

GODS OF KIRANIS

**KIRANIS
BOOK 1**

Ronald A. Geobey



Temple Dark Books

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Kiranis Book 1: Gods of Kiranis
First (Absolute) Edition
Copyright © Ronald A. Geobey 2021

Cover art (The Cage) by Eugen Baitinger
www.ebaitinger.de

Cover design & Typesetting by Temple Dark Books
Temple Dark Publications Ltd.
www.templedarkbooks.com

The Author asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

ISBN (E-Book): 978-1-8382594-9-5
ISBN (Paperback): 978-1-8382594-1-9

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author.

The following is a free opening sample e-book downloaded by a (Dis)Member of the Temple Dark Books family of creators and consumers. You are hereby authorised – nay, encouraged – to share this sample and invite your friends and loved ones into our dark embrace.

The future is said to be infinite and inaccessible. As we approach it, as each of us will, it takes on a new form and moves farther from our grasp, promising and delivering, threatening and taking. Yet the future knows us; it has waited for us. Watching with omniscient desire, it calls to us with its Siren Song of fate. We find, then, the Line of our destiny, an ethereal path along which we are fated to travel. But like the music of hearts which are aggrieved, these Lines resonate across the Universe with discordance and uncertainty if there is no dream at the end. To make our future real, we must first dream of it. Only then can our future find us.

From *Dreams of the Sentience*, one of the Seven Books of Balaam

PROLOGUE

Support Staff Quarters, Station 6, Earth Orbit, 2380 CE

Cana was dreaming: in a star system far from Earth, an alien planet was silent and lifeless. As he observed this world, he could not have known that it, too, was observing him. And so, he dreamed on:

Red lines reached out from the planet, jellyfish tendrils probing the blackness. Short and lacking any direction, they had no purpose. Until the cage appeared, materialising around the planet to surround it with its giant and myriad components. They began moving closer together, connecting to enclose the dark world, but before the complex wireframe of the cage had fully integrated, the component sections drew back, taking hold of the outer flesh of the planet to tear it apart with their retreat. Now the red lines flailed wildly, growing and multiplying and reaching farther out from the broken world in their thousands, their hundreds of thousands and more, anchored in countless different land masses floating chaotically around a vacant epicentre.

Sourced from a great mountain on one of these chunks of the world, one line raced outwards, spearing the blackness across space as it searched for its dreamer. Finding a distant star system and a blue and white world just the right distance from that star, it passed through the moon of this world – even through a vessel hidden in its shadows – before reaching a station orbiting this planet. It found the Support Staff Quarters. It found Cana...

He awoke with a start, alone in his dark and silent quarters, sure that someone or something had touched him. With the fog of sleep lifting, he knew that his certainty was lying, and yet the sound from his dream still lingered. This strange music soothed him, slowing his heart and mind, allowing him to drift swiftly back to sleep.

He stood in a forest with giant trees surrounding him. It was cool and secure here, and his nakedness did not disturb him the way he thought it should. The melody was clearer now, more confident and encompassing. It belonged to him, and he to it. He felt that he could stay in this place forever. Then he felt his feet tingle, as if there were something hot beneath him. Looking down, he saw smouldering coals, and the heat became instantly intense. He screamed and began to run, but the coal was everywhere and his feet began to burn. Flames licked at his legs, charring them as the fire climbed his body. He cried and screamed and ran as fast as he could, but there was no end to the burning ground and his flaming torture, and the music was so loud now that he felt his head would explode. Finally, he stopped, burning to the music of his fate, standing with arms outstretched and his face raised to the sky.

Except it was no longer as far above him as it had been, and he realised that he had been growing as he ran. The forest was far beneath him, tiny trees surrounding his feet like fresh-cut grass. He was a giant now, charred and agonised and furious. He roared in anguish, but flames spewed from his mouth. People ran about, beneath and around him, tiny ant-like things desperate to escape his attack. He tried to shout for help, for understanding, but they were terrified of him, as he was of himself. They may not even have heard him, for the music was so loud now that it filled the world. And scores of people burned to death, screaming as he walked on, his massive steps crushing everything in their path...

With a real shout of horror, Cana woke again. Heat coursed through him, the terror of his dream weeping from every pore. Throwing back the sheets, he swung his legs out and sat for a

moment, perched on the edge of his bed. As if in response to some imperceptible voice, he looked out of the window and, for a long time, he sat staring into the impenetrable distance. He felt as if something were watching him, hearing his thoughts, knowing him. He could not have known that his future – and indeed, the future of the Universe – had found him. But he could hear the melody of his fate.

PART 1 HUMAN

When I was young, I had no problem with darkness and shadows. It was when the shadows started moving that the nightmares began.

From *Chronicles of The World Killer*, by Chaerakh Tae Ahn

THE FIRST DAY

Station 6, Earth Orbit, 2380 CE

The corridor was long, silent and peaceful, the perfect place for Cana to escape the chaos of life on the station. From here, he could fix his deep blue eyes on Earth and pretend that the world was perfect. Any other day he would have cast the images to his Pops and lifted the old man's spirits. But not today. With the terror of last night's dream forced into chambers of deep memory and deeper fears, Cana was transfixed by the hurricane raging far below. He imagined this meteorological event as something akin to a spiral galaxy, its arms of benign clouds birthing stars and worlds as they slowly rotated, and he imagined his Pops saying, 'This world is fascinating enough for me, Cana. You'd do well to ground yourself from time to time.' Cana had smiled at his grandfather, who had simply pursed his lips and nodded knowingly. For Cana had long wanted nothing more than to escape the world and everything in it.

