

PAWNS OF THE PROPHET

**KIRANIS
BOOK 2**

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Temple Dark Books

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Kiranis Book 2: Pawns of The Prophet

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Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching; for they are a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck. My child, if sinners entice you, do not consent. If they say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood; let us wantonly ambush the innocent; like Sheol let us swallow them alive and whole, like those who go down to the Pit. We shall find all kinds of costly things; we shall fill our houses with booty. Throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse" – my child, do not walk in their way, keep your foot from their paths; for their feet run to evil, and they hurry to shed blood. For in vain is the net baited while the bird is looking on; yet they lie in wait – to kill themselves! and set an ambush – for their own lives! Such are the ways of all who are greedy for gain; it takes away the life of its possessors.

Proverbs 1:8-19, Anonymous, Approx. 4th Century BCE

PROLOGUE

Senate Buildings, Tokyo, 330 NE¹

Samuel Vawter was fully aware that he was a narcissist. And he was ultimately proud of it. A man of intellect and imagination, he was ambitious and resolute, tenacious and talented, the perfect combination of traits for his line of work. Of course, without the legacy into which Samuel had been born, such traits may well have been overlooked. Less than a century earlier, during the fallout from the Cage event, his grandfather had capitalised on the inevitable political and economic chaos. He had used his then considerable financial weight to bribe, scare and promise all the right people in all the right places into using his company like a safety deposit box. He then set about reminding all the wrong people in all the wrong places that his company was a manufacturer and purveyor of some of the most advanced weapons systems on the planet, thus ensuring that bad people bought his product line and contributed to the security of the funds submitted by the good people. Of course, all of that depended upon the subjective nature of right and wrong or good and bad, but old Grandfather Vawter had cared little for such...flexible designations. Times had always changed, but money was power, and when that money bought and sold weapons, it was the most powerful kind. Old Grandfather Vawter was moved to action by the words of a certain John Harrogate, the man who had revealed, in his posthumous address to the world, the subterfuge and betrayal of a covert organisation overseen by Anev Tesckyn.

It was Tesckyn's people who had, in a fool's deal made with the Kwaios Council, arranged for the abduction of millions of people by way of the Cage. Tesckyn had believed that he could use the Cage to return Earth to the universe to which it belonged. This had been implied by the Kwaios as part of the deal, but they had failed to mention that they were not in control of the Cage. The abductees had been taken to the planet known as Kiranis and they had suffered a terrible fate. Not death, but not life either, for they had found themselves subsumed physically and psychologically within the form of monstrous creatures born out of the primordial chaos of the forming planet. And when the Cage had finished its work at Kiranis, it had vanished from sight, taking the planet with it. Kiranis was never seen again, and the people of Earth were infuriated by the incident. Tesckyn's people were hunted down and killed, an operation which took decades but had a strangely unifying effect upon a population haunted by the reasons. But as their proverbial backs were turned and hopes for world peace filled the airwaves, something else was going on, for the legacy of Anev Tesckyn would not be so easily obliterated.

In the aftermath of his terrible error and the return of the mighty Kwaios Council to this part of the galaxy, Tesckyn had seen fit to involve in the affairs of Earth a species called the Illeri. They had offered to construct the Shield around Earth. It was an enormous undertaking and

¹ NE = New Era – retrospective dating fixed the Move (2150 CE) to Year 0. The Cage event in 2380 CE was newly dated to 230 NE. Note that the NE calendar is now also defunct, given what was learned of the Move in the 6th century NE.

Tesckyn knew that he would not see it completed in his lifetime. And that was without considering the assassin's bullet which passed through his brain twelve years later. Unfortunately, it was too late to stop the Illeri. The construction work was undertaken by automated machinery, highly advanced and seemingly impervious to the weapons of the day. Numerous attempts were made by autonomous militant groups and people calling themselves freedom fighters, but it seemed that the more the people of Earth tried to obstruct the work, the harder and faster the Illeri automatons worked. More of them arrived as the years went on, dropped off in Earth orbit like migrant workers. The closest things came to a work stoppage was short of forty years into the project, when a Kwaios vessel raced into the Sol system, destroying ships and outposts in an attempt to get to the Shield. When it reached Earth, weaponry and defensive systems of which the people had not even been aware were activated around the perimeter of the Shield, and the Kwaios ship was crippled. The Illeri robots towed it away, leaving the dying ship at a position just inside lunar orbit. The Kwaios never came again. This incident made it clear that construction of the Shield would not and should not be stopped, and the people of Earth became resigned to its shadowy presence.

As the decades went on, the progress of the work was akin to someone gradually blocking up every window in the house, but it soon became clear that the windows could be opened as the Shield came closer to full functionality, and politicians swiftly found the rhetoric of optimism leading to their taking control of a panicked people. For the first time in human history, one single entity, the Senate, ruled Earth. At least, that was how it appeared. In truth, what had always been known remained so: the rich ruled Earth. They controlled the resources, the food and, most importantly, the weapons. And Samuel Vawter stepped up to take control of what his father and grandfather before him had long known would become the most powerful corporation on the planet. Each of them had often been asked the question, 'So, what's your secret? What have you got that your competitors don't?' but they would simply smile and change the subject. Because there was something else of which old Grandfather Vawter had taken control.

As part of the deal Tesckyn had made with the Kwaios Council, his organisation had come into possession of Kwaios technology. When Tesckyn had retreated from the furious response of the people to Harrogate's call to arms, he had taken the secrets of Kwaios tech with him, guarding them as a dragon's treasure. But the backlash of hatred against his operatives not only saw them hunted down and killed; it also saw their finances frozen or appropriated and the organisation financially crippled. Grandfather Vawter just happened to knock on Tesckyn's secret door at exactly the right time with an offer he could not refuse. The fact that the old man walked out of the secret lair of the most wanted man on the planet with Kwaios technology minutes before a bullet went through Tesckyn's brain was surely a coincidence. As was the beginning of the end for Vawter's competitors.

It is a powerful truism that the enemy of one's enemy is one's friend. As humankind looked out into the dangerous stars around them, the Shield became a more comforting prospect, and the legacy of Grandfather Vawter found itself attached to government interests. By the time Samuel Vawter took over the company, the days of operating behind the scenes like a black-op contractor had passed, and he was very much in bed with the Senate. It was a comfortable bed, but Samuel thought it wise on occasion to keep the covers on and sleep near the edge. Exposure equalled vulnerability, and Samuel had no intention of becoming vulnerable. He saw the Illeri as a threat to the security of Earth, a theory only strengthened by the relentless progression of the Shield and the complete lack of communication from the Illeri since construction began. Samuel was baffled by the Senate's refusal to send a fleet to the Illeri home world to get answers, which was why he had sent someone himself. Because of the nature of the operation, the mercenary he had sent had been ordered to keep off all communication channels until he reached his destination. Two years had now passed, and there had been no word from the mercenary. The Illeri remained a mystery, a situation which would not last much longer, for the Illeri were on their way to Earth.

As he stood in the darkness, he tried to push all other concerns from his mind as he focused on the most important operation of his life. For the briefest of moments, he wondered what his grandfather would think if he could see his progeny now. The irony had the potential to bring laughter as much as it did tears. Wearing one of his favoured grey suits, Samuel stood in a darkness of his own design. He had deactivated all lighting in the room, and he waited with growing impatience as the minutes dragged on. There was silence but for his even, sometimes protracted breathing as he held the cold black cube in his hands. They had told him to come here so the communication would not be detected. These conspirators were more powerful than any of his other business associates, but this was a business of mutual benefit to both parties. Even if he did not understand their gain, still he appreciated their payment.

The cold box grew gradually warmer in his hands, but he knew this was due to his sweating palms. Then the room changed, stretching outwards in every direction, a virtual sensation that challenged his perspective and his senses. The ceiling rose, great columns of blue and the shimmering metal of hybritech lifting it high beyond his ability to focus upon it. Flashing lights, integrated bio-technical cabling and alien console systems surrounded him. But he was not alone.

Tall, so tall that he felt the need to step back to comprehend its enormity, a figure of shimmering silver, black and blue stood facing him. 'You are not required to speak,' the Kwaios told him, the words first coming in that dreadful language that hurt human ears, before it was translated by the device in his hands and transmitted to his brain. He nodded dumbly, respecting their requirements. Any businessman knows that there are compromises to be made during negotiation. The Kwaios continued: 'Our work is advancing to a further stage. We require an increase in supply. You will ensure that the influx is increased by a factor of ten.'

Samuel was about to argue, but the image of the huge Kwaios moved closer towards him. 'This is not open to negotiation,' it reminded him. 'You will increase our supply, and we will provide you with the payment you seek.' Samuel smiled as the Kwaios clarified, 'You will live forever.'

With the conversation ended, Samuel came out of the small antechamber and looked around the larger room in which it was situated. Giant windows overlooked a great city, and sunlight bounced off the surface of a massive glass table. Samuel stared into the reflected light for a moment, allowing his eyes to lose focus as he revelled in the temporary escape from reality. From the door through which he had left the antechamber, another figure appeared, a man in a black cloak of dragons. Naveen looked solemn, focused and driven. 'Are you ready?' he asked.

