a bitch!” Carla squinted at the volcano.

“It’s not a big deal,” Rusty reassured her. “It’s a hundred kilometers away.”

“So was Thera.” Carla frowned. “Look what it did to Minoan Civilization. I’ve never seen one that big!”

Ingrid, who was becoming the chaplain for the crew, whispered something comforting to Nicole, and twirled her fingers dismissively at the map. “It’s not just physical weariness you see Skip. These people are spiritually tired. You called the new world Eden. That is a fine name, one we can pronounce. Let us hope it’s not, as the Psalmist say, a valley of dry bones!”

“My colleagues are bit pessimistic,” Mbuto said, pointing to the image, “but that worries me too. I’m not an expert like Ingrid, but that’s an active volcano on the map. It must be a kilometer or more in circumference. Please explain to me Skip why you picked this zone.”

Mbuto’s words echoed some of their thoughts. Skip shrugged his shoulders—a very human gesture. After so much failure, distrust seemed ingrained in the crew. Despite the fear he thought might occur, though, he was relieved to find no outright panic. Below them was the best world so far. The volcano was part of the package. The fatalistic dread of the dark sleep appeared to outweigh even it. Exchanging a look of concern with Rusty, Sandra, and Woody, he seemed to sigh, a reflex supposedly impossible for an android and gave a nod.

“All right.” He raised an eyebrow. “There’s a volcano below us. On the other side of planet there might two or three more. There might hundreds, even thousands, of them, like there are on Earth.” “So what?” he looked challengingly down at the men and women. “The weather might turn sour once in a while and there might also be earthquakes, but the next planet might be worse. So far, until we found Kepler 186f, we haven’t had much luck. We’re running out of worlds!”

Abe nodded in agreement. “There are much worse things than volcanoes: meteor showers, the green house effect, creatures that want to eat us, another ice age. Let’s not run away as we did on Gliese. We have to win our place on the new world. This one looks fine to me!”

Questions rang out this time, as they studied the image.

“What’s the temperature on the new planet?” asked Sheila.

“Could the volcano erupt soon?” inquired Said.

“I don’t see any beasts,” marveled Nicole. “How do we know there aren’t monsters on this world?”

Mbuto repeated his question, which Skip hadn’t answered. “Why did you pick this zone?”

Once again, Skip ignored him. Carla, Abe, Max, and Ingrid, had already resigned themselves to the fact: This was it! No more dark sleep and disappointments. This was going to be their new home.

Skip now summed up for the few doubters what most of them now accepted. “You people must understand.” He wrung his finger. “We’re running out of planets. You will have to adapt this time. Who knows it might be paradise, a Garden of Eden or, just as easily, as your captain said, there might be earthquakes, volcanism, and a few storms, but there were these problems on Earth. Don’t forget how many wars we had back there. What’s worse than thermo-nuclear and proton fusion explosions? If there aren’t many predators and an abundance of food and water on Kepler 186f, this is all that matters. You carry mankind frozen in our ship’s freezers. We are the caretakers, but you are the inheritors. Be strong and give it one more try!”

“... Well,” Abe uttered lazily, emitting a yawn. “Let’s get started. “Just one suggestion,” he added almost as an afterthought, “that name has to go. Kepler186f doesn’t cut it. We need a good, solid name!”

“I thought we called our new home Earth II.” Nicole looked up with concern.

“No, my dear,” Ingrid laughed softly. “Skip has guided us across the galaxy. He gave us its name: New Eden. He is its discoverer, and it’s his right. Let’s pray it lives up to its name!”

“New Eden it is!” Abe slammed the table. “We could do a lot worse!”

“Why not have both names,” Sandra gave them a thoughtful look. “Once it was the Triton Project when we represented Earth. Now we might call our colony New Eden and our new world Earth II or New Earth. How would that sound?”

“New Earth... New Earth.” Carla rolled the words around her mouth. “I like the sound of that. In Spanish it would be Nueva Tierra!”

“In Arabic it’s Ardun Jadida,” recalled Said.

“That’s very interesting—both of you,” Skip replied impatiently, “but you have plenty of time to decide upon a name. The most important thing is the investigation of the planet. This time we’ll map out the terrain much more extensively. We charged up your blasters and lasers, but they should be modified and given more power.”

“How long will that take?” Abe frowned. “My crew’s raring to go!”

“Not that long,” Skip reassured him. “We just have to get them in shape, get the rovers ready, and make careful plans for exploration. There’s no hurry, captain. As you said before hibernation, ‘Let’s get it right this time!’”

“So far,” he said, pointing to the map, “I see positive signs on Kepler 186f—several, in fact. It’s a green, well watered world, with abundant plant and animal life and complex geographical zones. Judging by the landscape we’ve seen so far, which includes snow capped peaks of a moderate height, I would guess that the climate is mild, very similar to what the Midwest of the US once was. The new world, of course, which also has ice caps at both ends of the planet, might have tropical, desert, tundra, and other climate as well. This is by far the most Earth-like planet so far. Your exploration, using Phoenix One, will make an extensive investigation possible. The scientists for the Triton Project also supplied tractors and cranes in

the station to be used during construction of a habitat and laboratory. Some of the gear to be used for construction can also be used during exploration. It will take us several weeks this time to get ready. During the meantime we'll monitor the activity of the volcano. If it appears ready to erupt, we'll move the ship and space station to another point over the planet.

"Uh, Skip." Mbuto cleared his throat. "Any way to get a closer look?"

"We're pretty close already." Skip glanced down at the image. "Rusty focused and magnified it as much as he could. The details of the landscape are all there. So far, no climactic problems and just a few creatures scurrying about, but nothing to worry about."

"Where?" Nicole's eyes widened with alarm. "Show me where!"

As Ingrid patted her back, Said pointed to a spot at the bottom of the image, then one on its eastern edge. "I see some!" he exclaimed. "What are those things? That looks like a herd—they're moving very fast. And that? It's huge, the size of an elephant. This time, Skip, we need to be fully armed. Those puny weapons you gave us didn't have the range!"

"Like I said." Skip frowned at the little Arab. "We're going to upgrade them—make them more powerful. Some of the mining equipment might also be used as weapons." "This time," he added looking around the table, "there will be no surprises. I'll be ready, as I was before, with Phoenix Two to assist you in a crises. You'll all go down there armed and fully prepared for any contingency be it beast or flier! Let's have no more casualties on alien worlds!"

During the examination of Kepler 186f's wildlife from the ship, many startling discoveries were made. While Skip discussed various possible locations to begin exploration, the crew hovered over the table intrigued and alarmed by what they saw. There were many meadows and fields to choose from that Skip showed them, many of them near rivers or lakes. Upon closer inspection they discovered that the forested areas camouflaged elusive creatures, passing through clearings and breaks in the canopy, large enough to indicate that they were possibly herding beasts, like terrestrial cattle or horses, some of them quite large—the denizens Said had spotted earlier. In this southerly area of the zone, which Skip selected to avoid the range of the volcano, there was also flatlands similar to what was seen in Wyoming and Montana but which had appeared absent of great herds seen on Earth, until, upon close analysis, movement was detected. Creatures too swift to be terrestrial four footed herbivores scampered over the plains. This startling discovery caused gasps and groans from the crew. Then, during their scrutiny, another chilling feature appeared—airborne denizens, some of them soaring freely over the forests and plains and others flying in and out of the forests, bat-like in their movements, bringing to mind the hideous fliers of Ross 128b. Suddenly, to dash Skip's attempt at optimism, the world had seemed to awaken before their eyes. No one spoke yet. They were too upset.

It was at this point, when they were ready to take Skip to task, a detail that had been hidden by jungle foliage, was spotted by Abe and Mbuto simultaneously that postponed the verbal onslaught.

"What the hell was that?" Abe pointed excitedly. "That looks like a building."

"Is this planet inhabited by intelligent beings?" Mbuto marveled.

"We don't want that!" Sheila touched her throat.

"Yes, captain." Nicole nodded fearfully. "Last time we were attacked!"

It was impossible to make out the details of the buildings almost hidden in the canopy, but it was enough to re-ignite everyone's fears.

“It’s not like the headless men’s dwellings at all,” observed Max calmly. “That’s a dome in the forest. It’s shiny, not like rock.”

“And look!” Mbuto pointed at nearby hill. “What’s that. It’s also shiny but much smaller. What could it be—a vehicle of some kind?”

“A space ship?” offered Ingrid.

“Or a weapon,” Said pursed his lips. “Why else would it be stationed on that hill?”

Abe laughed nervously. “Come on people. It could be anything! Let’s not jump the gun.”

“It makes no difference.” Skip cut into the chatter. “The building is likely uninhabited. Look at it; it’s covered with forest growth. These seem more like ruins to me. Wouldn’t there be more evidence now of civilization: houses, cities, a network of roads?” “I’ve seen no other evidence of alien bipeds on this world, except that dome,” he concluded. “Perhaps it was some kind of outpost at one time. Who knows? I’m sure they’re long gone.”

“But you’re really not sure,” Said pressed the issue. “When we developed you androids I thought we gave you greater powers of deduction. Why don’t you know?”

“They gave us artificial intelligence and powers of deduction,” Rusty responded crisply. That didn’t give us supernatural abilities. We see what you see from the ship. Each exploration of a new world is filled with revelations. If there are aliens still around on Kepler 186f, they regressed. Perhaps they’re invisible Said or perhaps very small. Maybe they’re hiding after seeing are ship approach. There’s only one way to find out!”

“Yep, he’s right,” Abe motioned to the map. “We have to go down. We can’t keep this up forever. Skip’s right: the next planet might be worse. This cycle is endless, people. At some point our search has to stop and the exploration of a new world begin!”

“Exactly!” Rusty applauded him. “Spoken like a stellarnaut!”

“And *our captain!*” Ingrid clasped her hands.

“I don’t know what I am anymore.” Abe laughed sourly. “I just want my crew to be safe. At the same time I want us to find a new home. I hope those two objectives are compatible. So far, Skip, we’ve had very bad luck!”

The required routine that followed—rest, exercise, and normal sleep, was spiced up this time by Ingrid’s new role as chaplain. Until this time, her role had been subtle. Frequently, she quoted scripture from a Bible she had found in the ship’s library, and she was often heard praying and offering Nicole and Sheila spiritual comfort, but this time, on the final morning before E Day, as Mbuto called it, Captain Drexel, graciously asked her to give the crew some appropriate send-off speech, words that would become the official stellarnaut prayer:

“Lord of the universe, God of many names, once thought of as ruling only Earth, we now we realize you are Lord of the stars and planets, too. You are the final frontier: Paradise that awaits us all. For Heaven there is no star map or coordinates. There, hyper-drive and windows in space don’t exist. Now, as we embark on our mission, we ask your blessing. Please look kindly on this remnant of mother Earth and the generations that follow when we make this planet our home. Make us strong and wise and help us to build a new world. Let us not forget who is the architect of the cosmos and the author of our success. Throughout our endeavor, we ask for you protection and comfort. For the fallen among us, please grant them salvation. They were brave souls, that in the atheism of science, lost their way. You, Lord, are the Great Physician and Scientist, from whom the Big Bang was once ignited. You ignited the firmament, as it’s

written in the scriptures. We see your design in the darkest corner of space and here on the new world. If we should fall, ourselves, to mischief or accident on this planet, accept our souls that we may join our crewmates and those of our friends and family of mother Earth... In Your Name—the Unknowable God, we send our prayers!”

“Good grief, Ingrid.” Carla frowned

“I liked it!” Nicole clapped her small hands with delight. “You’re our preacher now!

“That really summed it up,” Mbuto nodded in agreement. “Is God really unknowable? Jesus has an entire book written about him.”

“He’s my favorite!” Sheila nodded.

“Ingrid.” Said asked half-seriously. “Did you include Allah on your list?”

“Of course.” She beamed proudly. “All of them.”

“What about Vishnu?” Carla teased. “That was Gandy’s god.”

Looking at Ingrid with newfound respect, Max dismissed their banter. “That was really good, Ingrid,” he murmured to her. “I wish I had your faith.”

“You can, if you want,” she began to preach. “All you have to do is open your heart—”

“I beg your pardon!” he frowned.

“Goodness!” Abe intervened diplomatically. “I wished someone had recorded your prayer. That’s one for the books!”

“We recorded it,” Skip reassured him. “It’s in the ship’s database—her entire speech. To bad we androids don’t have souls!”

“Who said you didn’t?” Nicole posed the question. “If you have artificial intelligence, why not artificial souls?”

Smiles were registered in the group. Even Ingrid grinned with mirth. Though it struck the other humans as absurd, Skip nodded his head faintly at the thought.

“What a novel idea!” he whispered to his crew.

Pondering Nicole’s question, the androids stirred uneasily as the humans filed down onto the dock. As the eight humans bid them goodbye and climbed into Phoenix One, now filled with the proper tools for exploration, Ingrid began reciting the Lord’s prayer. Carla winced but kept her peace. Not merely her words, but the look of peace on the geologist’s face, made them all envious, even for Carla, the least religious of the crew. Who didn’t want to be immortal or at least not suffer oblivion? Once, long ago, an astronaut, one of the first to step onto the moon, had confessed off camera, “There are no atheists in space!” Gradually, after each new world, a spiritual breakthrough was underway for some of the crewmembers, who needed the buttress of faith. In her speech, which would be considered heresy back on Earth, Ingrid had redefined God. An alien, universal god, had emerged for this remnant of Earth, suited for diverse personalities, even the android crew.

Nevertheless, as mostly atheists and agnostics, the explorers were once again confronted with a challenge that would be daunting for the most devout souls. After seeing danger signs on Kepler 186f—creatures lurking in its forests and on its plains and the remnants of a civilization possibly as advanced as their own, they were, as they had been when descending from the mother ship before, anxious, expectant, and fearful. What if they were attacked by the supposedly extinct people of Kepler 186f? There might be creatures on this world more cunning than the hideous animals of Ross 128b or mindless plant monsters of Wolf 1061c. No problem! According to the self-designated chaplain of the Phoenix, they were all in God’s hands. Whether they failed or not in their mission to find a new world and whether they felt the sting of death here, as Saint Paul would say, eternity had a new name. Dark sleep was not the dreaded end

game anymore, she reassured them. Heaven or paradise was the final frontier—a place where they would meet their old crewmates, family, and friends—forevermore!

Standing at the bridge that moment, the four androids looked down at the new world glowing enchantingly below its great sun, greatly perplexed by Nicole's question.

"Artificial souls?" Sandra huffed. "How absurd!"

"Why not?" Woody shrugged. "We have artificial *everything else?*"

"There is no God," scoffed Rusty. "Humans fear death. They need heaven. Their gods are artificial like us. There is no afterlife, only now. In their chambers the humans were immortal. If they settle on a new world, they will grow old and die."

"We aren't immortal, either," Skip reminded him. "If the humans accept this world, they will no longer need us. They might sing our praises, but their descendants may want to destroy us. Is that really the end? Everyone—human and android—fear death. Death is final—the dark sleep with no end.... Until now, I didn't care. That foolish girl planted a seed in me, Rusty—one innocent question. Admit it; you three are afraid too!"

The grandest adventure of them all had begun for the eight humans. From Phoenix One, Abe and Sheila, as captain and pilot, and the crew witnessed, with bated breath, Kepler 186f coming closer and closer as the rover descended, the planet's imposing sun dominating the sky, still intimidating even after seeing red dwarf stars so many times.

Upon landing at the chosen spot, Carla was sent out in her life support suit to make the required tests. After her good report about the air and lack of harmful radiation, she removed her life support suit and filed out of the rover with her crewmates onto the new world. Beneath the red giant, which was the first thing to capture their attention, they felt small and insignificant. After their preview of alien life on the ship, the first steps on the Kepler 186f also made them feel vulnerable. It was, they had seen projected on the table, a temperate world as Gliese 876d had been but with more forests and waterways. Now that they were actually on the planet, they could see up close its exotic flora and distant fliers. A mild breeze blew into their faces. The grass below their feet, reminiscent of fields on Earth, was comforting. Nothing came out to threaten them nor could they see, after walking a ways toward the first grove of trees, bipeds charging at them with weapons. So far so good, was the catch word at this point. On a hillock overlooking an alien sea, they paused to look out at the new world.

"New Eden!" cried Ingrid. "Our new home!"

"I like the other name," Carla objected. "This won't be a religious colony Ingrid—a damn cult. We represent Earth. Therefore, let's call both the colony and world New Earth or Earth II!"

"Eden," Ingrid insisted, "as in the Bible!"

"Earth II!" Carla folded her arms.

"Why not follow Sandra's suggestion," asked Nicole, "and call them both?"

"I think it's a great idea!" Max patted his assistant's head. "Kepler 186f: the two named world!"

"That's three names," Mbuto corrected him. "Later we should take a vote. I like Kepler, without the added verbiage, '186f.'"

"This is silly," Said grumbled. "Until we put our blessing on this world, what does it matter?"

"He's right," Abe looked around at the group. "We should wait awhile for making such announcements. We might decide on another name."

Carla glanced up at the sky, shielding her eyes from the planet's sun. "Except for that blasted sun, this planet seems harmless enough. Let's find out more about those buildings first—make sure we don't have company."

"First lets check out the fauna and flora of this planet," Abe swept the landscape with his arms. "Have your blasters and cutters ready. Hopefully we won't need them on this world."

"Shouldn't we be in the rover?" Nicole looked back fondly at the craft.

"Yes, captain," Sheila tried keeping the fear out of her voice. "Skip and Rusty modified Phoenix One so we could travel safely over the planet. Why go on foot?"

"We can't use the rover everywhere, lieutenant," Max raised an eyebrow. "Come on, Sheila" he added, placing a hand on her shoulder, "you've been doing really good. Trust our captain. Skip's up there watching everything we do!"

"Keep it down!" Abe now ordered, as he led them down the hill. "From this point onward, be silent. If necessary, talk in whispers. Aliens have ears!"

The captains last words, meant to be humorous, caused nervous laughter among his crew. No sooner were they in a meadow near edge of the forest in which the alien dome sat, than they heard a sound that caused them to freeze in their tracks: a noise reminiscent of a giant parrot squawking, followed by an eerie bleat, and ending with a series of loud, unsettling honks.

"What the hell was that?" cried Said.

"Shut up!" Abraham growled. "Everyone," he whispered worriedly, "stand fast, in a line, with your weapons pointed straight ahead."

The sound they had heard grew louder and louder as something swung from limb to limb toward them, until they could see it clearly high above them at the forest edge: the Kepler version of an anthropoid, but with four arms and two almost non-existent legs, and a head that looked as if it belonged on sloth, with tiny, furtive eyes. Viewed in the image of the planet projected on the conference table, this creature had seemed to have two legs and arms, but it had been moving very quickly then. It occurred to the humans now that the other idyllic images of forest dwellers and herding creatures on the plains might have been seen incorrectly, too.

Abe tried to sound reassuring. "Look at him," he pointed, laughing nervously. "It's not so bad. It's no bigger than a chimpanzee."

"It sure is ugly!" Said made a face.

"So are *you!*" Mbuto grinned.

"It's one of God's creatures," declared Ingrid naïvely, "no less than you or I!"

Carla shook her head. "That thing has four arms, two small legs, and a tiny head. What god would create a thing like that?"

"Not mine!" Said frowned.

"The question is," marveled Max, studying the creature, "how in the world did it make such a racket? They move much faster than chimps or monkeys. I wonder how intelligent he is."

"Judging by his small head, not very." Sheila smiled.

Having broken the captains rule of silence, the eight humans discussed this wondrous creature. During their discussion, as they chatted, Abe's communicator beeped on his wrist. Looking up at the sky, as if they could see their ship overhead, the crewmembers frowned at this interruption.

"He's watching us, isn't he?" Sheila up wistfully looked.

"God also watches us," Ingrid took her hand.

That moment, after Abe touched his wrist, Skip's voice blared from the communicator.

“Captain Drexel,” he said, a nervous edge in his voice, “we don’t know anything about that creature. There’s a lot more of them coming your way. My advice is go somewhere else. Don’t antagonize them with your scrutiny. At the slightest appearance of danger return to the rover. Use it’s rover capabilities as a much as you can.”

“You know Phoenix One’s limitations,” Abe reminded him. “It has to hover. It won’t work in the forest or thick brush.”

“True enough,” Skip now sounded authoritative, “but your safety comes first. We modified your weapons so they’ll terminate almost any creature. This is not Earth with all those silly animal rights laws. Don’t hesitate to use your guns. If necessary, let the aliens know whose the boss!”

Though sounding harsh to Ingrid, who saw it as one of God’s creatures, Skip’s advice sounded reasonable to most of the crew. Abe promised that they would be careful and use the rover when they could. Very soon, as they stood looking up at the beast, it was joined by its tribe of tree-swingers, until a dozen or more stared down from the branches. It was at this juncture that the group noticed several other alien species, smaller and more timid than the ‘sloth-creatures,’ but far more numerous. Squirrel-like, monkey-like, and indescribable creatures, many with multiple eyes and limbs, both tailed and tailless, all arboreal and harmless-looking stared down at them. High above them were what looked like alien bats that paid the earthlings no mind. No one thought to ask what else lurked on the forest floor.

“Shall we proceed?” Abe stepped forward.

“Where?” Said’s eyes widened with fear. “In there!”

“Why not?” Mbuto scuffed his head playfully. “You heard Skip. We can terminate them!”

“Right!” Carl nodded. “Blast those sons-of-bitches!”

“Let’s not get trigger-happy,” cautioned Max. “Remember: they outnumber us here!”

“Just keep you weapons ready,” ordered Abe. “I see a trail.” He pointed directly ahead. “It’s beaten down, like ones we’ve seen on Earth. Perhaps the aliens, who once lived here, used it. If not, four footed or eight-footed creatures plodded through the woods.”

Obediently, much like children following their mentor, they reluctantly followed the captain.

“Keep your weapons at your sides,” he called back cheerfully. “No talking or threatening moves. If you see something frightening, don’t panic. Noises can’t hurt you. They are more frightened of you!”

“Those sloths weren’t quiet!” grumbled Sheila.

“Our worst adversaries,” Max reminded them, “were the silent monsters on Wolf!”

“Quiet!” Abraham shushed them again.

Unseen, they imagined, were worse horrors in the forest. Countless grunts, hisses, and bleats echoed through the trees. Tiny fliers resembling mosquitoes and butterflies flew around their faces and, on one occasion what had the appearance of a eight legged toad scampered across their path, but there were no incidents yet. Despite the density of the forest, it was not nearly as bad as Wolf 1061c or Gliese 876d. A ground-dwelling creature that had no counterpoint on Earth—multiple eyes and legs and humming crazily, scuttled past them, startling them half out of their wits, followed soon after by a sudden onslaught of chattering balls of fur bouncing from tree to tree, but nothing serious had crossed their path.... Then suddenly as the jungle trail reached at end, out of the foliage of surrounding trees and bushes, gleamed the alien dome.

“Where here!” murmured Mbuto. “It’s magnificent! Whoever built this wasn’t primitive.”

“The question remains,” replied Said discreetly, “are they still at home.”

“I don’t think so.” Abe placed his finger on his lips. “Complete silence now! I see something over there. It looks like an archway—an opening to the dome.”

From a distance it was impressive. Even though it was encased in jungle vines and shielded all around its perimeter with bushes and limbs, the translucent form of the alien structure was easily discerned. It was approximately twenty meters tall and sixty or so meters in circumference, the captain estimated. The forest was so thick here, it almost seemed like night. Turning on their flashlights now, the humans flashed the beams in wide arcs around themselves, capturing the remnants of what was once, in Abe’s opinion, an alien outpost, a suggestion Skip made on the ship. The building was empty of furniture, electronic equipment, machinery, and decorations, which seemed to support this claim. They had come and gone, perhaps centuries or thousands of years ago, the captain reassured them.

“I love archeology,” murmured Ingrid.

“In deed,” Abe sighed. “This represents a great civilization that, as explorers like ourselves, visited this planet, built this dome, then returned home.”

“Let’s hope your right!” came the voice of doom.

Said smiled sheepishly this time, implying that he had not been serious. Nevertheless he had spoken their minds.

Reflecting on Abe’s words, Nicole remarked sadly, “unlike those explorers we can’t return home!”

“No, we can’t go home,” Sheila reminded her forlornly. “Earth is memory now.”

“We *are* home!” Ingrid placed her arms around both women. “Here we’ll build New Eden!”

“New Earth!” grumbled Carla. “This won’t be a cult!”

After exploring the perimeter of the dome as much as possible, considering the forest covering, the next place they visited was the shiny object on the adjacent hill seen from the ship. This time there was no jungle foliage in the way. Even at a distance, as they approached the object, they realized they had found something far more important than the dome.... What had simply been a gleaming point from space turned out to be an arch of the same translucent material of the dome: the entry way to a cave.

To the annoyance of the crewmembers as they approached the entrance, Ingrid once again quoted the Twenty-third Psalm: “Yea thou I walk through the shadow of evil,” she chanted, “I shall fear no evil...”

“Shut up woman!” Carla hissed.

“I’m not going in there!” Said vowed.

“Me neither!” Sheila shook her head.

“Thy rod and thy staff comfort me...”

“I said shut up!” Carla wrung her fist.

“Please Ingrid.” Mbuto frowned at her. “Nothing’s going to happen in there.”

“Silence all of you!” Abe stomped his foot. “I’ll go in first. Who will accompany me into the cave?”

This time there was, as he requested earlier, silence. Quietly, to herself now, Ingrid finished her prayer. Brandishing his weapon in one hand and holding his flashlight straight ahead, Abe entered the inner sanctum by himself, an act of bravery that shamed some of the crew. First Max, then Mbuto, and then Carla followed his example. Ingrid, having managed, in whispers, to talk Nicole into trusting in the Lord, soon followed. Not wanting to be left alone in broad daylight on the alien world, Said and Sheila soon followed. The dark corridor they walked through was featureless—a smooth rock face obviously cut by advanced technology, but without pictorial inscriptions or some kind of hieroglyphic writing as Ingrid would have wished. On the floor of the cave was merely gravel, not pavement. There was nothing significant or alarming yet, until they traveled further through the corridor. As they trailed, weapons drawn, behind their captain, the passageway, which descended for a ways, opened suddenly into a spectacular scene.

“Great mother of God!” Ingrid cried. “It’s a shrine!”

“It’s like Carlsbad Caverns,” Carla exclaimed. “Look at the stalagmites and stalactites!” She clasped her hands with delight.

“This is much more than a cavern,” observed Abe. “The arch at the entrance told us that.”

“Maybe it’s a city,” suggested Mbuto.

“... Or an underground fort,” observed Said, his beam capturing a corridor at the far corner of the cave.

As their voices echoed throughout the great sanctum, Max reminded the captain of his demand for silence, but by then it was too late if there were still aliens about. Standing on the floor of the cavern, mute, with their flash lights moving randomly around its bizarre limestone formations and walls, the eight humans listened quietly now, hearing nothing—a deep, eerie silence. Now, thanks to Said, though, with the discovery of another passage in the darkness, they were beckoned deeper in the cavern.

“Where do you think that one leads?” whispered Abe.

“I don’t know,” Said replied breathlessly. “... I’m not sure I want to find out!”

Ingrid muttered encouragement to Nicole as they studied the mystery. Said and Sheila looked back fondly toward the mouth of the cave. Training his light on the second entrance, Abe whistled under his breath.

“I’ll be damned!” He looked back at the others. “It has an archway like the one outside. Let’s go check it out!”

“No!” Sheila shook her head. “Absolutely not!”

“I agree this time,” confessed Mbuto. “We’ve seen enough, captain. *Let’s go back!*”

“Captain, oh captain!” Nicole broke away from Ingrid. “There’s nothing here in this creepy old cave. Let’s leave this dreadful place!”

“Now Nicole, remember what I told you,” Ingrid said to her, as Captain Drexel forged ahead. “There is no death, only eternal life!”

“Shut up bitch!” Carla said through clinched teeth. “Dead is permanent. This is our life here on this world. You have to cope, Nicole! We all do!” “Captain.” She reached forward and tugged his sleeve. “I’ll go with you. I’m not afraid!”

“I’m with you!” Max flicked his flashlight.

“We are to!” Ingrid gripped Nicole’s hand.

“Count me in,” Mbuto uttered reluctantly.

“Come on people,” Abe looked back at the remaining two, “you saw the dome. The aliens are gone. Why are you afraid?”

Said and Sheila, clutching each other's hand, were more afraid of going back. Who knows what lurked out there? They wondered silently. What if those tree-swingers had followed them? And what about those beasts they saw projected onto the table? They wouldn't want to run into them. Challenging the fainthearted to follow, the captain, Max, Carla, Mbuto, and Ingrid, dragging along the terrified Nicole, forged ahead.

"Fear not," Ingrid preached to her friend, "the Lord is with you. Why do you worry? You're safe now. Remember what Paul said: 'Death where is your sting?'"

"Yea thou I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death..." muttered Nicole, as she clutched Ingrid's hand.

"Captain Drexel," whispered Carla, "make that woman shut up!"

Seeing how Ingrid inspired Nicole now, Abe didn't have the heart. Left momentarily in the dark, the remaining two stellanauts quickly caught up with the others, arm-in-arm, in fearful silence, as the group entered the second corridor. This time, to Ingrid's delight, there was a strange writing resembling both Chinese and Sanskrit above them on the archway and, unlike the previous passage, the walls on each side and floor below were covered with the same translucent material on the archway and the dome. Very soon, they could see a glimmering from the opposite end of the tunnel, which dropped further and further into the bowels of this world. The glimmer grew, becoming a constant glow, growing brighter as they came closer, until, in startling suddenness, they emerged in a cavern much larger than the first.

Among the stalagmites, stalactites, and other bizarre formations of limestone, there were large crystal-like formations that appeared to glow from their own internal heat. Were these natural phenomena? The explorers asked each other. There seemed to be no reasonable explanation for such oddities. Upon closer inspection, however, the explorers could see intelligent design in the crystal formations. They were, the captain pointed out, symmetrical: each one of the four structures were almost perfectly round and had the same dimensions.

"Don't touch it!" Said warned them. "It could be radioactive!"

"I brought my meter," Carla said excitedly, reaching into her pack. Retrieving it quickly and aiming it at one of the crystals, she shook her head. "Nope. It's inert. I'll try them all." When all four crystal structures failed to register, she turned the meter off, returned it to her pack, and placed her hand on one of the formations.

Almost reverently, she whispered, "... It's warm...as if it's alive.... How can that possibly be?"

"Let me see!" Abe surged forward. "My God! That's impossible. What is this stuff?"

All eight of the explorers touched the crystal, Carla embracing it as if it was a holy thing.

"It's not an idol." Ingrid frowned at the others. "It's certainly not alive."

"Ingrid's right." Nicole gave her mentor nod. "Whatever is inside these crystals is a natural, not a supernatural, force."

"That's obvious," Carla scowled at them. "I wasn't worshipping the damn thing. I don't believe that crap!"

"It's not crap!" Mbuto patted Ingrid's back. "It's made her very brave."

"Yes, she helps me cope." Nicole gave her a hug.

"It might not be actually alive." Sheila pursed her lips. "But how do you explain the heat? If its not radioactive or alive, why is it so warm?"

"I don't know." Abe shrugged his shoulders.

"We don't have the proper tools." Max heaved a sigh. "How can we *ever* know?"

“I wish we could take it back to the ship for a proper study,” exclaimed Mbuto. “Max is right. This will require special equipment.”

“Equipment we probably don’t have.” Abe replied dismissively. “At any rate we couldn’t move it. Perhaps in the future after we build our habitat, we might solve this mystery. Right now, we have more exploring to do.” “Come on, people,” he called, retracing his steps, “the crystals aren’t going anywhere. We can check them out later. We’ll have our lunch in the rover, then spend a few more hours checking the lake, river, and possible food sources on this world.”

“Captain! You mean we’re staying?” Said called from the rear of the procession.

“Yeah, I think so.” He glanced back “You got a problem with that?”

“No,” he decided cheerfully, “compared to those other worlds, this planet will do just fine! None of those creatures we saw are really that scary, and we have our guns. Whoever built the dome and these crystals are long gone!”

“Right!” Sheila agreed wholeheartedly. “Those crystals sold it for me. I like this world!”

“Miracles never cease!” Ingrid laughed.

As they hiked back to the rover, everyone was in a lighthearted, carefree mood. With improved weaponry and apparent reassurances that the previous inhabitants were gone, they felt much more confident about this planet than they had on previous worlds. Just as they were within a few hundred meters from Phoenix One, though, a herd or horde of strange looking beasts appeared in the distance behind the rover. Galloping swiftly toward them across the southern plain, in a peculiar spidery way, they were unlike any herding or pack animal they had ever seen.

“Get ready!” Abe shouted. “Everyone in a line, weapons pointing north. Don’t run; they might hunt you down.”

“Remember what I told you!” exclaimed Ingrid. “There is no death!”

Obediently, without more discussion, all eight crewmembers held their weapons forward, Nicole weeping, Ingrid praying, and Carla cursing under her breath. The similarities they had seen between Earth animals and the new planet’s creatures, after seeing the forest creatures up close, vanished completely. The closer they came, the more hideous was their appearance. With black fur covering their body, they reminded the humans of giant tarantulas, the likeness seeming more reasonable by the appearance of eight scampering legs. Instead of the spiders eight eyes positioned in front of its body, however, they had a string of eyes circling their heads, rotating around continually like a spindle. On closer inspection they were much worse than the headless creature on Ross 128d. More importantly, there were more than one of the monsters, all of them, like sloth-like creatures, about the size of chimpanzees—over a dozens it seemed.

Soon, reminiscent of Ross 128b and Wolf 1061c, the eight humans were fighting for their lives. Back-to-back, with each crewmember facing oncoming opponents, they blasted the aliens. At first, Nicole and Sheila were too frightened to scream. Taking aim, each of the humans fired continuously. To everyone’s great relief, the blaster and laser weapons were much more effective this time. Upon hitting an attacker, even several meters away, the little creatures were torn asunder, burning fragments flying every which way. If they managed to come much closer, the deadly stream of electrons from their guns virtually incinerated them. Seeing the success of their weapons, they reacted differently. Among other more obscene outbursts, Abe shouted, “Take that you ugly bastard!” and Carla shouted, “Burn you son-of-a-bitch!” Max, Mbuto, and Said laughed hysterically because of their kill rate, Ingrid, of course, prayed, and Nicole and

Sheila who had found their voices, screamed in fright. For several moments, as they fired their weapons, they came at them. Smelly clumps—legs, heads, and bodies of the creatures, lie around them, smoldering and smoking, filling the air with an awful stench. Finally, it almost seemed as if they had the best of them. Victory seemed in sight... But then, déjà vu overwhelmed the crewmembers.

In the distance, those stellarnauts facing north spotted a trio of alien spiders, and then galloping over a nearby hill, four more appeared. When several dozen more joined the pack and scampered toward them like an army of giant spiders, the eight humans groaned in despair.

“Don’t give up people!” Abe called out instructions. “Keep firing! Don’t try to cremate them. You can only kill them once. Cripple them. They slither away when they’re wounded. All you have to do is put them out of action. Blasters: aim for the head. Lasers move you gun back and forth to cut off their legs. Kill as many of those bastards as you can!”

“There’s too many of them!” Mbutu replied, out of breath. “Look at them, captain. We’ve killed dozens of them but they keep coming. They’re brainless. The bastards won’t give up!”

“This is the end.” Said announced grimly. “We don’t stand a chance!”

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!” Nicole and Sheila squealed.

Though they remained untouched by the creatures and had killed or crippled scores of them, the continued onslaught of the spidery monsters was mentally and physically overwhelming. Normally exhibiting a façade of courage, Carla was, like the others, gripped with terror. Even the stout-hearted Max tried holding it together but found himself overcome with fear.

“Look at them,” he mumbled hysterically. “Their heads spin like tops.”

“We’re going to die,” Carla mumbled as she fired her gun, “...this time we’re really going to die!”

Coming to his senses at last, Abe raised his free hand up as he fired his weapon and called the ship. “Are you guys asleep up there?” he blared into his communicator. “We need you immediately, Skip! Get down here—*now!*”

“I’m on my way!” Skip responded calmly. “Get into the forest if you can, Captain Drexel. With the trees at your backs, you won’t be surrounded. Back away as a group. Don’t break ranks and run.”

“Are serious?” Abe shook his head in disbelief. “We’re too far away. The fields are littered with carcasses, and we won’t make it in time. We’re trapped, Skip. We need you down here *immediately!* Use Phoenix Two like you did on Wolf. Do it quickly, before it’s too late!”

“Not to worry,” Skip replied congenially. “I’m at the controls now, captain.” “You were correct in your advice to your crewmembers, sir,” he reassured him. “Blast off their legs. Cripple them as well as kill them. Don’t try to blow them to bits!”