The serenity of the orbiting station on which he now served belied the ferocity of the earthbound storm devastating an island chain in the South Pacific. He heard someone approaching but he continued to stare at the event below, feeling humbled by the silent majesty of nature's wrath. 'I heard they started evacuating people down there,' the newcomer commented casually. 'There's some archaeological dig going on.'

'In the Solomons?' wondered Cana, pushing back a blond fringe with habitual absence. 'Never thought of that part of the world as having anything of historical value.'

'I thought your lot considered every part of the world valuable.'

Cana glanced briefly at Randall Lyons, a friend and colleague ten years his senior who pretended to have little respect for anyone or anything in the interest of remaining in touch with the younger staff. It did not work, however, for Lyons kept his hair shaved close, his uniform neatly pressed and his mind on the job; in every way the opposite of how Cana presented himself. 'My *lot*?' Cana challenged, turning back to observe the wonder of the raging storm.

There was a twinkle of mischief in Randall's brown eyes. 'You know...that so-called church you're part of.'

Cana smiled thinly. 'That *so-called* church is fast becoming the most influential religion on the planet,' he replied. 'But you know that.'

'You know I tried to join once? Your church, I mean.'

'Really?' Cana decided to allow this nonsense to proceed.

'Just curiosity, of course. Don't believe a word of it.'

'You don't *know* a word of it, Lyons.'

'True. But I wanted to. Anyway, they rejected me. Said I failed the medical. A medical! To get into a *church!*'

'Yeah, now I know you're talking crap. They never said anything to me about a medical.'

'You got one for *this* job, didn't you? Your record's on file. Nothing to it.'

'So, the Church just demanded my medical records?'

'Well, they're the most influential religion on the planet, right?'

'Everything's a conspiracy with you, Lyons. Maybe you should try...' Cana stepped closer to the massive window as something caught his eye. 'What the hell was that?'

'What?'

'A flash. In the middle of the hurricane. Is that...' he pointed to something between them and the clouds. 'Is that heading for us?'

Lyons had not been focusing on the storm and it took a moment for him to see the object. 'It looks like...I think it's a missile!' He turned around and moved to the opposite wall, slamming his hand on an intercom screen. There was no response.

Transfixed by the rocketing object hurtling towards them at immense speed despite concerted countermeasures from orbital defences, Cana knew he should run. Shock overwhelmed him, convincing him otherwise. 'I can't get anyone up top,' said Lyons, his fear evident as he returned to the window. The object was larger now, mere seconds from reaching them. Cana dropped to his knees, lowering his head and joining his hands and beginning to mutter prayers of salvation. Lyons shouted in disbelief, 'The hell are you *doing*? Get up!'

The missile tore silently past the window, blackening outer layers of glass as hairline fractures spider-webbed ominously. Then the station trembled and groaned, a sea monster woken from rest. Explosions rocked the superstructure and the station lurched violently, turning until Cana and Lyons lay prostrate on the weakening glass surface. Now Earth looked far too close for comfort, and they scrambled desperately to their feet. An alarm began blasting, flashing red lights announcing the onset of evacuation procedures. 'They're gonna seal off the corridor!' Lyons roared. 'Move! Move!'

Whatever had struck the station had destabilised the internal orientation, and Cana was struggling to keep his balance while watching the nearby door begin its inevitable closure. The window which had looked out from the corridor was now a transparent floor beneath them; and it was shattering. The station rolled again, meaning they had to climb to reach the door. Lyons was quickly there, holding on to the frame while reaching out to Cana. 'Come on!' he yelled, his voice barely audible above the still barking alarm. Cana grabbed Lyons' hand and was pulled through the opening just as the window fell apart and the vacuum of space took Cana by the legs and the lungs. For a terrible moment, Cana thought he would die, but Lyons managed to drag him through and they collapsed together as the door closed and oxygen returned. Freezing and catching their breath, the two men exchanged glances, with Cana nodding his gratitude. 'We...have to...keep going,' Lyons gasped, 'in case they eject...the domestic levels.'

Cana was horrified at the thought, but he knew enough not to argue. They found a network of service ladders in maintenance ducts and made their way upwards through the station. With the gravity rollers thrown out of sync, the twenty-minute climb was a disorienting experience, as ascending the ladders changed from a horizontal affair, to one of decline and then incline, all caused by the changing orientation of the station. Emerging from the domestic levels, they were met by soldiers gathering fleeing off-duty personnel and directing them to safe areas. 'What the hell happened?' snapped Lyons as he fell out onto the floor, the maintenance duct was sealed and the sound of clamps and hissing hydraulics heralded the onset of the ejection procedure.

A soldier turned to him. 'What did you see down there?'

Lyons glanced at Cana, who nodded and replied, 'Something shot up from the eye of a hurricane and came straight at us.' The soldiers around them stopped and listened. 'What are you talking about?' one of them snapped. 'What's that got to do with all this?'

'All this?' Cana looked around. 'I don't understand. Isn't that what hit us?'