Samuel nodded as he turned, his eyes readjusting to the unnatural light of the room and his resolve strengthened by the presence of this enigmatic figure. 'They won't know what hit them, will they?'

Naveen grinned as he replied, 'That's the general idea, yes.'

PART 1 EARTH

The Sentience could be known, it could be felt in the heart and in the mind, yet still our people turned from its guidance. And so, the Sentience brought the Cage, and with it a plague to make us slaves to mediocrity so that the unworthy might be judged. But Mannix Relland had prepared the way, and those of pure heart were Chosen for Renewal. Now the Sentinels oversee those who have yet to Ascend, guiding our children and keeping our ways. As the Sentience is righteous, so shall Ascension set us free.

Extract from the so-called 'Monologues of Ascension' (author unknown), restored from corrupted Psy-cells discovered in 709 NE in the ruins of the Great 'Si' Library in Berlin. The 'Monologues' are copies of earlier texts thought to be composed by a Presbyter of the Church of the New Elect c. 320-370 NE. They are now housed in the Millennium Temple on Kiranis. It is unclear as to whether 'Ascension' in this extract indicates a retrospective on the events of the year 330, or it was an ambiguous theological concept pre-dating those events; a concept to be later legitimated by them.

THE MEC SYSTEM

MEC Station Gamma-48, Sector 116

The Argo ploughed the darkness in which stars would grow. It was a thing of beauty, this black-shredding ship. Sleek and fast, its rows of proximity beacons were like strings of pearls embedded in the shimmering skin of an obsidian predator searing through the waterless depths. And a predator indeed, because like many things of beauty, the Argo was lethal, a trickster of seductive destruction. Small windows along its hide emitted pinpoints of light belittled by the proximity beacons. But through these pinpoints one could see life. As the Argo was nearing a gigantic station living in the shadows of a nearby star, Captain Abigale Saranne was enjoying the silence as she traversed one of the outer corridors. There was no activity in this area of the ship, and she trusted that there was none anywhere else. Well...almost anywhere else. As she reached an elevator door, she tapped the control panel and said, 'Medical.' After a few seconds, the face of a man in his early forties appeared on a small screen. Green-eyed and handsome, his light brown hair was retreating from an encroaching forehead and losing the battle on two fronts, as invading grey also assaulted on the left and right flanks. 'We're ready, Captain,' he reported. *'Just you and me to go.'*

'Good,' Abigale replied. 'I want the bridge crew as soon as we're through.'

The man furrowed his eyebrows. *'I'm not a big fan of flouting protocol.'*

'You'll have to trust me on this one, Doc,' Abigale assured him. 'I just can't tell you why.'

On matters such as this, the conflict of authority between Command and Medical usually ended in stalemate, serving nobody's interests. The doctor conceded, aware that there was little time to argue. *'I'll skip straight to Engineering after the bridge then...to get back on track.'*

Abigale gave a little laugh. 'I can't imagine you skipping anywhere.'

The doctor smiled. *'You'd be surprised what I get up to when you're all out!'*

'I really don't wanna know.'

'Call me from the bridge,' the doctor said, as a warning sounded from his console. *'We're within scanning range.'*

'Will do.' Abigale tapped the panel and, as the screen went blank, the elevator door opened. She stepped in.

The dark station came to life as the Argo continued towards it. It was seen to be cylindrical as thousands of points of light burned the shadows, but it opened with an internal spiralling section separating its two operating units in anticipation of its latest client. The station was a portal to the MEC network.

Abigale looked at her reflection in the mirrored wall at the rear of the elevator. She was tired, and it showed. Loath to wear much make-up, the darkness around her eyes was rescued from over-exposure by her sallow skin. Yet still she could see it; she knew it was there. Her blue eyes saw an older woman than the one to whom it had become accustomed. And her long brown hair framed a face which had seen too much. She was looking forward to getting home. As she began to tie up her hair to transform herself into Practical Mode, she said, 'Bridge,' and two things happened: the elevator began its ascent, and the mirrored wall became almost fully transparent. Abigale could still see her reflection, enough to aid in fixing her hair, but she could also see something wonderful.

The self-perpetuating engine of the Argo represented a considerable evolution of even the most trusted and economical quantum intake conversion drives which had become the norm in the past century, but its mechanics were a secret fiercely protected by the Vawter Corporation. Whereas a standard QUIC engine collected its fuel on a quantum level as the vessel moved through space – its hordes of bots processing a theoretically endless supply of

energy – the pulsing and swirling sphere of multi-coloured lights in the centre of the Argo was the effect of the undulating waves of mirror-cased bots obscuring the true heart of the operation. It was suicide to investigate closer, a determination not unfounded. As captain, however, Abigale was necessarily privy to its secrets. She knew that the engine of the Argo was one of a kind, but it was not the only thing on view as the elevator rose higher, allowing Abigale to look down upon it.

The internal walls of the inner corridor-run of every deck could be seen, as well as the scores of elevator cars and lines. Hundreds of robotic automatons with various duties moved around the weightless interior, their mag-drive propulsion systems humming amidst the glow and pulse of the engine. Abigale loved this sight, the inner workings of the ship. It reminded her of the doll she once took apart as a child, much to the frustration of her father. As she sat in her room amidst the pieces, she had looked up at him sweetly and explained, 'I wanted to see how she cried.'

Flickers of blue light could be seen in the space between the two ends of the cylinder as the great MEC station prepared for the arrival of the Argo. Like an enormous glowing mouth waiting to swallow the vessel, the spiralling centre had been opened according to the dimensions of the ship, allowing for its passage through this giant metal portal. The interior of the portal activated then, crackling blue energy igniting to create a sheet of bright blue light.

The elevator stopped and, rather than having to turn around and exit the way she had entered, as on most other decks, Abigale watched the glass descend to open the elevator onto the short corridor leading to the bridge. It was also transparent, and Abigale walked a curving path until she reached the bridge, feeling a familiar shiver run through her as she stepped into the deathly, but occupied, silence. It welcomed her with a whispering, '*Remember me?*'. Seventeen of her crew were here, unconscious at their stations, laying comfortably in reclining chairs designed for this specific, haunting purpose. Abigale went swiftly to her own chair and settled in, pressing the button to recline with her left hand. Tapping the panel with her right, she said again, 'Medical.'

A holo-image of the doctor projected from the ceiling. '*Comfy?*' he asked.

'And if I say no?' Abigale quipped.

'*Not my problem. Close your eyes and relax.*'

'Ooh, I bet you say that to all the girls!' Abigale closed her eyes and tried to relax as she heard the soft hum of the hypo-spray moving into position at her neck. On the end of a short arm attached to the chair, the hypo-spray was ready to administer the sedative which would render her unconscious. It reached her neck, and with a short, sharp hiss, its pressurised delivery system shot the sedative through her pores and directly into her bloodstream. She was quickly out. Down in Medical, the doctor followed suit, until the Argo was like a ghost ship, its unique engine shutting down until it set as a solid reflective sphere. Power was systematically cut off in a pre-determined hierarchy of systems, until only the string-of-pearls proximity beacons were active. Then they, too, were shut down, until – all lights out, all life out – the Argo was drawn like a black moth into the sheet of blue energy inside the automated station. The prow of the ship pushed into the energy wall, but it was not destroyed. Instead, once the entire ship was devoured, the spiral reversed and closed the station, before an aperture opened on its dark surface and a ball of bright blue light shot out across the galaxy. Travelling at immense speed, it vanished into the darkness.

Ω

Many light years away, a very different ship was approaching Earth. A majestic vessel, it was beautiful like the Argo but larger and more powerful, the killer whale to the Argo's great white shark. It appeared to cause ripples in the fabric of space as it came closer to the planet around

which similar technology was being brought to fruition. For here, finally, were the Illeri, a species whose reputation preceded them only insofar as their mysterious nature had become synonymous with the Shield. Only slightly larger than the C-1 Battle Cruisers of Earth's military, the Illeri ship boasted no lighting of any kind, no indication of windows or the flashing, coloured strips of a proximity detection system. There was no visual evidence of life on board; but appearances could indeed deceive.

Star Marshal Rami Marush had heard little about these people, these strange new friends whom he observed from the command centre of the lunar station. A life form known only to humans as a Type-4 Sentient, this classification identified the Illeri as a primarily aquatic life form, and as such it was likely that they were loath to spend too much time away from their natural habitat. Marush tried to imagine them interacting with the Senate representatives, grinning as he pictured someone throwing the bureaucrats into a gigantic tank to swim with the Illeri ambassador.

'Could do with a joke, sir,' a familiar voice cut in. Marush did not particularly like the man, but he chuckled softly as he turned to see Commander Collenson, his direct subordinate for this operation, walking up the ramp towards him and saying, 'Been a long day.'

'Just thinking about this meeting,' Marush explained. 'How they're gonna do it without drowning.'

Collenson nodded, stony-faced as always. 'Should be interesting,' he agreed, missing the joke, 'although we won't see any of it 'til we get home. There's something interfering with civilian broadcasting.' He handed a light-key to the star marshal, who put it on his right palm and activated it. The projection jumped up from his hand, displaying approach vectors for the visiting ship as Collenson explained, 'They're clear for entry. Far as we can tell, the Shield itself is guiding them in.'