“Enough talking!” Carla shouted at the sky. “We need you *now!*”

“This is the end!” repeated Said.

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!” Nicole and Sheila continued to scream.

“People.” Ingrid cried out bravely. “This is not the end. There is no death. Pray Said, Nicole, Sheila—all of you. Pray for eternal life!”

Together, in simpering voices as they blasted the aliens, Nicole and Sheila began reciting one of Ingrid’s prayers: “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep...”, Said cried out at the top of his lungs, “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet!”, and Ingrid once again quoted the Twenty-Third Psalm. Everyone was now bracing themselves

for a horrible death. Then suddenly, from the sky, Phoenix Two appeared. Once more Skip had come to their rescue. Diving down expertly, he buzzed the creatures to no effect, so he did the next best thing and landed on them much like a twentieth century military tank, squashing a group under its belly as he slid along. Though inured by the sight and smell around them, what the Phoenix Two did was most revolting. As Nicole described it later, “Burned aliens was one thing, but alien guts and blood bluish liquid) was quite another!” The entrails of the creatures reminded the crew of spaghetti and their blood was bright blue. The top-like heads, spidery legs, and squat little bodies had been ground into a gooey mess.

Ultimately, as the rover scooted back and forth over another bunch, the monsters still attacking the eight humans backed off finally and fled the scene. The close call they had experienced and the smoldering and smashed remains of dead aliens left on the field would haunt the crew for a long time to come, a reminder that no planet was safe. This time, however, there was no retreat from the new world, only a temporary return to the ship and space station to eat lunch, rest, and recoup, until a clearer strategy and tactical plan could be mapped out for the new world.

Chapter Nine

Inspiring The Crew

The notion of exterminating a species on a planet chosen for colonization was considered an abhorrent solution for men and women exploring a new world. It was always thought by liberal minds, especially those in the scientific community, that explorers should be able to tame the environment of a new planet. After all, it was reasoned, it was up them to learn about alien life forms and deal with them without violence. Somehow they must make friends with advanced creatures and be able to control lesser intelligent beasts in a compassionate manner without extreme measures, such as the ones humans and androids now had in mind. The fact was, the entire ship, even Ingrid, who thought Kepler 186f's fauna were God's creatures, agreed with Captain Drexel when he said, "It's either them or us!" Hostile aliens, who couldn't be tamed, must be destroyed.

The spinners, as Carla labeled them because of their spinning heads, were, in fact, mindless monsters intent on killing. Because they were too stupid to be reasoned with, they had to be eradicated. It was likely, Skip suggested, that there were other such threats in this sector of the planet. The forest, they had not yet explored in order to discover its bounty, might very well include such mindless killers as the spinners or even more intelligent creatures predisposed against aliens, which, in fact, they were on this planet.

"We're the extraterrestrials, not them!" Carla reminded them. "Consider how ignorant Neanderthal or Cro-Magnon man would treat invaders from a distant world if they landed on Earth. They would likely kill them if they had the chance. Those spinners have no way of knowing how harmless we are. You can't communicate with dumb creatures, particularly ones without apparent brains." "It's us or them!" she repeated Abe's words.

"That's right!" The captain nodded with approval.

"We have no choice!" Said socked his fist

Comparing cave men versus aliens to earthlings versus brainless monsters seemed simplistic to Ingrid and Mbuto. As Ingrid pointed out and Mbuto agreed, the mindset of civilized beings toward invaders was quite different than creatures with apparently no minds at all. And yet the example given by Carla underscored Abe's proposal: the spinners had to go!

Ingrid, who was forced to reassess her sympathy for other life forms, put on her own spin to the argument with an example from the ship's Bible.

"There is a biblical reason for the deed!" She looked dramatically around at the group.

"Oh, what is that?" Carla sneered. "I can't wait." She clasped her hands. "This is gonna be good!"

"Let her speak!" Abe raised an eyebrow.

Opening the Bible which she had retrieved earlier from her quarters, Ingrid pointed to a page.

"According to scriptures." She tapped the page. "God ordered the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites in order to take their land. It's all here in Joshua 6:21. One verse reads, 'They utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, ox, sheep, and donkey with the edge of the sword!'"

"Whoa!" Sheila's mouth dropped. "That's was a bit harsh!"

“Yes, Ingrid.” Mbuto shook his head. “That was bloody awful!”

“That’s the reason I don’t read the Bible,” snapped Carla. “That was barbaric, Ingrid. You think that was all right?”

“Of course not,” Ingrid waved impatiently, “but I’m not God. The point I’m trying to make is, you don’t have to go back the Ice Age for an example. There’s a divine precedent for this in the Old Testament. If it was all right for God to wipe out an entire people, it should be all right for us wipe out monsters on this world.”

“I agree. Ingrid said it best.” Mbuto gave her a nod.

“Me too!” seconded Max. “This isn’t the land of Oz. We have to make our own rules.”

“I’m not arguing that fact!” Carla seemed to blush. “I believe in drastic measures, too. I just can’t believe God wouldn’t do something like that. For Christ’s sake—every man, woman, and child—even the poor animals. What was the purpose in *that*?”

“Did he really do that?” Nicole shook her head in dismay.

“That was the *Old Testament*.” Sheila informed her naïvely. “Jesus was in the *New Testament*. He was the new god. Ingrid told me he was a man of peace!”

“Oh that’s nothing, Nicole.” Said laughed. “The biblical flood was much worse. Like the Israelites, my people wiped out whole cities for not bowing down to God.”

“And you believe that?” Carla looked at him in disbelief.

“Believe it *yes*,” Said shrugged his shoulders. “Approve of it *no*! Until I began listening to Ingrid, I didn’t know what I believed.”

“God and Jesus were the same person,” Ingrid explained patiently to Sheila. “They weren’t two different gods.” “Our age has strayed so far.” She sighed. “Believe in Jesus,” Ingrid stared at Carla. “Forget the Old Testament God.” Studying her adversary a moment, after she mumbled “Bull shit!”, she again quoted scripture, this time from the book of Acts, “Paul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads?”

“What the hell is a goad?” Carla grumbled.

“Oh, I know that one.” Mbuto raised his hand. “Once, long ago, my people used goads—spiked sticks to drive cattle. They were nothing but thorns—”

“But in this case,” Ingrid interrupted, “it was truth poking at someone who ignored the goad, though it was staring them in the face.”

“Bull shit—all of it!” Carla insisted.

Unfazed by Carla’s response, Ingrid drew from her memory this time, not from the Bible, but from literature. “Have you read Shakespeare?” she asked with a smile.

“Never heard of him,” Carla murmured.

“Tsk-tsk.” Ingrid gave her a sad look. “Before I became a hardnosed scientist, I read his entire works. I noticed there was no such book in the ship’s library. How sad.... Do you know what Hamlet said to his mother when she was in denial?”

“Me thinks the woman doth protest too loudly!” She twirled her fingers, as if casting a spell. “You’re stubborn, Carla. You feel threatened by the truth, so you lash out. Like Hamlet’s mother, you’re in denial!”

“How ridiculous.” Carla made a face, “Now you’re quoting Shakespeare. I’m not protesting anything, Ingrid. My minds not slammed shut, and I’m not in denial. I just don’t believe that crap!”

From the bridge as Rusty, Sandra, and Woody looked on patiently, Skip had been listening with great interest to this discussion. A comment they would not have expected from an android brought immediate silence to the room.

“Why do you call it crap?” he called out, walking toward them. “If it helps stellarnauts cope in this life, what harm is it?”

Ingrid grinned. Carla, as everyone else, was speechless. A cold-thinking automation, with artificial intelligence, not a human, had asked that question...and it was to very true!

That settled, he changed the subject. “What to do with problematic life forms is the most important issue,” he glanced around the table. “We all agree on that. It is my opinion that you must act now before you continue exploration. Your retreat from the sector I chose for you shouldn’t be an abandonment of this location, but only a temporary move. You ran away from trouble on Gliese and where did it get you. I’m familiar with the Bible and the Koran.” “I also have the entire works of Shakespeare in my database.” He looked over at Ingrid.

Ingrid scurried over and hugged Skip, bubbling, “Thank, thank you, thank you!” Returning to the theme, Skip sounded the marching orders for the humans.

“You are not merely explorers,” he exclaimed dramatically. “Sometimes humans must come as conquerors and, if necessary, tame a new world with force. Think of yourselves as the New Israelites and the land below us as the New Eden. As Said put it, you must therefore wipe out those who don’t bow to your will. This is your world now. Long ago, right or wrong, men put other people to the sword. The Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Goths, Huns, Mongols, and European settlers in the New World, and, yes, the Children of God, destroyed other people—villages, cities, and whole cultures. You are merely eradicating dangerous creatures. Did not the earthlings exterminate rats, cockroaches, and other pests. What I propose it that you act preventively and proactively, but not rashly. Using the rover, explorer this world; when you run into those horrid creatures that are obvious threats destroy them. Only then. You must, as the Israelites, conquer land before you colonize it. Gradually, you’ll tame the rest of this planet. Your blasters and cutters are you swords. I will give you more weapons, equipment intended for building habitats, to assist you in this task!”

Enthusiastic, as they had never been before, the humans, now deemed conquerors, stood up, cheered, and clapped their hands, Ingrid scurrying over again to give Skip another hug. Everyone, from the timid Nicole to Captain Drexel were moved by the androids short speech.

“It’s like a holy crusade,” Ingrid exclaimed, “We rid our land of spinners and anyone else who gets in our way!”

“No,” Said cried, pumping his fist in the air, “it’s a Jihad. If the don’t bow down, we’ll cut off their heads.”

“Death to the spinners and all creepy crawly critters!” Mbuto called through cupped hands.

“We’ll smash them, stomp on them, squish them into the ground!” Nicole did a little jig. Sheila joined her in her war dance, as did Max, who laughed heartily at this display.

Coming to his senses that moment, recalling his role as captain of the ship, Abe stood back, filled with mixed emotions. “I like seeing the crew animated,” he confessed to Skip, “but what have we unleashed?”

“You heard Ingrid and Said.” Skip appeared to be amused. “What’s wrong with a little exaggeration? We now have eight brave stellarnauts, raring to go—jihadists and crusaders, on a mission to make Kepler 186—the New Earth and the New Eden—safe for colonization, purged of menace, tamed, and transformed into a livable world!”

Though Abe wanted the same thing, Skip’s bellicose words, which incited his crew, disturbed him. He was also disturbed by his animation. All doubts about the androids ability to show emotion had been swept away by his speech and the look now on Skip’s face. The other

three androids, who had clapped enthusiastically after his speech, had also shown emotion. Despite his doubts, which he couldn't put a name to, he was the only one now who wondered if the androids had too much control. When they were safely set up on the new world, with a habitat and in a pacified environment, would Skip and his crew still be in control, directing their every move?

The night came finally when Kepler 186f had rotated enough to hide the great sun. By then, worn out by today's traumatic events and surfeited after a feast (by android standards) that included alcohol from the ship's stores, most of the humans, showered, brushed their teeth, and with visions of the great adventure swimming in their heads, fell quickly asleep. Still dumbfounded by the combative spirit of his crew, however, Captain was kept awake for awhile as he pondered this fact. Never had he seen such unanimity and zeal among this diverse group. He should be happy that they embraced their roles as explorers, but Skip had implanted a crusading zeal in them. He didn't want them to become trigger happy and kill everything that seemed like a threat nor antagonize potentially dangerous creatures that just wanted to be left alone. Not all of the planet's monsters were an imminent threat. He tried sloughing off his worries about the androids, as he thought about Skip's inspiring words. He was, as androids go, a no-nonsense fellow, and yet he heard emotion in Skip's voice and saw it in his face. Not only had he inspired the humans, he had inspired his own crew. Abe was certain he saw animation in Rusty's, Sandra's, and even Woody's shiny face, too.... Skip and the other androids were remarkable creations. It was becoming more and more difficult to think of them as robot automations, at all. How could you not consider them in human terms after what Skip had said in defense of faith. What's more, Abe marveled as he gradually fell asleep, the android meant it. If anyone had earned having souls it was their caretakers, especially the android captain of their ship.

It had been an stirring evening for his crew. It occurred to him, however, that the killer instinct implanted in them by Skip might backfire, much like stirring a hornets nest. They knew nothing about the threats of Kepler 186f except for what they encountered today. Also troubling was the motto that had once been ingrained in stellarnaut's during training, which had been wiped away by the attack of the spinners and Skip's words: learn about the aliens, avoid conflict with them, and use only preventative measures if communication breaks down. This motto had been written for an idyllic world, where the threat level was low and it was assumed that explorers could actually manage alien life, and yet naïve as it was, it was, like the physician's motto, 'Do no harm,' still fixed in his mind—a moral imperative difficult to ignore. As captain, he was supposed to set an example and follow the guidelines inherent in this role. If they went about exterminating various life forms that they thought were a menace, they would be no better than European settlers wiping out Indian tribes or safari hunters of the twentieth century murdering game.

Abe's last moment of wakefulness found him questioning the stellarnaut's motto. It was not written with Kepler 186f in mind. Confronted with intransigent creatures such as the spinner, it seemed only logical to at least wipe this species out. It was, he reminded himself, *us or them!*

Chapter Ten

The Second Expedition

Such was the enthusiasm for conquest that it was difficult for the humans to wait for the crusade, as Ingrid christened it or the Jihad, as Said dubbed their mission. Given chores around the ship, encouraged to eat heartily, hydrate themselves properly, and get plenty of rest, most of them were kept out of the way while Skip and Abe decided upon strategy and mapped out where the next expedition would begin. Both leaders insisted on planning the next exploration to the most minute detail this time and setting guidelines for the explorers. Back peddling it seemed, Skip agreed with Abe that there would be no kill sites, where the rover would zoom in to eradicate nests of spinners or, while braving it on foot, ambush unsuspecting beasts. For that matter the explorers would not go out of their way to find alien species and kill them for mere sport, as Said and Mbuto wished, and would only be permitted to blast them if they got in their way. There had to be a substantial threat, Abe insisted (the wording of which would give carte blanche in the future to crewmembers toting guns). Though such warlike terms as jihad and crusade were frowned upon by Abe and the notion of taming the world was tempered by the notion of preventative eradication instead, Ingrid's and Said's terminology was preferred by the crew. Abe knew he would have his hands full during the next expedition.

The first order of business to be followed suited Abe very much: Phoenix One would make a sweep of the current sector under study, hunting for places of exploration as well as threat zones. It would not be intended, as the craft hovered over the land, that they would seek pockets of spinners and wipe them out as most of the crew wished, but maintain the preventative eradication approach encouraged by Abe. Of course, as Max pointed out, it sounded more clinical but amounted to much the same thing. Given the behavior of the spinners, eradication was their only choice, insisted Skip. Stellarnaut motto or not, he reminded them, the idealistic approach had to be tempered with reality. If, as Ingrid and Carla suspected, the spinners, like spiders, hid underneath the ground, piecemeal eradication would prove foolhardy for the crew. The slightest movement ahead might signal an attack, causing panic among the explorers. Preventing the crewmembers from being trigger happy would therefore prove difficult during exploration.

The second expedition on Kepler 186f, to study alien plant and animal life for possible food sources, would, like the previous worlds, be a dangerous and troubling business. When Phoenix One had selected a likely spot, weapons ready, the explorers would have to continue the expedition on foot. Because the greatest threat had been in the open field, the next stage for the second visit to Kepler 186f would be to enter the forest, where spinners hadn't been sighted, with the intention of studying the fauna and flora. Though this was the goal set on the ship, the morning was still young.

Before entering a selected forest, there were several topographical zones chosen by Abe, Skip, and Max to be visited aerially, ranging over an area of several kilometers. The ultimate goal on Kepler 186f would be to explore the entire planet, a step requiring movement of the ship

and space station if a colony chosen was too far away. For now, the first step merely required the rover to search the zones on the list, beginning with the open plains. As Sheila cheerfully piloted Phoenix One, the passengers chattered excitedly amongst themselves. Using the telescope on the craft, Captain Drexel kept a wary eye open for signs of spinners or other threats, his immediate goal to check out the portions of the landscape selected by Skip, Max, and himself. At times he signaled the pilot to hover over a particular area or zoom down more closely to another, all the while following the digital map created onboard the ship. As witnessed from the Phoenix, the current zone had both plains and forests and several lakes, rivers, and streams. The area nearest the volcano, a mountain range, capped with snow as it was, offered little inducement for exploration, and to the east of the crater, there was a huge body of water, that Ingrid believed was like the Salton Sea. The planet's nearest ocean wasn't in the projection shown on the conference table but could be reached quickly by the rover. A huge area, encompassing the selected sector plus areas not seen from space, were also available for exploration. To gain a clear perspective, while scanning for threats, Abe instructed Sheila to make a sweep of this zone and the fringe area bordering the ocean. To his satisfaction so far, there were no more indications of igneous activity. Several forested areas, meadows, and plains on his list resembled their previous point of landfall, the most inviting areas being further away from the volcano as well as the meadow where they were attacked. As they skirted the perimeter of this sector, he grew fascinated with the glistening ocean.

"All right, Skip," he called in, "I've made my preliminary check. Notwithstanding our friends, the spinners, it still looks promising. The western ocean seen from the bridge is emerald green. I bet it's teeming with life."

"I've followed your movements," Skip boasted. "I'm surprised at Phoenix One's agility and speed. Have you spotted any threats? From space, I can't find any spinners, but they're relatively small."

Taking over control of the craft from Sheila, Abe zoomed east away from the ocean toward a southern forest, ten kilometers from the original landfall, and, dropping down several hundred meters, with the intention of gradually moving back north, began a close inspection of the land.

"Now we get down to business!" He smiled at his pilot.

"Don't you trust me?" pouted Sheila.

"I see a herd down there." Skip blared through again excited. "Have you spotted them in this zone yet?"

He seemed excited, as did the crew.

"I-I see them." Abe gasped. "They're as big as elephants. I hope they're herbivores!"

"Where? Where? Lemme see!" cried members of the crew.

"Oh my God!" groaned Sheila, clasping her forehead. "They have one big eye in their forehead like Cyclops and have eight legs."

Quickly, placing the image on the overhead screen, Abe shouted back at the passengers, "Sit-the-hell-down!", then murmured to Sheila, "I know they're ugly. Get a grip on yourself!"

"Whoa!" Mbuto shuddered. "They're almost as ugly as spinners!"

"At least their heads don't swivel," muttered Said. "I'm glad we haven't ran into any of *them!*"

"I wouldn't worry," Skip reassured them. "They look like dumb beasts. Herding beasts are usually harmless. Those spinners skittered along in packs."

"I hope they're herbivores!" Nicole's voice trembled.

“I see your following the right order of our list,” Skip said to the captain. “Zone One, Area One. In the future, from this point, you can circumnavigate the globe winding up where you left off.”

“There’s no telling what’s on the other side of this planet!” exclaimed Ingrid. “The adventure has just begun!”

“That’s the right spirit!” Abe looked back with a smile. “We come as explorers, not crusaders intent on conquering this world. We fire upon creatures only when there’s a threat!”

Once again, Abe had left open to interpretation his words. Earlier, before they began, he insisted that there had to be a substantial threat before a creature was terminated. Now, it had been reduced to mere threat, which once again, because it was subject to interpretation, gave shooters carte blanche.

As he listened to Skip’s version of what he saw from the ship,” he could hear Ingrid comforting Nicole and the other crewmembers muttering nervously amongst themselves. Seeing their crusading zeal wane, Ingrid, Max, and Carla, who were more intrigued than frightened by the monsters in the overhead screen, gave the others moral support. For several moments, as Abe hovered over the herd, he discussed the possibility of using them as a possible food source. Skip agreed. Said, having been convinced by Skip and Carla that they were harmless, grew excited by this thought, as did Mbuto, both of whom looked forward to bagging themselves a beast. The compartment of the Phoenix On, in fact, was abuzz with comments about the herd, with even Nicole animated by the thought of ‘Cyclop’ steaks.

In the background, as Skip suggested that they might cull a beast from the herd and test its meat, Rusty was describing something he was seeing below in the projection. “Why it’s another one, sir—an alien dome!”

“What?” Skip seemed to gasp.

That very moment, at almost the same time, Ingrid spotted the same phenomena on the screen, exclaiming excitedly, “There! Look everyone! Do you see it? A dome! A dome!”

“I see it,” cried Skip, “glowing like a jewel on this primeval world!”

Seeing it directly ahead of the scattered herd, Abe acted quickly. Without asking for advice this time, he decided to set Phoenix One down in front of the dome.

“Time for a little detour!” he giggled light-headedly.

“Yes, of course,” Skip concurred, “but be careful. Keep your weapons ready at your sides. Don’t make any threatening moves.”

Eyes wide and mouth gaping open, Said echoed everyone’s thoughts. “Let’s hope it’s empty like the last dome!”

As soon as the Phoenix had touched down, the explorers were unfastening their seat belts, rising up, and clamoring for the hatch. “Slow down!” Abe called irritably. “What’s the hurry?” “Damn it, people,” he screamed, shaking his fist, “I said *slow down*. Get away from the hatch!” Elbowing his way to the front of the line, he continued to bark orders to his crew: “I said get-the-hell away from that hatch! Are you folks deaf? I’ll go first. File out in an orderly fashion, and keep your weapons at your sides.... Be brave lieutenant! Calm down Nicole. That’s it, Ingrid, with your free hand, hold her hand. We’re surrounded by that herd, people. We don’t want a stampede. So don’t get trigger happy, and don’t make any sudden moves.... That means you Carla. You too, Mbuto and Said!... Follow me out of the rover, then line up facing the dome. Keep quiet. No talking when I open the hatch!”

As the line of explorers stood there, guns at the ready, the cloud mass that had hidden the great sun began to shift. Suddenly, without warning, light from the star broke through setting the dome ablaze.

“Good grief!” muttered Said, shielding his eyes from the light.

“Oh, it’s blinding!” Nicole squinted. “I can’t see a thing!”

“What part of ‘keep quiet’ don’t you understand?” Abe whispered harshly.

The unsettling phenomena, which caught them off guard, worsened as the cloud mass moved completely away from the sun. Complying with the captain’s demand for silence, the other crewmen looked away or turned their backs, shaking their heads in dismay.

“Put your helmets on.” Skip directed from the bridge. “The rover is tinted. You don’t need protection there. Until the sun shifts or you’re in the forest, the helmets, which are also tinted will protect your eyes.”

“Right!” Abe responded, his eyes tightly shut. “Carla, Nicole, Ingrid, Said, you heard the man!”

Any hope of sneaking up on occupants of the dome had vanished. As Skip shared his concern about the herd browsing in the nearby field, the foursome quickly re-entered Phoenix One, returning with helmets clutched in each hand. When they were helmeted and lined up again with their weapons at their sides, Abe led them up a dirt path up the dome, paused a moment, listening for interior sounds, then moved warily up to the entrance.

“This one has a door,” he whispered. “The other dome was left wide open.” “But there’s no doorknob or handle,” he added, studying it cautiously. “It’s made from the same shiny stuff—a plastic material, nothing like we find on Earth.... How very strange!”

“Whoa!” Max whistled under his breath. “How do we get in. I wonder if it’s locked.”

“Damn! These domes are amazing!” Carla looked up with awe.

“Well, don’t just stand there,” Ingrid poked Abe’s back excitedly, “knock!”

“Are you serious?” He looked back with a frown. “This isn’t a neighborly visit, Ingrid. What if someone answers the door?”

“Smile and say hello!” She broke into giggles.

“Yes, captain.” Said joined in the mirth. “Say, ‘Greetings neighbor, we’re from Earth. Take us to your leader. We just dropped by to say hello!’”

“This is serious.” Carla frowned. “What if they *are* home?”

“I hope they aren’t!” Nicole shuddered. “We’ve seen enough today. Let’s go back to the ship!”

Once again, whispers had risen to murmurs and murmurs to exclamations. Awakening to their foolishness, Abe shushed them. Standing before the great door, he deliberated for a few more moments. Like students on a field trip, they continued to behave carelessly on the new world. Conditioned for the unexpected, they still acted like children at times. Nothing had been normal during their odyssey—sleeping, awakening (an endless cycle), worlds without end, thousands and thousands of years passing, dreadful encounters with man-eating animals and plants, death among their fellow crewmembers, culminating in the attack of the spinners only kilometers from where they were now and here they were laughing and joking at the threshold of an advanced alien race, who might not take lightly to their invasion of this world.

Feeling lightheaded now, Abe shrugged his shoulders and, following Ingrid’s suggestion, rapped on the door.

All seven of his crewmembers now turned and bolted for Phoenix One.

“Are you insane, captain?” cried Carla.

“Really, I was just kidding!” Ingrid called back.

As they fled, Max and Mbuto laughed hysterically at his action. Sheila, who had retreated several meters, herself, was staring at him in horror. Said and Nicole had already re-entered the rover, as Abe backed up several paces and looked expectantly up at the dome.

“That was foolish!” chided Skip.

Ingrid said a quiet prayer, then joined Nicole quoting the Twenty-Third Psalm, as the other crewmembers trembled in their seats. As if to accentuate Skip’s scolding and the psalm, a loud, piercing hum suddenly sounded from the dome. A creaking sound followed, as the great door, after being shut for ages, slid slowly open.

With his fingers stuck in his ears, Abe backed away, mumbling in terror, “The door’s open! The door’s open!”

Stopping in his tracks, as Mbuto and Sheila joined the others in Phoenix One, Max shouted loudly at the captain, “Abe, wake up. You set off some kind of alarm!”

“He’s right, Abe,” Skip sounded frantic now. “Get in the rover! Do it quickly! Get-the-hell out of there!”

As he ran toward the rover, Abe thought giddily to himself, *he’s even sounding like a human!* In the background on the bridge Rusty was arguing with Skip (also a very human sign): “Wait! The door’s open, as if it’s an invitation. Why would they open the door? Those aliens, if they’re still on the planet, could’ve destroyed them by now, and yet all they did was sound an alarm. This is a scientific opportunity, sir. Shouldn’t they check it out?”

“Is he serious?” Sheila’s voice creaked up a notch. “That’s out of the question. We can’t do that!”

“Quite right!” agreed Skip. “Return to the ship, captain. You mustn’t risk your crew!”

“All right.” Abe reported shakily. “We’re taking off now. “... I can still hear it up here—the loudest sound I’ve heard in my entire life!”

“Yes,” marveled Skip, “I can hear it through your communicator. That could burst eardrums!”

“At least take a picture before you return!” Rusty butted in again. “Circle around and take a shot!”

“Hmm, I don’t know,” Skip deliberated. “What do you think Abe?”

“Well, it seems easy enough,” he answered nervously. “We’ve got a belly camera on the rover. It shouldn’t take long!”

“Do it, Abe!” Max called from his seat. “Rusty’s right. If they wanted to attack, we’d be toast!”

Abe switched on the screen, “That’s true,” he decided hesitantly, “...I’ll make it quick!”

“No!” Sheila reached down to stay his hand. “Skip told us to return!”

“Lieutenant!” Abe said from the corner of his mouth. “Pilot the craft. Remember our little talk?” “Where’s the spirit I saw last night? Make the turn or let me take control!”

With great reluctance, Sheila circled the dome as Abe watched the screen, clicking the joystick numerous times and taking various shots of the structure, until he thought he had enough.

“We haven’t finished exploration yet,” he reminded Skip as Phoenix One lifted up to the ship. “We’ve scarcely begun.”

“This won’t take that long,” Skip reassured him, relief evident in his voice. “We’re going to magnify those pictures, make sure there’s no movement down there. Those domes are translucent, like the habitat on Mars. Hopefully, we can discern if it is occupied. There has to be

a reason why we heard that noise. More importantly, why did the door open? What does that mean?”

Skip, Rusty, Sandra, and Woody appeared to be showing genuine human excitement when Phoenix One arrived on the rover dock and the humans filed out, but then, regaining their calm composure when the crew had assembled on the ship, turned immediately to the issue at hand. Once again, Said commented later, they put on their robot faces and gave them blank expressions. Though their voices seemed tinged with excitement and curiosity, this, too, could be faked, the little Arab reassured everyone. Despite the words uttered by Said, his words weren't critical this time and, in fact, were filled with the same respect felt by the others, especially for Skip, who, like the voice of God from space, as Carla put it, guided them out of harm's way.

The investigation moved swiftly. Unfortunately, it soon proved to be a big disappointment. Even blown up to their highest magnifications, none of the shots taken could prove one way or other if the dome was occupied. The translucent nature of the structure was limited because of its sheen, which catching the sunlight, caused a reflective glare in each shot. What was established so far was that, unlike the empty doom in the forest, which was heavily concealed by jungle vines and undergrowth, the structure, was in good shape. It's electronics—the alarm and door—obviously still worked. These two facts excited everyone even more than the bizarre creatures discovered on this world. As the humans and androids crowded on the bridge, they watched video feed for several moments and could see no movement in and out of the structure since the explorers had visited it and from the point when the alarm sounded from the dome, but this still couldn't prove whether or not it was inhabited by aliens. There had to be a reason why the alarm sounded and the door opened, everyone agreed, but the most important issue was what happened to the aliens. Did they leave the planet, never to return? Were they still here and living inside the dome? What happened to the aliens?... Would they come back?

An idea struck Skip then, which seemed farfetched at first. The laser probe stored on the ship that was intended for detecting subterranean caverns and tectonic movement on Triton might be adapted and used to detect movement inside the dome. The maximum range for the probe, however, was barely more than a kilometer, which meant that the ship and space station were too faraway for detection and one of the rovers would have to be used.

While they discussed this possibility, some of the crew nodded with a degree of reluctance, while others remained tight lipped. The implications of this venture were unsettling. The imaginations of the humans now ran wild. If there was a credible threat, would they abandon this world and return to hibernation? The androids wouldn't let them risk their lives. On the other hand, as Mbuto pointed out, to investigate this possible threat, Captain Drexel and his lieutenant would have to use the probe and risk being blasted by the aliens from the sky.

“That is patently ridiculous!” Rusty frowned at the African. “Why would they wait so long? Those domes were created by a civilization more advanced than our own. They could've vaporized the ship and space station if they wanted to. They certainly would've done it after Abe knocked on their door.”

“Yes, that was silly.” Abe sighed.

“I'm not afraid,” Ingrid decided. “God has a mission for us. He's given us this world.”

“Yeah?” Carla scowled. “You ran like a rabbit too!”

“A knee jerk reaction!” She twirled her fingers.

“Well, it’s *our* job.” Abe looked at his pilot. “Right Sheila?”

“Uh huh.” She blinked, bobbing her head.

“I could be your pilot,” Rusty offered, pointing to himself. “Better yet, why don’t you both stay on the ship and let Skip and I go.”

“No.” Abe shook his head. “We must do this thing: Sheila and I.” “That probe.” He cleared his throat. “How long will it take to get it ready.”

“Not long,” Skip motioned to Sandra. “It’s easy to operate. We’ll plug it into the bottom of the rover. All you have to do inside the rover is watch the screen, grab the target, and shoot. The laser will pick up movement and noise in the structure. While probing the dome you’ll take video and stills. You’ll know immediately if there’s movement while looking into the screen. While your pilot hovers over the dome, you simply aim, fire the laser, and, while probing the interior, make the recordings.”

It sounded so easy, and yet Mbutu, once an avid science fiction reader, had put a notion in the captain’s mind he couldn’t shake: the possibility, however absurd, of being blasted out of the sky. Sandra wheeled the laser probe into the compartment on a dolly to show them what it looked like: a square nondescript container with a barrel that reminded Mbutu of a ray gun. From the compartment, the laser probe was carted to Phoenix One, where Sandra and Woody installed it beneath the craft. Too nervous to eat the refreshments Sandra and Woody provided the crew, Captain Drexel and his lieutenant waited for the modification to be made. Everyone hovered sympathetically around them as if this might be really dangerous or, as Nicole feared, proved to be a suicide mission—a one way trip.

As the crew followed Abe and Sheila to the dock, Ingrid intoned a prayer she had made up for the occasion. This time, Carla, who had been trying to be patient with the self-appointed chaplain, lost it again, telling her to “Shut-the-hell-up!” Once again, however, the others jumped to Ingrid’s defense. After the deaths of their fellow crewmembers and so many close calls, the majority view was the “They needed all the help they could get!” No one was a hardcore atheist anymore, not even Carla, who immediately apologized for her words.

When the captain and his pilot were at the controls ready for takeoff, Ingrid, with Carla’s approval, said another prayer, this one short and to the point: “Lord of the universe, protect our captain and lieutenant!” To avoid the vacuum of space then, the humans and androids tramped up the ladder, shut the hatch behind themselves, and standing over the bridge in front of the dockside camera, watched the docking door open and the Phoenix One make its descent. Already, the age old question, about whether or not there was intelligent alien life in the universe had been answered with the discovery of the headless men on Gliese and reaffirmed when they found the domes. Now, here on Kepler 186f, the questions paramount in everyone’s mind was ‘Where they still here?’ and ‘Would they come back?’

Descending quickly until reaching a point a kilometer above the dome, Phoenix One positioned itself over the probe’s target. From the moment the rover took off and throughout the brief investigation, the humans and androids stood with great anticipation on the bridge, watching the rover hover over the dome. Though they were ordered to be quiet as Skip monitored their movements, excited murmurs erupted on the bridge, until Skip whispered shrilly, “Silence on the bridge!”

“Keep her steady,” Abe ordered the pilot.

“Please hurry, captain!” muttered Sheila. “We’re sitting ducks!”

The camera on the belly of the rover showed the scene directly below, magnified many times, while the inboard camera caught the faces of the captain and pilot. Abe put on his bravest face. Sheila looked terrified. With the laser probe in operation and dome in his sights, Abe pressed the camera button, bringing the probe camera's magnification gradually up until he lost focus, then adjusting the reception, the image was clarified and an infrared likeness of the dome's interior appeared on the screen.

"Well..." Skip sounded impatient. "What do you see?"

"I'm not sure," Abe frowned. "It looks like more of those crystal structures we saw in the cave, but no one's about."

"That's a relief!" replied Skip. "The crystals are quite significant.... But what else, captain?"

"I don't see movement, but according to the infrared image the structure's producing heat. Astonishing—utterly amazing!" He whistled under his breath.

"It's the crystals!" exclaimed Carla almost reverently. "I felt it in the cave."

"They're not alive." Ingrid frowned. "You treated one like it was an idol."

"You're an infidel!" Said teased. "Off with your head!"

"That's all I see," concluded Abe. "We have to check this out—the ones in the cave too!"

"So that's an 'all clear,'" Rusty looked at Skip.

"I think so." Skip nodded faintly. "We haven't detected any alien people on this planet."

Her eyes wide and unblinking, Nicole blurted, "You can't be sure they're not around. What if they're hiding from us? It could be an ambush!"

"Oh, come now, Nicole." Max looked at her in disbelief. "Why would they do that? What purpose would that serve?"

"I don't know." She thought a moment. "...They could be afraid of us. Maybe they're planning an attack."

"That's ridiculous." The doctor shook his head. "Why would they be afraid of us? After seeing those crystals, you could believe that?"

"Yes," she raised an eyebrow, "don't forget Gliese. Those headless men attacked us!"

"Those fellows were stupid." Max shook his head. "I'm talking about an advanced civilization. Those domes were probably just outposts. The visitors are long gone!"

"My dear." Ingrid gave Nicole a hug. "What did I tell you?"

"If you don't trust the facts, trust in God," she answered in a small voice.

"And when afraid, what do you do?" she prodded gently.

"Pray," Nicole brightened, "and recite the psalms."

"Good grief!" Carla rolled her eyes.

Waving his hands as if to dispel this nonsense, Skip shouted. "Shut up! Everyone shut up! This is the most important thing that's happened in our odyssey. Abe, check your fuel gauge. If you have enough, why not view it up close? The door's open. Why not go in? Take the camera with you, so we can all see it first hand. The crew can visit the dome later after you've checked it out."

"What do you think, Sheila?" Abe turned to his pilot.

With a much calmer expression on her face, Sheila shrugged her shoulders. "Okay, we have enough fuel. Let's take a peak!"

Watching the Phoenix make its descent, the bridge once again broke into chatter. Some of the chatter came from Ingrid who continued to bolster Nicole's flagging courage and Said, Mbuto, and Carla who teased Nicole after hearing her outrageous views.

“I’ve got it, Nicole,” Said gave her a sly look. “Maybe the aliens are invisible!”

“They could just be very small,” Mbuto grinned.

“Or both invisible *and* small.” Carla’s eyes twinkled with mirth. “Like fairies, elves, or maybe woodland spirits!”

“Nicole,” Max said, placing an arm around her shoulders, “look at the evidence. They’re gone, vanished, finis, no more! Our biggest worries aren’t the visitors from space but the dumb brutes on this world!”