The first soldier stepped closer. 'You don't seem to get it, kid. We're one of the few stations left. Most of them were torn to pieces when the cage appeared. It just materialised in orbit and knocked out everything in its way. We might have suffered a lot more than a loss of stabilisation if we'd been anywhere else.'

'The cage?'

The soldier nodded. 'I'm sure everyone'll be debriefed once we get our house in order. For now, just make your way to the Yellow Staging Area. Follow the yellow lights.'

Lyons shook his head and gave a mocking laugh. 'What do you mean...a cage? What sort of cage?'

No longer in the mood for idle chat, the soldier grabbed Lyons by the arm and pointed him in the direction he was to take. 'The yellow lights,' he repeated forcefully. Cana took Lyons' arm and they walked away. As they passed a younger soldier, he leaned in and whispered, 'It's

around the whole planet, man. Never seen anything like it. The whole world...in a cage!' He shook his head and walked away.

Cana and Lyons followed the yellow lights, joining the rest of the refugees. Lyons was staring straight ahead when he spoke, so Cana never had a chance to learn if he had been genuine when he said, 'Now you can start praying.'

Ω

And a cage it was – a complex planet prison positioned around Earth in hundreds of component sections. Each of the sections maintaining equidistant and synchronous orbits were like massive satellites, huge hexagonal pyramids casting ominous shadows upon the world as the energy from fiery exhausts kept their positions intact. Spiked defensive arrays decorated each pyramid, and there were visible clues that these satellites could do more than merely defend themselves.

With the entire monstrosity rotating to match Earth's axial tilt, what might have been a control array above the Arctic was forming from larger sections extending thousands of kilometres into space. And while the myriad pyramid sections prepared to advance tube-like corridors and wireframe nodes to connect with their counterparts and complete this technological web, autonomous systems bore witness to the awakening of a single man, bound in a stasis tube in a nondescript area of the northern polar array.

Disoriented at first, Conner quickly came to appreciate the difficulty of his circumstances. Clamps held him captive in an open capsule of cold metal, his ankles, thighs, neck and wrists locked in place so he could not move his head to look farther than his enhanced grey eyes might permit. But he did not need to see the observer to know he was there. 'I can feel you staring at me,' he snapped. 'Release me.'

A man moved from the shadows while remaining in their wake. Perhaps a handsome man, his close-shaved hair and the purposeful configuration of his dark stubble troubled such a conclusion, giving instead the impression of shadows of fangs along his jawline. He smiled a cold smile, dark eyes locked firmly on the captive individual elevated above this enigma. 'What else can you feel, Conner?' he asked. 'Are you aware of the journey you've made?'

Conner closed his eyes and took a series of long, deep breaths. When his eyes snapped open, the man from the shadows laughed: 'Amazing, isn't it? All it took was a beacon fired from the planet and the Cage was able to travel across the galaxy.'

'This isn't my time.'

'No, we're four centuries before your time. When it began.'

'Why?' asked Conner. 'What am I supposed to do?'

'You know who I am?'

Conner tried to nod. 'They were calling you the Prophet. Omega said you were dead.'

The Prophet chuckled. 'Times change,' he replied. As he moved closer to Conner, the shadows held him possessively as if refusing to let him go. 'Speaking of such things, I should give you a little warning of what's coming.'

'Just tell me how to get home. There's something very important I need to do. I don't understand why I'm here.'

'You will, when you see an old friend.' The Prophet retreated into the shadows opposite the captive man. 'Is that *it*?' Conner shouted. 'You put me through all this and leave me with a *riddle*?' He struggled in the bonds, his considerable strength – both physical and otherwise – rendered worthless by his captor. 'Get me the hell outta here!'

As the blackness swallowed the Prophet, the clamps holding Conner in place snapped open and he fell forward, hitting the floor hard. He launched himself into the darkness to grab the man, but there was no one there. The only sound was the thrumming of machinery as the Cage maintained its position around Earth. Conner lay on the floor for a time, trying to decide what to do as he caught his breath.

Ω

Within hours, scores of military vessels were emerging from the atmosphere to approach the mysterious structure, exploiting the ability to pass through the still disconnected wireframe without incident. Powerful energy readings were emanating from the gigantic north pole section, suggesting that these areas housed the control centre of the alien structure. Charged with leading one of the many reconnaissance missions to a pre-determined sector, Captain Adam Echad of the Nostradamus did well to keep his trepidation from his bridge staff. He issued orders and stood firm and confident, eyeing the massive section towards which he was heading. But his confidence was a façade, for something had been nagging at him since he awoke that morning. The dream had been powerful, vivid, and intense. So vivid, in fact, that the thought of turning to observe his crew caused him to relive the disturbing scene:

In his dream, he had walked onto this very bridge to find it staffed by skeletons. They acted as if they were alive, addressing him and each other with mouths devoid of tongues and perpetual grins. Voices were normal in tone and tenor, even without vocal cords and lungs to define them. In his dream, Adam accepted this, despite having his body and organs intact and being dressed as would be expected. It was as he took his command chair that he noticed the lines. They were red, passing through every skeleton at the point where their hearts should be, some lines running away from the crew to the exterior of the ship, others leading off the bridge through various exits. A sudden flash heralded red lines of horizontal light stretching across the bow window. Now, as he looked at the strange heart-lines of his skeleton crew, every one of those lines were directed at him...at his heart. And they did not pierce him as with the others. They ended with him. They began with him.