'Probably what's blocking the broadcast,' Marush noted.

'As long as it's nothing more than that. I don't like knowing nothing about these guys.'

Marush nodded in agreement. 'Well, that's what this is all about. Fifteen planets and seven different species under their watch, all of them out farther than we're willing to go without a MEC station in tow. It'd be nice to find out how they managed to get all that power without antagonising the Kwaivos. Either they've nothing the Council wants, or something they just can't take.'

'Dunno which is better.'

'I know what you mean,' agreed Marush. As the sleek monster passed the moon and reduced to minimal speed, an escort of seven battle cruisers attached themselves. On the lunar station, an alarm suddenly sounded and shouts were heard across the command centre: 'We got incoming! Multiple targets!'

They had clearly been monitoring the approach of the Illeri, these predators. With terrible speed and ferocity, scores of ships arrived from different directions, assorted in size and strength. With some risking being torn apart by the sudden drop in velocity, this was apparently a concerted attack. Marush ordered fighters launched from the lunar station to engage them, but it quickly became clear that these were diversionary tactics on the part of the attackers. Larger vessels materialised in the space between the Shield and the escorted Illeri ship, Garran battleships opening fire on Earth's cruisers without delay. Marush could see only the flashing bursts of explosions in the distance and Earth itself was just a dark sphere looming in the background, but his screen magnified the scene just in time for him to witness something magnificent. In the shadow of the Shield, the Illeri vessel came alive, thousands of lights illuminating its surface, countless weapons pummelling the Garran ships and tearing them to pieces. Another alarm sounded and Marush shouted, 'Report!'

'A vortex, sir! Above the North Pole!'

The darkness beyond the zenith of the Shield rippled as if a stone had disturbed a pool of black, and three ships birthed from the darkness. The outer hulls of the warships of the Jaevisk Society were now composed of a shimmering network of black and reflective metal, and they

were deadlier than ever, from Marush's viewpoint appearing to descend upon their Illeri target like ravenous birds. The battle cruisers from Earth were severely damaged and would not last much longer, but even the Garran found themselves in the line of fire as the three Jaevisk ships opened fire on everything in their path. This was not a concerted attack at all. It was a moment of opportunistic chaos brought on by the Illeri arrival. Although the final guest at the party was fashionably late, it swiftly made its presence felt. The Argo roared into the fray like an angry beast.

Countless weapons, some never before seen by the attackers, disabled and destroyed everything that came up against it, and the Jaevisk found its lead ship with a gaping hole in its belly as strange missiles burst from this unique vessel to blow it wide open. The Jaevisk realised too late that the tide had turned as this new horror maintained a collision course with the weakened section of the lead warship, ripping it in two as the Argo burst through the explosion and the wreckage. Stunned by these tactics, the Jaevisk fled, waiting until they had reached a safe distance before opening a vortex and returning to the sanctuary of their space, leaving behind the burning debris of a warship. It was not long before the Garran and the other unidentified attackers followed suit, with Earth's military vessels snapping at their heels. In the aftermath, it appeared that the Illeri had suffered little damage, and they made no attempt to contact anyone to express any form of gratitude. Their lights went out again. And they resumed their course to Earth.

The Shield constructed around the blue planet deactivated its defence systems. Electromagnetic fields of protection went down, surface-to-orbit guns switched off and thousands of apertures opened to reveal the patchwork of metal encompassing the Earth. The metal world opened, allowing the Illeri vessel to enter its domain. Marush watched it passing through the Shield and he felt a shiver run through him as he observed, 'It's like it recognises them.'

Ω

The Shield was not exactly connected to Earth, but it was clear that some form of symbiosis had been engineered. Reaching down through the clouds from the interior panels were hundreds of metal columns, making contact with Earth at major bodies of water. Some of those descending into oceans were less than a hundred kilometres apart. They maintained their positions by way of the synchronous orbit of the Shield from which they protruded, and there was a constant hum of activity from these giant 'Fingers of God', as the people called them. It was known that water was regularly sucked up through these columns, and that cloud cover and precipitation were now intricately connected to the mechanics of the Shield. But apart from government rhetoric about regulating planetary temperature, further details were not forthcoming. The Illeri vessel docked on the interior of the Shield, and a comparatively tiny shuttle launched from it, following one of these great columns as it descended towards Japan.

Tokyo had long been a bustling hub of people, money, technology and power. Now it was the seat of the Senate, the centre of political control and the hope for the future of humankind. The fact that it occupied a precarious position on the planet, from a tectonic point of view, spoke either of the relentless determination of the Senate or its resignation to the temporary nature of government. Kai Tzedek was of the former school of thought, because of and despite the obvious power of his mysterious guests. Senator Tzedek was a tall man, dark-haired and dark-skinned. In these days of human exposure to so many other species of potential enmity, it was tempting to imagine that something so seemingly irrelevant as skin colour no longer mattered within human society. But then human society had always been prone to tendencies of segregation. It was an integral aspect of self-identity. If everyone were considered the same, the individuality so important to materialistic humanity would be compromised. Tzedek certainly valued his individuality, as he did his materialistic fulfilment. Money and power were everything to him, and he savoured what the two brought into his life.

His wife had been attracted to him primarily because of his obvious potential to climb the political ladder. She saw where he was going in life, and so she attached herself to him with such parasitic tenacity that he swiftly came to resent her. She may have seen where he was going in the long term, but she certainly had no idea where he had been going during the day or with whom he spent his time. At least, until a jealous secretary informed her. Tzedek had reacted as one might expect of any powerful man whose individuality was threatened. It cost a lot less than he had at first been quoted to get rid of the two women. But then Tzedek was a man who liked to shop around to get the best deal. The messy part was tidying up after his wife and secretary had been found dead, because he could allow neither the man who took the job nor the ones whose quotes he had rejected to survive. For that, he invented a story and asked a close and powerful friend of his to remove the assassins from the picture. Then he bought himself something nice, invited a young woman around to his home and opened an expensive bottle of wine. Now that he thought of it, he could not remember the colour of her skin. *Maybe it really doesn't matter*, he thought, grinning as the shimmering black Illeri shuttle touched down on the lower roof of the block-spanning Senate building.

Tzedek stood with his colleagues, men who thought of themselves as his equals – and here his grin faded – on the upper roof, two storeys above the landing surface. They were flanked by an armed escort of twenty men and women. The morning fog hung lazily above them all, wondering whether it belonged to this scene of diplomatic uncertainty. Tzedek glanced up to remind it that it did not.

Depressurisation systems hissed and vapour escaped from the shuttle while a ramp extended from the side. The ramp was formed by two black extrusions reaching out to the surface like probing claws. Once they had made contact with the roof, a sheet of energy connected them, forming a pathway down from the bulkhead door which had not been noticed until it opened. It was not so much a door as it was a vanishing trick. The portal in the outer bulkhead was simply no longer there.

While the members of the armed escort were dressed in navy and red, and the Senate representatives were clothed in many different styles and colours of ceremonial attire – Tzedek himself wearing a dark blue robe over a white suit with gold lining – the Illeri delegation had apparently decided not to dress up for the occasion. Tzedek's robe rippled in the breeze as two dark figures filled the wide portal in the black shuttle. They emerged slowly into the light, not walking but rather hovering, levitating a little more than an inch above the energy surface of the ramp, and their appearance unsettled everyone gathered to welcome them. For unless the Illeri were mechanical creatures, it was clear that they were not willing to show their true form. Encased from head to whatever passed as their feet in polished black metal, they resembled ancient knights from Earth in their intricate suits of overlapping armour. The layers of metal were fused in such a way that it was impossible to determine a beginning or end to the pattern, and there were no visible joints or points of vulnerability. The parts which may have protected arms were drawn back at the shoulders, where they flared up and out, almost as if wings were hidden inside. What was visible, however, and what drew the attention of the armed escort, was the array of integrated weapons in the armoured suit. The armed escort of the Senate was looking upon its counterpart.

Senator Mohammed Al-Rais leaned into Tzedek, saying quietly, 'You better be right about this, Kai,' to which Tzedek side-eyed him with sufficient condescension to remind him that he was as much a party to these proceedings as any of those standing with him. A third figure emerged into the light at the top of the Illeri ramp. This one was over two metres in height, slightly taller than the first two and distinguished from them by no other visible means. As it descended the ramp, however, the two guards stepped aside in obvious deference, waiting until it had passed them. Once it had, they returned to the ramp and, to the surprise of everyone watching, they went back into the shuttle and the door closed behind them, the bulkhead reappearing as if sealing a breach. The Illeri dignitary was left alone.