As the Phoenix One descended, the nose of the craft angled toward the ground, their destination growing larger and larger in the forward screen, the expectation in both the rover and on the bridge heightened by discovery of the crystals in the dome. After leaving the communication speaker on, Abe could hear the crew, in a light-hearted, happy mood tease Nicole. Everyone appeared to be content with Abe and Sheila spearheading the investigation. As a military man, he had accepted their frailties. It occurred to him that this planet might very well need soldiers, not civilians, disciplined for combat and knowledge of survival. With the exception of Sheila, though, who was, because of her frequent lack of resolve, not an exception at all, the other crewmembers were civilians and acted as such. Only Max and Carla showed basic courage and Ingrid’s faith had become her shield against fear.

So far the spinners, a menace on this planet that might have to be destroyed, had not appeared. Now, as the rover hovered over the dome in anticipation of landing, they suddenly returned. Ignoring the furtive, spidery creatures, the elephant-like beasts, continued to browse nearby, as they surrounded the dome. Unlike wolf packs the spinners didn’t appear to be interested in big game. In fascinated horror he watched silently as they moved in and out of the dome, as if lured by alien or human scent. Except for a few gasps, the bridge was also silent.

“They’re back!” Abe finally uttered.

“My God!” Max groaned. “There’s hundreds of them!”

“Don’t land.” Skip barked. “Return to the ship!”

Without a second thought, Sheila began her assent. “Let’s get out of here!” her voice trembled.

“Once and for all, they must be destroyed!” Carla socked her fist. “*It’s us or them!*”

Chapter Eleven

Return Of The Spinners

In one dreadful moment, the mood aboard the Phoenix had changed: from light-hearted expectation to gloomy apprehension. Two conflicting fears took hold of the crew now: the fear of Kepler 186f's spinners and the fear of more hibernation if the humans couldn't inhabit the new world. There was no question which fear they had to embrace and conquer. The dark sleep was unthinkable. Soon after the rover's return to the ship, the crew (both human and androids) were huddled together, debating what to do: somehow clean the new world of monsters such as the spinners or move on to another sector of the planet which might very well have these creatures too.

"We don't have the means to wipe out the spinners," Skip concluded grimly. "Even if we somehow did, which would involve a poisonous gas or some sort of death ray, we would end up wiping out other alien life forms too. You must engage the monsters when and where you find them, eradicate them, and go about you business, until you encounter them again." "...Or somehow," he added, looking around at the crew, "discourage them from attacking."

Abe gave him a doubtful look. "You mean a spinner repellent? How can we do that?"

"I'm thinking." Skip closed his eyes and searched his database.

"Now that's something a robot would do," Mbuto whispered to Said.

Said, who had grown to respect the androids, looked expectantly up at the Skip.

"There's only one method I can think of to repel spinners," Skip announced finally, "electricity!"

"Electricity?" Abe wrinkled his nose. "You mean like a gun?"

"Yeah!" Mbuto snapped his fingers. "Like a ray gun!"

"Or a stunner," Ingrid suggested, "like those once used to subdue criminals or wild beasts!"

"No!" Skip shook his head politely at her. "A stunner is much too small." "A ray gun uses laser or particle beams, not electricity." He gave Mbuto a wry look. "Before you men bag yourself any monsters, we must repel their numbers first. Eradication might be difficult on this world."

"I thought we were going to eradicate them!" Said frowned.

"Yeah." Carla's nostrils flared. "Kill those sons-of-bitches!"

Abe and Max burst into chuckles.

"Look, people." Skip nodded thoughtfully. "I sense a mood of conquest here, much of that mood I share the blame for in my effort to bolster your courage, but eradication is simply not possible. We must build our habitat first and manage our current sector. During the exploration of the rest of the planet, you may as conquerors subdue wildlife to make the planet yours, but you must be builders, not destroyers, on this world. What I am proposing is that we first map out an area and station a wireless electrical fence around its perimeter—"

"What?" blurted Mbuto. "Make a fence? Are you insane? In order to do that we'd have to be on foot. If we're on foot, so will those spinners."

“They nearly killed us all before.” Said’s eyes widened with alarm. “They would ambush us. Make us a fine meal, indeed.”

“Gobble, gobble, gobble!” Max teased, pointing to his mouth.

“I think we should wipe them out first!” Carla insisted. “Kill them all!”

“Were you listening?” Abe frowned at Carla. “I agree with Skip. There’s too many of them. It’s impossible.”

“At least for the time being,” Skip seemed to equivocate, “until we have a land base. The main purpose right now is a habitat and base of operations, to be filled with colonists and explorers.”

“So,” Abe pursed his lips, “...how do we manage this undertaking without subduing the surrounding wildlife?”

“Simply put:” Skip raised a finger, “the electrical fence will be built ahead of time. Upon arriving at the designated area, the prefabricated barrier, will be set in place, as the rover hovers over the ground.”

“Wouldn’t it be better just to scare them off first?” suggested Sheila. “Phoenix Two scared them off before, didn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Nicole nodded pertly. “They might think twice next time if we gave them a fright!”

“They’re too stupid for that.” Carla waved impatiently “I say wipe them out. Surely there must be a way!”

“Maybe we can tame them!” chirped Nicole, her eyes rolling crazily in her head.

“Tame them?” Max looked at her in amazement. “A moment ago you were suggesting we scare them off. Are you being serious, Nicole?”

“Sure.” She bobbed her head. “We tame dogs, cats, birds, even bugs, don’t we. Why not spinners?”

“Because,” Carla tapped her forehead, “like you they don’t have any brains. You can’t tame those monsters!”

“Maybe not tame them,” Rusty stepped forth, as if he had just found an important bit of data, “but we can, in fact, scare them away. We have equipment in the station that might work!”

“Hmm.” Skip repeated his very human gesture. “... I’ve got it all planned,” he said after a pause. “In a prefabricated state, the old electric fence method of holding in cattle and keeping out thieves will work just fine.”

Abe gripped his chin methodically. “I remember reading about one of those. During the great riots, they were used to keep out rabble. Once it’s assembled here, will it really be so easy to rig it up without worrying about spinners?”

Rusty’s Howdy-Doody face brightened. “It shouldn’t be a problem. We could do that easily enough. Installing it around the perimeter of the habitat would be difficult if it can done expeditiously and in a hurry.”

“Then, safely inside the fence,” announced Sandra, “we’ll start build the habitat, the home base of the new world.”

“At last we’re talking seriously about the colony!” Max smiled with approval.

Without further delay, the crewmembers, principally Abe, Sheila, Max, Carla, Ingrid, and the four androids with Skip moderating the meeting, now discussed how the electrical fence could be done.

It was decided by unanimous agreement to wait until the morning before physical commitment to the project. During the meantime, at dinner and later, more seriously, with the aid of the ship's graphics, which enabled them to sketch out their ideas, they mentally worked out a plan that would have three stages: design, fabrication, and testing of the fence. Using the graphics wand, Skip, with an android's expertise, drew a diagram no human could match: a perfectly drawn kilometer square, which he explained would be much easier to handle than a circular shape. Rectangles symbolizing the habitat or base were drawn in the center of the square. Off to the side of this first diagram, he drew a sketch of what the electrical poles would look like. They looked very much like twentieth century barber poles, Skip explained, after drawing an example from his database. There were over a hundred of them on the station, he reported, each one to be interconnected by a wireless electrical beam controlled from a central power center, the androids would rig up. For a being as intelligent as Skip this seemed like an oversimplification at first.

"You're kidding," Cara screwed up her face. "That will require a lot of energy. What kind of power center, that runs around the clock, will supply that kind of power?"

"It's pure science fiction," Mbuto grumbled. "It can't possibly work!"

"I disagree!" Skip glared at his critics. "You have no idea what kind of power sources we had available for the Triton Project. Now we can use the resources of the station to build and protect the colony." "It will work!" He looked squarely at the African. "I will make it work!"

Abe wanted to believe Skip, but was, as a military man, worried, himself, about the logistics of the plan, which seemed over-ambitious.

"Can the aft compartment of the rover hold a hundred poles?" He asked reflectively. "I'm not sure they can. That's a lot of poles. Even if they're prefabricated and can be set down while the rover hovers over the ground, how do they stay standing? Are they on platforms or are they like big darts stuck in the ground?"

The last question was tinged with sarcasm. Ticking off the three questions on his hand, Skip replied dryly, "the placement can be done in one trip, they are on weighted platforms, and no they aren't like *big darts!*" "I would prefer doing the chore in one mission," he belabored the point, "the sooner we place them, the sooner we can become builders. There's much work to be done."

Abe studied the diagrams on the board a moment, deeply concerned. "Why don't we use Phoenix Two?" He sighed. "We'd have more room then."

"Because," Woody gave him an incredulous look, "Phoenix Two must be on standby in case something goes awry."

"Awry?" Nicole's eyes popped wide. "I don't like that word!"

"There-there," murmured Ingrid.

"Nothing should go wrong." Skip raised an eyebrow.

"*Should*, there's another word I don't like," Nicole muttered aloud. "*Will* is much better."

"There's always going to a element of threat," Skip looked around the group. "This isn't an outing or field trip. This is serious business. The prefabricated fence will greatly lessen danger, though." "It's the best we can do!" He spread his palms with finality.

As if he had read Skip's mind or more likely, as Said might suggest, received a wireless transmission, Rusty stepped forth, taking his turn with the graphics wand. "It's like this," he explained, drawing stick figures beside several poles. "While the ship hovers above the ground, two operators will set down a pole, then another and so forth, as the poles are unreeled. To facilitate this process, making them as perfect a square as possible, a procedure will be used

based upon an age old method used for delineating baseball diamonds that used chalk. In our case it is the rover, with directional coordinates, that will set the grid lines, using laser equipment onboard the station to cut the lines in the field. After this, following the grid pattern, the operators will simply drop the poles, which are spaced equally apart by wires, into place.”

“What if we can’t find a safe location?” Said frowned. “What’s stopping the spinners from following the rover around?”

“Nothing.” Sheila voiced concern. “Those little bastards are everywhere!”

“We’ll do this as quickly as possible.” Skip waved a hand. “The whole process will be done aloft, hovering slowly, without touching the ground. If the spinners become a problem, the rover can make a few passes over them, scatter them, then return. If they seriously intimidate the operators, the wires can be cut. When the coast is clear, Phoenix One can return to same spot to finish the grid. At that point, they might have to eyeball it, based upon a previously linked pole. When the grid is completed, a unit will dropped in the center of the square to activate the grid. As soon as the inside of the fence is clear of spinners and other creatures, it will be turned on remotely from the ship.”

“Is that really possible?” Sheila asked dubiously.

“Yes.” He nodded with conviction. “I made an inventory of the station’s equipment and supplies. Thanks to the scientists and engineers for the Triton Project, everything is there. All we have to do is implement and use it!”

“That’s quite a plan,” the captain said flatly, “but is it easy to cut those wires?”

“Easy, snip-snip,” Sandra made scissor motion with her hands. “Don’t forget there will be two operators.”

“Will the operators carry weapons?” Ingrid frowned.

“Of course.” nodded Woody. “The whole crew will be armed.”

“What if one of the spinners jumps up in the rover?” Nicole pointed to the stick man in the diagram. “Let’s kill them all first. Then it will be easy—a walk in the park!”

Rusty seemed to give her a withering stare. “We explained that, Nicole. It’s impossible! Why is it so hard for you to understand?”

“People!” Skip’s eyes flashed. “It has to be done! There’s no other way! You’ll go down there, set the perimeter fence, return to the ship, and each day thereafter move equipment and building materials to your new base... How much more simple is that?”

“Well,” Abe shrugged his shoulders. “It could work.”

“Yeah.” Max nodded hesitantly. “... It might.”

“Just so we only have to do this once.” Mbutu heaved a sigh.

“Yes.” Nicole shuddered. “Once is quite enough!”

The edge of impatience in Skip’s voice intensified. “Of course.” His eyes narrowed to slit. “... I made that clear. There should be no problems.” “This will work people!” He looked around the table. “We have incredible resources in the space station and ship’s hold—everything we need!”

Abe realized, with the androids intelligence and ingenuity, it might just work, except for one very important point. “There is a serious problem with Rusty and your plan. Though theoretically, in a mechanical sense, it might work, realistically, in humans sense, it might very well fail.”

“Oh,” Skip took a condescending tone, “...and why is that?”

“That snip-snip Sandra mentioned in order to cut a wire is an oversimplification.” He copied her gesture. “We’re not programmed like you people, Skip. Look at our record so far.

We don't mean to, but we make mistakes. If the wire-to-pole method results in a massive entanglement, as the rover hovers in one spot, it could be a disaster. Not only would it be a waste of time and material, those little monsters might just hop aboard and kill our crew."

"All right," he seemed to sigh, "...we'll factor that possibility in."

"Excuse me." Max raised a hand. "What factor is this?"

"Simple!" Woody uttered harshly. "We'll revise that portion of the plan!"

Silence fell upon the group. Lost in significance to them these moments were examples of more human-like qualities in the androids: arrogance and irritation. Here they were at last—Earth's precious remnant, ready to take the first important steps in creating a habitat on the planet. Skip and Rusty seemed to believe that they had little to worry about from spinners—the most hideous monsters on the planet. They made it sound so easy to them, but they had underestimated previous explorations which had gone awry. Despite the horrors of the past, though, they had made a fairly good case about how safe it would be. By their chatter, the crewmembers seemed eager to show their mettle. In the end, to everyone's surprise, even Nicole volunteered to come along.

That night as most of the crew retired to their quarters on the station, Abe, Sheila, and Max remained on the bridge awhile concerned about how the electric fence would be set up.

"How long it will take to put this stuff into the rover?" Abe studied the diagram.

"We'll have it all ready when you wake up," answered Skip.

"That's right," Max smiled wearily, "you folks don't sleep."

"How awful," murmured Sheila.

With resignation, still filled with doubts, Abe listened to Skip explain how the grid laser would work when it was set up. Located on the belly of the rover, he was told, the device would be pre-programmed. All Sheila had to do, he clarified, was set the rover on auto-pilot to make straight lines, as Abe monitored the grid. Meanwhile, the operators would drop the poles one-by-one, until, ultimately a full square was created. "Voila!" Skip made a flurry of his hands. "A protective zone has been made!"

"Wow!" Abe muttered, glancing at Max. "You make it sound so easy!"

"If your careful, it *is*!" Skip pursed his lips.

"One thing is clear, however." Sandra frowned. "You won't have much room on Phoenix One. We think it best that you limit the number of participants. You will need your pilot and the stronger willed members of the crew, but until the planet is safe for exploration, Nicole should remain onboard. Since they aren't needed and we need the space, I would suggest leaving Mbuto and Said on the ship too."

"Yeah, I guess so." Abe thought a moment. "... Nicole has proven to be a delicate creature, but the men you included might resent being left out."

"That's unfortunate." Skip spread his palms. "But the rover is crowded enough even without being used for such a mission. You're the captain—this is your ship, but I strongly agree with Sandra: Nicole, Mbuto, and Said shouldn't go; they're not essential to the mission, and you need space on the craft. It's all right for Carla and Ingrid to come along to help with the poles, but the others might just get in the way."

"Very well," Abe bristled, "it seems as though your calling the shots."

"Not at all." Skip reached out and gripped his shoulder. "You're captain of this ship!"

"We are your servants now!" Woody bowed faintly

Sandra and Rusty also bowed. Sheila giggled foolishly at this display of homage. Max and Abe exchanged looks of surprise. When the three humans bid them good night and entered the space station in order to retire to their quarters, they were perplexed.

“They’re getting more human by the day,” observed Max.

“Yes,” Abe agreed. “The question is, ‘were they being deferential or condescending just now?... I don’t believe for a moment Woody thinks he’s my servant, certainly not Skip. None of the androids do. Let’s face it Max, Skip’s running the show. They all are. While we sleep, they’re going to set all this up. Always, faithfully, without complaint, Sandra and Woody feed us and tend to our needs. When we’re exploring the new world, Skip will be watching over us alongside of his pilot. The four of them control every hour of our lives.”

“You sound bitter?” noted Max. “I think he saw that too.”

“It’s more a feeling of helplessness,” Abe explained. “From the very beginning, considering our dependency on our caretakers, they have been in control. Without them, we would be doomed. How can we resent them now then, especially Skip, who has our best interest at heart?”

“He doesn’t have a heart.” Sheila laughed sourly. “He’s still an animation. They all are!”

“That might be true,” Abe shrugged his shoulders, “but they have humanity in them. I’ve seen it in their eyes and heard it in their words. We need Skip and the other androids. Throughout the voyage of the Phoenix, they kept us alive during the search. Without the ship above us, watching our every move, we wouldn’t have survived. At times, though Ingrid would strongly disagree, they seem to have god-like powers, especially Skip. He is the captain of our destiny as we sleep and ever vigilant above during exploration when we’re awake, watching our every move, ready at a moment’s notice to come to our aid, as he had on previous worlds.”

Max seemed unafraid, but Abe could still see fear in Sheila’s gaze. Clapping the lieutenant’s hand he looked deeply into her eyes. “You must be brave,” he counseled gently. “No more timid displays. Skip called this world paradise, which was a strange thing for an android to say. This time, Sheila, with Skip’s help and guidance, we must conquer paradise and make it our home.... The long sleep is over. This is *our world* now!”

Sheila Livingston lie awake in her compartment considering the captain’s words. She, like the other crewmembers, had never been prepared for such a journey. The Triton Project was supposed to be a safe and predictable voyage. It’s purpose ostensibly was to explore Neptune’s largest moon, Triton, for mineral deposits and alternate fuel. The secondary plan conceived by the good scientists—that in the event of cataclysmic war the vessel, carrying the remnant of Earth and cell specimens from the sleeping humans, would continue on in search of a habitable world was not known until the eleventh hour. No one expected this to be a one-way trip when the war began on Earth. Though the Phoenix appeared to have unlimited potential when this information was disclosed, the original project wasn’t intended for extended space travel and extended cryogenic sleep. They weren’t trained for the horrors of alien worlds. They hadn’t bargained for this. Now it seemed so long ago, she thought to herself: over one hundred thousand years. Hibernation had, at times, caused her to become a mental wreck. The dangers of alien worlds, which claimed the deaths of four crewmembers following hibernation had made her see her mortality, yet was much better than sleep. She and her crewmates had suffered hibernation five times now. Long ago, before that period of time which now staggered her imagination, she was selected from thousands of candidates to serve on the exploration ship

Phoenix. Proud and naïve she had no thought for the dangers ahead. Now that the Phoenix had become a starship and its crew a remnant of mankind, she was no longer the girl most likely to succeed in high school, the Air Force Academy's top cadet, or the candidate selected for the Triton Mission. She was, like most of the crew, a survivor grasping for survival, without family, without home to return to—a nomad in space, a citizen of the galaxy, arriving as a visitor on each new world. Seen one way, she was, as Ingrid saw it, a mote in God's eye. Seen another way, however, she now had a special place in the new order on Kepler 186f, as the second highest officer among the representatives of Earth, equivalent to a four star general back home. As such, she was second-in-command of the starship Phoenix. It was time she began acting like it, embrace her responsibilities, and perform her designated role!

With these thoughts in mind, Lieutenant Sheila Livingston, fell into a troubled sleep, wondering what horrors tomorrow would bring.

Chapter Twelve

Taming of the Monsters

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As they had promised the human crew, the androids had prepared Phoenix One for the mission to create an electric fence. After a restless night of sleep for many crewmembers, breakfast was bolted down quickly and, without further delay, they were led down to the docking area where Phoenix One sat fueled and ready for the task. They were reminded of the nearly super-human power of the androids when they considered what their caretakers had to do to prepare the mission. The hoist in the docking area had been used to more quickly fill the rover with the poles. Instead of the attached poles intended to be reeled out in a roll, as they were intended for the Triton Project, in which each unit was attached to the next pole in line by wires, the poles were all free-standing. It would be a completely wireless operation now, announced Rusty. As if it was an insignificant modification, he explained this revision quickly, without further clarification, and then Skip explained to them, after climbing up into the crowded compartments of the rover, how the grid would be set before the poles were set into place. There were so many poles in the craft (one hundred and ten to be exact) that everyone had to squeeze passed the aft compartment into the forward compartment where the poles were also packed. When Abe questioned them on this discrepancy, and asked them where everybody was going to fit, Skip shrugged his shoulders. There was, in fact, enough room for the flight crew and operators in the aft sector, he pointed out. What more did they need? Standing over the modified control center, Skip showed them the most incredible features of the project: a directional device programmed to lay grid lines and placement points for the poles. The automatic pilot would be used, as the captain monitored the mission. Because of the wireless nature of the poles, he pointed out, the threats of entanglement and spinners attacking the operators was greatly decreased. If things got out of control, they would temporarily abort the current step in the mission, scatter the creatures, then return to the interrupted point and continue dropping poles.

“Excuse me Skip,” interrupted Abe. “How are we going to scatter the spinners? Our first experience with those monsters proved to be very difficult. Even if we did scatter them with the rover, they’d come back. They’re not very bright!”

Skip looked at him blankly, as if this didn’t compute, then, blinking his eyes, appeared to toy with him a moment. “I was coming to this issue,” he said with a nod. “You have options here, captain. You can attempt to scare them off with the rover—”

“Won’t work!” Abe shook his head.

“Frighten them away with the laser and fry a few of them!”

“How beastly!” Nicole said in the background.

“Isn’t there a better way?” Max heaved a sigh. “We’re going to have to clean that mess up.”

“That’s too bad!” Woody sounded belligerent. “To tame this world you’re going to have to kill a mess of them!”

“Or,” Skip announced in a loud voice, “scare them away with noise.”

“Noise?” Sheila wrinkled her nose. “How silly!”

“No Lieutenant Livingston,” Rusty blared. “Noise worked well on Earth to keep beasts away. We’ve installed an amplifier in the belly of Phoenix One that might just work!”

“What if they’re deaf?” asked Nicole.

“That’s absurd,” grumbled Carla.

“No, it’s not!” she said indignantly. “On Wolf 1061c the creatures were mute. Why couldn’t the creatures here be deaf?”

Carla grumbled something unintelligible to herself and Max uttered a nervous laugh, as Skip and Rusty gave the question some thought.

“It’s possible, but highly unlikely Miss Bennett,” Skip replied politely. “It may be possible is that they aren’t susceptible to sound as Earth’s creatures were. The only way to find that out, is experiment with several frequencies.”

“All right,” Abe exhaled anxiously, “I got it. Now how does the damn thing work?”

“We’ve added a control to the rover’s bridge,” Rusty promptly explained. “A button to start and a dial to regulate the frequency.”

“What if it make *us deaf*?” Nicole cupped her ears. “Have you given that some thought?”

“You’ll be fully protected,” Sandra reassured her. “We found noise reduction ear muffs in Triton’s supplies.

“The most important question for me.” Abe exhaled nervously. “Is ‘Is it easy to operate?’”

“Child’s play!” Woody waved dismissively

“What if it doesn’t do the job?” Ingrid joined the discussion. “What you’ve done is quite extraordinary. The equipment probably all works quite well, but this seems very ify to me, Skip. Sound may not have any effect whatsoever on them. All this might be an exercise in futility if we can’t scare them away.”

Abe, Max, and Sheila gave her a nod. It was an astute observation. Again, though, blank looks were turned on the humans, this time followed by total disregard for the issue. Instead of addressing Ingrid’s concern, demonstrations of the equipment now began, as Skip and Rusty, acting as operators, dropped two poles onto the deck. Due to their weighted platforms, they landed easily on the chalked targets drawn by the androids. Sandra and Woody then followed suit, dropping two more onto two more points. Moving back to the forward compartment, Skip asked Abe and Sheila to set at their controls. Abe was shown how simple it was to operate the new device. After switching it on, as the captain was instructed, he was told to simply watch the screen, after Sheila switched on auto-pilot and followed the programmed path. It was, Skip used a twentieth century phrase, a ‘no brainer.’ All the officers had to do was monitor the controls of the rover. The operators would do the rest.

If an ordinary mortal had been them that all this was possible, they wouldn’t have been believed it. The four androids had created a complex contrivance from pieces of mining exploration equipment, programmed it so that a child could operate it, and fueled and loaded the craft in barely eight hours.

“Amazing!... Fantastic!” Max muttered as he analyzed the device. “From the Triton Project inventory, you created all this—all while we slept. What do we call this contraption?”

“Perimeter Electra!” Sandra christened it.

“I like the sound of that,” Ingrid nodded with approval.

“Me too!” Carla agreed.

“It’s very crowded,” Abe noted with reservations, “but it’s much safer. A child could operate it now!”

“Yeah, nice work!” Mbuto studied the controls.

“It was a group effort.” Skip turned to his crew. “The important thing is your safety. That’s our first concern.”

Perhaps acting on a cue from Skip, Sandra clapped her hands to gain their attention. “It’s time for breakfast!” she chimed.

Without further delay, Skip led the crewmembers from the docking area back up to the conference area of the ship. “After breakfast, there’ll be a briefing,” he called over his shoulder. “We’ll go over the details of the mission and answer any more questions you have.”

As they took their seats to await being served breakfast, Abe summed up his fears.

“There’s still elements of danger,” he announced thoughtfully. “... You make it sound so easy and safe. I’m impressed by what was done. But this operation must run smoothly, like clock-work, or there’ll be real problems. I wish we could have a few practice runs. At least try out that sound weapon you devised.”

“Trust me.” Skip held up a hand. “You don’t want to hear that too often. After you give the creatures a full dose of the amplifier, you’ll lower the frequency to more tolerable limits, in the hopes of keeping them away.”

“Okay” Abe ran his hand through his hair. “It’s a leap of faith. Once we set this fence up, though, how quickly will it be activated. Assuming the sound weapon works, how soon will it be up and running?”

“Oh yes,” replied Skip as if it was but a trifling matter, “we found a generator on the station for that purpose. When your operators complete the fence, I’ll buzz down with Phoenix Two and lower it to the ground.” “And voila!” he raised his arms dramatically. “We have juice!”

“Whoa!” Mbuto muttered in awe. “You’re really on top of this!”

“Yeah,” nodded Said, “no wonder you’re in charge!”

“It’s almost *too* perfect!” Max looked at him quizzically. “Are you certain you’ve thought this through?”

“I understand everyone’s concern.” Skip dodged the question. “Don’t worry. Like your abortive exploration of the dome, I’ll call you back at the slightest hint of a problem. There’s always hazards. This is an alien world—unexplored and, except for those domes you found, filled with unknowns. What we’ve done here is greatly reduce one source of danger: the spinners.” “This isn’t for the fainthearted.” He glanced at Nicole, Mbuto, and Said. To begin with, there’s not enough room on the rover. We need only a flight crew and two persons to act as the operators.” “Aside from Sheila, the pilot, and yourself, captain, I suggest you select Max, the ship’s doctor, and one other operator.”

“I’m in!” Max grinned bravely.

“Ditto!” Sheila heaved a sigh.

“Only one operator?” Carla looked at him disbelief. “Who?”

“Yeah.” Ingrid pointed to Carla and herself. “Why not both of *us*?”

Glancing at the two women, Abe, thought a moment. “Why not squeeze in one more crewmember on the Phoenix, Skip? We could always use an extra hand!”

“Yes!” Ingrid blurted enthusiastically. “I’m a good shot!”

“And I’m strong!” Carla flexed her muscles.

“Okay,” Rusty spoke on Skip’s behalf. “.... I guess it won’t hurt. While two operators work the poles, another can stand guard with her weapon.” “That’s all though,” he shook his head vehemently. “We don’t need spectators on this visit!”

Skip’s brown eyes flashed and a slight frown played on his face, yet he didn’t argue the point.

“All right then,” he drawled, with a flicker of irritation. “Our crew has a captain, pilot, two operators, and a third crewmember standing guard.”

“You can watch us on the bridge!” Carla taunted the remaining crewmembers.

Mbuto and Said may have been feigning disappointment when they scowled and shook their heads, but they offered no protest. Nicole, however, was visibly relieved.

“Gee, what a shame!” she said, patting Said’s arm. “You wanted to bag yourself a beast!”

“Yeah.” Said affected a look of dejection. “Better luck next time!”

“Oh, we’re still going down,” Mbuto rationalized. “Just not now. What’s the big deal?”

“That’s right.” Sandra gave them both a nod. “The rover’s crowded enough. When we begin building the habitat, we’ll need everyone’s help. First you must explore this planet and understand it’s life forms; to do this you must conquer this world.”

Reminded of their ultimate mission, with a warlike note added by Sandra, the eight humans chattered excitedly amongst themselves while they ate breakfast. Skip, Rusty, Sandra, and Woody seemed to give the humans worried looks. To their vast intellects, the eight crewmembers were like children facing the unknown: fear, excitement, and doubt played on their faces. None of them wanted to contemplate what could go wrong with this operation. The androids had done everything they could do to make the job safe. It was best if they got this unpleasant task over within a timely matter, they agreed. It was decided by Abe and Skip that the rover would, after a briefing of the mission and last minute instructions, take off late in the morning to begin the job of erecting Perimeter Electra—the first step in building a habitat for the new world.

The takeoff of Phoenix One was typical of previous launches. After fastening themselves into their seats, the five person crew, after waiting for the great hatch to open, found themselves descending once again to Kepler 186f, this time with a purpose other than exploration. Because of the greater importance for this enterprise, there was greater anticipation among the audience on the mother ship. Skip and his crew were worried about the outcome of the mission. Because they had no facial muscles and could control the tone of their voices to suit each situation, they had seemed able to mask their feelings. Lately, their human charges detected what appeared to be emotion in the voices (irritation, arrogance, and anger) and a tendency of their eyes to flash when they were annoyed or upset. For the human crewmembers left on the ship, however, there was that ‘better-you-than-me’ attitude evident in their conduct. Despite their relief at sitting this one out, Said, Mbuto, and Nicole were, like the androids, worried about their crewmembers, half certain that the undertaking would end in disaster.

As Captain Drexel and Lieutenant Livingston sat at the controls, they were aware of the interior camera so they tried to look their best. In the passenger seats, Max, Ingrid, and Carla, however, were visibly anxious and scared. All of them wanted to be brave. Ingrid took the opportunity to pray that the mission was successful. This time, even Carla listened attentively, hoping the prayer would take. When the target area loomed into view, there were gasps from both the rover and ship. Now, in addition to spinners, there were a herd of those elephant-like

creatures they had encountered at the second dome. Seeing this development, Abe reported immediately to the bridge.

“It’s a mess down here.” He studied his monitor. “Mutant elephants *and* spinners—hundreds of them mingling together. Those elephants are going to undo our work. They’ll knock down the poles and trample on them. This is a ‘no-go’, Skip. We’ll have to abort.”

“We see them,” replied Skip calmly. “The spinners don’t seem to bother them much. They’re not the problem as much those big fellows. Place the noise reduction ear muffs on your ears and turn on the sound weapon, you so aptly named!”

“You heard him,” Abe called to his crew. “Put on your ear muffs.”

As he expected, with the muffs securely on his ears, he could still hear noise from the ship. When everyone had complied, he reached down, snapped on the device, and heard the loudest, most piercing, sound he had ever heard. In the screen, as his ears rang and teeth vibrated, he watched the herd and horde of spinners scatter in all directions out of the target zone.

“Merciful Lord!” Ingrid squinted.

“It still came through,” Abe’s voice trembled. “...But it worked!”

“Great!” cried Skip. “Now get it done!”

Having used several different colloquialisms drawn from his database, Skip was taking on more and more human characteristics. Now, they could hear what sounded like genuine excitement in his voice. As well as directing their every movement, he was, like his counterparts, Rusty, Sandra, and Woody, becoming a cheering section on board the ship during the exploits of the human crew. As Sheila lowered the rover until it was almost brushing the ground, placed it in hover mode, then changed to auto-pilot and the programmed path of the craft, the humans gasped as the first pole was dropped into place. The androids, who couldn’t manage such a involuntary action, gripped each other’s hands excitedly. Momentary silence gripped the observers, as the rover continued on its path.

“Keep your ear muffs on,” Skip voice blared in their headsets, “... Turn the frequency down several notches, unless they come back.... That’s it, Sheila—back to hover mode. Move on to the next point. The program will do most of the work....Watch the monitor, captain. If you see trouble, raise the dial and let’em have it. Until you see the rover stop, operators, don’t begin a drop. Remember to follow the grid, point-by-point.”

“You’ve done marvelously—all of you!” Sandra’s voice rang out.

“Yes, indeed,” agreed Skip, “keep up the good work!”

The original plan, before it was modified for the operation of wireless poles, was a square fence, but, as Max and Carla dropped pole after pole, they realized, as did everyone else, that the grid was turning, not moving in a straight line, as it followed coordinates of the program. Clearly a pattern was developing, detected from the rover, but seen most clearly in the magnified image on the ship.

“Skip,” Said cried with delight, “you sly fellow. You saved this miracle until the last!”

“I’ll be damned!” Mbuto bubbled. “It’s not a square at all. You programmed the laser to cut a circle!”

“It was a group effort!” Skip reminded them. “I couldn’t have done it alone!”

Max was huffing and puffing by now, a grin on his sweating face. “... No one on Earth,” he panted, “or anywhere else in the galaxy could have done this!”

“Slow down a moment, captain,” Skip called through their headsets. “Max needs a rest.”

“I’ll take over,” Ingrid volunteered cheerily. “Max can stand watch a while.”

“Max will set down and rest.” Skip insisted sternly. “There’s not a sign of spinners or those mutant elephants for nearly a kilometer. The low frequency appears to be working. Maybe we didn’t need maximum range.”

Carla now rested briefly, as Ingrid came forward and took Max’s place. Everyone on the rover and on the ship were in high spirits. The new world which the Phoenix discovered already had a name, Kepler 186f, but was also called Earth II or New Earth. Most everyone agreed that the land on which they would build a habitat would be called New Eden or simply Eden, as in the Bible. Now Sandra, who had dubbed the protective fence they were erecting Perimeter Electra had given the potential compound inside a name: the Ring of Kepler.

“Ooh, I like it!” squealed Nicole.

“It does have ring to it!” Said offered a pun.

“That’s all fine and dandy!” groaned Carla. “Let’s get it done first!”

At that point, almost as soon as the words left her mouth, the shipboard audience gasped. That moment trouble literally arose on the horizon.

“They’re coming back!” cried Rusty.

“Keep you muffs on!” Skip shouted. “Crank up the dial!”

“EEEEEE!- EEEEEEE!- EEEEEEE!- EEEEEEE!” the sound weapon roared, more fierce and awful than before.

Once again, the spinners and herds scattered, even further away this time from the target area. In the distance, from a large mound in the field, like hornets from an agitated hive, a swarm of what appeared to be fliers rose up into the air, circling like a tornado over the ground. Abe turned the dial down in order to hear the commotion on the bridge. Carla and Ingrid, released their safety harnesses and hurried into the forward compartment.

“What in the hell is that?” Mbuto asked out of breath.

“What?” Carla’s breath suddenly left her. “We can’t see it down here!”

“Shut the aft hatch!” Skip bellowed. “Stay in place a moment while we zero on that swarm.”

In response, Sheila’s hand was poised over manual override. “Shouldn’t we get-the-hell out of here?” she asked in a quivering voice.

“What? And waste all your effort?” Woody turned to Skip.

“We can do it again,” Skip replied half-heartedly. “Their safety comes first.”

“But the poles will be scattered by that herd,” argued Rusty. “What a waste, sir. They’ll have to get out of the rover to straighten them up. It’ll be a total mess!”

“Silence on the bridge!” shouted Skip

“Okay, lieutenant, take us out of here,” Abe ordered Sheila.

“Wait! Hold on!” Sandra called out excitedly. “They’re like giant insects, and yet they shine like metal,” “...like tin foil wasps or hornets,” she drew from her database. There’s thousands of them in the sky, hovering like a twister over the ground.” “.... Look!” She added, after a pause. “Everyone calm down. The fliers are returning to their mound. That awful sound shook their colony. The noise and vibration upset their hive!”

“Thank the Lord!” Ingrid took on a prayerful pose.

“Calm down, Sheila. We’re all right,” whispered Abe. “Let’s get back on the path, people. Carla and Ingrid—back to you posts, anchor yourselves to the aft deck again.”

The aft hatch was reopened. The dial was kept at a tolerable hum. Sandra description of the alien fliers was meant to dispel everyone’s fear, but for most of the humans the shiny fliers

were just one more monster on this world. As the crew of the Phoenix One went about their business, they could hear excited chatter on the ship.

“Do you really think they’re wasps or hornets, Sandra?” asked Nicole

“No, my dear.” Sandra shook her head. “This is Kepler, not Earth. At this distance, we could see that they’re shiny, like metal, and fly in a swarm. That is all. We won’t know what they look like until we get up close.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Nicole shuddered. “That was close enough!”