As the Nostradamus rose ever closer to the monstrous object above and he found himself focused once again on the real world, Captain Echad could see red lines of horizontal light along the darkness of the alien metal. He found himself looking down to his heart, instinctively raising his hand to his chest as he took a deep breath. An irrational fear struck him, and he was reluctant to turn to his crew lest he see skeletons and red lines. Someone was calling him. 'Captain?' the female voice repeated.

Without turning around, he replied. 'Yes, Lieutenant.'

'We found what looks like a docking conduit, Sir, with an entrance large enough for the ship. Should we go in?'

Adam nodded. 'Let the fleet know. Ready weapons.'

'Yes, Sir.'

The Nostradamus led the reconnaissance fleet of ten ships into a huge aperture between two of the horizontal blue lines, where flashing red lights on either side guided them in along strips of yellow as if awaiting their entry. He inhaled slowly, turned to look at his crew, and then exhaled with relief; berating himself for his stupidity as he saw that they were all very much alive. For now.

Ω

Conner got to his feet, knowing he would have to get to safety. He could no longer sense the presence of the Prophet, and he felt more vulnerable and alone than he had ever been in his life. He knew that there was no time to waste on reflection and that people from Earth would soon be here. Feeling his way along the dimly lit corridor, he walked away from the cubicle and silently counted those he passed. Before he reached twenty, his hands touched the cold metal of a panel in front of him. Hoping it was a door, he fumbled around for a locking device. The panel was smooth and devoid of any outwards signs of a locking mechanism, so he applied a

different method, closing his eyes and 'seeing' inside the door. He found the lock, a mechanism designed to be discovered and accessed only by someone with telekinetic abilities. Finally, something familiar, he thought. Upon identifying the key function, he heard a heavy bolt snapping open, and the door slid aside.

He stepped out of the narrow corridor and was greeted by plenty of light as he entered a vast room. A gigantic window before him revealed what appeared to be a searchlight moving in the space beyond. Glancing back into the now illuminated corridor, he was able to see the great height of the ceilings and the seemingly endless rows of stasis tubes. As he allowed the huge door to close behind him and he reviewed the giant room, something more massive beyond the window filled his vision and gradually blocked out the exterior light. It was difficult to define it at first, but giant metal panels were visible, and he realised that he was witnessing the silent passage of a ship. It was not until the illuminated designation plate of the vessel moved into view that his hypothesis was confirmed. The huge letters of the name moved slowly from left to right across his vision. Recalling events from his own history, he did not need to see the full name before gasping in awe, 'Nostradamus!'

He moved quickly towards the window, before which was an array of illuminated control panels and equipment. None of the equipment was designed for tactile operation, but he identified a psychic interface as the ship continued to move slowly by. He braced himself and leaned over the panel as someone peering out of one of the windows of the Nostradamus happened to spy him. Conner sensed the gaze upon him, and he raised his eyes.

The young man on the ship stood with eyes wide and mouth open as thread-like metal tendrils pushed out through the thick dark hair at the back of Conner's head and stretched out and down towards the interface panel. The tendrils probed the panel, finding input ports and permitting Conner access to the system. And all the time, Conner held the astonished and horrified gaze of the young man on the Nostradamus.

Once the ship had passed and Conner had gleaned all the information he needed, he reached up to the back of his head, and roaring in furious agony, he used his considerable telekinetic strength to rid himself of the metal disc implanted therein. The flesh ripped open and the tendrils lashed at his waiting hand as his arm trembled and the pain tore through his body. As the disc shot out into his hand, the tendrils retracted and the device snapped shut. It was circular, no bigger than a small coin and bulging in the centre. Its silver surface was mostly covered in blood, and Conner blacked out as the pain swamped him and the blood flowed from his scalp.

The door opened and three black-garbed figures, armed and stealthy, approached his motionless form. Their faces were covered and they observed their surroundings through green-tinted goggles. As two kept watch for unwelcome company, the third reached down. Holding forceps in one hand while opening Conner's grip with the other, this one retrieved the blood-covered disc with surgical caution. All three left the room before Conner came around.

Ω

In an administrative centre on Earth, two women stood apart from the bickering crowd of government officials, knowing that none of them had any control over the situation. Cassandra Messina was an influential member of the Eurasian Council, Nell Raesa her political aide. Cassandra had just revealed the truth of the situation, and Nell was furious: 'You're saying you were *warned* this would happen?' she snapped, her eyes belying her disgust.

'This?' Cassandra laughed ironically. 'I don't think anyone could have anticipated this...particular scenario, Nell. There's a fucking *cage* around the world, in case you hadn't noticed!'

'There's no need to be facetious, Cassandra. You said...' Nell lowered her voice. 'You said that he told you.'

'He told me a lot of things.' Cassandra looked across to the squabbling men and women. 'Look, there's no way out of this, Nell,' she assured her. 'But you and I can be safe.'

Nell grabbed Cassandra's arm, twisting her to face her. 'How?'

'We need to get onto a ship called Nostradamus. As far as I know, it's up there as we speak. It's connected to this somehow.'

'So how do we get up to it?'