Tzedek led the others down the steps from the upper roof, his arms outstretched as if he might embrace the alien. Which of course he would have done if required. Graciously, there were no feet to be kissed, but... 'On behalf of the Senate,' he beamed, 'I welcome you to Earth...Ambassador. It is our pleasure to finally –'

The voice which dismembered Tzedek's fawning was metallic and chilling, sufficient to detract from the mystery of an Illeri speaking English. 'We will see...Echad,' it demanded, pronouncing the 'ch' like a 'k' rather than the guttural sound required of a name derived from an ancient Semitic tongue. The ensuing silence was enough to suggest to the fog that it could descend ever so slightly on the proceedings, just to add some atmosphere. The Senate representatives were close enough now to look up into the eyes of the armoured suit, but Tzedek could see only his reflection in those black globes. A chill ran through him which had nothing to do with the morning wind picking up at this altitude. 'I think I understand,' he replied finally. 'Our initial contact with your species happened during a tumultuous time for our people, and yes...a man named Echad played a prominent role in the events, but...that was quite some time ago. That man is long dead.' Tzedek managed a little laugh, before adding, 'We humans do not live very long.'

The cold stare of the Illeri suit was almost suggestive as the ambassador replied, 'We know.' The huge suit turned towards the doorway on the roof, and it began to float towards it. 'Echad had a son,' the ambassador continued as the Senate party quickened its pace to keep up. 'We will see Echad.' The senators began to whisper amongst themselves, but Tzedek's glare warned them to silence.

Inside the welcoming warmth of the top floor of the Senate building, where towering ceilings were the result of merging two levels, giant windows welcomed the morning light, enticing it in with open arms before taking it captive. A long, elliptical table with a blue and white stretched Earth across a surface of polished glass adorned the centre of the vast room. On a day like this, the Shield was painfully absent from the representation of the planet. At the place where Senator Tzedek would normally sit, the Illeri ambassador had toppled the chair and stood patiently for the humans to join it. They moved to their designated positions as Tzedek was forced to concede his own, moving instead to the opposite end of the table. He had long hated sitting with his back to the door, and many of the others took pleasure in his discomfort, barely able to conceal their spiteful smirks. Tzedek ignored them, concentrating instead on the big picture so he could maintain a modicum of respect for this powerful species. Illusions of deference were important in these times of transition. 'The Shield is complete,' said the Illeri as soon as everyone was settled and silent.

Tzedek felt a slight jarring sensation in his head with every word the Illeri spoke, as if someone was scraping a fork across the dinner plate of his brain. 'That's excellent news, Ambassador. I'm sure you can imagine how difficult it's been for our people to live so long amidst its construction.'

The ambassador was silent. Either it could not imagine or it did not care. Tzedek pressed on, desperate to strip away the tension. 'I wonder if I might ask some questions concerning the capabilities and function of the Shield.'

'Questions are permitted.' The Illeri voice was grating and seemed to scrape the windows around them all before it went into their ears. Tzedek found himself grinding his teeth before continuing. 'As I'm sure you're aware, the main reason for our...government at the time requesting the Shield...' he began, ignoring the heads turning towards him (there was no point getting into the specifics of authority from a century earlier), '...was to set up an advanced defence system designed to protect us from the Kwaios Council. But they haven't been seen anywhere near us in decades, so...maybe they're no longer concerned with us.'

'The Kwaios are...deceptive,' said the ambassador. 'You should remain protected. The Shield will protect your world in many ways. Planetary temperature is regulated through the hydro pillars and the operative cycle of the apertures.'

Tzedek nodded. So, what the people of Earth called the Fingers of God were called hydro pillars. It made sense, and while this was clearly a deflection on the part of the ambassador, Tzedek was nonetheless intrigued by the technology. 'Yes, we've noticed that,' he replied. 'The dispersion cycle has proved remarkable in combating global warming, although of course the Shield itself is responsible for the great majority of heat being trapped. But due to the overall decrease in temperature, we've had considerably less precipitation. We're beginning to experience some serious droughts and associated agricultural problems. It's also been noticed that the...hydro pillars are drawing greater volumes of water up into the Shield than the levels of vapour released into the upper atmosphere would suggest. Perhaps you could explain the...imbalance.'

For a moment there was silence and the ambassador stood motionless. The gathered senators found themselves searching for answers within the lifeless black eyes of the armoured suit. Then the ambassador spoke: 'Your sea levels have been rising for centuries, claiming large areas of otherwise habitable land. Initially, the Shield contributed to this problem, but the activation of the hydro pillars now provides a remedy. The Shield stores significant amounts of water, and you can control the balance between water extraction and vapour release. Apertures can be opened over specific areas to focus the light of your star on areas of unwanted freezing, as they can be closed on other areas to encourage freezing. Because the combined mass of the Shield and your planet would have resulted in orbital instability if polar ice had remained as it was when construction began, planetary mass has been altered to compensate for the synchronous movement of both bodies. If there is too much water on your planet, it can be stored in the Shield, and if the combined mass of the planet and the Shield threatens orbital stability, water may be released into space. This is the full functionality of the dispersion cycle.'

Everyone at the table was stunned. The symbiosis occurring here was far beyond anything they had imagined, and Tzedek was first to voice his concerns. 'It sounds like Earth is completely dependent upon the Shield, Ambassador. This isn't the message we want to deliver to our people.'

It was impossible to tell whether the ambassador was concerned by this reaction. 'The Shield is a complex machine,' it replied. 'We will instruct you thoroughly. Never have you been in complete control of your planet. There will be no more drought because you will regulate precipitation. Food will grow where you decide, and you can now reclaim land lost through centuries of flooding. Harmful radiation from your star will decrease and you will oversee your climate on a global scale.'

Kai Tzedek sat back in his chair and glanced at Al-Rais. The man was nodding slowly with wide eyes and a smile of wonder, and Tzedek shared his enthusiasm. This was an unprecedented step forward and it was a concept simply oozing power like nothing before. Whoever controlled the Shield literally controlled the world. Not just its money and resources, but its weather, its food production and ultimately where people could live. The Senate had struck gold, for the Shield was the ultimate fortress, protecting Earth from the outside while defining it from the inside. There were some narrowed eyes of distrust, and Tzedek grinned at the short-sightedness of the disbelievers. He rose from his chair and began to clap, that age-old human custom of displaying satisfaction at the show. Mohammed Al-Rais did the same, and the others gradually joined him and Tzedek. The Illeri ambassador offered no indication that he appreciated or even cared that they were happy. Once the clapping had died down to an uncomfortable state of uncertainty, the Illeri spoke again, saying, 'We will see Echad.'

Tzedek shook his head with a smile, still caught up by the excitement. 'Echad is dead,' he reminded the alien pleasantly. 'I assure you, he died out at Kiranis and he had no children.'

'He had a son,' the Illeri argued.

Tzedek chuckled with good humour. 'If he did, he didn't tell anyone,' he quipped. The joke was lost on the alien, and it moved away from the table, floating back the way it had come, passing Tzedek on its way to the doors opening out to the roof. 'Ah...' Tzedek began, to which

the alien stopped and waited. 'Perhaps you'd like to see some of our world. I mean...now that you've helped us to change it. I assure you, we have some impressive landscapes and geological phenomena.'

The ambassador turned and the black orbs stared into Tzedek's soul. 'No,' it replied eventually. 'We will see Echad. This is our price for the Shield.' The Illeri turned back to the doors and continued out to the roof. As the senators hurried to the doors, they watched the Illeri ambassador ascend the ramp to the shuttle. It passed through the vanishing portal in the bulkhead, which closed behind it. But the shuttle did not leave. For a short while, Tzedek and the others watched it in silence as the wind picked up again, and Al-Rais came up beside him, leaning in close. 'So where *is* he?' he asked quietly, the words almost lost to the wind.

'I'm not sure,' Tzedek replied. 'Deep in Garran territory last time I checked. Most likely headed for Omneri.'

'Omneri?' Al-Rais nodded. 'So, he's still looking for them.'

'I don't think he'll ever stop.' Tzedek looked up towards the shadows cast by the Shield, saying, 'We should never have told him.'

'Well, he's clearly not the only one who knows,' said Al-Rais, nodding towards the Illeri shuttle. 'What are we gonna do about this?'

Tzedek turned to his colleague. 'Whatever's going on, the Jaevisk and the Garran clearly aren't overjoyed by the Illeri being here,' he noted. 'So, our priority is to figure out exactly *why* they're here, cos if this is Illeri PR, they need to work on their people skills.' He put a hand on Al-Rais' shoulder. 'Does that sound like something you'd be interested in overseeing, Mohammed?'

Al-Rais nodded and said, 'Absolutely,' completely taken in by the unexpected camaraderie and sense of inclusion. Tzedek was known to consider himself superior to the rest of the Senate. Of course, what Al-Rais could not have known was that the attack on the Illeri ship had come as no surprise to Tzedek. And as to the reason for the Illeri being at Earth, Tzedek was happy to have Al-Rais conduct some wild goose chase for answers of which he was already in possession. He just hoped that the captain of the Argo had not complicated matters with her recklessness. Not now that the clock was well and truly ticking.

He looked towards the heavily protected annex room situated next to the doors through which the alien had left, drawing in a controlling breath.

THE CAPTAIN

Military Dry Dock, West Pacific Sync Orbit

Abigale scratched her head for the third time in less than two minutes, running her hands through her long hair. She could not explain the sensation, but there was a feeling that something was not right. 'I think that damned machine got my hair wrong,' she complained as Carena Moreno, her second-in-command and one of the few people she considered a friend, came up beside her. Carena smiled and looked at her reflection in the window, beyond which they could see the ongoing repairs to their ship in the dock. 'I think mine looks *better*,' she remarked, flicking it out playfully from both sides of her neck. 'More...bounce.' Abigale laughed as they watched the small maintenance vessels buzzing around the Argo. The prow of the ship and ten decks around it were crushed from smashing through the Jaevisk Warship, and it was for this reason alone that Abigale was standing here. She had been denied landfall until she received the inevitable reprimand for what must surely have seemed to others a maniacal course of action. And she could hear the footsteps of consequence approaching.