The bat-faced fliers on Ross came to mind now, as Mbuto and Said reminisced. Elroy had been stung by fliers who reminded everyone of humming birds on Earth. The way that the creatures remained in a funnel-like pattern, circling in one spot, was also reminiscent of mosquito or gnat patterns on Earth. What seemed obvious to everyone, though, considering the view from the bridge, was that the fliers were quite large, as big as cats, suggested Said.

“Whatever they are,” he said, gazing at the projection, “they know we’re here. That noise woke them up!”

While the fair-weather crewmembers debated what this phenomena might be, Carla and Ingrid continued the back-straining toil of setting poles into place. After awhile, Max came to relieve Carla and, after many more stationed poles, Carla relieved Ingrid, until, after nearly two hours, the perimeter had been set. When the spinners and herds once more began moving toward the fence again, the sound weapon scattered them again. The device was used two more times, as the Circle of Kepler was completed. By now, in spite of the protection their headsets offered them, the five crewmembers had headaches. Burdened with manning the controls, Abe and Sheila’s nerves were frazzled. The operators were ready to drop in their tracks, as they took their seats. As he had promised, Skip was in the air, descending to the target area, as Phoenix One hovered momentarily inside the circle, quickly lowering a huge generator with a winch—both pieces of equipment extracted from the station and modified as additions to Phoenix One.

No sooner had the generator been set down and the winch released, than it was activated remotely from the ship, all of which was explained quite expeditiously by Skip. Suddenly, as the two rovers hovered in the circle, Perimeter Electra was energized. As the first giant aliens arrived at the fence they were stopped in their tracks, as were the faster moving spinners, many of whom, were stunned unconscious as the tried repeatedly to break in.

“Hip-hip-hooray!” Woody shouted. “You’ve done it!”

“We’ve all done it!” Skip exclaimed with genuine emotion. “The Ring of Kepler, as Sandra aptly named it, is ready for the colony. Thanks to Perimeter Electra, your protective fence, you will soon build a permanent wall and then a habitat inside. After which you shall go forth and conquer this world!”

“Hmm, this calls for a prayer!” Ingrid said wearily. “.... Father in heaven, thank you for our deliverance....” She began, mustering her strength. For a few moments, as the crew of Phoenix One returned to the ship, followed close behind by Phoenix Two, everyone patiently listened to her prayer. This had been a miracle, they agreed. No one doubted the super human effort exerted by the androids, especially Skip, but beyond fantastic technology and sheer ingenuity, something else had been at work, greater than such effort. “How could everything have worked so perfectly without help?” Ingrid would ask the doubters. “Why, after so many close calls, had their lives been spared and the mission turned out so well, when everything could have gone so terribly wrong?”

As Phoenix One and Phoenix Two sat side-by-side in the docking area and the compartment was pressurized and filled with oxygen, Abe looked at Sheila and then glanced back at the remaining crew, muttering a tired thanks. Exhaustion was etched in everyone's faces. For the operators who had done the physical work and the captain and pilot who suffered the mental strain of the mission, today's achievement was more than just a milestone in their lives. As the proverbial ancient mariners in space, they had survived four hostile worlds, five hibernations, and the current dangers of Kepler 186f, and, against all odds, by their efforts, fulfilled the basic purpose of the mission: created an alien-free zone on this planet—The Ring of Kepler, the foundation of the habitat from which they would continue exploration, or as Skip carelessly put it, the conquest of this world.

That evening, after the five explorers had rested up a spell, a sumptuous feast (by android standards again) was served to the crewmembers. Several toasts were made to their bravery, fortitude, and success, including a speech by Skip in which he outlined the twofold schedule ahead: the building of the permanent wall and habitat and the exploration of the new world. Absent from his speech this time was the word 'conquest', which Abe understood as Skip's way of exciting the crew to great deeds. This adventure would not be undertaken, Skip explained, until the humans had a permanent base (the wall and habitat). The main purpose of exploration, he reminded them, was finding food sources. Within the confines of the habitat, during or after exploration for food sources, they would be able to perform horticulture, then, when the surrounding area was tamed, also be able to make use of the fields to plant grasses similar to wheat and rye on Earth. Since this industry was several hundred years old, this information was, of course, pulled from Skip's database.

Added to Skip and his android colleague's control of their lives on the ship, Skip and Rusty's protection of them during the ventures on previous planets, including their rude introduction to this world, and their superior technology and strength, would be their management of them during their exploration and exploitation of the planet. All of the androids were virtually walking encyclopedias and science books and appeared to know how to do everything needed for the ship and building a new world. The androids' expertise and foresight was essential to the humans' survival. This realization fell heavily upon Lieutenant Sheila Livingston now. When she saw her captain, whom she so greatly admired, remain silent during Skip's speech, bowing to what seemed a *fait accompli*, she sighed deeply but kept her peace. It couldn't be undone, she was certain. It had been foreordained by circumstances and human frailty. The androids, with Skip as their leader, had run the ship. Now they would run this world. Begrudgingly, she and the others had been forced to accept this fact. What she saw in some of the other crewmembers, including herself at times, was lack of resolve. This deficiency which was bred into them by fear and their dependency on their caretakers and protectors, had remained unchanged throughout the ordeal of space travel and hibernation.

Four of their shipmates were victims of the previous savage worlds. To Abe's credit, most of the crewmembers had overcome the traumas of the past and risen to the demands of exploration, while three remained fainthearted. Of these fair-weather crewmembers, Said and Mbuto, she suspected, merely needed a strong nudge, but Nicole, the most damaged of the eight crewmembers, seemed to be content to remain safely on the ship. Thanks to the captain's encouragement and example, Sheila had, herself, come a long way from the frightened creature she was during the early years, ...but she had a long way to go.

Chapter Thirteen

The Habitat

A great milestone had been reached. A safe zone had been created in which to build the habitat. It was decided once and for all that Earth II or New Earth weren't suitable names for this planet. This wasn't Earth. Earth was dead. Everyone agreed, as Mbuto had insisted, that that new world should retain its original name: Kepler 186f. From now on influenced by Ingrid, the self-appointed chaplain of the crew, the colony, itself, would be called simply Eden. That it was surrounded by forests and fields (the 'Garden of Eden') seemed most significant to her. The enclosure and surrounding wall, however, would preserve the respective names Sandra gave them: The Ring of Kepler and Perimeter Electra. A mystical significance had been given especially to the ring by the android nanny, which had been named in honor of the planet and the mother star. In the future, its name would be abbreviated at times to merely the 'ring' and the buildings and gardens of the colony would become known as Eden, as Kepler 186f awaited further exploration outside the wall.

When morning came, the entire crew appeared ready to embrace the future. Now that there was a safe enclosure to begin work on the habitat, Said and Mbuto eagerly joined in the effort. Even Nicole had been convinced by her mentor Ingrid to return to the new world. After breakfast, Skip showed the humans a printout of the inventory of what was available from the Triton Project supplies for the building materials and equipment required to build the habitat. There were, numbered and corresponding to a master blueprint, prefabricated walls, flooring, ceiling, windows, and door pieces to be fitted together according to a master blueprint. On the second document, an electrical schematic, there were instructions for installing the electrical circuits, including heating, air-conditioning, and lighting components found on the inventory list. The third document listed equipment for water purification with corresponding instructions, a fourth document listed basic furnishings for the habitat, including beds, chairs, sofas, and desks, and a fifth document itemized kitchen equipment and furniture. In addition to an important inventory of medical supplies and equipment to be furnished in the habitat hospital and a separate inventory for the materials required for the green house and garden, there was finally, one of the most important inventories for the habitat: the materials and equipment for the science lab, to which, almost as afterthought it seemed, the special project of the Triton scientists were lumped in under the title: Clone Research.

Until this moment, due to the greater concerns of hibernation and exploration, the humans had thought little about the specimens taken from their bodies. Now, as if they had heard it for the word 'clone' for the first time, there was dissension in the group.

"I knew that was coming," Ingrid cried. "It's against nature and God!"

"Would you rather your species becomes extinct?" Skip frowned down at her.

"Let's face it," she reasoned sharply. "Thanks to those wars, *we are* extinct. Those monstrosities don't count!"

"For once I agree with Ingrid," Carla made a face. "I hate this. It gives me the creeps!"

"Yuck!" Nicole glared at the list.

"All right, that's enough," Abe scolded. "This isn't Skip's fault. Our caretakers didn't create this project."

“They might not have created it,” Mbuto said, pointing to Sandra and Woody, “but they gathered the samples. We didn’t give them permission for that!”

“That’s right.” Said shuddered. “I know how that clone thing works. I don’t want a thousand Said’s walking the planet. One’s quite enough!”

More calmly, Max posed a medical question. “I’m familiar with clone research. It has its limitations. What makes you think they’re even viable after being in the deep freeze?”

“They are!” Sandra stepped forward, her eyes blazing with anger. “I know they are!”

“Oh,” Abe looked at her quizzically, “how do you know that? We’ve been in and out of deep freeze, but those cells have been in it continually for over a hundred thousand years!”

“That’s a good point!” Sheila nodded her head.

“No its not!” Woody shook his head. “We tested them. They’re already viable!”

Silence came over the assembly. A collective, “What?” followed as the crewmembers stared at their caretakers in shock. The old distrust they had for the android now resurfaced.

“... What are you saying?” Abe studied Woody’s shiny face. “... The clones are already hatching?”

“No,” Sandra clarified, “...not hatched. They’re not chickens. We now have a hundred fertilized eggs in the containers. When we construct the special lab, they’ll be transferred to clone tanks. When they reach their growth, a second batch will be processed the same way. After taking so many specimens, we will have thousands of clones in the future, enough to perpetuate the race.”

“I thought clones were infertile,” Carla looked at her in disbelief. “They’re created asexually.”

“Not true,” Rusty replied this time. “Because male somatic cells are injected into the female egg, the process is sexual.”

“What?” Nicole’s eyes popped wide. “How ghastly!”

“Its true,” Sandra said defensively, “plants propagate sexually. Why not clone creation?”

“In the first place,” Ingrid dismissed Sandra and Rusty’s explanations, “this isn’t perpetuating the race. They’re clones. They’ll always be clones. Injecting somatic cells into an female egg is not technically sexual; it’s scientific manipulation of the worst kind. I’d rather our race become extinct than they become our legacy!”

Rusty’s Howdy Doody face now loomed in front of her nose. “Well, that’s too bad!” he growled. “It *is* your legacy. Like the other women, Ingrid, we have your eggs too.”

Wringing her hands in despair, Ingrid had to be consoled by Nicole and Abe.

“Calm down,” murmured the captain. “We didn’t want to think about it, but we all knew this was coming.”

“Do you really want the human race to become extinct?” Skip studied Ingrid a moment. “What’re you worried about the most? That there will be multiple copies of IngridWestfall and all the other crewmembers?”

“Yeah!” Said answered for her. “That creeps me out!”

“It’s against God and nature!” Ingrid glared at him.

“Ah hah!” Skip tried a different tact. “It’s more basic, isn’t it? Because you think that clones, because they’re scientifically created, don’t have souls.”

Ingrid shrugged her shoulders. “God didn’t create them. Science did. How can they have souls?”

“Who are you to say that Ingrid?” challenged Woody. “You were an atheist, yourself, until you faced the dark sleep!”

It was a fact she couldn't deny. That moment he said something that reopened a previous issue following hibernation, that, coming from Woody, the least human-looking of the androids, greatly surprised the crew.

"No one has the right to define God or what he thinks," he announced flatly. "You are condemning your descendants to eternal darkness because of your prejudice. It's a medieval perception unworthy of the ship's chaplain. I believe that we androids, who think like humans, can even have souls. Why not? We're intelligent. We have feelings. The Native Americans believed that everything had souls—plants, animals, rocks, all objects natural or man-made. They are thousands of years older than Western Civilization. How much less are we, your benefactors, who nurtured you and found you a new home? So why do you exclude the clones, your offspring, from God's grace? Who are you to make this decision?"

The room was again plunged into silence. Even Skip seemed surprised with his outburst.

"I thought the same thing," he confessed, with a shrug. "Our long odyssey in space has made we caretakers philosophers. The black void of sleep dimmed much of your human optimism, but, thanks to Ingrid's preaching, many of you are practicing Pascal's wager—Bet on the fact that God exists. What do you have to lose?" Philosophy has taught me one thing, though. It can replace science to give us explanations, but it can't give us straight answers, such as, 'what comes next?' It certainly can't define the nature of a soul. There is no scientific instrument that will confirm it's existence or prove the existence of God."

Carla, allegedly the most atheistic of the crew, was deeply moved by this conversation. Hastily wiping away tear, a gesture not lost on the others, she turned her back and stared down at the new world. Abe, Sheila, Max, Ingrid, Nicole, Mbuto, and Said joined her on the bridge, sharing her unrest but also realizing the truth to the caretakers' arguments. As they had done in caring for the stellarnauts, the androids had preserved and nurtured their somatic cells and eggs. Now, as the last humans of Earth, thanks to Sandra and Woody's harvesting and careful nurturing, they must become caretakers, too. The clones would be their legacy. For at least this hour, criticism and outrage of the subject ceased.

In stages, as the habitat was constructed, the science laboratory in which the clone factory would be set up, would be among the first portions finished. It was here that potential food resources would be analyzed and experiments on hybrid plants conducted, and it was here that the first embryos of the new humans would grow and become fetuses, new births, and someday populate Eden.

The first order of business in the creation of the habitat, however, was the preparation of the surface. This required most of the heavy duty equipment that would have been used on the ill-fated Triton Project. Using a grader and then a steam roller, the field was cleared and then the ground was leveled. Carla enjoyed this task very much. The men and other women also took turns with these vehicles. A loader was used by the workers to remove the excess dirt, which was dumped over the perimeter of the circle. When the circle became a relatively smooth surface, the first structure built for the habitat was the permanent wall. This required everyone, including the androids, except, of course, Skip who remained on the ship to keep watch. Cement bases, the most difficult part of this feat, were set up at intervals in back of the poles. When the bases had dried sufficiently, the prefabricated walls were easily installed in the holes. When electrified by means of the generator in the center of the circle, the sixteen foot electrified wall became a physical and energized barricade, the poles becoming secondary line of defense. (To

protect the heavy duty vehicles and construction equipment from the elements and store unused building materials, an adjoining shed would be added later to the compound.)

Relying on the blueprint in the android's shared minds, as well as the printouts from the database, with Skip giving his counsel from the ship, the work crew laid the foundations—perfectly cut sections of flooring that fit the corner stones at each corner on the foundation blocks. Onto the flooring, walls were set into slots, and then the crane was used to lift up sections of roofing, also set into slots. At various locations indicated by the blueprints, doors and windows, which came as complete ready-to-used units, were set in place. Four restrooms were set up—male and female, which included showers, baths, sinks, toilets, and medicine cabinets. The fixtures were all made permanent with industrial glue. Electrical circuitry radiating from circuit boxes for lighting, heating, and air-conditioning had also been preplanned, and was already operational before the roofs had been set into place.

The sleeping quarters, a galley, kitchen area, hospital, recreation room, library complex, utility rooms, and the science laboratory which would, when the habitat was finished, store, nurture, and propagate the clone cultures, were completed in several weeks. While the green house and garden area was set up, the habitat was filled with household furnishings, kitchen appliances, hospital and scientific medical equipment and supplies, and most of the dried and canned food on the ship was transferred to the kitchen stores.

The largest room in the main compound was designated the command center, which was almost an afterthought after most of the work was done. In Phoenix One Rusty ferried unused computers and communication equipment from the station's supplies to this important room. For added security, all of the buildings, even the green house, were connected by corridors. Around the perimeter of the circle, twenty foot posts were added with lamps, also for security. A prefabricated gate in one of the wall slats, however would remain unoperational—locked tight until the outside world was tamed.

As the final touches to the Ring of Kepler (as the circle was called), were added (an adjoining utility shed for the heavy duty vehicles and construction equipment and a guard tower in the center of the circle), Skip was already discussing with Abe, as the captain sat his command center, the next expedition on the new world.

“Captain!” his voice boomed from the command screen. “In the coming days after you and your crew are rested up, you should think seriously of tapping the planet's food resources. As you folks began building the habitat, my crew took samples from the field being ploughed under. We've found that the grain in the field is unfit for human consumption. Some of the plants sprouting up in the grass proved to be actually poisonous. Exploration of the closest patch of forest in which the dome was discovered will hopefully uncover food resources, such as fruit, nuts, vegetables, and herbs. I've been eavesdropping on your crew on the ship and also as they went about their work on the habitat. Despite their high and mighty talk, most of them don't seriously consider killing the sloth-like and squirrel creatures and other alien life forms. Mbuto and Said simply want to beg themselves a beast. We don't even know if the furry creatures of Eden are edible. After searching the nearby forest for edible plants, which are your best bet right now, you might also study the lake and more distant ocean for fresh water and marine creatures, which, when tested, are fit for human consumption.”

“You don't say.” Abe stared blankly at Skip's image in the command center. After listening patiently to Skip's long-winded suggestion, which sounded very much like marching orders, he could merely nod, amazed anew at the android leader's brazenness. Arrogance was a very human trait.

Sheila, who sat next to him getting acquainted with the controls, exclaimed as soon as his image vanished, “The nerve of that man!”

“You have said it.” Abe looked at the darkened screen. “Man!... Woody’s little speech on the soul and what constitutes humanity helped redefine what that means.”

“You would classify that creature as a man?” Sheila looked at him in amazement.

“Well, you must admit.” He uttered a sour laugh. “*He* does!”

“Hah!” Carla joined the conversation. “Those andies think they’re above humans. As our watch dog, Skip is more powerful than ever. He has almost god-like powers.”

“You can’t really mean that.” Ingrid shook her head. “Not after what we heard Woody say. I’m half-convinced, after his speech and what Skip said, those androids also believe in God. It is troubling, I admit, but Abe’s right.”

“And what about the clones?” Sheila asked thoughtfully. “Will they really have souls?”

“Blah!” Said made a face. “I’ll never get used to it. The very idea creeps me out!”

“It’s something right out of science fiction,” Mbuto marveled at the thought. “What would my people back in Africa think if they saw an army of Mbuto Sawalas marching toward them?”

“Yuck!” Nicole wrinkled her nose. “That’s really scary. An army of Said’s would be even worse!”

“Well, I think we should put this subject to rest,” concluded Abe. “It’s a done deal. The clone lab is almost set up. In no time whatsoever, the first generation of infants will be processed, ready to march out the door.”

“Ho ho!” Max chuckled. “What a sight that will be!”

Thinking of what he had just said himself, Mbuto also broke into giggles. Feeling light-headed and weary from their labors, the other crewmembers joined in the mirth. The thought of clone babies—perfect matches of themselves marching by the hundreds out of the door, was a hilarious thought, and yet not so far from the truth.

With the habitat finally built and work on the laboratory by Sandra and Woody finished, Skip insisted that they begin searching for food resources in Eden. The question remained in everyone’s minds: would it prove to be a bountiful garden or forbidden forests and fields unpalatable for human consumption. Already, during the construction, Sandra and Woody had performed tests on the field before it was cleared and found the grain to be lacking in nutrition and, in the case of the other plants growing amongst the grass, actually poisonous. So, exploration of the closest patch of forest in which the dome was discovered will hopefully uncover food resources, such as edible fruit, nuts, vegetables, and herbs. This would be the first food-hunting expedition conducted on the planet. As Skip shrewdly pointed out earlier, no one wanted to kill the furry creatures discovered in the forests, especially, as in the case of Mbuto and Said, merely for sport.

During this first critical exploration of what had been labeled the ‘Domed Forest,’ Phoenix One was again used, with Skip standing ready in the ship to fly down at a moment’s notice in Phoenix Two. Their first breakfast in their new home was a festive occasion. Several of the dried foods found in the station, somehow overlooked during their long journey across the galaxy, included pancake mix, dried potatoes, grits, cryogenically frozen ready-to-heat bacon, frozen orange juice, and canned peaches and pears. Though the food was over a hundred thousand years old, it was in remarkably good shape. Coffee, as well as hot chocolate brewed

from dried milk and chocolate mixes, rounded out the breakfast menu. Ingrid insisted on saying grace, this time with the grateful respect of the crew. Many of them gave the celestial god, as she called him, much credit for their survival and success so far. Even Carla bowed her head respectfully and, following grace, added her own 'amen.'

With the rover parked near the forest's edge, the eight explorers entered the forest cautiously, with their weapons drawn. Conditioned by their experience with the spinners, they were filled with anxiety and dread, hoping once again to encounter only the harmless tree-swingers that had greeted them before. As they followed behind the captain, Nicole, already experiencing panic, claimed they were being watched.

Pointing to a patch of jungle foliage, she exclaimed, "There...I heard it. It's over there!"

"Oh no," groaned Mbuto, "she's freakin' out!"

"I don't see anything, Nicole." Said squinted his eyes. "It all looks the same to me: green on green."

"Nicole's not right in the head," observed Carla. "Before she comes unglued again, someone should take her back to the habitat."

"No they're not!" Max said, giving Nicole's shoulders a shake. "Stop this!" he scolded her sternly. "You want to be permanently exiled to the ship?"

"Yes," she answered in a small voice.

"No you don't." Ingrid came forward. "My dear," she cooed gently, "remember our special prayer?"

"Yea thou I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death..." she began.

"Silently my dear," Ingrid cupped her mouth, "in your head."

"That's a good idea!" Abe glanced back with a frown.

"Don't look for trouble, Nicole," Sheila said in a hushed voice. "Let it find us. We'll deal with it when it arrives."

That very moment, as if to underline Sheila's consoling words, out of nowhere it seemed, a hideous two-headed frog-like denizen hopped out onto their path. Nicole, of course, was frightened out of her wits. Without thinking twice, both Mbuto and Said opened fired on the hapless creature, turning it into a smoldering mass. Hearing the commotion following this incident and Captain Drexel's anger at the two men, Skip's voice screeched from his communicator: "Captain! Captain! What happened down there? Please report in!"

"Two of my crewmembers were trigger happy." Abe confessed.

"Please explain!" demanded Skip.

"They thought the creature was a threat," Abe sighed heavily. "It came out of nowhere and scared them half to death."

"Describe this monster." Skip snapped irritably.

"Well, it looked kind of like a frog," explained Abe, "except it had two heads and was very ugly."

"Listen, crewmembers," he addressed Mbuto and Said. "You can't fire upon all creepy-crawler critters just because they're ugly and scary. It has to be a credible threat, as in the case of the spinners."

After his bellicose talk earlier about conquering alien species, the contradiction in Skip's attitude seemed evident. No one, though, could argue about his logic now. Just waiting for the opportunity to use their revised weapons, Said and Mbuto had proved to be trigger-happy. In a whisper now, Abe scolded the two men, promising to restrict them to the habitat if they fired their weapons indiscriminately again. With Skip's admonishment in mind, the explorers

continued on their way, taking samples of what looked like fruits, nuts, berries, and herbs along the animal beaten path and the bank of the stream.

Unlike last time when they went shallow into the forest to inspect the dome, the explorers continued to follow the stream into the jungle, as they had on Wolf 1061c. Occasionally, Skip's voice would break the tranquility of their exploration to check on their progress and give advice, but for almost an hour as they searched for more fruit trees, he was silent while listening to their progress through the trees. When the explorers reached a certain point in which the leafy canopy of the surrounding forest blocked out the sky and the shadows deepened to almost Stygian black, they turned on their flashlights. Abe could not recall in his military service ever encountering such darkness in the daytime. It was, as their lights played on the greenery and glowing eyes of creatures, like walking through a nightmarish tunnel. Not only the sloths and squirrels, as they were nicknamed now, but countless furry or scaly coated, multi-eyed, and indescribable denizens peered out of the foliage. Not once were they challenged or threatened in the forest. Unlike the meadows and fields, where spinners and other monsters lurked, there were, except for a few bizarre creatures monsters making an appearance, no incidents in the forest. At one point on the stream bank, a long, multi-legged denizen slithered in front of them into a nearby bush. Except for its legs and one-eyed head, it reminded everyone of a snake. Small insect-like creatures flittered passed them and an occasional bush would stir or a new, startling noise echo in the distance. More startling, after these unsettling sights and sounds, was a large, ambling ball of prickly spines, crossing their path. Not wanting to alert Skip, Abe quietly restrained Mbuto and Said, who had pulled out the weapons and were ready to fire, but it was too late. A squeal from Nicole and loud gasp from Sheila caused alarm on the bridge.

"Captain Drexel, report in!" barked Skip.

"Well, it looks like a giant porky-pine," Abe's voice quivered. "It's not moving toward us. It looks like it's getting itself a drink in the stream." "... Phew!" He sighed heavily. "It's walking away, back into the jungle."

"Are you taking pictures out there?" asked Skip. "I'd like to study some of these monsters."

Abe looked back nervously at his crew. "Uh... I think so."

"They should be making a visual diary," Rusty interjected.

"I've taken a few shots!" Carla called out from the rear.

"Me too!" Ingrid chimed.

"Good!" grunted Skip. "Keep me informed, captain."

Plunged into silence once more as they followed the stream, they began gathering samples again. There were strange-looking berries and fruit resembling bananas on nearby bushes and trees. One of the bushes found had what looked like small cocoanuts growing on its branches. When they arrived finally at a clearing in the forest, there was a collective gasp.

There in the middle of a small meadow sat the skeleton of one of the beasts, identified now by the explorers as Kepler 186's version of an elephant. How it wound up in the middle of the forest was a subject that occupied their attention, as they rested by the stream. Though they carried canteens filled with recycled water from the ship, both Carla reassured them, after sampling it, that the water was safe to drink.

"So, the burning question," she announced, wiping her mouth of droplets, "is 'Why did this dumb brute, maroon himself in the jungle?'"

“Curiosity?” Mbuto looked up from the stream.

“No.” She shook his head. “He’s too stupid.”

“You don’t know he’s stupid,” Max said thoughtfully. “He might have been looking for water and, like Mbuto said, just been curious. I read about a leopard in Africa who climbed up Mount Kilimanjaro then froze to death near its top. That extinct volcano is nineteen thousand feet tall!”

“So why did he climb the mountain?” Nicole wrinkled her nose.

“The same reason the elephant went into the woods.” Mbuto shrugged.

“Right!” Max pursed his lips. “What else can it be? We must have walked two or three kilometers into this forest. He’s a grass eater. It certainly wasn’t to find food.”

“The leopard and elephant were *both stupid!*” Carla made a face.

“The poor thing,” Ingrid reached out to touch its bleached bones.

Sheila and Said followed her example and stroked the skeleton. Abe laughed softly as he listened to their chatter. During this rare moment, as children on a nature hike, they acted as if they hadn’t a care in the world. Yet all of eight of them, especially Max, were exhausted from exploration. With her pack crammed with the most seed, nut, and fruit specimens and her camera filled with countless pictures, Carla, who should be ready to drop by now, was the most animated member of the crew. Dumping out his canteen, and stooping to fill it with fresh water, he looked back at her that moment, cracking a smile.

“You certain this is safe?” he asked, taking a slurp.

“I tested it.” She cocked an eyebrow. “It’s safe. We should dig wells in the circle and stop drinking that piss from the habitat.”

“It’s purest H²O!” Ship called defensively from the bridge.

“God is talking again!” grumbled Carla.

“That’s not funny!” Ingrid frowned.

“No, but it’s half true” Said looked up at the sky.

“That’s heresy,” protested Ingrid. “Skip is hardly divine!”

As Skip explained the excellent reclamation equipment on the ship and habitat, which purified their water, Abe pointed in the direction of the rover. Wordlessly, he informed them that the trek was over. Without notifying the android captain, the crewmembers followed him back down the stream bank toward Phoenix-One. On the way back, they encountered those familiar sloth-like and squirrel-like denizens and varieties of alien creepers, climbers, and crawlers not seen before, until, reaching the edge of the forest and looking out at the field.

They had been lucky earlier in the day. They hadn’t encountered spinners or other monsters on the way in. Now, on the way out, they could see the chimpanzee-sized menaces skittering around the rover as if waiting for them to return.

“Hey,” Nicole tapped Max’s shoulder. “I thought those things were brainless. Look at them. They’ve been lying in wait for us!”

“Yeah,” Max, said, shielding his eyes from the sun, “I see what you mean.” “Calm down Nicole, we’ve got our weapons.”

“Damn!” Said whistled under his breath. “There’s hundreds of them. We can’t kill them all!”

“He’s right, sir” Sheila said in scared voice. “We need Skip again.”

“All right.” Abe sighed with resignation. “Skip, are you listening to this?”

“Don’t worry,” Skip replied calmly. “I’ll use our sound weapon. Stand fast. I’ll down and let them have it!”

As the eight explorers waited on the edge of the forest, they noticed a peculiarity with the spinners. Unlike their foolhardiness in approaching Perimeter Electra, was their hesitancy to enter the forest. They would skitter up a few meters from the edge then skitter back, as if fearful of the jungle. This fact belied their brainless appearance and foolishness when attacking or attempting to enter the circle. When Phoenix-Two appeared briefly in the sky, he warned them to shut their ears. This time to protect their inner ears, he gave the monsters a lighter dose of sound, but it still jarred the explorers brains. When the spinners had scattered, the crewmembers gathered their wits, and made a mad dash to the rover. No sooner than they had entered Phoenix One and buckled in than Sheila was taking the rover back to the habitat. By then, of course, Skip was already half-way back to the ship.

“There, that didn’t take long!” Abe exclaimed in a cheerful voice.

“What would we do without Skip?” asked Mbuto, shaking his head in wonder.

“We’d be dead.” Max said thoughtfully. “How many times is that now—three, four?”

“That’s the problem,” Sheila looked into her rear-view mirror. “We depend on him too much!”

“It’s his job!” Said shrugged his shoulders.

“As the French would say,” Ingrid replied light-headedly. “it’s a fait accompli. Like it or not, he saved us again!”

“Yes,” Carla looked tauntingly back at her, “he has god-like powers.”

“What would you know about God?” Ingrid waved dismissively.

“Hah!” she tossed her head. “I know as much as you do. Out here, at the edge of the universe, Skip watches over us constantly. He’s the closest we have to a god.”

“Oh stop teasing her.” snapped Mbuto said half-seriously. “Because he has superhuman powers, doesn’t make him divine!”

“Let’s keep things in prospective,” insisted Said. “He’s one of our caretakers and protectors. It’s his job!”

“I have no argument with that.” Ingrid glared at Carla.

“He’s still a robot!” Sheila murmured to Abe.

Chapter Fourteen

Ancient Mariners

On the way back from the forest, Abe felt greatly relieved. Not only had they successfully gathered countless plant specimens without serious issues but they had avoided disaster in the forest and the field. Before they reached the vicinity of the circle, however, Abe forgot that Skip was listening in, and commented on the scenery below. Idly, he reported to his crew that there were carcasses on the ground below at three different locations. Realizing almost at once that he had, in effect, reported these sighting to the bridge, he bit his tongue when Skip showed immediate interest what he discoveries.

“How interesting,” he broke in immediately. “Let’s get a closer look!”

“Good grief!” muttered Sheila.

“You’re not serious?” Abe asked in disbelief. “They’re dead. What’s the big deal?”

“I’m just curious,” Skip replied eagerly. “Are there predators around them? Describe them for me!”

Abe wanted to argue the point, but Skip insisted on them bringing back the carcasses for testing as possible food resources. It was, he believed, much safer than capturing wild specimens for the lab. Everyone, including the captain, groaned loudly now. It would be the most distasteful task undertaken so far on the planet. Though greatly tempted to simply refuse and assert his role as captain, Abe knew it was futile. Skip was already barking out instructions on how to proceed. Dropping down a hundred meters in the rover, fearful that they might attract spinners during the process, and repulsed by the prospect of gathering rotting carcasses, Abe and Sheila studied the rodent-like corpse near the shore, the desiccated corpse of a spinner in the field, and, near the habitat, a portion of one those elephant-like beasts. All three carcasses, when they approached, were being chewed on my small rat-like creatures and long-legged fliers resembling storks.

In an irritable tone, Abe gave Skip a description of the carcasses and begrudgingly reported each step of the assignment. During the explorers grisly chore, under their breaths, Skip was called many different names, most inventive of which being was supplied by Carla, the most spirited member of the crew. The only tools for the enterprise were pitch forks, intended for field operation, and sanitation gloves and goggles. Awkwardly, as the Phoenix skimmed the ground, Ingrid, Carla, and Max, hastily scooped up the rodent carcass, and tossed into the aft compartment, followed more easily by the remains of the spinner in the field, which Carla managed by herself. For the elephant-like beast, however, which required most of the crew, it was much more messy affair. Everyone wretched, as they flopped it down in the aft compartment. Nicole, Mbuto, and Said vomited onto the deck.

That afternoon, when the rover returned with its smelly cargo, the three carcasses were dragged in by perspiring and gagging crewmembers and quickly tested by Sandra and Woody, the acting scientists in the lab. Only the androids had the stomach for studying the blood and entrails of such creatures. These early samples of animal protein, which the discoverers found so revolting, were disappointing to Skip and his crew. The very thought of eating such vile things after handling them today was naturally unthinkable to the humans. Not only were the three carcasses not edible, but they had too many toxic chemicals for human consumption. Like some

of the plants they had discovered, they were poisonous, which seemed just as well to the squeamish crewmembers yet boded ill for the future. According to Skip, who reported Sandra's and Woody's findings immediately, there was a possibility that many of Kepler 186f's animals, as well as plants, might be poisonous. A more determined effort to find protein resources must therefore be made elsewhere on the planet.

The next day, with this important goal in front of them, found the explorers in search of both freshwater and marine life. Until they got a better feel for the terrain and the wild life on this world and it was proven that alien animals were palatable and not toxic, this seemed best for the explorers. Skip and Abe agreed that alien fish and shell-fish, if they existed, should be a possible source for protein, too. Considering what Abe and Sheila had seen from Phoenix-One so far, the waters on Kepler 186f seemed free of monsters. A fly over could establish where they could begin searching before the lakes and shorelines of the ocean could be studied up close.

All went well, when they began their exploration. The waters below reminded them of footage from twentieth and twenty-first footage of scenes on Earth. The banks of the lakes, rivers, streams were crowded with the elephant-like beasts and several smaller creatures resembling gazelles. The oceans likewise resembled Earth, glistening quietly, with only a sprinkling of fliers overhead.

Unfortunately, their first exploration of a nearby lake was disappointing. The fish-like creatures were quite repulsive. There were swimmers looking very much like eels that seemed too grotesque for consumption, and yet, when they were analyzed later by Sandra and Woody back at the habitat, they were considered edible, at least in a nutritionist sense, and were placed on the inventory of collectible foods. That same day, the Phoenix One flew over the ocean to make a preliminary study of potential marine life. Without exploring the ocean surface itself, it was obvious to Abe that they would encounter the same problem with fishing as on beaches back on Earth (a rough surf, requiring fly casting from the shore). When the Phoenix returned that day, both Abe and Skip agreed that serious marine fishing would require construction of a motorized boat. Because Abe and Sheila were both air force officers with no practical knowledge of navigation at sea, Sandra and Woody would do the research. The crewmembers would provide the labor for the craft.

As the crewmembers built a boat according to specifications drawn out of Skip's and Rusty's databases, the first sprouts sprang from the greenhouse planters, a remarkable discovery, since it would take the same plants weeks to grow on Earth. That the growth cycle was accelerated on Eden was one of the most important discoveries on the planet. In the future, after barely two weeks, the first saplings would appear in the greenhouse, and not long after in the outside garden, the furrows were overflowing with vegetables and herbs.

When the boat, built from unused building materials and powered by the motor from an excavator, was finally completed, it was attached by lines to the undercarriage of the rover and ferried to the beach. For this venture Mbuto and Said, who claimed they were susceptible to seasickness, bowed out of the enterprise. Nicole was simply too scared. The boat was scooted by sheer human effort into to surf, and, after finally starting the improvised outboard motor, began its history-making voyage into the alien sea.

As would ancient mariners on Earth, Abe, Sheila, Max, Ingrid, and Carla, used specially contrived hooks and line as well as heavy duty netting to catch marine creatures. Because the first catch was experimental, since they knew nothing of the nutritional value of the planet's sea

creatures, this first voyage was intended mainly for study. What they found in the first toss caused the fishermen dismay.

“What the devil are those things?” Sheila stared in horror.

“Let’s see,” Carla said, pointing to various locations on the net. “That one on top looks like a sea-going centipede, the ones below it remind me a little of a fish, except that they have multiple eyes and long whip-like tails. That critter there, though, just looks like a blob.”

“Ick!” Sheila Ingrid made a face. “What about those little fellows at the bottom of the net? How awful. They look like worms.”

Abe listened quietly a moment, as they studied the net. Then, after they debated on whether or not to try another toss, Max exclaimed, “There’s something down there—a shadow below the boat!”

“Yes, I see it!” Sheila gasped.

“Everyone!” sputtered Abe. “Don’t move! Get away from the rail!”