'That's already arranged. But we need to wait until tomorrow. There'll be some kind of...radiation or something from the cage. It'll come in waves starting soon. By the time the second one's over and people become symptomatic, there'll be chaos and those idiots over there will be throwing everything they've got at the cage in desperation. That's when we leave.'

Nell nodded. 'Tomorrow,' she noted, exhaling emphatically. 'How do we avoid exposure in the meantime?'

Cassandra held her gaze, expressionless. Nell could feel the warmth of fear in her belly and she nodded again, resigned to her fate.

Ω

Captain Echad ordered that the ship be brought to a full stop, and the other vessels following Nostradamus did the same. Although the area appeared to allow them access to the interior of the structure, there were no suitable docking ports, and an away team left the ship using lines and EVA suits. Echad's voice was in their helmets: *'Remember...whatever Crewman Barnes saw...you're not alone in there. Keep your eyes open.'*

This team was part of a massive recon mission happening simultaneously on every accessible section of the structure. All information gathered from every ship was being monitored and shared as it was fed to Central Command on Earth. Each of the ten ships of the Nostradamus Recon sent four armed personnel into the alien docking area. They used lines, bridges and docking extensions depending on the access points and the configuration of each vessel, and they set out in varying directions. Helmet-mounted cameras transmitted live feed to Central Command, which was a hive of activity as hundreds of monitors were observed along high walls of equipment. The reconnaissance teams had been briefed on the presence of an unidentified man, so tensions were high.

For Conner, too, tensions were high. Psychic he may have been, but scores of armed men and women angered by the intrusion of some monstrous structure into their territory were not going to be easy to avoid. He needed to become one of them, and only by selecting the right group would that be possible. The Prophet had given him a clue as to why he was here and seeing the Nostradamus confirmed it. He stood silent for a moment in the viewing area, blood trickling down the back of his neck and matting his hair as it dried. Closing his eyes, he listened for their thoughts, quickly finding what he was looking for. Someone was thinking of returning to the Nostradamus, hoping to get back there safely. Conner moved his sight out into the darkness of the corridors, racing along like a hunting dog with the scent in his nostrils. He found the group of four from Nostradamus and he saw the man he was looking for – the right height, the right build, even the same colour eyes. 'Perfect,' he whispered.

William was nervous, and annoyed by the fact. He was highly trained and capable of conducting this kind of operation, and yet something was troubling him. He was experiencing a sensation of imminent doom, and he longed to return to the safety of the ship. The commander of the team, Sandra Miller, turned to look at him, sensing his unease: 'You okay, Will?'

The voice in his helmet startled him, and Sandra saw as much as he turned to her and nodded. 'Just a bit spooked, I guess,' he replied. 'Can't put my finger on it.'

'Well, you're not alone,' she assured him. 'Let's just get our area secured and get the hell outta here.'

'Couldn't agree mo-' William stopped, gasped and looked around.

'What is it?' snapped Sandra, infected by his paranoia.

'I felt...I think...someone's watching us...' His eyes were wide and crazy. 'No, they're watching *me!*'

Another of the team members, a burly man by the name of Joshua Colle, stepped up to him and grabbed his arm. 'Get it together, Will!' he spat. 'You think you're that special they'd pick you out? If you can't say anything useful, keep your mouth shut!'

William looked to his commander for defence, but it was not forthcoming. 'He's right, Will,' she said. 'Just concentrate on what you're doing.'

William nodded as he heard Joshua and the fourth and youngest member of the team, Jason Archer, muttering to each other about him. As they set off, he realised that the conversation could be heard back at Central Command – never mind on the ship – and the embarrassment set in. Sandra glanced at him, shook her head and followed the other two down the dark corridor as they swept the area with their torches and rifles, but William hung back until his heart stopped pounding and his breathing slowed. Just as he was about to follow the commander, he felt a sudden and terrifying paralysis rush through his body and a wave of fear dropped him to his knees. With his mouth open, he desperately tried to cry out, but he remained silent and motionless. He did not hear anyone approaching from behind him, but his helmet was unlocked, twisted and removed before a blade was pressed against his neck. With tears of horror in his eyes, William watched the others move farther away as the blade opened his throat. The vicelike grip on his neck suppressed most of the arterial spray, and William felt the warmth of his blood inside his EVA suit as it poured slowly down his chest.

Ω

Adam was on edge as time went by, but for reasons other than the portentous alien structure and the rumours that utter destruction awaited the entire planet. It was more than the dream, more than the general feeling of doom. Something specific and centred upon him was occurring. He spent some time chiding himself for such ridiculous paranoia, but he had never experienced this kind of fear and foreboding. He felt as if the walls were closing in; not those of the bridge or the ship itself, but the unseen boundaries of the universe, affirming his significance in some great scheme of which he would rather not be part. The crew watched him pace the bridge erratically, his anxiety evident and his dread barely concealed. 'Where are they now?' he asked.

'They're approaching one of the main energy sources, Sir,' someone replied. He did not care who. He simply nodded. There was another voice: 'Sir, there's a com request from the Council. Priority Red.'

Adam turned away from the bow window, feigning composure. 'I'll take it in the Briefing Room,' he replied. As he walked to the door, his anxiety grew. Something bad was going to happen.

Ω

Encased in William's EVA suit, Conner caught up with the rest of the away team as they reached a huge door. Sandra turned to him. 'Thought we'd lost you,' she quipped. 'You okay?'