Carena and Abigale turned as five men came up the ramp towards them, none of them showing concern as to what was happening beyond the window to their left. 'Tell them you were drunk,' Carena joked under her breath.

'Again?' Abigale replied from the side of her mouth, maintaining her composure as Carena turned her head away, covering her mouth and pretending to clear her throat before looking back at the military officials. 'Something amusing, Commander Moreno?' she was asked by one of them.

'No, sir,' she replied as she straightened with military decorum. 'I am never amused, sir.'

A reprimand for sarcasm was cut off as the man on the far right of the group, dressed in civilian clothing of grey practicality, raised his hand. Abigale was surprised to see her superiors lapsing to silence as the civilian addressed her cordially. 'Captain Saranne,' he said, smiling pleasantly, 'my name is Samuel Vawter. I am –'

'I know who you are, Mister Vawter,' Abigale interrupted him. 'I know my ship is privately commissioned.'

Samuel's smile was a few degrees colder as he replied, 'The Argo is *my* ship, Captain. On loan to the military. And I can take control of it whenever I see fit. You'd do well to remember that.'

'I'll keep it in mind,' said Abigale. 'Of course, I hope we can hold on to her for a while. She's a beauty.'

He laughed wryly, stepping close enough to whisper to her, 'Are you patronising me, Captain? Because I'm sure you don't want to make an enemy of me.'

Knowing her friend and captain only too well, Carena had stepped wisely to one side, wincing as Vawter spoke. Abigale replied, 'Are you *threatening* me, Mister Vawter? Cos right now, I'm not sure what I want to make of you.'

Samuel appeared to enjoy this turn in the conversation, and he could not help but grin as he moved back and asked, 'Why did you ram the warship?'

Abigale was not an idiot. Despite Vawter's light-hearted demeanour, she understood what was at stake here. 'I knew they wouldn't anticipate it.'

Samuel appeared to like the answer. 'So, you were going for the...unexpected?'

'Exactly. They're unsettled by what they can't predict.'

'You understand the Jaevisk?'

'No,' Abigale admitted, 'but I understand men with power.' There really was no disguising the venom in the conversation now as Samuel replied, 'Really? I do hope you're not comparing the men of the Senate with the Jaevisk, Captain.'

Before Carena could stop her, Abigale replied, 'I wasn't talking about the Senate.'

Samuel took a deep breath to calm himself, because he knew that time taken to maintain one's composure was time well spent. 'The Argo is the most advanced ship available to the military, Captain,' he reminded her. 'The damage you did today will cost billions, and yet these men...' he gestured to the four behind him, 'have convinced me to leave you in command of one of my prized possessions. I trust you won't be so reckless with her again.'

Abigale brushed imaginary debris from her right shoulder and breast, a gesture which did not fail to attract the attention of every man gathered, Vawter most definitely included. 'Your concern for my crew is touching, Mister Vawter,' she replied. 'Now, if that's all, I'd like to get back to *my* prized possession. She's waiting for her mother to come home.'

Samuel's eyes had lifted to meet her steely gaze once again, and he felt a rush of excitement course through him. Not because she had aroused him – at least not only so – but because she had walked into his trap. 'It's interesting you should mention your crew,' he remarked, stepping back from her. Now she could see the concern on the faces of the military men as he continued: 'Because something else happened which I believe you'd call...unexpected.'

She glanced at the others, asking, 'What's he talking about? What's going on?' Carena stepped up protectively as Samuel told her with a poisonous grin, 'You killed twelve of your crew when you rammed the warship, Captain. Not my concern, I know, but...I thought you should hear it from me. Now, if you'll excuse me...I have a flight to catch.' He winked provocatively before turning to leave, pushing past the four men. They watched him go before they turned back to Abigale and Carena. Abigale was stunned and Carena asked, 'Is he serious? We lost people out there?'

One of the men, middle-aged, tall and plump with ruddy features, nodded. 'I'm afraid so. These men are here to investigate.' Carena and Abigale hardly glanced at the other three, and Abigale said, 'I don't understand. There were no fatalities reported.'

The man shook his head. 'You presumed everyone was pulled back from the forward sections, right?'

Abigale nodded, noting that the other men were listening intently and taking notes. 'As per my orders,' she replied. 'I gave them before we entered the MEC station.'

'Why?'

'I...' Abigale glanced at the battered ship in dry dock. 'I was warned about the attack.'

'By who?'

'An Axcebian trader,' Carena put in. 'Out in 184.'

The red-faced man glanced at Carena, nodding slowly. 'Okay...so a trader heard some rumours,' he said. 'Was that all?'

'What do you mean?' asked Abigale.

'Well, you didn't just rush here, did you? You ignored MEC protocol not only by jumping the network queues but by having yourself and your bridge crew revived before vital systems were manned. And it looks like you knew before you even entered the MEC that you needed your forward sections evacuated! What are we supposed to think here, Captain?'

Abigale looked at the ship again, and then back at her inquisitor. 'You're *supposed* to think that we saved a lot of lives today!'

'That's not gonna work,' the man replied, shaking his head. 'How did you know to protect the prow?'

'Protect...?' Abigale looked at Carena, saying, 'That's exactly what *he* said!'

Carena nodded as the man demanded, 'Who...the trader?'

'Yeah,' Abigale replied. 'He said I'd need to protect the prow. When we got here and saw the warship...our trajectory...' she shrugged. 'It just...made sense. It was like...'

'Like he knew what was going to happen?'

Both women nodded and the man stepped closer, the others stepping up also to continue with their impeccable notetaking as he said, 'You need to tell us everything you remember

about this trader, Captain. *Everything*. It's imperative that no one intercepted your conversation with him.'

Carenna and Abigale exchanged glances, before Abigale admitted, 'I think someone might have. There was a burst of interference and...' she nodded, 'he cut us off quickly after that.'

'What's going on?' asked Carenna. 'Who was he?'

'That's not your concern,' the man told them. 'We'll examine your com data. But we still need to know why those people were in the forward sections despite your order to pull back.'

'I've no idea,' said Abigale, 'but if you give me their names...that might help.'

'You can leave the investigating to us, Captain. For now, enjoy your shore leave. Once our intel locates this trader of yours, you're going straight back out to get him. We need him here by the end of the week.'

'What? Why? He's just a debt collector.'

'So when you find him,' said the tall man, 'tell him we owe him.'

Ω

Walking across to the transport hubs on the outer fringes of the gigantic space-dock, Abigale waved farewell to Carenna as she headed to the Gamma-Route station, while she herself headed to Delta. If the words of their superiors were anything to go by, they would be seeing each other again very soon. Carenna lived in Russia, and the shuttles on the Gamma-Route went that way every hour. Delta-Route covered the countries of western Europe, and Abigale lived in Ireland, the last stop on Delta. The next shuttle left in ten minutes, meaning Abigale would be home in less than three hours, allowing for any delays caused by casual observers of the Illeri ship. Since their arrival, scores of civilian craft had taken people up to see the vessel docked inside the Shield. Most of these tour operators acquired clearance from the military to cross their flight paths, but some private craft did not.

Abigale's journey was made in silent contemplation, piecing together the events of the day. She stared out the window into the busy and occupied darkness, making a mental reminder to speak to the Argo's doctor when she returned to the ship. Perhaps he had made some error during the revival process. But that should have had no bearing on their position on the ship, so she could be wrong. Given the time between the emergence of the ship from the MEC in Earth territory and the fight with the Jaevisk, all Abigale could think was that those twelve people had been revived before anyone else, and that something had led them to the forward sections of the ship. What Abigale needed to know was who they were and in which sections they had been. Pushing it to the back of her mind, she thought of her ten-year-old daughter, Hannah. Abigale had promised her a trip by MEC to an archaeological dig on one of the planets orbiting the star Gliese 581, discovered in the early twenty-first century, long before the Move. It was impossible to say whether archaeological excavations in the Home Universe would have found anything even remotely interesting, but the dig on this 581g was proving fruitful, having uncovered ruins of cities built before the first dinosaur had walked on Earth, in either Universe. 581g was certainly in the so-called 'Goldilocks' zone, which had drawn attention to it, but Goldilocks had long ago left the woods. Although Abigale felt like doing little more than soaking in a hot bath on her balcony, she was not one to break promises to Hannah, who saw her mother so infrequently these days. With a smile of contentment and Hannah's face in her mind, she slept for a while, but when she woke, tears were drying on her face and she felt a terrible emptiness. It was often this way when she came home, for memories of her husband were inevitably stirred. He had been such a gentle soul, loving and caring beyond measure, but at the same time fiercely protective of both ladies in his life. Hannah was only five when he had died, and since the moment he had first taken his baby girl in his arms, his life had greater purpose than ever before. Abigale still recalled the tears of joy she and Daniel had shared in the delivery room, but that memory had been later tainted by the tears she had shared with Hannah when Daniel was gone. And it inevitably led to recalling Hannah's words as the coffin

was lowered into the dark, cold earth. Squeezing her mother's hand, she had said, 'Don't worry, Mom. We'll see him again one day.'