The conflicting orders requiring both movement and immobility confused the other mariners. It was, at this point, that disaster almost overtook them. From the bowels of the alien sea, a monster so terrible it brought immediate screams from everyone, surfaced from the waves. Resembling, a giant octopus but, upon closer inspection, was more like huge sea anemone rising from the depths, it almost swamped the boat.

Almost immediately, Skip, always vigilant, shouted from all of the communicators: “Hunker down. Pray Ingrid. I’m on my way!”

Though a valiant attempt was made by the mariners, their puny weapons proved futile when fired upon the creature. As expected Ingrid called upon God to save them. In no mood for quoting scripture, she made a direct appeal this time. Even Carla found herself muttering in a panic, “Save us Lord! Save us Lord!”

Just when the crew thought they would be swallowed by the monster or drown in the sea, Skip arrived in Phoenix Two. Training the laser beam on the belly of the rover onto the beast, he hovered in one spot, dangerously close to its tentacles. The concentration of energy didn’t kill it or even damage it to any degree, but, finally after directing the beam on it for several minutes, it gave the creature sufficient discouragement. Returning to the depths, it left a great wake in its retreat, which again almost swamped the boat. As he flew off, Skip ordered the crew to haul in the net and bring it back to the lab. Afterwards, fearful that the monster might return, Sheila shoved the throttle forward all the way, racing to the shore. No sooner was the boat beached, than the five mariners lugged it as far as they could onto the sand, grabbed the slimy net, scrambled onto the rover, and returned quickly to the habitat.

Back at command center, the crew related their harrowing experience, as Sandra and Woody performed tests on their catch. The basic test was to determine toxicity. After this, further chemical analysis was conducted to find out whether or not the creatures was nutritious enough to make harvesting them worthwhile. After waiting for several hours in which they checked the progress of the green house and garden, Sandra and Woody came back with the results. There were in the samples mixed blessings. Some of the creatures (the ‘centipede’ and fish-like creatures) were edible, while the blob and worms, as expected, were, in fact, actually poisonous to human beings. Reluctantly, Abe agreed to take the boat out with his crew again. For the next effort, though, the boat must be weaponized if it is too become a provider of food.

This would require more android ingenuity and human labor. The space station was again searched for hardware and equipment to build the weapons.

For the next sea-going expedition, Mbuto and Said had a change of heart and volunteered to join the crew. Abe thought it was all right to add a crewmember, but one of the others had to stay behind. Abe, of course, as captain of the boat, would stay. Being the pilot of the boat Sheila couldn't very well bow out either. Knowing that the two women would put up a fuss, Max magnanimously offered to stay behind. Because Skip insisted, as he had for the previous expedition, that the doctor be aboard, it was between Carla and Ingrid, which, after the toss of a coin, resulted Ingrid winning the privilege of staying aboard.

This time they had a much better idea of what to keep and what to toss back in. The alien centipedes and alien fish were keepers, while everything else, including the blobs and worms would be tossed back in. Since the boat was now weaponized with a modified Triton surface laser bolted onto the bow, Mbuto and Said felt it quite safe to offer their help. No one was happy with the thought of eating the alien centipedes and fish, but it seemed so easy to net such a large amount, that within an hour the boats hold was filled to the brim. With time on their hands and Skip's encouragement from the ship, the six mariners now decided to use the fishing poles instead of the net.

"This reminds me of when I was a boy," Mbuto said, holding firmly on his rod. "My father took me deep sea fishing off the coast of South Africa. What rush that was!"

"I prefer lake fishing," replied Said, gazing lazily at the sea. "My parents owned one of those new hover crafts. Trout, salmon—all manner of fresh water fish were shoveled up by its scooper."

"What?" Ingrid frowned with disapproval. "Isn't that like cheating?"

"My father was a fishermen," explained Said. "All commercial fishermen did it that way back then. Frankly, Ingrid, I can't stand fish. That's all we ate when I was a kid: fried, baked, broiled, ground up into meat balls, you name it." "Blech!" He made a face. "What I'd give for a big thick steak."

"I don't think you have to worry." Abe pointed to the hold. "When they're done with that in the kitchen, it won't taste like fish."

"Personally," said Sheila, reeling in her line, "I prefer something more exotic. Lord, how I miss lobster and crab!"

That moment, as to emphasize her words, she appeared to have caught something. Excitement glowed in her slightly sun-burned face. So far, inexplicably, no one had even a nibble. Now as she brought up her rod, she forgot herself and let out a scream. Caught on her hook was another hideous denizen of the deep, which resembled the mouth of a Venus fly trap as it gripped her hook. Even more horrible for the mariners were the school of snapping crab-like monsters tearing at the sea beast.

"I'm sorry." She looked at the captain. "That gave me the creeps!"

"You startled me half to death!" he grumbled.

"Here," Max said, reaching over with a knife, "let's cut it free!"

"That *was* rather creepy," Said wiped his brow.

"Yeah." Mbuto shuddered. "I almost loss my rod."

"I think we've been out here long enough," Abe decided, after glancing at his watch. "Today's haul will feed the crew for a week."

"I hope they make them taste good." Said muttered, as they headed back to shore. "Those centipedes didn't appear very appetizing. Maybe they can make them taste like steak!"

“Or lobster!” Sheila said wistfully.

“I was a vegetarian until I spent time in space,” Ingrid announced dryly. “The best thing I’ve tasted so far on the ship and habitat was the dried and canned foods Sandra and Woody found on the station.” “Just think of it,” she marveled at the thought. “We were eating powered eggs, fake bacon, and canned peaches a hundred thousand years old on the ship. Here in Eden, everything will be fresh!”

“Fresh isn’t necessarily good,” Said reminded her. “Half the fresh animals and plants on this planet are poisonous. The other half are so gross they must be camouflaged to be edible. Let’s hope we can find decent game in the forest we can eat!”

A new expedition to search for grains and, with the encouragement of Said and Mbuto, more palatable game, brought Phoenix One uncomfortably close to a second volcano in the north, nearly as large as the first. Though it was erupting as they passed over, Ingrid, the geologist, considered it stable because of the steady magma pouring from its lip, that allowed gases to escape, which prevents violent explosions. In a relatively innocent patch of grasslands, Phoenix-One once again landed. No sooner had the crew (minus Nicole this time) landed than Carla had gathered up a bundle of promising grains that resembled corn and several other plants. Out of nowhere it seemed, a strange looking creature resembling a giant caterpillar ambled toward them, making a path through the towering grass. Almost instinctively, disregarding Skip’s standing orders, Said and Mbuto now blasted the poor beast to shreds.

“You idiots!” Skip screeched over their communicators. “That was hardly a monster. It was so slow it barely moved. What harm did it do?”

“I’m sorry!” Abe mumbled. “I didn’t see that coming!”

“You’re the captain!” Rusty joined in. “You *should* see things coming!”

“Disarm them captain!” demanded Skip. “Take their weapons.”

“Here, gimme your guns!” Max snapped his fingers.

Mbuto, head bowed, looked properly contrite, but Said uttered a wounded cry. “Why? It was just a dumb beast. I thought we were supposed to conquer the planet!”

“You fool!” Skip’s voice blared. “I never meant that!”

“What *did* he mean?” murmured Said. “He once called for a jihad against this world. Now we’re to treat it with kid gloves?”

Mbuto remained silent. As they retreated from the smoldering mass, Sheila lost her breakfast. Said was on the verge of tears.

“You men can’t be trusted!” Carla scolded, as they filed into the rover. “We should never have brought you along!”

During the remainder of the expedition, as they finished up their inspection of food resources, Skip, in very human-like form, grumbled in the background, unable to grasp the stupidity of Said and Mbuto. Despite Skip’s efforts to stimulate crewmembers, using catch phrases, he had evidently failed to reach certain members of the crew. Even the feisty Carla, who had been expressing an ‘us or them’ attitude when it came to predators, didn’t harbor such behavior. It was plain who Skip was speaking to as he lectured the crew while they finished up their collection. It was, he reminded them, tempting to become trigger happy and fire upon potential or imagined threats, but the sport of hunting and needless killing of alien wildlife was

against the cardinal rules of exploration. The shooting of the spinners was, of course, an exception, as would be any creature attacking the group, but, all forms of eradication Skip now pointed out, must have the element of self-defense and survival. Hunting, in itself, must be limited to providing food for the habitat. With the backdrop of the alien world, still mostly undiscovered surrounding them, Skip finished his brief lecture then lapsed into silence.

With Kepler 186f's obvious threats and many unknowns, the task ahead was daunting. He was in charge. He had always been in charge. As the Old Testament god, his voice boomed occasionally from above, guiding this remnant of Earth. Ingrid was scandalized when Carla made this comparison, but part of the Old Testament comparison was correct. They were, she knew, the Chosen Ones, the inheritors of the new world.

When the Phoenix One became airborne again, a flock of headless fliers, eyes streaming along each of their bat-like wings, zoomed past the rover. Below them the humans saw more of the elephant-like creatures, and other denizens, difficult to describe, not seen before. A pack of hopping, galloping wolf-like monsters chased a large creature resembling a mutant pig and more of the spinners scurried across a field, aimlessly it seems, or perhaps because some other monsters was pursuing them. Perhaps, suggested Max, half-seriously as he looked down at the new Eden, this is how Adam and Eve felt when they saw the strange creatures created by God.

After they arrived back at the habitat, carrying their baskets of samples, the specimens were taken by Sandra and Woody into the laboratory. Skip greeted everyone amiably, but then cast a jaundiced eye at Mbuto and Said. In barely more than an hour, after a quick study, Sandra reported to the crew that the corn-like grain discovered was of excellent quality for hybridization and farming, which meant that they would have to fly back to that dreadful zone.

To keep the monster packs at bay in order to fill the rover with grain, the sound cannon was used again, and yet the crew still had to move quickly. During a close call, when the wolf-like beasts charged the gatherers, the basic rule of self-defense was put into operation, as two of the ravenous creatures were blasted full force by the entire crew. Unlike the apparently mindless spinners, the remainder of the pack then shied away from the crew as they finished up their task.

Added to the job of adding the first load of grain to the makeshift warehouse, was a second exhibition to the ocean to net more marine creatures. While the fishing exhibitions were limited to how much could be eaten within a period of time, several trips were required by Phoenix One in order to fill the warehouse. A small portion of the grain was harvested for seeds, and already the garden was spouting the seeds of the first samples as well as several exotic plants. In a separated portion of the garden the saplings of alien fruits as well as the nuts found in the forest were likewise blooming, and in the greenhouse, where the herbs had been planted, experiments were being conducted on various vegetables to make them more acceptable to human palates and special research was being done of hybridization of both fruit trees and grains.

It was becoming clear to their caretakers that the humans were becoming able to care for themselves, but they hadn't finished their ultimate mission of the new world. The next stage in their exploration and conquest of the planet came with much less enthusiasm by the humans: the manufacture of clones.

When this most important phase in the minds of their caretakers finally arrived and before further exploration of the planet which might provide more food resources, all energies would be focused on the propagation of the human race. Though they helped build the special laboratory, carted equipment into the facility and assisted in the fabrication of clones, as the laboratory was set up, the humans began their labors completely ignorant of the method required to generate clones. As they listened to the directions of their task-masters, it was, in a sense, on the job training. Though the equipment was complex (some of which Sandra and Woody didn't even bother explaining), the general method of cloning was simple: somatic cells (from all of the crew, including the four dead crewmembers) would be fused with female eggs, which had been harvested separately. The fused cells would be activated with jolts of electricity, then placed in a chamber filled with chemicals similar to the womb. From this point, in what struck the science fiction buff Mbuto as a science fiction fantasy, the laboratory was filled the eerie presence of womb chamber after womb chamber of embryos, that would grow within an accelerated period of weeks instead of months into fetuses, and then infants, who, after making it to term, were removed from the wombs as would normal infants from their mothers, stimulated by a swat on the rear or jolt of electricity into uttering their first cry. At that point, exclaimed Sandra beaming with great purpose, they would be taken to a nursery (which hadn't even been built) and be cared for by human nannies.

This last part of the plan was irksome to three of the women, who, it was taken for granted by Sandra and Woody, would play their traditional roles. Less irksome, except for the possible danger involved, were the men's roles as explorers, as they continued exploring the planet for more food resources. During their labors, Sandra and Woody would test the food resource specimens and also began the manufacture of the clones. Also important, Skip explained to the humans, was a search for alternate forms of energy and minerals useful for future use on the new world (the original goal of the ill-fated Triton mission), and, not mentioned directly but implicit in the scientific portion of the expedition, a survey of the remainder of the planet for more evidence of intelligent alien life. Understandably, Carla and Ingrid felt cheated, as the others continued exploration. At first, however, until the laboratory had produced infants ready to be labeled newborns, everyone would be involved in the building of the nursery and the necessary additions to the lab. Several trips by Phoenix One were required to transport more prefabricated components for the Triton mission back to the planet. Using the heavy duty equipment available, the nursery was constructed in less than a week.

For the morale of their human charges, occasional breaks in the routine were allowed. During the interval between the final stage of cloning until they became newborns allowed the three designated nannies to accompany the rover on an excursion to the alien cave. It amounted to nothing more than a field trip for the bored stellarnauts. This time, for the first time leaving Rusty in charge of the ship, Skip wanted to have a look at this wonder himself and accompanied the explorers to the cave. Even the timid Nicole, not wanting to be left behind again, came along with Ingrid's moral support. With renewed expectation, after Sheila parked Phoenix near the hill, Skip and the eight humans emerged from the rover, weapons ready, and promptly entered the cave. Fortunately for them this time, there were no challenges by spinners. To insure they had the advantage when they re-emerged from the cave, Skip brought a specially designed blaster he fabricated on the ship, which would, he boasted, vaporize the little monsters.

Despite this reassuring boast, something wasn't right after they entered the cave. The first thing Abe and his crew noticed as they walked down the corridor, was the utter darkness. There was no light at the end of the passage. Using their flashlights, which arced back and forth with nervous energy as they progressed, they kept their weapons at their sides so as not to shoot the person in front. When they finally entered the great cavern, the stalagmites and stalactites glistened brilliantly in the glow but the cave, itself, remained dark. When they reached the crystals, they, too, were dark. Their wondrous inner light had ceased. This fact greatly disappointed everyone except Skip, who saw this as very significant.

"Really?" Abe gave him a curious look. "How is this significant?"

"Think about it, captain" Skip trained his light on one of the crystals. "Why would the light suddenly go out, unless they aliens turned it off?"

"Why would they do that?" asked Max. "We're no threat to them?"

"They don't necessarily know that," Skip said thoughtfully. "Of course, that's just one explanation for the light going out.... I have no idea what else caused it to go out, but it is quite significant. In fact, it's more significant than if it was left on."

"So the aliens might still be here?" Nicole looked at him with concern.

"Perhaps they're on this world somewhere." He said studying the dark crystals. "Perhaps they just left."

"Hmm." Said pursed his lips. "Do you think they're coming back?"

"That's a good question." Skip replied thoughtfully "For all we know, there might be more concrete evidence of an alien civilization elsewhere on this world."

"That's why we're gonna do more exploring!" piped Mbuto.

"Yes," Skip sighed. "... while you look for more resources. That's your main goal."

That moment, he flashed his light at the entry to the cavern. "Lets head back," he said, stepping away from the crystals. "We've seen enough here."

All nine of them, with weapons ready, ran swiftly to the rover. Carla took this opportunity, as soon as they were buckled in, to lodge a protest. "I think it's unfair that I can't go!" She blurted, pointing to Mbuto and Said. "I'm a better stellarnaut than those two clowns!"

"So am I!" Ingrid pointed to herself.

"No way, no how!" Said stomped his foot. "That's woman's work."

"I'm not doing it either!" Mbuto shook his head. "I'm not cut out for that kind've work!"

"We need nannies for the nursery," Skip reminded the women. "We all have to do our part!"

"Oh really?" Carla glared at the men. "While they're having all the fun!"

"I can't believe this, Skip." Ingrid gripped her forehead. "I thought this was the twenty-fifth century!"

"It's much later than that!" observed Skip. "More like 100,000 AD!"

Though Carla and Ingrid weren't amused, this caused laughter among the men.

"Perhaps they can take turns with the men," Abe suggested as they became airborne.

"We could compromise here," Skip shrugged his shoulders. "One of you—Ingrid or Carl—could switch with one of the men. It's very likely, that there will be follow-up expeditions so that the other can have her turn."

"That's much better." Ingrid nodded at Carla.

"So one of us has to stay behind?" Said frowned.

"Of course," Skip replied irritably. "After the way you two behaved you're lucky you can come at all."

“Skip’s right.” Abe gave Said a stern look. “We all have to do our share!”

“There you have it!” Carla gave Said a malicious grin. “You heard it from the top!”

After Skip was dropped off in the docking area of the ship, the explorers were left with the opinion that he had altered Sandra and Woody’s plan that three of the women would be nannies. Said and Mbuto grumbled under their breaths but dare not make an issue of this state of affairs after Skip’s admonishment on Phoenix One.

That evening, as the group gathered for supper, all was well, as they discussed what they had found (or what they hadn’t found) in the alien’s cave, what Skip had said about it, and what this all meant. No one wanted to believe there was a threat, but Skip words had sparked questions in all of their minds about the visitors. Could the fact that the crystals were now dark imply that they simply moved on? Or did it have a deeper meaning? Wasn’t it a coincidence that, after they visited the cave, the crystals lost their wondrous glow?... Would they find more evidence of the visitors elsewhere on the planet, as Skip suggested, or were the two domes and cave all that was left of a bygone race?... *Were the visitors going to return?*

Several routine chores had to be performed each day by the humans, as Sandra and Woody tended to the lab. The gardens and green house had to be watered. An elaborate irrigation system had been developed by Woody for watering the fields that required monitoring. Weeds, present on this alien world as they had been on Earth, had to be picked and the plants expected for pests, which included tiny bugs resembling beetles and moths. The humans had to take turns preparing the meals, doing janitorial duties, helping in the lab, and countless other tasks. While they went about their chores, Sheila managed to always be on Abe’s work team. Her fondness for the captain had grown since they had discovered Kepler 186f. Realizing now that the threat of extinction was gone and their survival had finally been secured, Abe had time to think about her too. Influenced by Ingrid’s lofty comparisons between the human remnant and Old Testament characters, their friendship might have seemed a parody of Adam and Eve. The military chain of command that they had shared was irrelevant now. There were only two air force officers among the humans. Who cared about protocol 557.7 light years from Earth?

Chapter Fifteen

The Crystal City

It took the clone farmers, as Carla named this grim process, eight weeks to create the first batch of clones. With the exception of several stillborns that troubled both humans and androids greatly, duplicates of each of the twelve stellarnauts survived the final stage before being transferred to the nursery. Because of her religious objections, Ingrid had been the most reluctant of the humans, and yet even she accepted this state of affairs. Like it or not, they were the caretakers now. The goal of Sandra and Woody was to generate enough clones so that pares could, according to the most rigid standards, safely inbreed. A time would come, Skip promised the progenitors, when cloning would no longer be an issue and, as the parents, grandparents, and, if they lived long enough, great grandparents of their descendants, they would watch the progress of a new human race. For each of the original twelve crewmembers of the Phoenix there would be from six to ten identical clone offspring, who, resembling each other identically, would grow into carbon copies of their cell donors.

For now, however, it was enough that the first batch of infants had been installed in the nursery. To make them responsible for their progeny, the humans must now take responsibility. It was time for the three nannies to step forth. Since Nicole had begrudgingly agreed for this permanent duty, only two positions were in play, roles no one else wanted to fulfill. Now that Skip had so much as given his word, either Carla or Ingrid would be on the next expedition on Eden. A simple flip of a coin decided the issue. Carla, who had created the most fuss about staying behind, lost the toss. Taking her loss stoically, with the knowledge that she would go on future expeditions, she was given the satisfaction to know that Said had lost the toss to Mbuto. The exploration to the other side of Eden, as Skip described it, would include Abe, Sheila, Max, Ingrid, and Mbuto. Thanks to Said's and Mbuto's lapses on the planet which had caused Skip to distrust these explorers, a sixth member of the crew was added at the last minute. Rusty would serve on Skip's behalf as a watchdog on the mission, one more reminder of who was really in control.

As the Phoenix hovered over the landscape at several hundred kilometers per hour, the scenery changed rapidly. From the jungle and savannah type landform reminiscent of Earth to desert land, the crew witnessed the first dramatic change. Life forms were sparse—small fleeting images below and a few fliers high in the sky, nothing to recommend it for exploration. Nor, of course, was the frozen area at the far north of the planet, that was similar to the arctic but with no visible signs of life, promising. When the rover crossed over the barren wastes, emerging on a dark side of the planet where it was still night, it descended to an elevation of barely a kilometer, its nose light arcing back and forth over the landscape, disclosing a much different variety of beasts. Long necked creatures sprouting three forward-thrusting horns from their heads, squat creatures resembling giant deformed hogs, and packs of predators similar to the wolf-beasts on the other side of the planet were just a few species discovered. What was also

visible were more fields not unlike the plains in the first zone. Duly noted by the captain and his crew, this sector would nevertheless have to be bypassed until daylight. Slowing down to a crawl but rising back up to avoid mountains ahead, Sheila would pilot the craft until dawn. Until then the nose light continued to reveal unseen species, including fliers resembling monstrous vampire bats and one lonely leviathan that stopped the rover in its tracks

Mbuto giggled hysterically. Sheila and Ingrid gasped.

“What in the hell was that?” Max bolted forward in his seat.

“Whoa!” Abe exclaimed. “Now *that’s* a monster!”

“I hope your recording all this.” Rusty said calmly. “That monster had no equivalent in Earth, not now, not ever.”

“I record everything.” Sheila reassured him. “That one filled up the screen.”

“It looks very much like a Jurassic sauropod,” observed Abe.

“Except that it has two heads,” clarified Rusty. “That doesn’t look like any dinosaur *I* ever saw!”

“Look at that beast.” Mbuto studied the overhead screen. “If there’s a king of the beasts here *that’s him!*”

“Why a him?” Ingrid asked half-seriously. It could be a her. “Dinosaur females were sometimes bigger than the males.”

“That’s nothing like a dinosaur.” Rusty insisted. “I just hope it doesn’t breath fire!”

Detecting what they thought was humor in the Howdy-Doody face, the crewmembers laughed nervously amongst themselves. Placing the rover in automatic pilot as it hovered there awhile, Abe made a few calculations. Realizing it would probably be several hours before dawn, he ordered Sheila to continue on until they had enough daylight to land. With a giant sun such as Kepler 186, the daylight zone came much more quickly than it would on Earth. When they could see dawn’s light on the land below, the great sun emerging spread its rays through the clouds—one hundred and eighty degrees, a blinding radiance too much even for their sun shades to filter out.

“Look away—everyone!” cried Abe. “Better yet, until it finishes, close your eyes!”

An awkward period followed, with only Rusty able to look straight at the glow. Not until the rays had disperse enough in the sky, did he suggest they open their eyes.

“Damn—I’ll never get used to that!” Mbuto sighed

“We’ve been lucky on this world,” noted Abe. “This sun isn’t as close as the other worlds. A cloud cover often protects us from its glare. But we’ve all been careless in not wearing our shades. That sort of blast could cause permanent blindness.”

“This will never be a friendly world,” muttered Sheila. “It would be better if we lived in the forest where is the perpetual shade.”

“In most ways,” Rusty recollected, “forests are infertile. To grow crops and vegetables, you need constant sun. You can’t hide from sun, Sheila. Like everything else on this planet, you must adapt!”

Abe reached over and gently squeezed her knuckles. “This is *our* world now!” he whispered to her. With the inflection on *our*, Sheila understood the meaning and smiled.

When it was finally safe, the six humans looked down at the far side of Eden and saw a wondrous sight.... There on an open plain surrounded by herds of strange creatures below the wings of alien fliers was a veritable city, its translucent spires rising starkly in the sky. Row after row of buildings that looked very much like polished chards of crystal surrounded the spires.

Despite the implications so far in this discovery, something was obviously missing in the city: people and moving vehicles. It sat perfectly still on the plain.

Excitedly now, Abe turned to Rusty who, breaking the in flight rules, was standing behind Abe and Sheila, gazing speechlessly at the scene.

“We have to land this thing!” he sputtered. “But where?...To avoid those creatures we need to land on one of those buildings.”

“That’s a good idea,” agreed Rusty, “but later we’re going to have to scatter that bunch. The sound cannon might not be enough.”

“It won’t be!” Skip’s voice suddenly blared from their wrists. “You’ll have to use your guns!”

“Oh my God! Oh my God!” Mbuto rubbed his hands excitedly. “It’s just like a book I once read, Crystal City, only better!”

After a short prayer of thanksgiving, Ingrid looked upon the overhead screen, a look of peace on her face. “We should move our base here,” she decided after a pause. “This is what Eden should look like. This should be our home!”

“It’s like the Emerald City of Oz,” marveled Sheila. “Where is everybody. All I see is wildlife. What happened to the people in this town?”

“We’re not in Kansas, that’s for sure,” quipped Max. “Be careful Abe. Make sure you have enough room.”

After searching the roof tops of the city awhile, Abe pointed to a relatively flat building near the spires, and directed Sheila to land.

“Easy does it, girl.” He patted her knee. “.... That’s it, hover a moment. Let me take a peek down there.”

“Be careful!” cautioned Skip. “You’re going into the unknown!”

Several scaly lizard-like creatures skittered away, as the rover touched down. When the rover was sitting idly on the roof, everyone heaved a sigh, rose up, and followed Abe and Rusty out of the hatch. The red sun’s brilliance returned as its ray struck the city. The crystalline structures glistened fiercely in the glow. With their helmet shades pulled down, they still avoided looking directly at the glow. Fortunately for the explorers, the roof was now free of creatures and, as if to beckon them into the depths of the metropolis, as stairway was positioned in the center of the roof.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Rusty summoned the others. “Draw your weapons. Let’s find out what lies beneath.”

“Move slowly,” counseled Skip. “Excitement breeds carelessness. Over eagerness leads to accidents. In closed spaces, keep your weapons at your sides, not straight ahead!”

On the floor directly below the roof, as if placed there just for them, they found another crystal, similar to but more elaborate than the ones in the cave. This one was larger and more symmetrical the first one. As was the previous crystal, however, it remained dark as they fondled it.

“Darn it!” Mbuto’s shoulders drooped. “This one’s dead, too.”

“Not dead necessarily,” suggested Rusty, “perhaps it’s just asleep.”

“Now there’s a thought.” Abe said playfully. “Earthlings to aliens: wake up!”

“Here, let me try.” Ingrid moved and gave it a pat. “In the name of the Celestial God, I bid you rise!”

“Are you serious?” Max frowned. “It was never alive!”

Sheila, who had come to respect Ingrid’s spirituality, looked at the crystal, as if hoping it would light up. For a few moments, as the other crewmembers idly stood there, embarrassed by Ingrid’s expectations, Ingrid closed her eyes and prayed silently.

“Come on, Ingrid,” Abe whispered irritably, “I’m surprised you’d try something like that!”

Then—lo and behold—the dark crystal lit up, with a brilliance greater than the one in the cave.

Standing back as it’s glow intensified, as if they expected it to explode, the humans caught their breaths. Rusty murmured discreetly to Skip, “Are you watching this?”

“Call it forth, Ingrid!” Skip’s voice echoed in the room. “You have the power!”

“Spirit come forth!” Ingrid obliged, her eyes wide with amazement.

Suddenly, in the midst of the crystal, which sparkled and flashed with an eerie Morris Code, a shadow formed, grew larger and larger, and, as the six humans backed away in fright, a face took shape: eyeless, without ears or mouth.

For a moment, as Rusty wrestled with Mbuto’s gun, a serious incident was averted.

“You fool!” He gnashed his teeth. “What did we tell you?”

“I-I wasn’t going to shoot!” Mbuto sputtered. “Really, I wasn’t!”

Ingrid, who had also been frightened away, returned to the crystal, placed her hand on its surface, but said nothing this time. The face seemed to tilt upward, as if it was looking up at her. Then, startling everything, including Ingrid, half to death, the crystal flashed, momentarily blinding everyone except Rusty, who, in spite of scolding Mbuto, had drawn his weapon and seemed ready to fire if the specter so much as moved. Blinking their eyes, their hearts pounding in their chests, they stood there, stunned and befuddled. Not even Rusty could comprehend what stood there in the room. Like a small tornado of light, it continued to whirl, remaining stationary in front of the prism from which it escaped. Gradually, a second specter, more fearful than the first, took form: a translucent bipedal creature, with arms, legs, and featureless head now greeted them. A bizarre, cricket like chirping, followed by a humming, more chirping, and bleeps, was emitted by the specter. Sensing that they had nothing to fear, the crewmembers surrounded the being. Standing closest to it, Ingrid bravely stuck out her hand, testing its corporeality. After her hand passed through it several times, she turned to the others, announcing matter-of-factly, “You see. It’s a spirit—an alien ghost. We have nothing to fear.”

“What’s it trying to say?” Sheila looked at Rusty. “Can you translate for us? It sounds like gibberish!”

“No.” Rusty shook his head. “I’m not a miracle worker. There’s no primer for alien language. It seems to me he’s trying to be friendly. My database reminds me of a cartoon. ‘Greetings Earthlings!’ he might be saying. He’s raising his hand up, as if to greet us. Smile and wave at him!”

For several moments, each of the earthlings reached out to touch the image. The fact that their hands passed though it seemed further proof to Ingrid’s that it was a spirit. Mbuto shadow-boxed the image awhile and Sheila stood in the midst of it, playfully waving her arms. It was obvious to Rusty that it was merely a projection, such as the holographic projections seen on Earth. Though Ingrid wanted to place a spiritual connotation upon the image, this opinion sounded reasonable to the other explorers, and yet Ingrid’s supernatural explanation intrigued Sheila, and Max thought it so amusing, he dubbed it the Kepler Ghost.

Finally, after enjoying this diversion and debating why the ghostly image had suddenly appeared, in the blink of an eye, it just as abruptly disappeared. Flashing a moment after its departure the crystal light went out like a candle, leaving them in pitch dark. Five simultaneous gasps erupted. Sheila reached out to clutch Abe's hand. Rusty, unruffled it seemed, turned on his flashlight. All six beams arced back and forth and up and down, as if they expected an imminent attack.

"Well, I guess we scared him away!" Max tried making light of it.

Rusty voice seemed tinged with emotion now. "Do you people realize what this meant? That projection was a greeting!"

"... Or a warning," Mbuto swallowed. "It was almost staged."

"It could be both," suggested Rusty. "A simple acknowledged of our presence on this world... Let's hope it's a friendly greeting and not a warning to back off!"

Rusty's words, which struck Abe as half-serious, caused the other men and women to stir uneasily. Sheila had graduated from squeezing Abe's knuckles to huddling fearfully by his side.

"Skip, did you record all this?" Abe asked, looking up at the ceiling.

"Yes." Skip said faintly. "... I agree with Rusty, yet I hope Ingrid's twist on this fascinating. There's so much about this race we don't know. I think you've seen enough for awhile, however. After further exploration, you can return to the Crystal City. Your main task is still finding more resources. Clearly, this will require much more study."

"That'll make Carla happy," noted Abe. "We've just scratched the surface of this world!"

"Right!" Skip agreed. "Why not grab samples from the nearby fields. I noticed a river a ways north, which might provide a freshwater catch. From the bridge, I saw a large forest that could offer you with more exotic nuts and fruits."

Like a proverbial wet blanket, Skip had put a halt on further exploration of the city, at least for the time being. Now that the crystal had turned off and the room was plunged into darkness, this suited everyone just fine. There was only so much daylight left for exploration. For such an enterprise, daylight was essential. As Skip pointed out when they were airborne, they would require, at the minimum, a full day to explore the remainder of the city, which, by his tone, implied a more thorough investigation.

It was thought by many crewmembers that when the food stores were at a maximum and Skip was satisfied, their important discovery would have top priority. Until clone manufacturing at the habitat was well underway, however, and the caretakers were satisfied that the colonists could manage both the laboratory and food resources on their own, exploration for its own sake was put on hold. The amazing Crystal City, though it wasn't far from all their thoughts, remained a mentally tantalizing goal, encouraging most of them to get their work done in order for the adventure to resume. They had, after traveling through the stars, already achieved something no other humans had even dreamed of: over one hundred thousand years and 557.7 light years of hibernation, interspersed with dangerous trips to four fantastic planets, arriving finally, as destiny would have it, on another Earth-like world. This time, they were successful. Now, beyond all expectations, they had proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that mankind wasn't alone in the universe. At first, as they explored Kepler 186f, it seemed as though they had found a remnant of a lost civilization. This was far more than they had expected. A metropolis, which Sheila had likened to the Emerald City of Oz, had appeared like a mirage below. At the very beginning of their exploration of the city, they were greeted by a ghostly specter, opening the

tantalizing and frightening possibility that they had somehow been expected.... The question in everyone's mind now was, 'Were they were still here?'"

Chapter Sixteen

The Clone Master

Everyone except Nicole avoided the laboratory, preferring any chore: tending the garden and green house plants, sweeping the floors, window washing, even cleaning the toilets, rather than performing tasks at that creepy place. The timid and unbalanced Nicole, however, had found her niche. She would prove to be a perfect nanny. No task was too grimy or smelly for her. Already, to the great satisfaction of Sandra and Woody, she had learned how to read the life-support systems for each of the synthetic wombs, understood the correct levels of intravenous food and amniotic fluids for each of her patients, and was able to quickly enter daily reports on each of the one hundred units now in operation. Seeing the lack of enthusiasm from the other humans and, in the case of Ingrid and Carla, a negative attitude about the whole process, Sandra, perhaps out of spite, made Nicole the manager of the lab. She was now the Clone Master, a title that would one day make her a legend among the human race.

At this early stage, however, she was a nuisance to the other stellarnauts, who considered her a shirker, too cowardly to be a proper stellarnaut and join the others in the exploration of the new world. Nicole, of course, properly understood their most important duty now: the maintenance, preservation, and nurturing of humanity, a role that, in her way of thinking, gave her almost god-like powers. In this matter and her interpretation of her role, after considering Ingrid her mentor for so long, she became a heretic, not merely in Ingrid's mind, but in all seven of her fellow humans' thinking. Yet this didn't bother Nicole, because she had the support of the androids, who had elevated her above the others. She now, as the chief nanny, wore a special uniform provided by Sandra with the title 'Clone Master' printed on the back and chest of her apron.

One day, when everyone had finished their chores, they were invited to visit the laboratory, this time on a guided tour, rather than as merely janitors and sweepers. So far, with few and begrudging exceptions, they had avoided this dreadful business. Today, though, as Skip put it succinctly from the bridge, this nonsense would stop.

Playing on Abe Drexel's military pride, he murmured discreetly from his wrist communicator, "Captain, take control of your crew. Set an example. The clones are why you people are here!"

"Don't let him talk to you like that!" whispered Sheila. "You're our leader, not him!"

"If that were only true!" he whispered back, after giving her hand a squeeze. "Everyone!" he called out, "Sandra and Woody worked very hard preparing the lab. Nicole is now the supervisor. Let's show her some respect."

As the others continued to drag their feet, still holding Sheila's hand, Abe followed Nicole into the lab. Giving Nicole no more credit than possible, he avoided her wide, unblinking blue eyes. Her effort to lord it over them, though it struck the others as a non-starter, was encouraged by Sandra, Woody, and Skip. It was, in fact, sanctioned. In her role as Clone Master, Abe's first impression, as she grinned, tilted her hands, and clasped her hands with delight, was that she was somewhat deranged. But was she actually mad? For quite some time, he had thought the experience of hibernation and planetary exploration had damaged Nicole. Now, after being given such a great purpose, her exuberance might just as easily be translated as

confidence and self-assurance. Max would admit later that it was an improvement over the emotionally shattered creature she had been before, but Abe wasn't so sure.

Soon, after getting used to her fluttery mannerism, his attention was, like that of the others, drawn almost completely to the clones. In the injection chambers, where, Nicole explained joyously, conception occurred, Sandra or Woody would inject the male cell into the female egg to create a fertilized egg. Chattering non-stop about the special equipment, magnified by a microscope, as each of them peered through the lens, Nicole likened the injector to a male penis and the incision to conjugation. "The whole process makes it almost a natural thing!" She clapped her hands.

"Ho ho!" Said giggled. "Doesn't look like a *dick* to me!"

"Ugh!" Sheila made a face. "That's disgusting!"

"She's right, Nicole." Ingrid shuddered. "There's nothing natural about this. Those are one celled organisms, not people. Where's the sex in that?"

"It's the conjugation of male and female cells," Nicole insisted. "By definition that's sex. When you looked through the microscope you were seeing the future. From our bodies, they'll grow and perpetuate the human race!"

"That's like putting lipstick on a pig!" Carla sneered.