Conner opted for silence, and he was surprised to see a smile reach her eyes, the only part of her face visible in the helmet. 'See you decided to keep quiet after all,' she joked, patting him on the shoulder. 'Don't take it personally, Will.'

'Commander, we're ready,' Joshua reported, unable to disguise his impatience. He and Jason had finished placing compressed explosives on the door and they moved back in preparation. Before doing so, Sandra drew Joshua close to her and said quietly, 'You got a problem, Colle?'

Holding her gaze throughout, he said nothing, lifted the detonator and pressed it. The only expression on his face was a minute contraction of his facial muscles as the explosion filled the corridor. Then he nodded, said, 'No problem,' and turned away from her.

Waiting for the smoke to clear, the team entered the room to find an array of strange equipment and technology, but there was one object to which everyone's attention was immediately and fully drawn. 'Is that what I think it is?' asked Sandra, pointing to a monitor set high into a black wall. Many things about this monitor struck the team as unsettling, and even Conner felt a shiver run through him as they moved deeper into the room. There were parts of this momentous event which had remained secret from the people of Earth and their descendants for centuries. Standing here, looking at what could only be a countdown timer in the characteristic blue light of this place, Conner could sense the defeat emanating from these usually brave people. 'Yeah, it's a countdown alright,' said Joshua. It had just passed nine days and nineteen hours. 'And it looks like we've got just short of ten days,' he added.

'Till what?' Jason wondered aloud.

'Well, that's what we're here to find out,' Joshua reminded him.

'Ah...excuse me?' Sandra pressed, pointing up at the figures, 'but you guys are overlooking the obvious here. I mean, can't you see what's wrong with this?'

Jason saw it and was chilled to the core by the implications. 'They're not alien digits,' he announced. 'They're ours!'

Ω

Adam leaned forward in his chair, infuriated by what he was hearing. 'With all due respect, Madam Councillor,' he argued, 'are you sure about this? I mean, shouldn't this be coming from Central Command?'

Councillor Cassandra Messina, the woman on the imager before him, replied in her soft and sure voice, 'I wouldn't order it unless I was certain, Captain. Central Command have their hands full at present, which is why I am delivering this message to you personally.'

Echad stared at the screen for a moment, and then sat back, defeated. 'Is he dangerous?' he enquired.

'I suspect he won't harm any of you,' Cassandra replied, 'but yes...he's quite capable. Simply keep him on board and stay where you are until I arrive. Can you manage that?'

Adam gave a cold smile of contempt. 'I'll switch the engine off, shall I?' Cassandra responded with a smile of a more diplomatic contempt, before severing the connection. Adam allowed himself a moment of reflection, leaning back to absorb the conversation, before returning to the bridge.

'Recon team's back on board, Sir,' Lieutenant Morris reported. 'Can I ask why you recalled them when the others still have their teams out?'

Adam looked at her for a moment. 'No,' he said. The Lieutenant could feel the stares of the crew on her and she reddened, refusing to let it drop: 'Captain, Central are asking the same question. Don't you think we should respond?'

Adam walked to the rear exit of the bridge. 'No,' he called back as he left.

Ω

Conner stood in the airlock, in Phase One of detox with his EVA suit still on, waiting for the captain to make an appearance. He could see through the smoked glass that the other three had removed their suits in the Phase Two chamber and were heading for the detox showers in the Phase Three annex. 'What the hell's wrong with you, Will?' a naked Commander Miller shouted from the other side of the door. 'We're back now. Get outta there!'

Echad's voice could be heard over the intercom: *'It's okay, Sandra, I'll handle this.'* They turned to see him standing outside the detox chambers and Sandra moved to the intercom. Pressing the button, she explained: *'He was acting pretty weird, Sir. Never seen him like that.'*

Adam nodded and gestured for them all to move out. As they did and Echad waited for them to leave, he kept his eyes fixed on the man in the EVA suit. Conner opened the airlock and stepped into the Phase Two chamber, removing his helmet as Adam looked on, drawing a gun from the back of his belt. He could see dried blood at the back of the man's head as he turned away to remove the suit and place it in its compartment. Unlike the other members of the team, Conner remained fully clothed, clearly with no intention of going to the showers. Instead, he approached the door which led directly out of the Phase Two chamber into the area where Adam stood watch. 'Don't do it,' Adam warned him, raising his gun and stepping back from the door.

Conner could not have heard him anyway, and he reached out to the panel to open the door. It hissed as the pressure corrected before opening on heavy hinges. Conner stepped out to see the gun at his face. 'One of my crew said you had tentacles,' said Adam.

Conner grinned ironically, recalling the agony he had experienced as he had removed the disc. It would be best to maintain the discomfort these people felt. 'Suppose that's one way of describing them. I hate them, but they serve a purpose.' He made to step farther forward, and the gun was brandished with more emphasis. 'Think they can stop a bullet?' Adam threatened. The gun was suddenly wrenched from his grip by some unseen force and it slammed against one of the lockers before falling to the floor. 'They won't have to,' Conner assured him, moving closer still. 'Are you Echad?'

'What?' The Captain looked from the fallen gun to the man before him.

'Is your name Echad?'

'I'm...Captain Adam Echad, yes. Who are you?'