But such comforts were for the innocent and the faithful, and Abigale was too far beyond either to find a way back. She looked out the window to see the ruddy sunset burning through the grill of the Shield over Ireland. 'Coming down over Derry now, Captain,' one of the stewards told her as she passed her seat. Conscious of her drying tears, Abigale wiped her cheeks with both hands and forced a smile. 'It's good to be home,' she replied absently, blissfully unaware that nothing would ever be the same again.

Ω

As she walked up the path, she knew instinctively that something was wrong. The last time Abigale had returned home, Hannah had set out a banner to welcome her. Under the watchful eye of Karolina, her Nanny, she had even tried her luck in the kitchen, preparing what had been – for all the wrong reasons – an unforgettable meal. Today, however, there was silence in the house as Abigale closed the door behind her, and there was every sign that the place had recently been cleaned and tidied. Karolina had certainly been doing what she was hired for, but she was also a friend, and it was unusual for her to miss Abigale's homecoming. 'Hello?' Abigale called. 'You here, sweetheart?' Silence remained, and Abigale made her way across the living room to the large black console on the wall. It lit up as she approached, activating and welcoming her in its friendly female voice. 'Hi, Maria,' Abigale replied. 'Any messages?'

'Hannah went to Gliese 581g this morning,' the computer informed her. *'She is due home at midnight.'*

Noting that Karolina was not mentioned, Abigale felt a shiver run through her. 'Who did she go with?'

There was a moment of silence, as the computer seemed to struggle with the answer, before responding, *'That information is unavailable.'*

'Unavailable?' Abigale was not convinced. 'Are you telling me that not one of your twenty-two on-site cameras saw the person she went with?' If the computer had seen this person, they would have been identified instantaneously by way of the Global Mainframe to which every security system available to the military forces was connected. *'That is correct,'* the computer replied.

'Oh, come on, Maria. At a stretch, I'll buy that you couldn't identify the person, but...what...you didn't even see them?'

'That is correct.'

Abigale stared at the console for a moment, trying to make sense of this. 'Show me security recordings for their time of departure,' she ordered.

'That information is unavailable,' the computer repeated. The screen went blank. Now Abigale's suspicions were raised, and she offered her palm to be scanned by the Network activation grid, the military equivalent of the CivilNet. 'Access today's transport itinerary for MEC station Alpha-3, Mars orbit,' she requested. The information was displayed and she said, 'Locate Traveller Saranne, H.'

Scrolling through the list of thousands of people, her daughter's name and destination was displayed and highlighted. A second Traveller was highlighted beneath Hannah's name, but it said simply, "Companion". This was highly unusual, and Abigale tapped the word. The computer buzzed and a monotone voice a lot less pleasant than Maria stated, *'Access to this Traveller denied.'*

'Explain,' she demanded.

'Level 1 clearance required.'

'Military?' she mused aloud. The computer buzzed again: *'Access to this Traveller denied.'*

Abigale knew there was only one way to do this. 'Display return itinerary for Traveller Saranne, H.' The information was shown. Whoever this Companion was, they were due to

return to station Alpha-3 tonight. With Hannah. Abigale looked at the word “Companion”, the chill of fear replaced by the thrill of anger. ‘Whoever you are,’ she told the screen, ‘I’ll see you at the station. You still there, Maria?’

‘Yes, Abigale. I’m here.’

‘What time did Karolina leave?’

‘She has not left.’

Abigale’s stomach almost turned. She could have simply looked around the house, but instead she said, ‘Locate her.’

‘Karolina is in her bedroom.’

Abigale knew then. She knew what had happened, and for some time she could not bring herself to go upstairs. She knew she should call the police, but there was a chance they would take Hannah into care or Abigale would be forced to resign her command. They would also take over the investigation and Abigale wanted to look this person who had taken her daughter in the eyes before making them pay. Her mind reeling, she climbed the stairs and, passing Hannah’s room with heart-wrenching reluctance, she saw Karolina’s feet on the bed through the next open door. The girl was only twenty, and she would often stay here when Abigale was on deep space runs. As Abigale pushed back the door, she saw that Karolina was lying face up on the bed, still and silent. There was no sign of struggle or injury, and Abigale toyed with the idea that perhaps she had simply fallen asleep. As furious as she would be with the notion that Karolina had slept through the abduction of her daughter, Abigale still preferred that to...the alternative. Yet neither was the case, for Karolina groaned as Abigale approached the bed. Her voice was little more than a pained whisper as she explained: ‘They...took her.’

‘Karolina!’ Abigale was on the bed and it was clear that the girl had been drugged, paralysed in some way. *They?* Her child was snatched by a team and brought to the MEC station! Could it have been that terrorist group, out to get military personnel? ‘Who took her?’

‘Don’t know,’ she whimpered. ‘So...fast.’ She started to cry, and Abigale stroked her hair soothingly: ‘It’s okay, Karolina. I’ll find her.’

‘Please...call...a doctor.’

Abigale stood up from the bed. ‘I can’t do that. I’m not losing her.’ Karolina made a sound indicating that she did not understand, and Abigale explained, ‘If I report this, they’ll take Hannah. If these people wanted you dead, you would be.’

‘But they...drugged me.’ She started sobbing.

‘I know. I’m sorry.’ Abigale walked out of the room and closed the door behind her, her heart breaking.

Ω

She was waiting in the Arrivals area of the feeder post serving the Mars MEC station. A shuttle had taken her up through the Shield, where she discreetly boarded an interplanetary freighter with her military clearance and headed for Mars. The civilian vessels emerging from the MEC station would take their passengers – *Travellers*, as they were known in the MEC system – to the closest feeder post, where they would be processed to resume their journey by whatever means they had arranged. The itinerary for Hannah and her mysterious escort failed to mention the intended means of her ongoing journey, but Abigale intended to take her home with her on the next military transport.

The feeder post was relatively quiet, and cleaning bots roamed the floors somewhat aimlessly, as if anticipating the end of their shifts. That or their batteries were running low. Intelligent Marketing targeted Abigale’s little corner of the world, the holograms buzzing around her head like ghostly moths of commercialism. The good thing about IM was that one could literally swat them aside; gently to browse the adverts, forcefully to end the show. As soon as Abigale saw Hannah, she was decidedly forceful. The IM ended as she called, ‘Hey, Glitterbug!’ and headed to intercept her. For the briefest moment, she was sure that Hannah

did not recognise her, appearing somewhat disoriented. Then light returned to her eyes and she smiled and shouted, 'Mom!' as she dropped her souvenirs and ran to Abigale. Captain Saranne had her daughter in her arms and the world was immediately better. Beyond Hannah, back at the Arrivals gate, was a morbid scene, four black-garbed men wheeling a covered body on a trolley. Someone must have died somewhere along the route. Then Abigale remembered her reason for coming here and she got to her feet, looking around desperately for what she presumed would be some shady figure. There was no one else in sight, apart from the dark scene of death.

'Hannah...' Abigale asked softly, staring at the passing trolley, 'who took you to Gliese?' Hannah did not reply, and Abigale stared at the covered body suspiciously before asking the men, 'Hey...what happened?'

The response was short and sweet. Well...not sweet: 'Some old bag's heart gave out soon as she stepped out this end.'

Abigale stared at the one who had spoken, a sallow-skinned, unkempt brute whose appearance echoed his vulgarity. 'That *old bag* could be someone's wife...or *mother!*' she snapped as they moved away.

The men laughed as one, and Abigale got the distinct impression that she was outside the joke. A chill ran through her, and she turned back to Hannah, who was gathering her fallen items. 'Who took you, Hannah?' she asked her daughter, more forcefully this time. 'Why did you come back on your own?'

What happened next would long haunt her, and Abigale felt a churning in her stomach as her daughter ignored her and stepped back pointedly. Yet it was not because of the anger in her mother's voice. This was something else entirely. With a smile of ghostly contentment on her face, Hannah stepped back in and took her mother's hand, leading her away from the Arrivals area. Abigale could find no words.

In the distance, next to a military vehicle parked in a restricted area, one of the black-garbed men looked back a final time as they loaded the body into the truck.