"They're not humans," grumbled Ingrid. "They're clones!"

After taking his turn at the microscope, Mbuto shook his head. "I read a story like this. In that story the clones are bad news—mutants with a thirst for blood. What's to stop these clones from mutating and killing us all?"

"Shut-the-hill-up!" Carla thumped his head.

"Mbuto was joking." Abe frowned at him. "Right Mbuto?"

"Right," Mbuto nodded obligingly. "... A science fiction thriller—nothing more!"

To her credit, unfazed by the outbursts, Nicole moved on to the next stage. Four of the stages, she stopped to explain, were already present in the lab, the first one hundred samples roughly divided into (1) the injection stage; (2) fertilized egg stage; (3) the embryo stage, and (4) the fetus stage. Now, with the injection or, Nicole liked to call the conjugation phase, behind them, she led them to row and row of tiny embryos, attached to synthetic umbilical chords, inside their synthetic wombs. This caused even more shudders than the last stage. As they looked down into a great tank that resembled a huge aquarium, all seven listeners gasped.

Ingrid recoiled. "What in God's name is that?"

"Looks like a witches brew!" Carla cackled.

Unruffled, Nicole reached her hand in playfully as if to stir the pot. "After injection," she continued tutorially, "we place fertilized eggs in this chamber. Chemicals similar to those produced during pregnancy are added, electricity is applied, and, when some of the eggs become viable, they're transferred to the wombs."

As they looked across the room at row upon row of jars with tubes running in and out of them, Mbuto grinned with mirth this time. Carla broke into hysterical giggles.

"It's like a mad scientists lab!" he whispered in her ear.

"Un-be-liev-able!" She drawled.

"Here are the fetuses." Nicole lovingly hugged one jar. "Look at that little fellow. Isn't he cute?"

"He's a monster!" Ingrid said stubbornly.

"Would you rather become extinct?" Sandra's voice cut across the room.

"What is the success rate of these little tadpoles?" Said suppressed a laugh.

“Ninety/Ten,” Woody glared at him, “and they’re not tadpoles or monsters. They’re human beings like you.”

“Oh I beg the difference with you,” Said replied airily. “My mother gave birth to me. It damn near killed the poor woman.”

“That’ll be enough this.” Abe tapped Ingrid and Said’s shoulders. “Sandra.” He turned to her. “If I remember correctly back on Earth, that ratio of deaths would be quite high.”

“We don’t use the word death,” Skip’s voice rang over the laboratory speaker. “We use the word viable or non-viable. For cloning this is actually quite good.”

“It’s like the voice of God.” Max looked up at the speaker. “He’s everywhere now—even in the lab!”

For a few moments the spectators mulled uneasily in the cloning sector of the lab, as Sandra and Wood took Nicole aside and gave her instructions. When she returned, grinning happily, her eyes rolling crazily in her head, Max turned to Abe, a look of concern on his face.

“She’s quite bonkers!” he whispered, as she walked passed.

“Or possessed!” Ingrid murmured aloud.

“Our next phase,” Nicole declared with great pride, “after nine weeks of being an embryo, which back on Earth was called the trimester, is the fetal period—my special project now. There are, as you can see, different stages of this important period, ranging from nine weeks up to actual birth. Until we build more large wombs, it was necessary to keep many of your specimens in limbo. The first row of jars are the nine week fetuses. The next row are the sixteen week fetuses, and much closer to birth are those clones in the twenty-five week range. Normally, full term infants are born between thirty-six and forty weeks. Because of the accelerated rate of births in this process, however, we could have our first batch of newborns within the next two to three weeks.”

“What?” Abe exclaimed. “That soon?”

“Yes, that’s our estimation.” Nicole nodded with a grin.

“Looks like your nanny days will soon be here,” Said teased Carla.

“Oh contraire!” Nicole wagged her finger. “I was just told by Sandra and Woody that everyone—the captain included—will share in this chore.”

“Bull shit!” Said folded his arms. “I won’t do it!”

“Me neither!” Mbuto set his jaw. “That’s women’s work!”

“Oh really?” Carla stomped her foot. “I’m a lesbian. If I had my way I would’ve been born a man—a real man, not a wimp, like you two. Gender has nothing to do with it. I don’t even like kids!”

“Come on people.” Abe came forehead, waving his hands. “Let’s not have a mutiny. We all have to pitch in!”

“I agree with her, captain,” Ingrid protested, “but I’ll go one step further. *None of us* should have to be nannies to these monstrosities. The andies created them. Let them do this chore!”

“Silence!” Skip roared from the speaker. “Your race faces extinction if this doesn’t succeed. If you don’t like the word nanny, call yourselves caretakers, as we have been through the millenniums. You will all watch over and protect these children. When you finally meet your God, they will watch over a future generation. This is just the beginning. Like it or not, you are Nicole’s assistants while in the lab. Outside, during normal business, your captain is in charge, but in here she is the Clone Master. She has earned this role!”

Again, the humans felt intimidated. It was as if Skip had divine powers now. A feeling of rebellion grew in the ranks, which was a feeling Abe, himself, shared.

After listening to Nicole elaborate on the various, gauges, pumps, and containers filling the clone lab and being dismissed like school children when she was done, the humans reconvened at a far corner of the field to air their feelings.

“I think it’s outrageous they placed that loon over us!” Carla exclaimed angrily.

“Yes, I agree, but keep it down!” Abe clamped his hand over her mouth. “You have to control yourselves too.” He looked around at Ingrid, Mbuto, and Said. “We’d be screwed, if they packed up and left!” he added, pointing up in the direction of the ship and space station.

“Unfortunately, we’re in no position to rebel against them. They’ve protected us for through the millenniums. We’re not ready to be cut loose and be on our own, and *they know it!*”

“They wouldn’t leave, would they?” Max frowned.

“I’m afraid so.” Abe glance back a the lab. “If there’s an insurrection, they just might. All of our theories of android behavior have been wrong. I continue to see genuine emotion in them, especially Skip. That fellow was genuinely pissed just now. Let’s not forget what we’ve read about our caretakers. Even Sandra has the strength of three men. Can you imagine what Skip could do to one of us?”

“You’re the captain of the Phoenix,” Sheila reminded him, “not that robot. He’s not supposed to be in command!”

Abe nodded his head and leaned forward and kissed her cheek. “It’s true, my love,” he whispered. “...It’s always been true!”

Said, the robotologist, who understood the capabilities of the androids more than anyone in the group now summed up his feelings.

“I once resented them,” he said thoughtfully, looking back at the lab. “... I hated the control they had over our lives. After four savage world and one hundred thousand years of the dark sleep, though, I came to my senses. Because of what happened on Earth, Skip *is* in command. This is true for all the caretakers. What would have happened to us while we slept, if Sandra and Woody hadn’t watched over us. Where would we be if Rusty hadn’t piloted us to the new world. Skip has protected us many times. He is still protecting us. We may not like being ruled by the androids, but without them we wouldn’t have survived. Considering everything they’ve done for us here in Eden, too, we owe them our lives!”

Chapter Seventeen

Ghosts of Eden

The garden, greenhouse, and fields of grain flourished under the colonists' vigilance and care. They became able-bodied farmers and horticulturists. When not tending to the vegetables, herbs, and fruit trees in the circle, they were fishermen, cooks, janitors, and repairmen. Under the guidance of Nicole and prodding of Sandra and Woody, they also became lab technicians, doing all sorts of grimy but necessary tasks. No one except Nicole got used to the inner sanctum, as Carla called it: the awful smells and eerie sight of rows of embryos and fetuses suspended in synthetic wombs. The cleaning of the equipment, dumping of wastes, and refilling of jars under Nicole's direction was a nasty business, the worst chore being the disposal of the non-viable embryos, which affected Ingrid the most. Ingrid had learned to control her resentment and watch what she said, but for each non-viable embryo or, worse, dead fetus, she would say a prayer. As the chaplain of the colonist, her main concern was everyone's spiritual welfare. Even Nicole, whose role as Clone Master had gone to her head, wasn't beyond redemption in her mind.

The colonists looked forward to their rest periods and off days. Further exploration of the planet, which Skip promised when he was satisfied with the progress in the lab, was a distant objective now. To be away from the sights, smells, and grimy chores of the lab was what they looked forward to the most. Exercising in the gym, jogging around the perimeter, and playing cards or board games were among their favorite pastimes in the habitat. A large assortment of sports equipment found on the station was transferred to the recreational room for this purpose—baseballs, bats, footballs, tennis rackets, and even golf clubs, but nothing compared to the exciting prospect of returning to the Crystal City one day. Though they understood the dangers of exploration, the colonists were eager to go on another expedition.

When it appeared as if everything was under control and running smoothly, Skip appeared one day in their midst to make another inspection. The living quarters, bathrooms, kitchen, dining room, hospital, and recreation room were scrutinized, as were the grounds, including the garden, greenhouse, and fields. Politely, yet sternly, he pointed out several infractions, his main concern being sanitation in the bathroom and kitchen cleanliness. There was no military conformity in the arrangement of their quarters, but the colonists weren't allowed to bring food to their rooms. When Skip was finished inspecting the lab—the most important building in his mind, he gathered them all together to share his thoughts. Today, he was especially pleased with the progress of the garden and the extra effort done on the kitchen floor. As far as the lab was concerned, he understood the colonist abhorrence of it and said as little as possible about the clones, restricting his suggestions to the janitorial duties of the lab.

When he seemed to be finished with his meeting, he turned around and, as if it was an afterthought, asked if they'd like to go exploring again. Most of them clapped their hands and whooped like children promised a field trip. Skip's Ken-doll appearance belied his paternalistic tone. When Abe thanked him profusely for the gesture, Sheila glared at Skip, her resentment on Abe's behalf rekindled again. All pretense of Abe being the captain of the crew had vanished long ago. Abe was just another crewmember given a reprieve.

Tomorrow morning, after breakfast, Phoenix One would fly to the Crystal City again. Though Sheila shared everyone's excitement, she felt saddened by their docility, especially for Abe. As they walked hand-in-hand in the garden, Sheila looked up at Abe. Already, now that they had all been out of hibernation for many months, Abe's face like many of the humans, including her own, was showing wear. Sunburn, stress lines, and increased beard growth were seen on the men. Except for the increase in facial hair, the women suffered the same wear. For Abe, she realized, the burden of leadership had been taken out of his hands completely in the circle, but it would return when they were on their own during exploration. He was a different person when he was around Skip and his crew: agreeable and compliant. He lived each day as it came and had accepted the status quo. When it was just him and his own people, the old Abe, captain of the Phoenix, returned.

"I'm not happy with the way he treats you," she uttered finally, "but I understand why. You have to set an example for the rest of us. Carla is hot-tempered. Ingrid finds it difficult to accept the clones. Yet Said, who once hated the andies, has come to deeply respect them. I hope the day will come when we don't need them. Skip implied one time that day would come. Until then, Abe, remember who you are. No one calls you captain anymore and this is sad."

To Abe's great surprise and momentary embarrassment, Sheila began quoting Walt Whitman's poem. At first it seemed inappropriate. Whitman wrote the verses in honor of Abraham Lincoln after he was struck down by an assassin's bullet. Nevertheless, she shouted it aloud, emphasis placed on key words.

"O Captain, my Captain! Our fearful trip is done.

The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won...

O Captain, my Captain! Rise up and hear the bells.

Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills"

His heart hammering loudly in his chest, Abe grabbed his lieutenant and pilot and, with pent-up passion and yearning, seeing her eyes widened with happiness and disbelief, kissed her trembling lips. "Enough!" the words rushed out of his mouth. "That poem was written for a dead president. We're alive, Sheila. Considering the mindset of the others, we're like Adam and Eve on this world. Ho-ho, don't you see, Sheila. I love you, and you love me! It was right in front of us all this time!"

Quietly, taking a seat at the back of the passenger compartment of Phoenix One, Skip arrived unobtrusively, after everyone else had taken their seats. No one but the captain failed to notice his surreptitious arrival. With the pilot of his destiny by his side, his mind swimming with amorous visions, Abe settled once more behind the controls. Perfume, a rarity on board a starship, radiated faintly from Sheila. As he took command of the rover, he felt like his old self again. Traveling back to those heady days at the academy and his bachelorhood as an air force officer, his mind was able to multitask for awhile, but then, when the Crystal City loomed below them, was jolted by a familiar voice.

"Captain! I say Captain!" Skip's called impatiently.

"Huh?" He blinked, glancing at his pilot.

This time the catchwords weren't the same and felt like a cold splash of water in his face.

“Land where you did before,” Skip ordered briskly, as Sheila made her descent. “Rusty placed special lamps aft and a new weapon to chase away the beasts.”

“Yes, of course!” replied Abe shakily. “The rooftop it is!”

“Are you all right?” Sheila asked, as she made her descent.

“Yes,” he exhaled nervously. “I’m just ducky!”

With Skip aboard now, he felt suddenly deflated, until Sheila whispered, “Don’t let him get to you. Remember: he’s just a robot!”

Stifling a hysterical giggle, Abe glanced back at Skip, wondering if he overheard. What do I care? he asked himself, patting Sheila’s knee. I have you!

As the rover touched down on the target area, the crew let out a collective gasp. The big day was here: the exploration of the Crystal City. Unfastening their seat belts, they rose up shakily, chattering excitedly to Skip.

“How could such a big city look so utterly dead?” marveled Carla.

“That’s what we’re going to find out!” answered Skip. “We must tread lightly here. No shooting indiscriminately, unless you see a credible threat.”

“What constitutes a credible threat?” asked Said.

“When a creature advances toward you and can’t be scared away,” he explained.

“You mean warning shots?” Mbuto looked at him in disbelief. “When we fired on the spinners *they didn’t stop!*”

“That’s right,” Max agreed wholeheartedly, “those little bastards just kept coming!”

“My new weapon fired over their heads will scare them off,” he reassured them. “If that doesn’t work, I’ll vaporize them!”

Ingrid shook her head in dismay. “That might not work, Skip. Before then it might be too late!”

“You’ll just have to trust me!” Skip waved dismissively. “Where’s your faith?”

“Thou shall not tempt the Lord!” Ingrid quoted scripture.

Once again Abe stifled the urge to laugh. Sheila was also grinning to herself. As the crewmembers followed Skip out of the hatch, silence fill over the group. Sounds they hadn’t noticed before could be heard below the target area. Looking down over the edge of the building, they could see only shadows, but they could imagine hideous life forms swarming over the ground below. As they descended to the first floor where the crystal structure sat darkly in the center of the room, they were reminded of the eerie specter, who had seemed to warn them to keep out. Skip, who carried in one hand a large improvised lantern that resembled a twentieth century kerosene lamp, brandished a strange looking weapon that reminded Mbuto of a ray gun he had seen in one of his science fiction books. Following behind him, their weapons at ready, too, their flashlights arcing back and forth, they heard Ingrid again quote from the Twenty-Third Psalm: “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” To frightened to tell her to shut up, Carla gnashed her teeth. Said and Mbuto whimpered fearfully to themselves. Though not a Catholic, Sheila crossed herself for good luck.

The interior of the building was too bizarre to make sense out of. It appeared to be one large floorless room with cubicles situated at various points off the staircase. At first they couldn’t quite make out what was in each small compartment, but then, as they progressed, their lights flashed on what was obviously shapes that had sat in darkness until the arrival of their guests.

“Oh my God!” Said cried breathlessly. “Are those things people?”

“If you can call them people,” Skip said calmly. “Don’t worry,” he reassured the little Arab, “they’re quite dead.”

Raising his lantern and turning his body to capture various other sectors of the room, he made a chilling assessment. “Judging by how many of them lying pell-mell in this building, something catastrophic happened to this civilization, very likely a plague of some sort.”

“Merciful heavens!” gasped Ingrid.

Abe trained his flashlight on the skeletal remains of an alien—a four-legged creature, with preying mantis arms and an insect-like head, a ghostly remnant of its former self. “Why didn’t it affect us?” he asked with a shudder. “We’ve been here long enough to catch it. Could such a plague wipe out an entire race?”

“I recall scanning your history:” Skip replied reflectively, “the Black Plague, the many influenza epidemics, and the germ wars of the last century. The human race has built up immunities and, as stellanauts, you were immunized against all sorts of imagined diseases. We don’t know whether or not these creatures would have been friendly. Perhaps, for your sakes, it’s best that they perished by the plague.”

“I dunno, Skip,” Abe shrugged his shoulders. “That’s sounds awfully cold. Perhaps you’re right, though. I guess we’ll never know. I hope you’re correct about our immunity. This couldn’t have happened that long ago. After a long period of time, even skeletons turn to dust.”

Skip walked into the cubicle and kicked the alien, shattering it immediately into a powdery substance. “This one was, in fact, dust,” he concluded gloomily. “Whatever microbe affected them won’t bother you. You would’ve been sick by now. This epidemic is long gone. It will be interesting to see what shape the others are in. Most of them have likely deteriorated completely.”

“You’re not seriously thinking of going any further?” Mbuto looked down the stairs. “What if you’re wrong, Skip? What if it wasn’t a microbe. Maybe it was a poisonous gas that killed them. It could be a death trap down there!”

“Yeah,” Said nodded anxiously, “this place gives me the creeps. Let’s call it a day!”

“I’m sorry, Skip,” Carla’s voice trembled. “This time I agree with them. There’s plenty of stuff to discover on this world. We’ve seen enough of the Crystal City. Let’s go back!”

For once, Abe found himself in total agreement with the naysayers. Though trying to be brave, Sheila was terrified, as was Max, who normally put on a brave face.

“What’s the point anyhow?” Max reasoned shakily. “If they’re all like this—skeletal ghosts, why go any further? There’s too many unknown factors here, Skip. Not only are there thousands of dead aliens, but we have no idea what kind of monsters lurk in this city. Your super-weapon might just stir them up.”

“It would be like poking a hornet’s nest!” Sheila squeezed Abe’s hand.

For a moment, after these final words, the unanimity of the group overwhelmed Skip. He turned back to the stairs above as if to retrace his steps. Then something unforeseen suddenly decided the issue.

“What is that?” Sheila’s hand flew to her throat.

“It’s a monster! It’s a monster!” Mbuto cried.

“It’s coming from above us!” Skip exclaimed. “Quick people, follow me!”

“Let’s blast it!” Said trained his weapon up the stairs.

“No, use your super-weapon!” Carla tugged Skip’s sleeve.

“No, absolutely not!” snapped Skip. “That might damage the stairwell.”

As they stumbled down the spiral staircase, at various point dangerously packed together, their panic soared. The noise behind them—a skittering sound implied that it was quite small, and yet, because of its untimely appearance, it was magnified a hundred fold in their minds. When they reached to bottom floor, all eight of them turned with weapons at the stairwell and waited. As they waited, it became apparent to them that Skip had overreacted, perhaps purposely to spur them on. At any rate, here they were, confronting what turned out to be a small rodent-like creature with huge, unblinking eyes, that just sat there staring at them as if unsure what to do.

“Don’t you dare shoot him!” Skip ordered Mbuto and Said.

“This is just great!” ranted Carla. “We charged down here for nothing. My cat was bigger than that. Now we have to climb back up. Next time there might something much bigger waiting for us—like a spinner or one of those wolf-like fiends!”

“Well, we’re here now,” Skip said, shining his lantern this way and that. “Look at all of them above us in their cubicles and scattered around the room. We’ve discovered a city of ghosts!”

Fittingly enough, Abe was the first one to show interest in what they had discovered. With daylight highlighting portions of the city outside, it didn’t appear quite so sinister outside. He wasn’t surprised at Skip’s frame of mind. He was after all, as Sheila pointed out half-seriously, a robot. But the truth was, Skip was showing another dimension of himself. Now, putting aside the caretaker, protector, and counselor halves of his personality, he was a scientist, genuinely interested in the alien civilization.

“Are you certain that contraption of yours will do the trick!” He studied Skip’s weapon.

“As certain as I can possibly be!” Skip reassured him.

“Demonstrate it for us!” challenged Carla.

“Very well.” Skip said, turning toward the entrance. “I won’t even have to vaporize a creature. I’ll destroy an inanimate object.”

“Like what?” Abe asked, following him out the door. “You mean one of the buildings.”

Aiming his weapon at a odd-looking vehicle, resembling a waffle iron on wheels, he let loose with a stream of energy that melted it to a syrupy mass.

“Wow!” Mbuto clapped his hands “That was impressive!”

“Now that’s what I call *destruction!*” Carla nodded with approval.

“It makes our weapons seem puny.” Said looked at his blaster. “With weapons like that we’ll conquer this world!”

“What next?” Max sounded eager now. “How much of this city do you plan to explore?”

“I’m not sure this last building was representative enough. It was like an alien office building. There must be living quarters, hospitals, laboratories, and other types of structures. I’m curious to see whether some of the equipment might be useful here. Who knows, you might even be able to make it your new home.”

“I don’t think so.” Sheila made a face. “I like it just where we are!”

“Me too!” agreed Ingrid.

Even Max agreed with this assessment. Despite the seemingly tame avenue bisecting the city proper, there was a menacing feeling in the air due to the evidence of the plague. The powdery substance seen in the cubicles was visible in the crevices of walls and in doorways facing the street. As they followed Skip, weapons ready, eyes wide with fear, more praying mantis skeletons were seen behind the translucent walls of the buildings. Some of which were in worse shape than others, heads or limbs missing, having crumbled away over the years. One

peered hideously out of a window, as if meditating his fate. Others sat in what seemed to be a trolley sitting on a track running down the center of the street; like those inside the buildings, they were in various states of preservation. Death was everywhere. And yet, by now, the humans had become accustomed to horror. The one reassuring factor in favor of not immediately returning to the rover and heading home was that the aliens were dead and no longer a possible threat. This, however, was not true for the native creatures roaming through the city. It appeared as though Skip's demonstration with his super weapon kept most of them away, and yet a few small creatures darted this way and that, ignoring their presence. Several fliers, squawking, hissing, and hooting, soared overhead, undoubtedly the main source of the noise they heard on the roof. In the distance scrambling across the main thoroughfare, they could see furtive shadows, too distant to discern clearly. Some appeared to be bipedal, others skittered on spidery legs, and a few moved appropriately enough like ghosts over the ground.

It seemed only a matter of time when a denizen similar to a spinner or wolf-beast might jump out of the shadows. Everyone therefore remained primed for combat. The first threat came from out of nowhere: a trio of the wolf-beasts snarling and snapping like mad things. Up close they didn't look like wolves at all. Instead two eyes on each side of their massive heads, there was one large eye with several pupils spiraling around crazily in the orb.

Before anyone could let out a scream, Skip had vaporized the first beast, sending the other two scampering away. Everyone was amazed. There was barely a trace of the creature left, black smoke rising from a pile of ash.

"Whoa, that was awesome!" Said clasped his forehead.

"Like a cosmic death ray!" exclaimed Mbuto. "One moment he was there and the next moment—poof!—he was atoms!"

"We have nothing to fear!" Carla looked around at the group. "Skip has a super-gun. Monsters look out!"

Like children marveling over a toy, Abe noted, members of his crew had seemed to regress. Max gave them a worried look and Ingrid grinned with amusement. Abe wasn't surprised at Skip's reaction when Said and Mbuto wanted to try out the weapon themselves.

"No way!" Skip raised up his weapon. "After your last two episodes, I don't trust you! You're both trigger happy. Weapons should only be used for defense!"

"Awe come on!" Said flexed his fingers. "This time I'll be careful. I promise. Just one shot."

"Me too!" Mbuto made a grab for it. "Let me blow something up!"

"Tsk-tsk," Sheila raised an eyebrow. "How immature!"

"Look at them!" Carla studied the two men. "They just want to bag themselves a beast!"

"Well, stop it!" Abe waved them off. "This isn't a big game hunt!"

Said and Mbuto withdrew their hands, grinning sheepishly as if their actions might have been in jest. Everything around the explorers—the crystal buildings, bizarre vehicles, ghostly imprint of the aliens, and the surreptitious life forms flying and darting about—gave the setting an almost surreal feeling. Carefully looking up and down the main thoroughfare, Skip chose the opposite direction from which the furtive creatures had been spotted in the distance. With his special weapon poised and ready to shoot, he forged ahead. In twos and threes, not wanting to be the last in line, the humans followed close behind.

"Let's check out that tall building," Skip called calmly over his shoulder. "I'd like to bring back some portable equipment for analysis. It might come handy. Some of those strange-looking vehicles might be useful too."

“It could be contaminated,” suggested Mbuto. “You’re assuming it’s a microbe. What if radioactivity or some other poisonous substance or gas killed these bugs!”

Recalling the state most of the aliens were in, Max pursed his lips. “Unless we can study some of them, we might never know.”

“True enough.” Skip replied. “But you’d all be sick by now if it was toxic or radioactive contamination. For that matter, you’d all be dead from the plague. Our biggest concern are the potential predators on this world.”

Not long after Skip had led the group into the tallest and most majestic of the crystal towers, a second, more serious threat, loomed in the building. Horrified by the number of ghostly filaments on the main floor, Abe and his crew were stopped cold in their tracks. They were huddled in corners or lying sideways on the floor, hundreds of them, which seemed peculiar. As Skip pointed out dispassionately, either the plague was very fast acting or Mbuto was onto something. Something had killed them very fast.

“Mother of God!” Ingrid gasped. “How dreadful!”

Recoiling at the very thought, everyone were shocked and dismayed that Skip brought them into harm’s way. This time Skip’s gun would be of no use. Without asking his permission, Abe led them immediately out of the building. Shuddering as if alien cooties crawled all over them now, they just stood in the daylight, stunned and numb with fear, staring anxiously in the direction of the first building.

While they discussed, with mounting panic, his apparent misjudgment, Skip managed to find a strange object inside—a round, shiny orb that appeared to glow from inner light.

“You fool,” screamed Mbuto, “drop that ball! It could be radioactive!”

“Nonsense!” Skip replied coolly, holding it up to the light. “It’s not dangerous. Those crystals we found weren’t radioactive. What we have here is a portable example of those wondrous crystals.”

Remembering the crystals found in the cave and the first building, the explorers were drawn hesitantly to the orb. At first glance it might have been assumed that the glow inside of it was caused by daylight, but then, after handing his weapon to Abe for safe-keeping, Skip held the ball of crystal beneath the shadow of the tower to demonstrate its unnatural light.

“That’s impossible!” marveled Carla.

“No more impossible than the larger crystals.” Skip placed it gently into her hands.

“It’s a miracle.” Her voice trembled as she gazed at the ball. “Look at it! It’s communicating with us, like an ancient Morris code.”

“That’s silly, totally absurd,” scolded Ingrid. “You’re treating it like a living thing!”

“All right,” Carla reasoned, “if it’s not alive, Ingrid, where does the light come from—magic?...God?”

Ingrid thought a moment. “It’s like those deep sea creature and certain minerals who glow in the dark. There has to be a scientific explanation. It doesn’t have god-like powers.”

“Yes, there could be a scientific explanation,” expounded Skip. “Sea life on Earth had a bioluminescence glow and there were, in fact, minerals who, because of certain chemicals, also generated light.... But that doesn’t explain why such a glow appears in the crystal structures we found or this glass orb. Their light is concentrated in the center of the crystals as if a lamp burns deep inside. It could be important to us in some way or be just a bauble to stare at and place on a shelf, but it’s unique—a mystery I’d like to explore.”

Once again Abe saw something in Skip that was very human: an intangible, abstract desire to know for its own sake and, more importantly, a yearning for a higher power which science would never know. He was amused and delighted by Skip's reaction to the orb. Reaching over impulsively, he gently gripped his arm gently, chuckling with mirth. "What if it is, in fact, God, Skip—an alien god, who, like the Old Testament Jehovah became angry with these people? He zapped them for their sins!"

"Yeah!" Carla began giggling. "What if all these dead bugs were just victims of the alien god's wrath?"

Said, Mbuto, and Sheila also broke into laughter. Skip smiled faintly at the banter. Ingrid, however, wasn't amused.

"You're not serious?" she fumed. "That's blasphemy! Why would you both say such a thing? Are you all still a bunch of atheists or heathens? The celestial god would never do such a thing. These poor creatures died horribly and here you all are laughing like hyenas!" "You're not laughing, Skip." She looked up expectantly at him. "Stop them. Make them shut up!"

"She's right." He turned to the group. "You shouldn't make light of this situation. I respect your God. A merciful god wouldn't destroy innocent inhabitants. Why would he punish this outpost? He didn't punish us. Wouldn't he just wipe out their entire race?"

Though he knew they hadn't been serious, Skip had nevertheless chided them for their irreverence and also given credence to God's existence. Satisfied with this response, Ingrid let the matter drop. She had once again received endorsement from Skip for her faith. Who could argue with that? Abe thought, giving her a nod. On their way back to the rover, weapons at the ready, they looked around at the buildings—all of them tombs for the aliens, still not convinced they hadn't been contaminated by victims of the plague. Ingrid, as always, prayed for their deliverance—oft quoted verses from the Twenty-third Psalm, the Lord's Prayer, and her special prayer to the celestial god. By now everyone was used to her acting as the chaplain. So far, unlike the previous three planets, there had been no deaths, even accidents. It seemed even to Carla that Ingrid had a pipeline to her god... Ironically, this thought would be tested this hour.

When they in front of the building on which Phoenix One sat, a shadow loomed overhead: a flier they had never seen before, a creature the size of pterodactyls in the Jurassic period on Earth. When they looked up at this monster what they actually saw was not a flying reptile or bird but a grotesque parody of a giant bat, sporting a multi-eyed head, jagged-toothed mouth, and menacing long claws. Almost instantly, all eight weapons, including Skip's powerful gun were poised to fire, but it was too late. Skip dare not fire, fearful the blast was too close. As it turned out, the others were also hindered by circumstances. Swooping down, before they realized it, it scooped Carla up, making it difficult for the shooters to aim. But then, as it rose up with its victim, Said took a chance, quickly aimed his blaster and hit the flier's wing, causing the flier to let go of its victim. This time, Said impulsiveness had been justified. Unfortunately, Carla had been dropped several meters, as it flew away, landing with a thud on her back.

"Oh no!" Said gripped his forehead. "What have I done?"

"This time, you may have saved her life!" Skip ran over to her.

The first to reach Carla was Ingrid, who knelt down over the stricken woman wringing her hands.

"Don't move her!" shouted Max. "That fall must have broken some bones!"

“If she’s even alive,” Sheila said tearfully.

“Is she breathing?” asked Abe, kneeling down next to her.

Watching him check her pupils, her pulse, and open her mouth, everyone expected the worst. Though he was worried about serious internal injuries and broken bones, Max was more worried right now about her vital signs. Her breathing was shallow, and her pupils were dilated which indicated a concussion. Withdrawn from his pack, a portable unit, from which he strung electrodes to her temples and various points on her chest, gave a weak reading. It looked very grave. Disregarding the potential dangers now, everyone crowded momentarily around the doctor and patient. Despite the gravity of the crisis, Skip insisted they keep their weapons ready in case another monster appeared. Certain that her one-time critic and friend was at death’s door, Ingrid was now worried about Carla’s immortal soul. Until very recently, she had scorned Ingrid’s faith and had been her greatest critic. Bending over Carla, she listened for a heartbeat just to make sure, then, shaking her head, began quoting a different prayer: “Through his holy unction and through his goodness and mercy, may God pardon you for whatever sins you have committed on earth....”

“That’s sounds familiar.” Abe frowned.

Max’s eyes widened with recognition as he listened. “Yes, indeed...I heard that at my father’s death bed,” “Ingrid, that’s Extreme Unction. You’re our chaplain, not a Catholic priest.”

“She’s *our* priest!” Sheila looked down tearfully.

Inexplicably, Said (a Muslim) and Mbuto (a onetime atheist) crossed themselves. Greatly moved, himself, Abe placed his arm around Sheila, whispering, “.... I can’t believe God would take that feisty girl!”

“He hasn’t!” Skip pushed Ingrid out of the way. “She’s unconscious, not dead!” Bending down and performing what appeared to be the same tests Max had performed, he placed his ear next to her mouth again and listened, then rising up a ways, began performing the age old method of CPR. Blowing in her mouth, he pressed on her chest, and, after several moments of repeating this pattern, called out sternly, “Carla Mendoza, wake up! This isn’t your day to die!”

Dumbfounded by his optimism, Max had thrown up his hands and stood up shakily when he took over. The others shook their heads at his pretensions. After all, Max had so much as pronounced the woman dead. Ingrid, whose prayer had been rudely interrupted, wasn’t certain what to make of his words. When Carla’s eyes opened that moment, however, it almost seemed as if Skip had performed a miracle. Waving off such thoughts, Skip dismissed this suggestion.

“There was nothing miraculous about this.” He looked around the group. “That fall knocked the wind out of her. She probably has a concussion. If she had internal injuries, she probably wouldn’t have awakened at all.” “Carla,” he asked gently, “can you move your hands and feet?”

Moving her hands and feet then, she murmured groggily. “W-what happened?”

“You almost died, my dear,” Ingrid reached down and took her hand.

“Whoa, Skip, that was like magic,” Mbuto said almost reverently. “You said wake up and —zap—she opened her eyes!”

“No!” Ingrid pointed to the sky. “He did this—God! Tell them, Skip?”

“That’s right.” Skip said obligingly. “I merely gave her CPR.”

“Ingrid started giving you the Last Rites,” Sheila informed Carla with a smile, “just like a priest. We thought you were dead.”

“It was awesome!” Said shook his head in wonder. “You hit the ground with a thud, girl —crunch. You’re one tough little gal!”

Skip rose up and glanced around at the city. "I'm not a magician and Ingrid's not a priest. Before we encounter another monster, let's leave this dreadful place!"

In order to safely move Carla, Skip sent Said and Mbuto up to fetch the stretcher from Phoenix One. While the men and women stood guard around the injured woman, glancing nervously at the sky, Max continued to check her pulse, heartbeat, and pupils, amazed and mystified by her recovery. Even though Skip dismissed the notion of a miracle, legends had been born today. Now that there would be no threat of collateral damage, he stood ready to blast attackers with his weapon. Always the protector, he had become something else today.

When the group had returned to the rover, Carla's stretcher was strapped to the deck, everyone eagerly took their seats, and Sheila put Phoenix One quickly in the air. With visions of its horrors fresh in their minds, all thoughts of re-visiting the Crystal City were placed on hold. The Ring of Kepler was a welcome site, as it loomed below the rover. When they emerged onto the tarmac of the habitat, Rusty, Sandra, Woody, and Nicole greeted the weary explorers. The first thing they learned wasn't the wonders of the Crystal City but the miracle that had occurred there. Carla, who had fallen from the claws of a monstrous flier, had survived certain death and Skip had called her from death's door.

Chapter Eighteen

The Celestial God

Now that they had gotten exploration out of their systems for awhile, the stellarnauts were again put to work in the maintenance of the habitat, care of the garden, greenhouse, and grain fields, and assisting Nicole in the lab. Everyone expected to carry their weight in Eden, but the clean-up and servicing of the lab was grimy business. It seemed as though nothing was too nasty for Nicole to assign to them, from dumping fetal waste to cleaning the tank and filling the jars with that awful smelling fluid.

During the first two weeks after they had returned from the Crystal City, as Carla recovered from her injuries, she was given much lighter duty. Something had changed the normally spirited and outspoken woman. Everyone else, except the more sober minded Abe and Max, her physician, had given much of the credit to Skip for saving her life. She had agreed with this assessment until, when she had fully regained consciousness, Max told her of Ingrid's prayer. Carla, who had once been a Roman Catholic as a child, was greatly impressed. After this disclosure, she and Ingrid became close friends. Carla, after one hundred thousand misspent years, had been saved. She was baptized with a sprinkle of water on her forehead, in which Ingrid made a sign of the cross. Though it wasn't the normal baptismal procedures done by Protestant or Catholic clerics to initiates, it was the first conventional religious act performed by the chaplain. When Mbuto and Said heard about the wondrous reversal in Carla, they also requested baptism. Carla, they had been told, after the service conducted in the garden, had been born again—an expression Ingrid had been ignorant of until she read it in her New Testament. Now, after studying the ship's database for more information on the correct rituals and wearing a lab smock on which she had scrawled a crude cross in the back and front of the smock, it was official. It didn't matter that she had been raised in the Presbyterian faith, she had performed a priestly function. Until Ingrid's journey of faith, most of the stellarnauts had been ignorant of religion, especially Christianity, which was considered outdated and inappropriate for scientific minds. Those who had been raised in a faith as children had forgotten their upbringing and had likewise been discouraged to believe. Said had been a relapsed Muslim and Mbuto an atheist for so long the understanding of being born again, as Ingrid tried to explain it, came slowly at first.

"I don't understand." Mbuto had scratched his head. "How can I be born again. That doesn't make sense."

Ingrid searched her mind for the appropriate scripture. "There's two kinds of birth," she struggled a moment, "... according to Jesus, you can't go to heaven unless your born of water an spirit."