'Conner...Conner Echad.'

The Captain was thrown off guard and the man punched him in the face. He lost his balance and struck his head against a bench before falling to the floor. 'I'm sorry, Captain, but we haven't got time for the niceties.' He stood over Adam as he gradually lapsed into unconsciousness. 'The Jaevisk are coming,' he heard Conner say as his vision blurred and there was a buzzing sensation behind his eyes, 'and we don't want to be here when they arrive.'

Ω

Having completed her duties, Val stepped into her quarters gratefully. She removed her uniform without delay, discarding it half on the floor and half on the bed before stepping into the shower to wash away the stress of the day. Of course, the stress had form and the potential to continue as such. The alien structure around the planet continued to amaze and terrify.

The heat of the shower soothed her muscles, and she closed her eyes to further appreciate the water on her head. She heard a sound from the main room. Sweeping her hand across the sensor, she stopped the shower and listened in silence. 'Adam?' she called. 'You there?'

Through the glass, she could see someone approaching and she grinned. 'Couldn't wait till later, no?' she joked, reaching out to open the steamed-up glass door. 'I think there are more important things to do than -'

The man reached in and grabbed her roughly by the arms, dragging her out of the shower. She screamed and lashed out with her fists, feeling a sudden sharp pain as if something had spiked her from behind at the base of her neck. She lost all power to her limbs and the man caught her as she collapsed. Paralysed and naked, she was terrified of what was about to happen. 'You can stop imagining such horrible things, Valentina,' he assured her as she looked up at him. She had never seen him before, and yet there was something familiar in those eyes. 'I'm going to dress you and take you somewhere out of the way,' he continued. 'I'm sorry for your embarrassment, I really am. But this is the only way he'll do what I want.'

Ω

The dream came to Adam again. This time, however, the skeletons of unidentified Humans morphed into both real people and aliens and the bridge was exposed to the vacuum of space, disconnected from everything. It was above a planet, one Adam did not recognise, and he felt that if he were to walk to the edge of the floor he could simply step off and fall into the clouds. The clouds escaped the atmosphere, rising lazily to envelop the open bridge.

The people around him – Valentina, the woman he loved; Helen, his argumentative Lieutenant; Cassandra Messina, the member of the Council with whom he had recently spoken – looked at him expectantly, as if awaiting his next move as the clouds closed in. There were other shadowy figures – a Humanoid alien, more than two metres tall; another creature, taller again, with a tapered head; and yet another, towering over everyone else – and they all waited. Every figure was connected to Adam via the red lines.

The last figure stepped out of the cloudy obscurity, and Adam was taken aback, for it was him. This other Captain Echad approached him with a stupid grin on his face, offering him a mirror. Adam took it, but it was not his own face he saw. It was the face of the man he had just allowed aboard...

He woke with a groan, finding that he was being helped to a seated position against one of the locker rows. He heard Sandra's voice. 'Captain, are you okay? What happened? Where's Will?'

Adam took a moment. 'That wasn't Will,' he replied eventually. 'He must've killed him.'

'I knew there was something wrong with that guy!' Jason spat.

Joshua agreed: 'No way Will could keep his mouth shut that long!'

'There's a medic on the way,' said Sandra, as she examined Adam's bruised face. 'Any idea where this guy went?'

With Sandra's help, Adam was trying to get up off the floor. 'None,' he replied. 'But...I was ordered to let him on board.'

'Ordered?' Sandra was clearly shocked. 'By *who*?'

'Councillor Messina.'

'What's *that* bitch got to do with this?' Sandra's hand came away from Adam's head with blood on it. She looked up at the others: 'Let the Lieutenant know we've got an intruder, and that he's not afraid to use force.' They were moving away when she added, 'Oh, and guys...'

Joshua turned back, his earlier animosity dissolved: 'Yeah?'

'Get me a gun.'

Ω

In the auxiliary engine room, Val was gagged and her wrists were clamped through a rail at her back. The pulsing of the engine behind her rattled her to the bone, and she struggled to break away. 'Don't bother,' her captor told her. 'The clamps keeping your hands together have a wire running to the engine casing. There's an explosive trip at the end of the wire which will snap and activate if you move away. I don't need to explain what will happen then, do I?'

Val's eyes widened and she stilled herself. 'Do I?' he repeated. She shook her head. 'Good.' He hunkered down in front of her. 'By the way, you don't need to speak. Just think what you want to say and I'll hear it.'

She looked incredulous, and he grinned. 'Try it.' He waited. 'You want to know who I am.' He stood up, noticing the sceptical look she shot him. 'Of course, who wouldn't ask that? Or what I want, or why you, or something like that. All obvious questions.' He turned his back to her theatrically. 'Why don't you try telling me something, then...something I couldn't possibly know?'

She did so, sure that he was lying and that her secret would remain safe. But he turned back, evidently shocked. 'You're pregnant?'

The shock was shared. How could he have known? He hunkered down again, speaking softly. 'I swear to you I didn't know. If I had, I wouldn't have boarded this ship.' He lowered his head, shaking it, while Valentina stared at him in fear. 'I've put everything at risk,' he chided himself. He stood again and looked up as if some entity were watching everything. 'You put me right in the middle of it, didn't you?'