THE DOCTOR

GenLab-3 Health Facility, Berlin

The world-renowned geneticist Doctor Ian Romis stood over the body on the table before him as two of his clinical staff prepared to hold it down. Despite the head being securely fixed to the operating table and the body strapped at each appendage, the extra staff knew they would still be required. Romis was ready to operate a laser implement designed to create cavities in the skull, and a tiny white box was on a small shelf protruding from the laser housing. The nurse next to him operated the vacuum, preparing to lift the bone flap which would be secured through suction. Romis flicked a switch on the laser-cutter, and it hummed lightly as the illuminated targeting system was activated and the energy grew in preparation. The crosshairs projected on the shaved skull narrowed as Romis moved the device closer, preferring to do so manually rather than relying on the electronic alternative. The laser emitter descended into position and he fired the invisible beam, filling the room within seconds with the smell of burning ozone. The skull was breached, and the nurse lifted the bone flap, deactivating the vacuum as she transferred it with tongs to a saline-filled dish. As Romis moved the laser housing aside, he used a simple scalpel to cut through the final layer of protection, a filmy membrane clinging to the brain itself. Before he continued, he looked up to the control room, and one of the observing team gave him the confirmation he was looking for over the intercom, *'The field is active, Doctor. The room's secure.'* Romis nodded, then pressed a release catch on the side of the white box. The lid popped open, and the two orderlies strained their necks to see what was inside as the doctor reached in with finger and thumb. He withdrew a minuscule object – a metal disc, black and silver. As he brought it closer to the open skull, he tapped a button on a console beside him. Scores of threadlike tendrils erupted from the disc, immediately shooting towards the heat of the subject brain. The body convulsed with neural shock and the orderlies struggled to hold down the flailing limbs. But the apparent agony of the unconscious subject swiftly subsided, and the probing tendrils of the disc could be seen inside the head, resting into place and connecting with their relative organic positions.

Romis was impressed with himself, and it showed. He looked up at the control room. 'Any reaction out there?' he asked. A woman in a blue suit shook her head. *'Not than I can see,'* she replied over the intercom. *'But if the Kwaios know we have this, they'll find a way of tracing it.'* Romis nodded and returned his focus to the activity of the Jaevisk marker device, before he was interrupted again. *'How's our girl?'* asked a different voice from the control room; a familiar and, at this stage, unwelcome voice. Romis indicated that the subject be turned over before looking up again to see Samuel Vawter: *'She holding up okay, Doctor?'* the man asked. The doctor nodded, glancing back to the vital readings as the orderlies turned the woman onto her back. He leaned over her, seeing her eyeballs moving beneath the lids, REM sleep the only activity they could allow for now. *'She's dreaming, as usual,'* Romis reported, unable to keep a thin smile from his face as he looked up again at Vawter and added, *'It's all Cassandra can do these days.'*

'Best way to keep her out of trouble, I'd imagine,' Vawter agreed.

Ω

Doctor Romis hung his white coat in his locker and closed the door. He took a glass of water from the table in the centre of the room and drained it before collapsing into the welcoming chair. He was tired, hungry, and quite preoccupied when the man in the grey suit entered the room. *'Doctor, it's good to finally meet you face to face,'* he said, his hand outstretched towards Romis, who looked up in surprise.

'Sorry, I didn't hear you come in,' Romis replied, shaking the offered hand and feeling something akin to an insect bite as he got slowly to his feet. A rush of blood caused him to sway a bit as he added, 'Ah, Mister...Vawter, isn't it?'

Everyone knew who Samuel Vawter was, and he nodded and smiled knowingly, recognising the need of a narcissist to maintain his own sense of superiority. 'That's right,' he replied. 'I'm one of the chief benefactors of this institution.'

Romis' smile was warm and practiced. 'Of course, yes,' he said. 'I've heard a lot about you.' Romis did not trust these people, throwing their money at situations they hoped would change the world. What was their angle? Of course, his own deviation from medical ethics left him with little ground for self-righteousness. 'I understand there was an accident with one of your vessels,' he continued.

'The *military* consider it an accident, Doctor,' Samuel declared. 'I consider it recklessness. But then who am I to argue with the military?'

'You're the guy who pays their wages.' The words had escaped before Romis had even tasted them in his mouth. To his surprise, Vawter seemed to find this amusing. 'Indeed I am,' he agreed. 'Perhaps workers' rights have finally gone too far.'

'Oh, I think that happened a long time ago, Mister Vawter.' The doctor poured himself another glass of water and offered the same to his visitor, who declined, saying, 'Call me Samuel, please,' as he sat on the low table. With his back to Romis, he continued: 'So, Doctor...did you hear anything else about this...accident?'

Romis returned gratefully to the chair and swallowed the water, his nostrils flaring as he tried to detect in the air any traces of impending danger. 'I heard there were some...fatalities,' he replied carefully, 'but then that's to be expected when you ram a Jaevisk warship, I suppose.' He chuckled ironically. 'An impressive tactic, I thought.'

Samuel did not agree: 'When it comes to my property, Doctor, I prefer to have it treated with a bit more respect.'

'Well, with all *due* respect...Samuel...perhaps you're in the wrong business?' Romis took a black overcoat from the wall and put it on, turning to face his visitor.

'Oh, I don't think so,' Samuel replied, ignoring the attitude as he stood up. 'I'm in the most lucrative business there is – war.'

'Is that why I'm doing all this? Some obscure military goal?'

'Come now, Doctor, you know as well as I do that advancement begins on the battlefield. With the right mind, all of our technology can essentially be used for battle.'

'Were you always such a cynic, Samuel?' Romis pushed past him and walked out of the room, but he stopped when he heard Vawter call to him: 'We're celebrating the tenth anniversary of the first MEC route tomorrow, Doctor. I'd like you to be there.'

Romis turned, but the man had not even followed him. Still in the locker room, he was waiting for an answer, his arrogance total. Romis had met his match. 'Why would you want *me* there?' he called back.

'Two reasons,' came the reply. 'You're highly respected in your field. The people know this, and they'll listen to you.'

'*Listen* to me?' Romis swallowed his pride and returned to the door, nodding: 'So...reason number two...what do you want me to say to them?'

'I want you to remind them how safe MEC is,' Samuel told him, smiling. 'I want the people of Earth to be assured of a safe journey, whether they're exploring, or vacationing, or...whatever. Young men and women even need to be convinced of the safety of MEC before they'll sign for military service these days.'

Romis could find nothing immediately wrong with this, which made it all the more frustrating. 'Well, I've...never travelled by MEC myself,' he replied, 'but I'm fully aware of its safety record. I can explain that much, but little else.'

Samuel nodded gratefully, knowing full well that this man had not been through MEC. 'Thank you, Doctor,' he said. 'That might just do. If you don't mind me asking, why have you never travelled yourself?'

'Hypocritical terror,' he explained with a grin. 'I'm in the system, like most people, but...I guess it defies my profession. After all, I like to keep people in one piece!'

Samuel found the answer amusing, but not for obvious reasons. 'You should try it sometime. It's quite...' he shrugged, 'extraordinary.'

'That's what worries me.' Romis turned to leave, asking, 'When and where tomorrow?'

'Senate Buildings, about eleven. And there's one more thing, Doctor.'

'Yes?'

'The victims of Captain Saranne's recklessness will be brought here. I want you to attend to them personally. Your findings are to be brought only to me. Is that understood?'

'I'm sure it doesn't need to be...Mister Vawter,' Romis replied. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going home.' He stalked away and Samuel opened his right hand, reading the display on the dermascreen he had equipped with a nanoneedler. The screen read: *Traveller ID: Ian Romis. MEC Journeys: 0. Mnemonic Profile: Updated.* Looking up to see Romis pushing through a door at the end of the corridor, he sighed in resignation. And perhaps something darker.

Ω

The Shield was fully open for the first time in months, allowing the sun to shine on more than just a selected area of the world. Although the coverage was not, of course, total – with the projection of the open Shield sections blanketing the world in a patchwork of shadow and sun – it was still a welcome change to the prolonged periods of darkness. There was still a lot of opposition to the Shield, and rightly so. The infamous actions of Anev Tesckyn a century ago were sufficient evidence against trusting an alien race with the welfare of humankind. Opposition parties maintained that a giant error in judgement such as the Shield would see the downfall of the Senate, possibly worse. Unfortunately, the opposition parties had no leverage, nothing to convince the people of Earth that life would be better without the Senate. They did not have MEC, the political incentive that had reinvigorated the waning power of the Senate. And it was a truly amazing incentive.

Doctor Ian Romis, highly respected geneticist and covert Senate puppet, tried to estimate the size of the crowd gathered in the main square at the fore of the Senate buildings. It was a futile enterprise. Word had spread across the world of his presence here today, and he found that slightly unnerving. There were plenty of other dignitaries around the world who would have been just as effective in declaring the safety of MEC. Hundreds of millions of people who had travelled by MEC were in perfect health, true testament to its reliability. Doctor Romis was a solitary man – or tried his best to be – and there was something about all this that set his mind racing.

Standing on the balcony of the seventh floor, from where he would make his speech, Romis felt a tsunami of anxiety as an idea struck him. Opposition leaders would not want this. With the arrival of the ultimately disturbing Illeri delegation and their ominously powerful vessel docked inside the Shield, the promises of the Senate were doing little to sway the suspicions of the populous. It was an opportune time for the opposition to incite ideas of political revolution. However, it was not political revolution that worried Romis, for right now he was sure that the heat he felt was the result of a laser-sighted weapon trained on his chest. He then shivered, and there was a tingling in his forehead. He thought he might vomit. Would they want to kill him? There were more than mere suspicions being brought to the fore these days. Rumours of the Senate employing mercenaries for secret missions had reached the ears of the military, and Romis had been unfortunate enough to overhear this distasteful tale. He realised that he wanted no part of all this, and he should never have agreed to make this

speech. He simply wanted to do his job, to remain a silent player. The problem, of course, was that he was playing a game that would one day be far from silent. And he feared that he would find himself rolled out of play long before he reached Home.