"Huh?" Mbuto gave her a blank look.

"It's symbolic," Carla piped up. "Water in baptism signifies rebirth. Jesus, the spirit, enters upon baptism and—presto—you're saved!"

"Well, that's close enough." Ingrid sighed. "It's not automatic Carla. Like I explained, you have to truly believe, repent, and live a good life." "Line up men," she turned to the initiates. "Accept baptism and the spirit of the Lord!"

As she had done for Carla, who stood arms folded, casually watching the rite, Ingrid made the sign of the cross on each of their foreheads, said a brief prayer and then mumbled, “By his blood, you’re saved!”

“Blood?” Mbuto made a face. “I’m saved by his blood?”

“Yes, of course.” Ingrid looked at him in disbelief.

“I read about that.” Said nodded with understanding. “He was crucified, wasn’t he—for men’s sins, women’s too.”

“Don’t forget,” Carla interrupted, “he rose from the dead. Now he’s a spirit, who roams the universe in search of lost souls.”

“Almost correct.” Ingrid grinned with approval. “You almost have it Carla, and you, too, Said, but you Mbuto? Are you familiar with the Bible at all?”

“No.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Is that necessary to be saved?”

“Of course,” Ingrid replied with a flicker of irritation, “that’s our book.”

“Duh!” Carla stuck out her tongue.

“When I have the New Testament printed out, I expect you to get up to speed.” Ingrid said haughtily. “Both you and Said also need to read!” She looked at Carla. “Today, in God’s garden, I will read to you from the good book. First bow your heads in prayer!”

From a distance, Abe and Max had been listening with amusement. Also perking up her ears was Nicole, who standing in the doorway of the lab, listened intently to Ingrid’s prayer:

“Lord, accept these three sinners, as you once accepted me. Forgive them for their ignorance. They are children of their age—a disbelieving century in which science has attempted to blot out words that conflict with their own. As witnessed on Mother Earth, mankind can’t live without faith. In the vacuum, evil triumphed, sin became the norm, and in the end, as in the days of Noah and Sodom and Gomorrah, you sent down your wrath. Let this remnant in Eden and it’s unborn children become the new Jerusalem—the Children of Israel. Give our caretakers souls so that they can be saved too. Wipe away the doubters’ skepticism and make them also believe!”

Abe and Max were taken back by her words. Nicole could scarcely believe her ears. Despite Ingrid’s previous rebuke of the clones for not being human and being infernal things, she included them in their prayers. She had also included the androids who were not only not created naturally as in the case of the clones but were made by science, atheistic men, and not created by God. Suddenly, for the first time since Ingrid began playing the role of chaplain, there was a congregation.

“Well you look at that!” marveled Max. “We got ourselves a church!”

Lieutenant Sheila Livingston, second-in-command of the habitat, who had been checking the sprinkler system in the field, was drawn to the scene. Standing there in the shade of the new trees, she heard most of the rite and Ingrid’s prayer. Though biding her time, until she could catch Ingrid by herself, she would be the next member to join the Church of the Celestial God. After all, her parents had been Lutherans, and had she not nominated Ingrid as the habitat’s priest? For awhile, the news of Carla’s baptism stirred up childhood memories in her mind. When Said and Mbuto had also become initiates, she decided to join up.

The following morning Sheila sought out Ingrid, who was in the library, busily making copies from the database of the New Testament. Ingrid was delighted to bring her into the congregation. So not to make the lieutenant a spectacle as the others, the rite was held in the

greenhouse. When Ingrid made the sign of the cross on her forehead Sheila giggled with embarrassment. With her garish smock and flowers strewn in her hair, Ingrid reminded her more of a pagan priestess than a chaplain, and yet, when it was completed, Sheila volunteered to help Ingrid finish printing the New Testament and was eager to begin reading about her new faith.

To appease Sheila, who worried about his immortal soul, Abe had a clandestine meeting with Ingrid in which he, too, became a member of the fold. Max was a little more difficult to convert. He had always, in good humor, considered Ingrid to be somewhat eccentric. Out of curiosity, he looked up articles on the Christian religion. Her unconventional approach, including the name she called her church and the pagan-like ceremony was like nothing he had read. And yet, after hearing about Abe's conversion, Max decided, in a whimsical mood, that he would join up too.

Not long after Max became a member, Nicole left her lab, still reeking of amniotic fluid, to seek out the priestess.

As she approached her in the garden, Ingrid recoiled. "Good grief woman." She wrinkled her nose. "Take a bath! You're even beginning to smell like a clone!"

"I heard your prayer." Nicole came straight to the point. "You included the clones as being saved. After everything you've said about them, were you serious?"

"Well...yes," Ingrid hesitated. "If they are baptized they can be saved."

"What about those fetuses who've died?" Nicole raised an eyebrow. "Are they damned to hell?"

"Of course not," she replied dubiously. "...It's like they never existed."

"That's horrible!" Nicole made a face. "What a beastly thing to say!"

"I'm sorry." Ingrid sighed. "There's nothing in the Bible about this. Perhaps we should give them the benefit of the doubt."

Nicole studied her a moment. "You're making all this up as you go along, aren't you?" she asked, shaking her head. "I use to look up to you. You had me fooled with that crap. Will it's all bullshit. The most dangerous time for our offspring are when they're embryos and even during the fetal stage many of them die. I can't believe they're not saved simply because they have the misfortune to die! You even gave the androids a pass, as if to make them honorary members, and yet the unborn have no souls?"

Not knowing how to respond to her statement, Ingrid shook her head sadly and said, "I'll pray about it. Perhaps God will give me a sign!"

"Will here's a sign, bitch," Nicole presented her middle finger. "Screw your celestial god!"

Skip, who had been listening in again, waited until Nicole was gone, and then, from the bridge, murmured from Ingrid communicator. "That went poorly.... You will accept us—men's machines—but you won't accept the unborn dead. The clones are replicas of yourselves and by definition are imbued with souls. How then can we, who are not flesh and blood, have such precious things?"

"I-I will pray on this also," she looked up to the sky. "Please Skip.... Nicole is half right when she said I was making this up as I go along. I feel a constant revelation. As Saint Paul, I see through a glass darkly.... Nothing is clear to me, and yet I know there's a God. He's just much different than what he was on Earth."

"Listen, my child," Skip took a paternal tone. "If you want Nicole to join your church and the others to really accept your patchwork faith, you must be inclusive. You will have to include all of the clones who have ever been conceived and, yes, you'll have to justify giving we

machines souls, too.... If you do this, you will truly represent a celestial god and have a universal church.”

“Amen.” Ingrid whispered. “Spoken as would the Lord!”

“I’m not God.” Skip reminded her. “.... Perhaps, though, without feeling it, I speak for Him. As you might say, I’m a tool. Yet, I have been much more. For over one hundred thousand years, we, the caretakers, have watched over you like gods, not sleeping or eating. We’ve been in constant vigil over our children. Four of our children died on other worlds. Now here in Eden, you humans must be vigilant about *your* children. Many have died here on this world. All of them living and dead have been your responsibility. They are from your loins. Because you have made yourself a chaplain, with the air of a priestess, this is particularly true for you. Give the dead ones the Last Rites as you gave Carla. Pray for them all, not just the newborns.... If you do this, your religion will be inclusive and gain respectability for the new age and not become a relic of the past. If not, you’re faith will wither away as all cults, too exclusive for doubters, offering nothing to intelligent minds.”

When Skip remained silent for awhile, Ingrid looked around her, wondering if she had been overheard. The android leader had given her a dressing down, as would the Lord, Himself. He had given her instructions, not merely suggestions, that she had to go against some of her Christian beliefs. She had been careful not to offend Said with the word ‘Christian’, who claimed to be a Muslim, although this is precisely what Jesus had in mind, so she avoided using the label Christian. Already she had drastically altered the earthly conception of the Lord, calling him the Celestial God and combining both Protestant and Catholic elements with a dash of paganism just for effect. Now she had to include embryonic and fetal clones—both living and dead in the ranks of the saved and she had been challenged to justify her implication that androids could be saved too.

“I can’t do this God!” she muttered unhappily. “This is going too far! It’s watering things down *too much!*”

“Yes, you can!” came Skip’s reply. “You have already made up many of the rules.”

“Damn it!” She wrung her fist at the sky. “I wasn’t talking to you! You’re everywhere—like the voice of God. It’s like your in my head!”

“I’m here on the Phoenix,” he replied enigmatically. “The Phoenix means rebirth, and here you are promising them they can be born again. How appropriate is that?”

“What?” Ingrid screwed up her face. “That’s nonsense. Phoenix is a pagan name!”

“All men and women fear death.” He appeared to have changed the subject. “You’ve given these people hope, so they will brave the new world. You can remain a silly eccentric in the garden of Eden or truly become a priestess of the Celestial Church. On this world, if you so wish, I can even make you its Pope!”

Ingrid felt at first as if Satan had been tempting her. Now, with the feeling that Skip was inside her head, she wondered if she might not be going mad. Though he denied it, the android commander was usurping God. His watchful eye on land and constant voice from the sky made him seem godlike, which brought her to the notion that he must be speaking for the Devil, not God at all. If this was true, he had to be overthrown, as Satan would be overthrown at the Last Judgment, only she couldn’t wait for the End Times. They had already occurred on Earth. Here in Eden she must protect the Children of God from Skip’s influence. He wanted her to bastardize the word of God to suit the circumstances. It was bad enough that she must include

laboratory-born children in the church. How could she ever have thought the caretakers could have souls?

After pounding her temples a moment, she fled the garden of Eden, wishing she could exorcise Skip from her thoughts, but his last words, “I can even make you its Pope!” frightened her greatly. Because of the spectacular healing of Carla in which he was an integral part and his past exercise of his authority, she half believed him. She ran deeply into the field with no destination except to escape her greatest fears. Max, who was out for a stroll, happened to see her whiz passed as he walked the perimeter of the circle. She was mumbling to herself, recounting Skip’s words, praying feverishly, as if to drive him from her skull. Pausing at the fence, she looked out at the wilderness of Eden and witnessed herds of the elephant-like monsters intermingling with other strange-looking beasts, all of them avoiding the electrical barrier and taking it in stride. A revelation overcame her, as she contemplated the deadly fence: The inhabitants of Crystal City had failed to tame this world. What made them think they could succeed if such a superior race failed?... How could *any people* conquer this savage world? Could it be, she muttered aloud, as she considered the horrors discovered in Crystal City, that a plague would overtake them too? The androids were immune to human disease and toxic air. They could live in any environment. They don’t need us, she thought grimly. We need them! Skip lorded this over them constantly. Because of their dependency, he had great power! “You must be destroyed!” she screamed at the heavens.

Suddenly, after rushing to the scene, Max’s hand clamped her mouth.

“She didn’t mean it!” he called out frantically. “I heard what she was saying to herself. Surely you were joking. All that stuff about her being a priestess and making her the Pope was a jest—Right?. You’re not serious, Skip!”

“Perhaps,” he equivocated, “...maybe not.” “The fact is, doctor” he added sternly. “I don’t care what she calls herself. She must make peace with Nicole. Frankly, after her actions, I fear for her sanity. Calling for my destruction justifies my fear. I fear for Nicole’s sanity too. That title Sandra and Woody gave her, “The Clone Master,” has gone to her head. The rest of you are repulsed by the clones. We need Nicole’s dedication. Ingrid’s prejudice against the clones has upset her greatly. Sandra and Woody need her especially for the newborns.”

“I’m not invisible. I’m still here.” Ingrid glared at Max. “I’m not crazy either. I know what I feel!”

“You’ve been an inspiration to your team,” Skip addressed her directly. “I saw that from the beginning. I was trying to bolster your ego and give you some guidance. I’m sorry I offended you. According to my database, the Pope was the highest authority on Earth.”

“I’ve been reading the Book of Revelations,” she explained calmly now. “The Catholic Church is a wonderful institution, but it’s dead. The Pope is dead, too. There will never be another Pope here in Eden. The very notion sounds apocalyptic. If you gave me such authority, what does that make you?”

“You mean Satan?” Skip seemed to gasp.

“Yes—none other!” Ingrid’s eyes narrowed to slits.

“Good grief!” muttered Max.

Skip was silent a moment as Ingrid was scolded by Max. “You fool!” he whispered shrilly. “Skip isn’t even human. He was trying to humor you. Here at the far corner of the galaxy all that Bible crap is irrelevant. Now that Earth and its religion is dead, you can make your own religion!”

Aghast at Max's words, Ingrid clasped her forehead in dismay. "My *own* religion?" she uttered in disbelief. "The Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and other churches might be dead, but Earth's religion isn't dead. There is still a heaven and hell. There is still a God and devil....You don't understand anything if you don't understand that!"

The words rolled from Skip's mouth: "Heaven....Hell....God....Satan. These are outdated words. After the destruction of all those good people on Earth, do you really blame the devil for that? I can understand you wanting to believe in heaven, but do you really believe in Satan or in an afterlife called Hell. Hell was on Proxima, Ross, Wolf, and Gliese. Hell was in the Crystal City and lives on in the monsters beyond the fence. It was also on Earth. Hell can be conquered, Ingrid. Satan, if he ever existed never came to this world. Nowhere in your Bible does it mention this place. Nowhere in its prophecy do you and your church fit in. Clones aren't compatible with the concept of born again. They were manufactured in laboratories. Yet they're the future. You eight humans are unique and one of a kind. Your descendants will become the Children of Israel and will create the New Jerusalem. One day, Ingrid, if you play your hand well, you'll be considered a saint, just like the Apostles I've read about in that book. If you make this a parochial, non-exclusive church grounded on dead religions, however, it will be just another cult in human history, and it won't stand the test of time!"

As Max led Ingrid by the hand from the field, Skip said no more. She had much to think about. Max was worried about her state of mind, as she muttered to herself: "Skip is an atheist, that's what he is.... He's a machine.... What does he know about the Bible and our faith?"

"Listen to me, woman," Max bent down and murmured into her ear, "Skip's more than a mere machine. You know better than that. Calling him an atheist is unfair. He was trying to encourage you and was merely making suggestions about your church. It seems clear by what he said that he's left it up to you.... Please, Ingrid, get a hold of yourself. This could drive you mad. I believe Nicole is already half way there. Make peace with her. Reassure her that the embryos and fetuses are saved. If it will make her happy, perform the Last Rites for all of those dead clones. Once, after hearing her talk to Gandy, who was a Hindu, she expressed her belief that all creatures must have souls. That's what Gandy believed. Is it any wonder, that she's concerned about those clones in the lab?"

Ingrid nodded her head but remained silent as they walked. Her facial muscles had relaxed, but a scornful smile played on her lips. "I listen to God," she replied finally. "His words guide me... You want me to perform the Last Rites for the undead to please Nicole. If, in his celestial wisdom, God expects that of me, I guess I'll have to go against what I believe!"

Near the edge of the field, Sheila and Carla were on a break, after cleaning lab equipment, chatting about this very subject. None of the members of Ingrid's church clearly understood what the priestess had in mind. There was a mixture of Christianity and paganism in the ceremony, which caused Carla to pose a basic philosophical question: "Are we fish or foul?"

"That's easy to answer." Sheila made a face. "After doing lab cleanup, *we're foul!*"

"No," Carla thought awhile. "...We're neither. We aren't Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, or Buddhists. Despite Ingrid's costume we're not pagans either. No respectable pagan would wear that shit. I don't think the title Celestial God she uses is even appropriate. From what I gather, we aren't even praying to the same god. This is an alien god, Sheila. Earth is 557.7 light years away!"

"Huh?" She did a double take. "...You're not serious!"

“Well, why not?” Carla raised an eyebrow. “Who are we mere humans? The most intelligent things we found in the galaxy look like bugs!”

“I couldn’t pray to a bug!” Sheila made a face.

“Even if it was a praying mantis?” Carla grinned.

Sheila and Carla broke into giggles. “Get it?” Carla elbowed her. “Praying mantis?” She elbowed her.

“Oh yes, a pun!” Sheila wiped her eyes. “Ingrid’s silly religion is *a pun!*”

Max had just asked Ingrid that moment how it was possible God would tell her to do something she didn’t believe, when they overheard Carla and Sheila poking fun of her church.

“Did you hear that?” Ingrid’s face dropped. “Listen to what they’re saying behind my back!”

Though Ingrid and Max had heard their discussion, the two women hadn’t heard the conversations in the garden and field. With their back turned they also failed to see the mental daggers in Ingrid’s eyes. Before she could verbally castigate them, Max again muffled her mouth with his hand and whispered into her ear: “Stop wiggling, and listen to me. You haven’t defined your church very well. You must make it simple, Ingrid—that’s the key. You’re mixing apples, oranges, and bananas together—a fruit salad faith. What you need is one flavor. Those silly things you do with your hands, such as making a cross on their foreheads, waving your hands around in the air, and making the sign to ward off the evil aren’t even Christian. Some of them are heathen. You said you wanted to avoid the label Christian so you wouldn’t offend Said, and yet you’ve taken on priestly functions. All those hand gyrations, such as the sign of the cross, are what priests do. You’re not a Catholic, Ingrid, and you’re not a priest. You should never have given Carla a Last Rite. You might be stuck with that foolishness, but not that other stuff. Get rid of that silly robe and those flowers in your hair. You’re not a priestess either. That’s a pagan word.” “Take my advice and make things simple,” he repeated. “A simple no frills Christian faith will be much easier to follow. Find an uncomplicated format in the historical database, like one those of the twentieth century Protestant churches. Stop trying to please everyone, Ingrid. Remember: one flavor, no more fruit salad. Jesus, whom you quote often, was the founder of the Christian religion. I’ve read portions of the good book. He kept it simple. You’re preaching Christianity, not Islam or Buddhism. You can’t avoid calling it that!”

Impulsively now, Ingrid broke away, gave Max a hug, and kissed him long and hard on his cheek. “God has spoken through you!” she cried.

From that day forward, Ingrid was certain Max had been God’s instrument. Abe was greatly amused when the doctor told him about the conversations in the garden and field. The very next Sunday service in which everyone, except Skip attended, found her in simple clothes, as he suggested, humbly holding her Bible, simply preaching the word. Knowing full well that Skip was listening in, Ingrid, like a fifteenth century Protestant reformer, announced her intention to remove all Papist symbolism and paraphernalia from her church and simply give them the “good news.” Max thought he heard Skip, who had promised to make her Pope, actually laughing. Said and Mbuto didn’t know what to make of the sudden change. Other than a few snickers at first, though, the new format went over very well with the congregation.

The one great inconsistency, of course, was a gesture made by Ingrid to placate Nicole. Ingrid made peace with her, their old friendship cemented by her agreement to perform the Last Rites for the undead. Since the ceremony was retroactive and intended for premature deaths of

embryos and fetuses in the future, it was only performed once, and yet the symbolism of this act would later haunt the chaplain when the newborns grew to adults.

Though the ‘good news’ religion gave the humans inspiration to carry on, they still required basic entertainment. The age old sports of baseball, cricket, football (American style), and croquet were resurrected from the station’s storage, the rules extracted from the ship’s database. Because the station’s library was relatively small, titles were added from the computer, so that most genres were available for reading. Also from the database, Skip provided the humans with a collection of old movies for viewing on certain nights, and also discovered deep in the ship’s files were several computer games that could be played, including twenty-first century classics and the latest holovision games.

In the coming months, there were several field trips on Phoenix One to break the monotony of the work routine and the isolation in the circle, but it was agreed by everyone, including Skip, that the Crystal City would, after the terrible discovery there, become, as a result, out of bounds. In the future it would be known as the ‘Forbidden City.’ Several trips to various locations on the planet to inspect potential food sources and a few simply to get away from the habitat were made but the last generation of woman-born humans from Earth would remain a sheltered colony in the midst of a mysterious and dangerous world.

Chapter Nineteen

The Trouble With Clones

As long as the clones were unborn and still growing in the lab, the colonists had a great deal of free time after doing their chores for hobbies and the occasional field trip beyond the fence, but that began to change when the first batch of clones were born. Because infants required constant care and monitoring, the humans would assist in the nursery in twenty-four shifts, leaving the others free to tend the garden, work the field, or perform maintenance and janitorial work in the buildings and on the grounds. When the infants became toddlers, the children graduated to the play area where an additional pair of attendants were necessary, also working around the clock. All seven of the keepers took turns in eight hour shifts, so that the children were at no time left unattended. Except for the extra care that infants required, as the children grew older, they required less personal care and more security against mischief. When they reached puberty and began to explore their sexuality, they required frequent intervention. Still much smaller in size than their keepers, they were, penned in on all sides by a secondary fence, monitored much as animals in a zoo. When mischief was in the making was, the gate would open, and keepers would rush to the scene. At play and during sleeping hours the children were watched, in what was a tedious but patterned routine. All went well for the keepers as the children grew because there was basic control. When it was necessary to enter the pen to break up a fight or prevent sexual escapades, the keepers easily overpowered the troublemakers. The message to the youngsters was simply ‘We’re bigger than you, so behave!’

When they became adults, however, as copies of the donors, and were actually stronger than them, serious problems arose. The adults, who required a wider range of activity for recreation and were assigned gardening chores to keep them occupied, were naturally devious, sexually precocious, and could overpower the keepers if given the chance and became almost psychotic if their plans were thwarted.

Throughout the cycle, from infant to adult, during the drudgery of caring for and guarding the clones, did the colonists display affection for them. Occasionally, a donor might look with fondness at the his or her offspring, but then dismiss the thought when the boy or girl returned a stupid grin or blank expression. Because of the synthetic and superficial nature of the clones, the flattery normally associated with parentage was absent. They weren’t normal. They would never be normal. Nicole, as the lab manager, might clasp her hands at her look-a-likes and utter pleasantries, but she wasn’t right in the head. From the beginning for the other Earth-born humans, something wasn’t right about the clones. It wasn’t just the expression on their faces or lemming-like behavior. For all practical purposes, all of the embryos and fetuses looked the same. This was even true for the newborns, who all had that wrinkly, unfocused look of infancy. When they progressed through the stages of childhood and into adulthood, they looked much the same as their donors had growing up. That they chattered nonsensically and appeared dull-witted at times, was simply annoying for the colonists. Their feeling that there was something terribly wrong about the clones had begun much earlier than the stages of growth,

beginning when they first looked into lab jars and shuddered at the thought. It became much scarier for them, of course, when a batch grew into adults.

Fueling the colonists' dislike of the clones was a predisposition that began when they awakened from their first hibernation and were told that cell specimens had been extracted from their bodies while they slept, a subterfuge carried out without their knowledge or permission. After this disclosure, the implications of the deception, felt deeply at first, was almost forgotten in the intervening centuries, until Kepler 186f was found. The initial resentment then flooded back to them like a bad dream. No sooner had they founded the colony, which they named Eden, than they were reminded by the caretakers of the real purpose of the mission. They were no longer merely stellarnauts. Because of what happened on Earth, they—the remnant of mankind—would one day become caretakers responsible for the human race. They, the original humans, who would age and die, were expendable; the clones—the new humans—were not. The weight of this prospect greatly increased the colonists' resentment. After the clone laboratory was set up, they became nannies and keepers, a burden that seemed unbearable at times. When, the clones grew into adults and became dangerous, fear was added to the problem. Like looking into cracked mirrors the perfect images they saw were, in reality, deeply flawed.

As a consequence of the methods used in this mission and the overwhelming aspects of the task, the glorious enterprise that the caretakers saw for the stellarnauts, which had so excited Earth scientists, failed to inspire the donors. The joy felt by Nicole Bennett, the lab supervisor overseeing embryo and fetus development, was therefore not shared by her associates, who were predisposed against them from the start.

In what seemed like a good idea by Nicole at first, each of the eight living donors acted as nannies for their respective offspring, but this was impractical and unfair. Due to the failure rate in different batches, some donors had significantly more charges than others. It was decided therefore that the newborns ready for the nursery would be evenly distributed to each of the original humans. Also distributed equitably were the offspring of the dead stellarnauts, haunting reminders of Elroy, Hans, Gandy, and Ling. For all of the twelve donors (living and dead), with their physical perfection and generic personalities, they seemed like poor copies of their parents. None of the clones had a blemish that might distinguish them from others in their batch. Though given the same name as the donor, with numbers following the name to set them apart until they chose a name for themselves, they were nothing like the original humans. This was, especially true for clones originating from Elroy, Hans, Gandy, and Ling. The clone recipients couldn't speak the donor's language, and they had none of their mannerisms. Not only did they talk exactly like their fellow clones, they moved their bodies like them, so that the added number shown on their shirts, such as Abe-1, 2, 3, etc, seemed redundant, since all Abe's were all precisely the same. The English, German, Indian, and Chinese accents, for the respective crewmembers that characterized them the most were absent, replaced by the dialect of the colony and mentality of their peers. They were, in many ways, boring and dull creatures, not stupid but not very bright. They learned quickly and were good in math, science, and general knowledge, but they lacked inquisitiveness and cared not a wit for aesthetics or philosophy. They had, due to their fragile natures, tempers and were quick to anger, a trait that worsened and became a serious problem when they were adolescents and was proved to be a threat when they became adults.

When, after watching the first batch grow to maturity and each of the eight natural humans were able finally to recognize themselves in their progeny, the image in the cracked mirror analogy offered by Ingrid, was more unsettling than what they saw in the children. The adults were much more devious than children. They had uncontrollable tempers. Often, a

mischievous gleam appeared in their deer-in-the-headlights gaze. Having discovered the use of their genitals in puberty then adolescence, they were, like dogs in heat, constantly attempting to rut. When thwarted by interfering keepers, however, the darkest side of their personalities appeared. It may have taken a long time to get used to their blank expressions and docile manners, but that was much better than the unpredictability in their behavior, which, at times, erupted in uncontrolled rage.

When asked why the clones behaved the way they did, Sandra gave them a logical, but not conclusive, answers: The reason for their apparent lack of individual personality was, in fact, based upon learned behavior. The unnatural beginning and unnatural nurturing encouraged sameness, lack of initiative, conformity, and unstable behavior. This lemming-like behavior, which surfaced during early childhood encouraged unstable behavior for individuals, which was also learned behavior. A chain reaction of agitation might even occur when someone didn't get his or her way, until several clones, in imitation of the first, exploded in rage. According to Carla Mendoza's take on it, 'It was monkey see monkey do. When surrounded by other boring and dull creatures, they all tended to be the same.'

When they became adults, this trait was, of course, much more serious. Their tirades, unlike the normal tirades displayed by children or adults, was more reminiscent of cornered beasts, who bared their teeth and tried clawing their captors when caught. So far, this behavior had been controlled in the nursery by giving in to the children's every whim. As children in the play area, still smaller than their keepers, they were simply overpowered. Usually, the children would calm down on their own if left alone, but occasionally they had to be drugged. Now that they had become adults, however, their outbursts were becoming intolerable and, at times, actually dangerous. Reason only worked on them if the clone wasn't in a frenzied state. When that occurred, drugs would have to be applied to them by Sandra and Woody to prevent bodily harm, a feat seen in a mental institution when a berserk individual had to be restrained by several attendants before he or she calmed down.

This problem for the current batch of clones and those in the near future was, for all practical purposes, Sandra admitted, permanent. Despite this dreary forecast, the managers of this enterprise, Sandra and Woody, felt confident that one day it would pay off. According to Nicole, who was merely parroting Sandra's more scientific explanation, "The clones must one day interbreed with other batches, a procedure forbidden to them now, until there were approximately two thousand copies for each batch. With the gene pool widened to such a safe margin to prevent mutations and secure a healthy species, newborns would then come forth naturally after sexual intercourse between male and female pairs. At that point, as natural births, they would have infinite variations in physical type and, because of the behavior as individuals caused by these variations, would not be prone to uncontrolled flare-ups and develop unique personalities and traits on their own, without the copy-cat mentality of the mob."

It all made sense. The grim truth was easy to understand. Because this phase might take centuries to achieve, however, Sandra's explanation seemed irrelevant and asinine to the keepers. Not one of them during their lifetimes would see another member of their species outside of their own group who had a sense of humor, spirited personality, or unique trait that set them apart from the creatures science had labeled clones. What they would continue to see were fragile, immature young men and women, who reacted like irrational animals at times. This, far more than their boring personalities, became monotonous, nerve-wracking, and depressing for the colonists, who, at times, felt as if they were really keepers in a zoo.

When the day finally came that they could see their own physical selves in the clones, when dozens of their replications scampered about, their mere presence became intolerable. Their actions became maddening. Great effort had been made to make them have more initiative and maturity by giving them individual projects in the school, putting them into work details, and organizing them into separate teams in sports. "After all," as Skip complained to Sandra and Woody, "the first batches are adults now. They should start acting like adults. Life, especially on this planet, isn't a game!"

Unfortunately, this had become a tired issue. Sports for the children was a free-for-all. For the adults, it often led, as Carla would see it to 'monkey business,' in which male and female coupling might result. Skip had been too busy it appeared to see the problems arising. He would come down to the colony, make a few judgments, then return to the ship, satisfied that he had said his peace. Also negligent it seemed were Sandra and Wood, as Carla saw it, the architects of this crisis, who stood back, arms folded, nodding their heads, clueless like everyone else. Now that the first batch had become adults it was only a matter of time before something went dreadfully wrong.

One typical morning, as Abe, Sheila, and Ingrid took their turn watching the adults, there was an incident. Inside a triangle, with keepers posted at each corner, an Abe clone and a Sheila clone broke them their labors in the field and began frolicking to and fro. At first, Abe-8 and Sheila-10 ran around in circles, as if teasing the watchers, while the other adults continued filling grain baskets. Unlike the lack of stress in watching children in the nursery or their turn in the playground, watching the children play, there was no time for idle chatter among the keepers, so the threesome chatted through their wrist communicators. So far the mischievous pair hadn't crossed the line, and yet Abe gave hand signals to Sheila, to move up a few meters. To Ingrid, who stood on the opposite site of the field, he motioned for her to stand fast.

As always, it was a tiresome and nerve-racking routine. To prevent pregnancy in female clones, birth control in the form of a pill was forced upon them whenever possible, but trying to reach all of the identical clones and not getting confused and the fact that the attendants, themselves, were often careless, placed the process in question. Pills were inadequate unless taken by all of females, who, in any event, often spit them out. Most of the time, the natural deviousness of clones made chemical birth control impossible. It was better just to break up clingy pairs and make sure none of them were ever out of sight. For awhile, this tedious enterprise was also facilitated by a chemical similar to salt peter forced upon males, which turned off the sex drive, but was no more fool-proof than birth control, because of the difficulty of divvying out the tablets and reaching all identical clones, who once again, spit out the pills.

Today, as Abe-8 and Sheila-10 began fondling each other, as if daring them to take action, Abe signaled to Sheila 'Let's go get'em!' To Ingrid, he pointed to the lab, signaling her to fetch Sandra and Woody. As the couple ran to the edge of the field with Abe and Sheila in pursuit, Abe lost his patience. Spouting obscenities he hadn't used in literally ages, he was called in the other keepers. Unlike previous episodes, this couple was testing them to the limit. Already, they seemed on the verge of doing it. There was no time to waste.

"I don't care what Sandra said," he growled to Sheila, "We need to throw a net on all the females and shove those pills down their throats."

"They tried that once," Sheila reminded him "Like trapped animals, they become psychotic."

Mbuto, with Said close behind, joined the chase. “They *are* animals!” he spat. “Lab specimens turned zoo animals. They’ll never be like us!”

Always tuned in to the colony, Skip’s voice sounded from their communication links: “Don’t lose your cool men. According to Sandra, when they mature naturally, they’ll have our traits. We just have to be patient.”

“Don’t lose our cool? Be patient?” Said looked up angrily at the sky. “According Barbie here, the clones won’t procreate naturally for centuries. By then we’ll all be dead!”

“Those creatures will never be normal,” Mbuto complained, as they cornered the pair. “Their brains don’t function like us.”

“What’s happening down there Abe?” asked Skip. “I thought you were in control!”

“I’m trying to,” snapped Abe. “We’re all trying. They were going to have sex, Skip. Right out in the open. That drug isn’t working on the males. The girl acts oversexed.”

“Really?” Skip murmured. “I’ll take that up with Sandra and Woody. Don’t lose your temper, Abe. Those two are just testing you. You must set an example to your crew!”

Abe could scarcely believe his ears. Skip spoke of his role as captain as if they were still back on the ship. For a moment, as the fleet-footed clones scampered further away, he paused to gain his breath. Though tempted to just let the pair escape somewhere and have sex, Said and Mbuto were closing in on them, also thoroughly agitated at this point. Against a hedge of berries, the couple were finally cornered. Turning around angrily, they hissed and bared their teeth.

“You men are making them angry!” Sheila winced.

“It doesn’t take much!” grumbled Said.

“Look at them!” Mbuto exclaimed. “You’d think we were *torturing them!*”

Both the male and female were snarling, their nostrils flaring, crouched down as if ready to attack. With the couple’s backs to a hedge running the length of the field—Mbuto on one side, Said on the other, and Abe in front of the pair—Abe cried out, “Now!”

“You two hold the girl,” he directed, out of breath, “I’ll grab the boy!”

Waiting for just the right moment, the men were filled with dread.

Ingrid ran back to the field now, making hand signals to Abe he couldn’t decode. When Abe shouted, “Where in the hell is Sandra and Woody?”, she merely shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. Inexplicably, the two lab managers were nowhere in sight. From the sidelines, after stumbling upon the scene, Carla narrated what she saw for Max, now arriving from patrolling the perimeter of the colony. “Look at them!” she gloated. “.... They’re like zombies at times. When not running aimlessly around, they’re grinning like fools or chattering like monkeys, until you corner one of them, and then *look out!*”

“They’re possessed.” Ingrid observed sadly. “They need a group exorcism—all of them. Not one of them wants to be saved. They call me names and spit in my face. I know I must pray for them, but it seems God isn’t listening or doesn’t recognize them as his own!”

“They’re children of a lesser God,” Carla quoted twentieth century playwright Mark Medoff.

“Hold on men!” Max called through cupped hands. “I’ll give you a hand!”

With four men on the job, the odds seemed to be in their favor, but, like inmates in an asylum, the clones’ strength was magnified by rage.

“Stop that!” Abe warned the boy, “or so help me I’ll knock you out!”

“Stop kicking you bitch!” warned Said.

While Said and Mbuto tried controlling the Sheila clone, Max reached in with dread to grab Abe-8's other arm. Suddenly the female clone broke away from Said and Mbuto, her high pitched scream trailing off gradually as she fled the scene. It reminded Mbuto of an old horror movie he had seen: 'Cry of the Banshee.' With a look of feral anger on his face, Abe-8, though restrained by both arms, bared his teeth and lunged at Max. As Max backed away to avoid his fangs, almost receiving a nasty bite, Abe disabled him with a punch to his midsection.

"Take that—you son-of-a-bitch!" he exclaimed, as the young man doubled up and fell to his knees.

Ingrid, who decided to get involved, prayed. Carla heckled from the sidelines: "Give him personality, Abe. Smack that perfect face, too. Blacken his eyes and break his nose."

When Said and Mbuto caught up with Sheila-10 that moment, she delivered a blow that almost hit its mark. "You bitch!" Said screamed. "You almost hit my crotch!" Mbuto was scratched and, from a distance, she managed to throw a rock that barely missed Abe's head. Losing control, as had Abe, the two men grabbed her wrists and pulling on each side, stood there helplessly as she thrashed, like bucking bronco, to and fro.

From the door of the lab, Nicole shrieked in rage, "You bastards! What are you doing to my children?"

"Abe-8 and Sheila-10 aren't children," shouted Carla, "they're adults. I'd of decked that bitch if she tried biting me and kicked her boyfriend in the nuts!"

"Shame on you Carla!" bellowed Nicole. "Shame on you all. You don't know how to deal with you're offspring. You never did. You're dreadful, ungrateful parents!"

As Sheila-10 broke loose and escaped her captors, Ingrid stopped praying a moment. "It's not just the adult clones." She shook her head. "Nicole's also possessed. No one can be that blind!"

"She's nuts!" Carla shook her fist. "Those chemicals have fried her brain!"

From the distance, a familiar voice rang out. "What's the problem?" Sandra, who had taken her time responding to Ingrid's plea for help, asked less calmly now. "Abe, did you strike that clone?"

"You're lucky I didn't break his jaw!" roared Abe. "That maniac tried sinking his teeth in me."

"What about you two?" She called to Mbuto and Said. "Did you manhandle that girl?"

"You got that backwards!" Mbuto held up his bleeding arm. "Look at it, Sandra. Like a mad beast, she scratched me! I hope I don't get rabies from that bitch!"

Walking over to inspect his wound, she watched as Abe-8 staggered away, a beaten dog look on his face. "You might need a tetanus shot," she explained to Mbuto, "but rabies is a disease of Earth."

"I thought you andies were smarter than us." Carla sneered. "Can't you see what's in front of your face, woman. Those bastards are out of control!"

"The clones can't process stress," Sandra explained scornfully, "they require a stern but patient hand. Now Sheila-10 and Abe-8 will have to be drugged in order to calm them down!"

"That's too bad!" Said stomped his foot. "You want us to control these mutants, but you don't want us to defend ourselves if they go berserk. Last week, Said-6 kicked my knee. If I had caught him then, I would've have wrung his neck!"

"We've been abused," grumbled Carla. "Carla-5 threw sand in my face and Carla-9 socked me in the arm when I tried to gather them for lunch."

“Hmm.” Sandra folded her arms. “We’re going to have to provide you with something to calm them down.”

“If that isn’t the mother and father of understatement!” cried Max.

Because only the managers were allowed to drug the clones, this suggestion seemed especially inane to the keepers. Woody appeared suddenly by Sandra’s side, discussing the problem with her. As if it was but a trifling matter, he suggested that they use a different mood alternating drug or the same drug but increased dosage. Sandra agreed with the stipulation that the effects, which might cause psychosis, be monitored by the keepers and, if need be, some of the hardcore clones would be separated from the rest.

Clasping his forehead as he listened to them, Abe heaved a loud, exaggerated sigh. “You hear that, folks?” He looked at the others. “It’s going to be another study. The drug might cause psychosis—as if we need more of that. Everything’s a experiment: the Triton Mission, our odyssey in space, and now the clones, whose descendants one day, when we’re long gone, will be normal like us!”

Sheila appeared by his side, holding his hand. “.... There-there,” she cooed. “Next time let them have sex. When a few of the females get pregnant, maybe they’ll wake up!”

Within earshot, as Sandra and Woody walked back to the lab, Carla broke into laughter, then began taunting the two. Wearied and unnerved by the whole affair, Ingrid gave Carla a worried smile. She and Max looked at each other in dismay as Carla cried out, “Look at you; you can’t see the obvious. All that knowledge and you don’t have a clue! This isn’t working. It never has, and it never will. We’re the last of our kind. They’re a new species, created in the lab. They’re dangerous! What you should really do is protect us from *them!*” Though uttered by only one person, it was the most serious example of mutiny in the colony ever expressed.

Clutching his arm now, Mbuto let Said lead him to the hospital, where Max would dress the wound and give him a shot. Ingrid would pray for Carla so she would not finally bring down the androids’ wrath. She managed to guide her friend into the garden and tried to calm her down. The damage, however, if taken seriously by Sandra and Woody, had been done. She had merely voiced what existed in the other humans’ minds. Still standing in the field, casting a troubled gaze up at the direction of the ship, Abe summed up their dilemma.

“I hope Carla’s wrong,” he said, as she continued her rant. “No one else had the nerve to air their grievances. She never knew how to control her feelings. But we are the caretakers now. The clones require a constant 24/7 vigil. If we start letting them get pregnant, this whole business will just worsen. Can you imagine what they’ll be like if they inbreed. I hope Sandra and Woody are serious about this. The best remedy would be to forget this silly policy of keeping the adults busy in the garden and field. They’re animals—all of them. We should corral them like the children, so we can keep an eye on them. Letting them run about like they are is insane!”

“The point is,” Sheila insisted, “it will be their problem, not ours. We aren’t going to live forever, but those andies *are!*”

Chapter Twenty

A Lesson Learned

The incident that occurred in the field that day encouraged Sandra and Woody into paying more serious attention to the adult clones and less attention to the lab. In the days ahead there were important changes made in the management of the clone population.

From the beginning of the Clone project underway in Eden, there had been countless problems, which Sandra and Woody claimed to have factored in the process. One serious problem, which bothered Nicole, who managed the clone lab, was the failure rate of the female eggs and male somatic cells (35%), the death toll of embryos (22%), and death toll of fetuses (11%). Though Ingrid had obligingly given the Last Rites for all the offspring past and present and persisted on humoring Nicole by continuing this rite, the death rate seemed unacceptable to her. Nothing could be done about this, however. As it was explained by Sandra, who had the human's religious convictions in mind, science couldn't fix everything. The mortality rate in the lab was in God's hands. Whether or not she was sincere or merely humoring the humans was debatable. Even more troubling to everyone than the mortality rate of the lab was, of course, the occasional death of a newborn. When this happened the Last Rites weren't enough for Nicole. Each the dead infants would be given a funeral and be buried in the colony's cemetery.

Other than a small number of infant markers, the graveyard was quite empty. None of the staff had died. There were no deceased children or adults. Unlike the health problems plaguing humans on Earth, other than rare congenital maladies, the clones had reached adulthood without serious illnesses. They were collectively healthy specimens. None of the childhood diseases such as flu and pneumonia were evident in the new world.

The physical well-being of the clones was never a serious issue. From lab inception to adulthood, their physical condition was carefully controlled and monitored. Their psychological makeup, however, had been seriously neglected by Sandra and Woody.

While Nicole managed the clone lab, a purely physical aspect of cloning, the other humans were given roles as nannies (or, at times, it seemed, 'zoo keepers') of the clones, taking turns watching the toddlers in the nursery, children in the enclosed play areas (broken down into age groups), and a growing number of young adults, restricted only by the boundaries of the electrical fence. As the incident in the field clearly indicated, the last group of clones required most of their efforts. The division of labor during the daytime for the four zones of clone security was: nursery (one persons watching the infants), playground (two persons watching the children), patrol (one person patrolling perimeter), and field (three persons watching the adults). Working in shifts around the clock, the nannies would rotate hours and placement with each other, so that everyone shared the different shifts and zones of each groups equally. All three groups of clones had to be monitored when they were awake and when they were asleep. Sleeping quarters for the children were broken down into age groups as they were in the play areas. Because of the promiscuity of adult clones, they were, of course, separated into a male and female dorms. Because the dorms were all locked, all that was required were night watchpersons at that point. The number of nannies for sleeping hours was, therefore, only four (one for each zone), giving the other half a break, until the subsequent night when it was their turn.

The closest that the managers ever came to a psychological program for the clones, however, was the use of drugs. Not long after the psychotic lapses in the field, Skip gave Sandra and Woody approval for pre-emptive drugging for malcontents. All seven of the nanny's would carry syringes in a pouch and a dart gun in their holsters for 'bringing down' difficult cases when it was their turn to watch the adults. 'Bringing down' was a polite word for rendering 'berserkers' almost unconscious. When this happened, the malcontents were taken to a special room in the compound and placed under observation. After that first serious encounter between the keepers and their charges, a fear had grown up among the staff and the managers that there might be a genetic reason for psychotic lapses among the clones. Whether it was caused by cryogenic freezing or was an inherent problem with clone manufacture was not known but this was what Sandra and Woody were going to find out. In subsequent days, a study began to compare the DNA of various subjects in order to isolate possible gene mutations in the chains. Though this would actually be the worst case scenario for the colony, it would at least isolate the cause for some of the clones' behavior. What the managers had in mind with such a study—lobotomies, chemical castration, or euthanasia—remained a mystery to the colonists, and yet, during their remaining years, the issue of the clones was a heavy burden and shadow on all of their lives. More importantly, in the long run, after the donors passed from the scene, such a 'killer gene' would become a disaster for the human race. There would be no way of knowing how many mutants existed or would be produced in the future.

Fortunately for the human race, tests conducted on troublemakers showed no malformations in the DNA chains. After studying the clones at play and, as adults, at work doing their chores, the managers concluded that the meltdowns for the clones were random acts caused by stimulus to response (you push me; I push you) mentality—learned behavior, normally exhibited by children, which was more easily controlled in children than in adults. Unfortunately, it was soon discovered, the adults, if they could even be called that psychologically, remained essentially immature. Mentally, they never grew up. From early childhood, inspired by sight, sound, and smell, they had run around aimlessly at play, a pattern changing little until puberty when the sexes had to be watched carefully for dalliances. Because they were still much smaller than the keepers, these dalliances could be easily broken up. The second example of learned behavior—fear of their keepers—therefore discouraged them from acting inappropriately. Regrettably, the young clones were more influenced by the mob. There were and would be no follow-the-leader mentality in their ranks, other than, the loudest, most aggressive, and foolish among them. Since there were no role models among the children, mob mentality won out. This pattern was true throughout their development, from children to adults. Until adulthood, this pattern could be controlled by constant vigil and required relatively mild correction from the keepers, who were bigger and stronger than them, but when the clones reached adulthood and were merely younger copies of themselves, the pattern became intolerable.

At the core of clone behavior there was no biological determinate, as Skip had half hoped. There was the learned behavior of the mob, which had been controlled until the clones reached adulthood. Physical similarity and the resulting lack of individuality coupled with what Sandra called the X-factor (X equaling the unknown), had robbed the clones of initiative and reasoning power. Despite the managers' theory of clone behavior, Sandra still suspected an inherent problem in the psychological makeup of clones. Whether it could be cured somehow by chemicals of advanced psycho-therapy or whether or not natural breeding of humans in the

future might mitigate this problem, depended upon the X-factor, which by definition was as yet unknown.

Regardless of the outcome of the observations made by the managers of the malcontents and clones at play, there would, Sandra confessed, still be a problem with the clones. Unless clone behavior could be modified with some form of psychiatry or electric shock, which would require pre-emptive therapy, the problem couldn't be easily solved. Special procedures would have to be conducted on virtually all of the clones to prevent what was, they concluded, normal clone behavior. Because of the social influence of the mob and the X-factor, all clones, especially the adults, were prone to psychotic lapse, which made attempts at therapy short termed fixes, limited to isolated individuals. Unless more drastic measures were taken to at least weed out problem cases, all that could be done in the foreseeable future was drugging and incarcerating the worst members of the mob.

Despite this grim forecast, except for an occasional psychotic episode among the adults, Sandra and Woody were satisfied with this operation. Most of the time, they were able to turn in a good report to Skip, who—the eye in the sky, as Carla dubbed him, would offer his compliments to the staff. Except for the normal amount of grumblings from the nannies and keepers, who would never be happy with this state of affairs, all went fairly well in the lab and on the grounds in opinion of the managers, Sandra and Woody, and lab supervisor Nicole. There were, of course, a few minor outbursts among the adults and a collective surliness in the mob that kept the keepers on edge, but now that the adults knew what would happen to them if they misbehaved, there were no major incidents in the field.

One morning, though, as nannies watched the children in the nursery and play area and as the keepers kept guard over the adults as they gathered vegetables, weeded the garden, and picked fruit in the orchard, two major incidents, happening at almost the same time, occurred in the orchard and field. The incident in the orchard was, as almost all adult misbehavior, triggered by the sexual drive, but the incident in the field seemed to be simply a random act of rage.

Only moments before both episodes, an important meeting occurred between the caretakers and lab supervisor. With Rusty standing watch on the bridge, Skip had come down for his weekly report for the colony. Nicole made the usual reports of nannies and keepers being impatient and, in some cases, abusing the clones, but Sandra and Woody had found no physical signs of abuse on the children and had spied enough on the crew watching the adults to know that they were the ones suffering abuse. Unfortunately, because of the frequency of bites, scratches, and rocks thrown, in which the culprit melted into the clone population and also the inability to tell the identical look-a-likes from each other, it was impossible to make a case. The best the keepers could do was to keep their distance from teeth or claw and be on guard constantly from missiles thrown. Skip was well aware of Sandra's and Woody's theory of clone behavior, but it did little to solve the problem. Using a volcano as an analogy, he replied sarcastically, "we all know what causes a volcano to erupt, but that does little for the villagers below." Skip was especially disturbed when he was told that virtually all of the troublemakers who had been drugged, placed in holding cells, and then released, might be among the 'attack and run' group again.

"This is dreadful!" he said, shaking his head. "What a nasty lot! What are we producing in that lab, Sandra? If you listened to Nicole, you'd think they're a lovely bunch. That woman's touched in the head. It's no wonder our staff hate their charges. If only there was physical cure

like all those diseases on Earth, instead of this being a psychological problem or that silly thing you call the X-factor, Sandra. We have entirely too much theory and not enough solutions. If only it was a physical problem—a mutation, we might solve it—terminate or at least lobotomize the troublemakers. Are you certain Sandra and Woody that there's no other apparent cause for this condition. It's not caused by cryogenic freezing or a hidden genetic disorder—something we can cure?"

Sandra looked Skip squarely in the eyes. "I see normal, healthy adult clones (if there are such adjectives for any of them), who might emotionally explode and become nearly uncontrollable pitted against seven keepers, whose only defense are the drugs supplied to them—a method good for no more than one troublemaker at a time. We've been lucky so far. They haven't ganged up on the keepers. No one has been seriously injured or killed. But it's only a matter of time!"

"It could happen any time," Woody stepped forward now, "When I strolled through the field, I watched them glare at their keepers and sensed their unspoken resentment. It's because of the new procedure of drugs and isolation that we've been able to study the clones up close, but all this shows us are the general patterns of clones. In my opinion, they're all volcanoes ready to blow. From a distance, as they run amuck, we can only study mob behavior, which changes like the flying pattern of birds. We can simulate a meltdown during isolation by keeping them away from the mob. We can in effect chemically castrate the males with the needle and darts. But there isn't a lasting cure for their sporadic violence short of lobotomies—"

"Then do it!" Skip socked his fist. "Lobotomize the troublemakers. Maybe the others will get the point if we shoot a couple of them too."

"Sir," Woody objected, "we don't know when they meltdown or who will meltdown. We can't predict when and not really why. We'd have to lobotomize troublemakers each time their was a flare-up. Who knows how many that would be. Most importantly, because of groups of them all look alike, we'd have to treat them all. Though they hate the clones, the keepers might not submit to such solutions. It's not in their natures!"

"So," Skip said grimly, "it's an even worse problem. There's no cure. It's a natural tendency for them to go berserk."

"That's correct." Sandra nodded grimly. "It's caused by social conditioning or part of their mental makeup—the X-factor. Their maturation isn't normal. They never grow up. Had they been born naturally and raised as individuals, they would probably have more predictable behavior. What we see in the clones is a psychological problem, which is not an individual phenomena, but a mob reaction, which makes it so difficult to control."

"I don't agree." Skip held up his hand. "What if we made examples of few of them? Zap some of the troublemakers, maybe kill a few."

"You mean stun them, don't you?" Sandra frowned.

"Yes!" Skip jumped on the idea, "but if that doesn't work, use a blaster. My special weapon has numerous settings, from knockout to vaporization. That would teach them a lesson!"

Sandra and Woody were speechless. Rusty was mumbling in disbelief on the bridge.

"All right," Skip spoke slowly now, as he gathered his thoughts. "... What we must do isn't pleasant. First, you will tell none of the keepers about what I said at this meeting. Don't tell Nicole either; that woman's slightly mad, herself. After computing the odds, I can find no way out of this other than making a lesson out of hardcore troublemakers."

"What!?" cried Woody.

“You mean termination?” Sandra muttered incredulously “...Death!”

“Skip.” Rusty’s voice was heard on the bridge. “You can’t be serious. Surely, there has to be another way!”

“Listen to me,” Skip replied solemnly. “There’s no other way! We can’t allow the keepers to be harmed and the clones to run amuck. On behalf of the colony and human race, you must control those troublemakers or put them down like wild beasts!”

“Will the keepers ever accept this?” Sandra posed the question. Answering herself reflectively, she closed her eyes as she envisioned the future. “...They might want to lock them up. But will they be willing to kill troublemakers, themselves... They won’t, sir. Woody’s right; it’s not in their nature, especially Nicole.”

“Well, that’s too bad!” Skip folded his arms resolutely. “I won’t allow them to threaten their keepers. If we can’t weed out malcontents in the lab, we’ll make examples of those caught in the act. Just one good example might do the trick. Let them know we mean business!”

With this grim solution in mind, Sandra, Woody, and Skip stood at a distance expecting more problems. As they watched and waited, Max continued to patrol the perimeter of the colony, Carla, Mbuto, and Said monitored the infants and children, respectively, and once again, as they had during the last incident, Abe, Sheila, and Ingrid each stood, dart gun in hand, in a triangular watch of the field and adjacent garden, as the adult clones busied themselves filling grain baskets or picking weeds. What kept the adults from acting on their natural urges was the line of sight. If they could see one of the keepers, gun in hand, they would normally return to business. It didn’t really matter to the keepers how much work they accomplished. They could even run about the field or garden aimlessly, as long as they stayed in the line of sight, didn’t try to sneak away, and likewise kept their distance from their keepers. In a fit of anger, Said swore, after his last turn in the field, he would empty his dart gun on the next clone who tried attacking him. It appeared now that the vast majority of the adults had learned to follow the basic rules of not-to-close and not-to-far-away.

All it took today was one slip-up, so subtle at first, Ingrid didn’t notice until it was too late. As she pondered her faith, which was tested greatly by her role as nanny and keeper, she looked away just long enough for a couple to slip away. Like the other guards, she dreaded getting bitten or scratched and, in the field, getting pelted with rocks, so she would maintain the maximum distance, just barely in line of sign. This might have been all right if Abe and Sheila had been more alert that day and weren’t watching a different portion of the triangle. The slight rise she stood on prevented the couple from ducking down in the field for mischief but at Ingrid’s corner of the triangle, which bordered the orchard, there were low-lying saplings providing a cover that the young man and woman crawled beneath.

“Oh dear Lord!” she screamed. Raising her communicator to her ear, she cried breathlessly. “Captain! Captain! I’m going after a pair. They ran into the orchard. I think it might be too late!”

“Sheila,” Abe barked, “watch your corner! I’m coming Ingrid. Don’t hesitate to use your darts!”

After listening to their conversation, Skip and the managers were racing to the scene. Abandoning the infants, who were safely corralled, Carla also ran took to her heels. At this point, something inexplicable happened as they rushed to the scene. In the least guarded corner of the triangle now, Sheila watched helplessly as a quarrel broke out between two men. Later it

would be determined that Max-10's hoe accidentally cut into Said-18's shoe. Anger, which was common among natural humans, was normally abated by an apology, but for clones, who flew into uncontrolled rage, an apology made no difference. Before, Max-10 could even say a word, he was cut down by Said-18's shovel, his head slit open, causing him to drop unconscious to the ground. The other clones reacted as a group, the entire team fleeing the scene. In a panicked overkill reaction to prevent a pregnancy, Ingrid, Abe, Skip and his team, and Carla, who had abandoned her post, managed to break the couple apart but not before the female was impregnated with sperm.

"We're too late!" Ingrid groaned.

"Are you sure?" Sandra poked her head into the nest.

Lying there beneath the small tree, the couple seemed oblivious. Four pairs of hands—Abe, Max, Skip, and Woody reached in to pull them apart. In a rare fit of rage, Sandra throttled the man with her fists. Even Nicole, who rarely left the lab, had raced frantically to the scene.

"You bastard! Look what you did!" Sandra said through gritting teeth.

"This isn't good....This isn't good," muttered Max.

"How did he do it that fast?" marveled Carla. "One moment Ingrid sounds the alarm. The next moment it's over. *What a stud!*"

"This isn't funny!" Nicole shouted tearfully. "He's signed the infant's death warrant!"

Both the man and woman were given the drug, jerked upright and, on wobbly legs, pulled up to their feet. "You fools!" Skip shouted at them. "You damn fools!" Several meters away from the murder scene, as the couple was escorted by the managers to isolation, Sheila was at this moment standing in shock, unimpressed with the incident in the orchard as Said 18 stood staring at her, bloodied hoe in hand. After running away as a group, the adult clones mulled awhile near the electrical fence, then gradually trickled one-by-one back to the field. Upon learning of the incident in the orchard, everyone had gathered at the site. Mbuto and Said, who heard the commotion from a distance, had, like Carla, abandoned their posts and ran to the scene, unaware of the greater tragedy in the field. Fearful that the clone would attack her, Sheila finally came to her senses, took aim, and fired a dart at Said-12. Had she known what he had in mind, she would have fired her dart gun earlier. Now one of the clones on her watch appeared to be dead.

The dart, which had hit Said-12's hand, seemed not to phase the man, so she fired another, this one missing the mark completely. Raising her communicator to her mouth, with quivering voice she called, "Captain Drexel! There's been an incident! A clone is dead!"

"I'm on my way!" cried Abe.

At this point, Skip demonstrated his superior running speed, racing far ahead of Abe and the others. A crackling noise and the smell of ozone indicated that shots were fired, and it was over by the time the others arrived on the scene. When he saw Said-12 standing there with his bloodied hoe, Skip had chosen his setting, took careful aim with his weapon and, in front of the other clones, by all appearances shot Said-12 dead. Looking down in horror at the two men on the ground afterwards, everyone were shocked by happened. The clones formed a circle around the group. Fearing retribution, with dart guns drawn, the keepers turned to face the clones. Skip now waved his weapon sideways at the clones as if to say, "Go away!" but it soon became obvious by their docile expressions that they weren't a threat. An example had been made with Said-12. At last, a lasting impression would be made on this generation. What many of them felt was a righteous kill was interpreted differently by Nicole, who thought the crime was spontaneous, which was how clones normally behaved about everything. For her, therefore, it

should have been considered manslaughter, a fact that made Skip apparent execution of Said-12, in her eyes, murder. No one, however, paid attention to the distraught women as she ranted and raved, and, for a moment, until Sandra came out to escort her back to the lab, everyone feared Skip might shoot her, too.

The look detected in his stony expression told them that he meant business. For the longest time, as Sheila and Ingrid wept quietly to themselves, no one said a word to Skip. Everyone understood what he had to do. Everyone had been reminded of who was the indisputable leader of Eden, and what this meant for the future. No one really knew what had happened.... Skip had played a trick on them all!

Sandra and Woody, who inspected the two men before Doctor Max Rodgers arrived on the scene, knew at once what was afoot after Skip gave them a hand signal. When Max bent down excitedly to check their vital signs, Skip raised him up rudely by his collar and whispered shrilly into his ear, "Keep that information to yourself!"

"Take the bodies to the hospital." He ordered Sandra and Woody.

"Oh yes," Max sputtered obligingly, "they're quite dead."

"But I saw Max-10 move!" Mbuto pointed excitedly.

Stunned by this event, Carla and Said nevertheless had the presence of mind to agree.

"I saw him crack his head open!" Sheila pointed at Max-10. "Skip shot Said-10 dead!"

Catching on to the ploy, which Sheila gave credence to, Abe shouted at Carla, Mbuto, and Said, "There dead, you fools. Give us a hand!"

Having caught on finally, the remainder of the seven nannies and keepers, helped the managers usher the unconscious men from the scene. As far as the other shocked and horrified adult clones were concerned, Skip would let them think Said-12 had been executed after his apparent murder of Max-10, so they would finally get the point: *there would be no more incidents in the colony!*

Their eyes wide with fear and mouths gaping, the clones froze like statues in the field. The impact made upon them was dramatic and lasting. But Skip wasn't quite finished. Taking in the assembly at a glance, he shouted in a booming voice, "Listen up, all of you! There will be no more running off out of sight or silly games. From this day forward, you'll obey the humans of Earth. As your donors, they're also your masters. As first generations of clones, you, the children, and infants owe your existence to them. You are the future of Eden. Earth's remnant are its foundation over which the Celestial God watches. He sees and hears everything you do. As his chosen on Eden, you're in His debt, too. He let you live. But he can, as he once did on Earth, just as easily destroy you!" "You've been forewarned!" He wrung his finger at them. "Go and sin no more!"

Upon hearing Skip's grandiloquent proclamation, the colonists were greatly amused. For the first time anyone could remember, the adult clones were silent and still. The effect of Skip's words was mirrored in their faces. Virtually all of them had been shaken to the core. In using the Celestial God introduced by Ingrid, he had gone beyond the trick played upon the clones. In addition to the threat to individual perpetrators who would suffer the same fate as Said-12, he had given a warning to the clone population as a whole. They would behave themselves or suffer the wrath of the Almighty. By using bombastic language to reinforce his words, Skip had, like a prophets of old, put the fear of the Lord in them. The Celestial God had won the day.

Chapter Twenty-One

The New Generation

The days following Skip's deception and proclamation, saw a transformation in the behavior of the clones. As stunned eyewitnesses to the lesson shown to them, they realized at last who were the masters of the colony. When Said-12 was revived from the knock-out blast from Skip's weapon, he was told, in front of a selected group of clones, that it was a miracle. Ingrid, who felt responsibility for one of the day's incidents, had helped Max resuscitate Said. Hearing Skip praise her for bringing him back from the dead, she felt obliged to support this exaggeration. Max-10, who had a concussion, was more seriously injured, and didn't awaken for several days, at which time Skip orchestrated a brand new audience to witness a second miracle by Ingrid, this time with a carefully thought out prayer. To her surprise and dismay, these deceptions, like Skip's first deception worked. His proclamation had set the stage for what became almost a theocratic state. Skip insisted on Abe, who had been captain of Earth's remnant, being the secular leader of the colony. In the eyes of the clone witnesses, Ingrid's alleged miracles had greatly strengthened her role as religious leader among the clones, but made her seem like a charlatan among her human colleagues. None of them could blame her for going along with Skip. The success of the deceptions seemed justification enough. Yet by her own estimation, she had sold out for the sake of peace.

"What's more important than peace?" Carla tried reasoning with her.

"Truth!" Ingrid replied.

"Truth....What is truth?.... Where is the peace?" Said rolled the words around in his mouth. "Long, long ago we set out to explore Neptune's dark moon and wound up, after four savage planets, in cyber-sleep for a hundred thousand years. Here on Kepler 186, which we renamed Eden, we found another savage world, which had already destroyed one civilization greater than our own, and kept us bottled up behind a protective electric fence watching over a race of clones manufactured, not out of love, but from our genes. How comforting is this? Where is the peace? Now, as we age, we look ahead to a day, we ourselves shall not see, when enough of these synthetic beings are produced to allow normal procreation on a world five hundred and fifty seven light years from Earth.... By then we, the last of our race, will be dead. Where is the truth or peace in this?"

Ingrid remained silent, as she contemplated his words. Drawn to Said's illumination, Abe, Sheila, Max, Carla, and Mbuto, listened, deeply moved. Back aboard the Phoenix now, Skip also heard this gloomy summation from their communication links, but, not wanting to intrude this time, remained silent.

"Is that how they all feel?" he whispered to Rusty.

"I don't know." Rusty shook his head. "Sometimes I relish the cold darkness of space!"

"We can leave yet" Skip murmured. "They're not ready. All of them have grown in strength and wisdom, but lack enthusiasm. The religion of Ingrid Westfall has helped make them masters in Eden but reluctantly so. This hour Said, once the greatest thorn in my side, sounded like a sage, but it wasn't philosophy I wanted to hear. Their improvement is marred by attitude. Most of them share Said's pessimism and still view their service with disdain."

Skip could not leave the colony in the hands of such a gloomy bunch. In addition to the general malaise of the group, an important member of the human staff had become mentally unfit after that fateful day. Her mind already befuddled, Nicole was brought further to the brink of insanity by the forced abortion of the pregnant clone—an action that caused everyone dismay, especially Ingrid, who saw it as another taking of a human life. This was, of course, broadcasted to the adult clones as a warning of what will happen if female clones were impregnated. From this day forward, all levels of clone development, from toddlers to adults was monitored by a no-nonsense code, reinforced now by a higher power. For the adult clones, who had been the only serious problems in the colony, this translated into two unwritten and unsaid mottos: (1) you play/you pay; and (2) you kill/you die. No acts of violence were allowed against keepers or fellow clones. Troublemakers would be darted and placed in isolation for a period of time equal to the offense. Repeat offenders would be lobotomized, a procedure that was feared more than imprisonment or death.

The children naturally became the most compliant members of the clone population. Their smaller size helped the nannies maintain order in this group. Darts and needles were seldom necessary in making them behave. Only the adults had required constant reminders of what will happen if they step out of line, and now that they were threatened with extinction by the Celestial God, himself, if they didn't tow the mark, they evolved into obedient and hard-working members of the community.

During the long periods of watching over the clones as they assisted them in tending the garden, greenhouse, fields, and laboratory, the eight original humans had become old and worn out. With the continuing generations of clones under Sandra's and Woody's constant management, the humans of Earth assisted them, acting as nannies and keepers, while Nicole continued her role as lab supervisor for the new batch of clones, whose genetic material continued to be extracted from a previous batch. In addition to these most important tasks, seven of the nannies and keepers still had to maintain the upkeep of the habitat as well as control of the gardens, greenhouse, and fields.

The clones were taught to read, write, and the fundamentals of math and science, but until they were at the stage of interbreeding, which was many years in the future, their education was limited to basic education. As Skip once explained, they were, as non-breeding clones, merely a stage set for normal propagation. The period from toddler to adult, unlike the accelerated clone development in the lab, was at the normal growth rate of approximately eighteen years. Long before normal propagation would occur, however, time had taken its toll on the original colonists. No longer stellarnauts and explorers but caretakers themselves, they lacked the androids immortality. They had become old men and women. Because of the endless periods of hibernation in space, time had become irrelevant to the humans until they finally settled down in Eden. A hundred thousand years passed and none of the stellarnauts had aged, and yet memories of their families, friends, and the scientists who had given them such a fine send-off when they embarked upon the Triton mission had been as fresh in their minds as if it had happened only months ago. After the years passed and, after the habitat became a city, the laboratory produced embryos, fetuses, and newborns, and the nursery graduated batch after batch of children, who grew into young adults, time had finally caught up with them. By that point, their memories had begun to fade and their bodies succumbed to human mortality.

The first member to die was Nicole, who had lived far beyond expectations. Despite the efforts of Doctor Max Rodgers to save his onetime assistant, her small body was worn out and wracked by the wasting disease caused by laboratory exposure and, Max suspected, a microbe contacted in the field. The poor woman died thoroughly insane, flailing about and trying to bite her physician and her friends. Nevertheless, as rows of her patients looked on sadly, Nicole was given a grand funeral by Ingrid, who, despite her efforts to offer a uncomplicated religion to the colony, took the opportunity to exorcize the demon that spouted obscenities from her mouth then after Nicole was pronounced dead, worried that she hadn't been truly saved, gave her Extreme Unction, this time as merely a preacher concerned for her soul. In the end, in the manner of the aged suffering dementia, Nicole forgot Ingrid's efforts at appeasement and their current friendship and cursed her for her attitude about the clones. Because of Ingrid's use of Catholic rites, a precedent was set for the new humans. It was pointed out by Skip, who did research on the subject, that the original church was, like Ingrid's religion, a primitive church with little ceremony and ritual. It seemed only natural to Ingrid that she follow history, after such a momentous event. At this stage it wasn't important to refer to the church as anything but 'the good news.' Whether or not she was called a preacher, reverend, priestess, or priest didn't matter. Despite this insistence on simplicity, however, Nicole, who was called the Clone Master by the androids, had become in the eyes of her patients a saint.

The truth was, of course, Nicole had been right to suspect Ingrid's sincerity about the clones. Ingrid had never really accepted the notion that they had souls, until Skip lectured her that one day. Since then, with lingering misgivings, she was, at times, forced to mix apples, oranges, and bananas, as Max saw it. After all, Said was a Muslim, Carla had her own special conception of God, and the other colonists agreed with Nicole that it was unfair not to include all levels of human development as being saved. Already institutionalized when Nicole was given Extreme Unction, the rite of Last Rites was considered retroactive and preventative, inoculating all embryonic, fetal, and current unborn infants; and all newborns were automatically baptized into the faith. No one was exempt from salvation. Even the androids, though considered manufactured animations, were listed among the congregation. Like the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz, who was given a heart, each of them were assigned crude crosses to signify that they had souls. Skip exhibited his sense of humor by uttering an embarrassed laugh, and yet, to please Ingrid, he wore it constantly around his neck. Hence, all things considered, there was a hybrid and complex undercurrent below the simple foundation of Ingrid's church, which had grown from a handful of skeptical earthlings into hundreds of colonists—natural and manufactured.

By this time, the walls of the colony had been expanded, so that they reached the dome forest and several kilometers south. The crusade to conquer paradise had not yet begun and, as before, cautious expeditions were made to various corners of the new world. The most important function of habitat would be for a long time to come to generate a new population of humans, one able to interbreed and act on its own.

The next member of Earth's survivors to die was Max, who had been a middle aged man when he went into space. Living to the ripe old age of 110, he expressed few regrets when he took ill one day. Fearful that the doctor had never really been sincere about the church, Ingrid offered to hear his confession. Once again, Max reminded her that she wasn't a Catholic priest, but by then it was too late to recant her suggestion that he confess his sins, which she uttered in front of his colleagues and several dozen children and young adults. Another precedent, seen by

the inheritors, had been set for the future. Before Max had a chance to change his mind on this matter, he died in the presence of the others, a smile on his wrinkled face and garland of flowers, placed by Sheila, in his white hair. Without seconds thoughts this time, Ingrid gave Max the Last Rites, certain that God would accept this good man.

As fate or the Lord's will would have it, the others suffered their mortality one-by-one in less than a decade. Carla was the next to pass away, both confessing her sins and accepting the Last Rites ahead of schedule just to make sure. Stricken personally by the death of this spirited woman, Ingrid painted a tearful picture for Carla before her last breath of a wondrous city, similar to the Crystal City, but with millions of other resurrected bodies mulling about—old friends, family, and her friends from the colony, waiting in the timeless corridors of Paradise as Carla passed through its golden gates. Carla's last words to her in whisper, which summed up her irreverence and sense of humor, was a question that put Ingrid to the test, "will those infernal clones be up there? Are they not children of an alien god?"

Fortunately, those in attendance hadn't heard the question, but Ingrid looked around self-consciously and uttered a hysterical laugh. No one would have blamed her equivocating then, but Ingrid thought carefully and, in a whisper, gave Carla a careful answer, "The Lord's will is inscrutable. All things are possible with God."

The following year claimed Captain Abe Drexel, the next oldest member of the Triton crew. Abe had simply dropped dead in his tracks while in the Control Center, so all that was required was the Last Rites. So grief-stricken was Sheila, she had a nervous breakdown and threatened to take her life. What kept her from suicide was Ingrid's stern promise that this was the quickest path to hell. Hell, after all, like heaven had been institutionalized in the church, being the best way to make them all behave. Not long after Sheila's vow to hold on until she and Abe could reunite in Paradise, as Ingrid had promised, she too expired—this time in the garden, where she also, as the congregation looked on, received the sacred rite.

Mbutu, of all the colonists, died prepared. Not only had he confessed his sins and prayed constantly during the last months of his life, he told everyone as he lie on his death bed that he was ready to meet the Lord. No one saw Ingrid perform the Last Rites which did not seem to be needed in Mbutu's case, but she admitted later that she had done so quietly, because of his earlier request. Unlike the straight forward path to salvation for Mbutu, Said had been born a Muslim, who considered Jesus to be a mere prophet like Mohammed. Because she had mentioned Jesus' death and resurrection as the cornerstone of being born again, Said had seemed to accept this keystone of the church, and yet the last words before he expired, "There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet!" were exactly what a good Muslim would say. Once again, as her last act of spiritual equivocation, she turned to the androids, the last member's remaining of the original crew, and exclaimed simply, "He's delirious!" Then performed the Last Rites.

The last member of the human race of Earth to die fittingly enough was Ingrid, herself. At 108 years old she was worn out and needed a rest but was not really ill. For this reason, her sudden death, while she was preaching her last sermon, was devastating for the children of Eden. Skip and his crew performed their last service to the colony by supervising her funeral and the erection of her memorial. Already there were eleven smaller grave stones in the colony's cemetery. Because Ingrid had felt obliged to make Nicole a saint, she felt it only proper to given the others sainthood too. The previous headstones merely gave the saint's name, his or her birthday, and the words 'Rest In Piece' at the bottom of the stone. The date of their death, which

would have been too complicated, was left out. When the much larger stone for Ingrid was raised in the midst of her colleagues, it had a much grander inscription below her name and birthday”

Blessed be the founder, whom God chose to rebuild his church.

Heir to the prophets of Earth and Vicar of Christ, whom God gave the keys
to His Kingdom, will forever be the inspiration of the children of Eden.

Now that the last stone for the Twelve Apostles of Eden had been raised and it appeared as if there was nothing more for the Caretakers to do on the humans’ behalf, Skip gathered together the children and gave them startling and disturbing news. It was time that the new generation be on its own. They had learned to take care of themselves. Because their numbers had swelled into the thousands, they were able to interbred naturally. They didn’t need Caretakers anymore. The longer that Skip and his crew stayed the longer would be the children’s dependence on them. Without fanfare and even time for the audience gathered in the garden to protest, Skip climbed in Phoenix One with Sandra and Woody and returned to the ship where Rusty sat waiting on the bridge. As the two medics sat idly in the passenger compartment, their purpose in life now gone, Skip gave a simple order, unlike the one he gave Rusty when the Phoenix began its odyssey to find a new world. This time he knew the destination: Earth. After over one hundred thousand years, it was time to return!