'Ah, Doctor!' Romis heard the voice but felt compelled to ignore it. Admittedly, he was so preoccupied with imaginings of imminent assassination that he could not tear his gaze from the many vantage points of which a sniper might avail. So many vantage points. Samuel Vawter stepped up beside him and, as the Senate Members filed out onto the long balcony amidst the cheers of the swarm of people below, he whispered to Romis, 'Kindly wake up, Doctor. The Senate will look favourably upon anyone who strengthens their hold on the world.' And there it was, the reason he was here, served with Vawter's derision and a dash of political corruption.

Senator Kai Tzedek approached, offering his hand in a perfunctory gesture of welcome. 'I finally get to meet you face to face, Doctor Romis,' he said, as the handshake dragged Romis across the metaphorical line. There was no going back now. He glanced at Vawter as he noted the similarity in greeting, like some well-honed mantra, appropriate for just such an occasion. Romis felt as if the wolves had been circling for a long time, and that they had just closed in around him, a wall of important people, a select circle of which he was now an honorary member. 'I've been a great admirer of the Senate for a long time,' he lied, sliding into the expectant role with ease and a smile. 'Not everyone in my field gets to meet their ultimate employer.'

'Not everyone is as good at their job as you, Doctor,' Tzedek replied, the compliment dripping venom, its implications beyond measure. 'And...ultimately...everyone in every field works for the Senate. Even those who don't want to...' he winked conspiratorially, 'and some who don't even realise it.' He fixed the doctor with a glare that spoke volumes, as Vawter took the front of the balcony and addressed the masses, his words simultaneously broadcast around the world.

'I realise it,' Romis declared, disturbed by Tzedek's glare.

'And you don't want to.'

'Are you asking me or telling me?' Romis heard it in his own voice, the absence of pretence. He could no longer disguise his feelings, and it was as if this man had found them deep inside him and dragged them out.

'Your personal opinions are irrelevant for as long as you wish them to be, Doctor.'

'Which means?'

'Simple. Keep them to yourself. Do your job. We want the device ready by Saturday.'

'What? What's the rush?'

Tzedek smiled the smile of all conspirators and turned to join his fellow Senators. 'Make us proud, Doctor,' he called back as he heard Vawter announce him to the crowd. A great roar went up, for Vawter had prepared them well, promising a month of free space-travel across the entire MEC network. And here was the man who would assure them of just how great a deal this was: Doctor Ian Romis, highly respected geneticist, and covert Senate puppet. Romis took a deep breath as he added political conspiracy to his repertoire, stepping forward to tell his lies.

Ω

Obscured from the Senate's snipers on a much higher balcony outside their field of cover, Abigale watched through her binoculars and listened as the infamous Doctor Romis began to speak about the safety record of the MEC network. Abigale found herself listening intently despite her reason for being there, for now more than ever she needed to understand fully how this system worked. Too long she had allowed herself to remain in ignorance about MEC, like the rest of the beguiled sheep of planet Earth. Abigale recalled being both fascinated and terrified when she learned that the system required the breaking down of one's body into countless millions of molecules before being transformed into a ball of energy and fired across

the galaxy, only to be put back together by the station at the other end of one's journey – and somehow with your clothes still on! Ten years later, the safety record of the system spoke for itself. Not one person had died from MEC travel. Still, there were some three billion people on Earth who had yet to use it. These were either the people who were afraid of it, or simply could not afford it. Being in the military, Abigale had no choice but to use it for operational purposes, and the matter of cost never entered the equation. Even her off-duty travel was free. Vawter's offer of a month's free MEC use was about to change everything.

The audio system enhanced Romis' voice to great effect, but Abigale had stopped listening, for something else had caught her eye through the high-powered lenses. On the balcony where Romis and the Senate stood, the owner of the Argo, Samuel Vawter, appeared to whisper something in the ear of Senator Kai Tzedek. Tzedek nodded and the two men began to step back inside the building. Abigale saw that Senator Al-Rais had also seen this, but he was too late to react. There was a high-pitched 'zip' sound as the projectile tore through the air from far beyond Abigale's position and way outside the Senate's field of protective cover. Half a second later, the balcony on which the Senate were standing exploded. In the main square below, the crowd erupted in terror. Someone had just attacked the Senate. Their beloved leaders might all be dead. The only way the people would ever recover from this traumatic event was by taking a free trip on the MEC system to remind themselves that the galaxy was a wonderful place.

Ω

Romis opened his eyes, looking up at the harsh lights above him. Momentarily disoriented, he lay where he was until the ringing in his ears ceased and his eyes focused on the ceiling. Bile rose in his throat and he felt the onset of nausea as he forced himself to sit up on the table. He dropped his legs over the side to his left and sat there, looking around. He was in his lab, alone in the silence and sterility of familiar surroundings. 'How did I get here?' he whispered, glancing up to see that no one watched him from the room above.

The beeping of a computer console on the wall startled him, and he hesitated a moment before walking across to it, settling his nerves and steadying his breathing. There was a message waiting to be seen. 'Display message,' he told the computer. The black screen lit up, and the smiling face of Senator Kai Tzedek greeted him as it explained: *'Sorry to leave you alone, Doctor, but we're close to finding the people who tried to kill you. I trust you remember what happened. If not, well...maybe that's for the best. As long as you're well and fit to resume work. You should probably remain in the lab for a few days.'* Tzedek's smile dropped as he warned, *'Don't talk to anyone, Doctor. We're not sure who you should trust.'* The screen went blank.

For a moment akin to hypnosis, Romis stood there staring at the dead monitor. And it stared back. He realised he had no memories that fit with this man's description of events. The last thing he remembered was meeting Samuel Vawter at the end of a long day at work; he remembered shaking hands with him. Someone had tried to *kill* him? But when? Had he still been here? Or on his way home? There were times in one's life when knowing the truth was not necessarily the best option. Romis, however, was a man whose entire life revolved around pushing the boundaries of knowledge and, as such, truth was a temporary and flexible construct. Today's truth was often tomorrow's lie, and Romis needed the truth of what happened today. He just hoped it would remain so tomorrow, because he did not think his nerves could take it. Tapping the screen, he said, 'Access CCI footage for Laboratory A.' The closed-circuit imaging files were displayed in hourly increments and Romis breezed over the timestamps, realising that he had no idea which hourly slot he needed to see. 'Display live feed and reverse at double-time,' he told the computer.

He saw himself standing at the screen, and he turned around to see the camera mounted on the wall behind him. When he looked back, the screen showed him returning to the table

upon which he had woken. He watched himself lying there, motionless, and he became impatient. 'Increase speed,' he said. At four times the speed of normal play, the footage raced in reverse, and Romis watched the minutes go by. Still too slow. 'Increase speed,' he said again. And again. And again. The minutes raced by at thirty-two times normal speed, and it took more than five agonising minutes until Romis saw something different. Three hours ago, as he was lying unconscious, someone suddenly appeared next to him and lifted him off the table, the speed of the footage distorting the continuity. 'Pause!' he shouted. On the screen, he saw himself in the arms of two men dressed entirely in black, their faces covered like counter-terrorist operatives. 'Play at normal speed!'

The men carried Romis to the table and set him down, one of them pressing an injector to his neck. His immediate thoughts were for the drug coursing through his veins at that moment, something which had taken three hours to bring him around to full consciousness. 'What did you give me?' he whispered. The men could be seen leaving the room, and Romis wanted to see if they were otherwise alone, if for no other reason than to figure out who 'we' was in the conspiracy to which Tzedek had alluded. 'Access footage for camera...' He looked around the room, locating the one with the best view of the door. 'Number five,' he said. Five looked directly at the door, but when Romis told the computer to resume playback from the same timeframe through that camera, it appeared unwilling to comply. '*File corrupted,*' was as close as it came to an apology. He set about checking the footage from the other cameras, hoping that the men's departure had been picked up by one of them. It was a waste of time, and he ended up finding the nearest chair and sitting down, trying to make sense of things. He pushed the sleeve up on his right arm, and then the left, noticing that there was not a mark upon him. Not a scratch, or any sign of recent surgery. Hadn't he just survived some sort of attempt on his life? Tzedek had said in the recording that someone had tried to kill him. *Him! Doctor Ian Romis!* The thought of it made him vomit, and he hung from his chair as he decorated the once sterile laboratory floor with what should have been the contents of his last meal. Instead, there was only bile and saliva, and he retched until his chest ached, feeling more alone than he had ever been.

This place no longer felt like his workspace. Waking here stunned and confused was bad enough, but then he had been reintroduced to reality by a man he had never before met but who spoke as if they were compatriots in some grand scheme. No, this place now felt like his tomb, and he felt a chill run through him as he thought about going out again into the world. He walked back to the table and climbed up on it, settling into a foetal position to sleep this nightmare away. Hopefully, he would learn the truth by tomorrow, and that he would not be doomed by today's lie.

Thank you for reading this sample. Now that you have freely enjoyed the fruits of this author's labour, we strongly advise that you purchase the full title wherever you may find it. Failure to do so will be...unpleasant.



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