He looked back to Valentina. 'No, I'm not insane,' he assured her, still surprising her by reading her thoughts. 'I was brought here and I've got to find a way home. Captain Echad is my only hope now, and you're the leverage. He won't want any harm coming to his girlfriend...especially if she's carrying his...' He stopped. 'Oh...he doesn't know. Well, I'll be telling him. Sorry, but it'll give me more to bargain with.'

Val cried and lowered her head. 'I know,' said Conner. 'Why don't you just try to relax? I'm sure he'll do what I want. Surveillance went down the minute I boarded, so they'll find you when I want them to.' He left her, and when she once again looked up, the room was glowing red.

Ω

Adam waited with increasing frustration as the bridge crew tried to no avail to scan the ship while armed teams searched for Valentina the old-fashioned way. 'Surveillance is completely shot,' Lieutenant Morris reported as she joined him. 'Teams are following standard search protocols.' She leaned in: 'Sandra's asking about Will. She wants to go back for him.'

'Tell her to concentrate on her orders,' said Adam coldly. 'Any sign of Valentina?'

Morris shook her head. 'She's probably asleep with her com switched off. You know what she's like.'

'Yes, I do, thank you, Lieutenant.'

She looked at him for a moment, moving in to say quietly, 'What's going on? I know we have our bad days, but I'm on your side here, you know.'

He was about to snap at her, but he thought better of it. He sighed, resting a hand on her shoulder. 'I feel like an idiot, Helen,' he whispered. 'I was ordered to let this guy on board by a Councillor known for always having her own agenda. He stood in front of me and said he's...' He stopped himself. It was ridiculous.

'He's what?' the Lieutenant pressed.

'He said his name's...Conner Echad.'

Morris held his gaze for a moment. 'Okay, now I see why you're freaked out.' They kept their tone low. 'You think he's got Val?'

Adam shrugged. 'I don't know what to think.' He took her arm and led her away from hungry ears. 'Helen, he's some sort of...telepath.'

'What?' She laughed the word with nervous mockery.

'When you get a minute, run the footage from the airlock. You'll see what I mean. Can you keep an eye on this? I'm going to look for Val myself.' She nodded and he patted her upper arm, saying, 'Thanks.' But as he turned away, the black-clothed intruder stepped onto the bridge. Weapons were pointed at him, but Adam raised his hand and shouted, 'No!'

He could see that Conner was not armed, brandishing nothing more than a rolled imager in his right hand. 'How did you get up here?' Adam enquired calmly, glancing at Helen. 'We've got people all over the ship looking for you.'

'You don't need to know the answers, Captain,' said Conner. 'There's one thing and one thing only that you need to know.'

Adam approached him, furious at the implication. 'If you've hurt her...'

'Captain, you can read minds. Congratulations.'

'Where is she?'

'This is the part where I tell you she's safe and nothing will happen so long as you do what you're told.'

Helen moved closer to him, her gun levelled. 'What do you want?' she demanded. 'And what are these things around the planet?'

Conner looked only towards the captain. 'First of all, your people down on the surface have already figured out that these...*things*...are just one thing. It's a cage, built to...well, to enclose a planet. Believe me, you don't wanna know what's gonna happen. We're gonna get out of here as fast as possible. Lucky for you guys, I just made fast as possible a reality.'

'You mentioned...the Jaevisk earlier,' Adam recalled, his head swimming and his stomach turning as he spoke a name he thought should not be familiar. 'What have they got to do with this?' He pointed to the scene beyond the bow window. 'Is this thing theirs?'

Conner shook his head. 'I'm not entirely sure who built it,' he lied, 'but I know it's not theirs.' He laughed ironically. 'It's from the future.'

'What a load of crap!' snapped Helen, her trigger-finger tightening. Conner glanced at her and the gun snapped from her hand, firing as it did so. A smoking hole ten centimetres above Conner's head was testament to Helen's intention. As Adam repeated that no one was to fire at the man, glances of shock were exchanged and weapons were lowered. The captain called Helen but her fiery gaze was fixed on their intruder. 'Lieutenant!' he repeated.

She turned to him. 'You have the bridge,' he told her. 'Find Valentina. Our guest and I have some things to discuss.'

Ω

'Why are you doing this?' Adam demanded as he sat at the long desk in the Briefing Room. 'Did you have to kill one of my crew? You did kill him, right?'

Conner nodded as he, too, seated himself. 'Believe me, I considered all the options and the consequences. This way I can become him. It's the only way I can balance things. You should also believe that I could have taken control of this ship by force.'

'I gathered that much.'

'Oh, really? And who told you that?'

'Told me what?'

'That I was dangerous,' said Conner. 'I heard you saying it.'

'You heard? I was *thinking* it.'

'Makes no difference to me. Ah, I get it. Cassandra Messina. The terrible irony. Maybe this gives you some idea of what's happening here.'

'No,' said Adam. 'Makes it even more confusing, actually. What the hell do you want?' He pointed at the open imager on the desk between them. 'What are these coordinates? The numbers are...I've never seen numbers like this. What sector is that?'

'Just get your Nav officer to input them and let me do the rest. I made a little adjustment to your aux engine.' He grabbed Adam by the wrist as the captain reached for the imager. 'And stop planning ways to beat the crap out of me in that dangerous little mind of yours.'

As he let go, Adam stared at him in shock and frustration. 'I'm not comfortable with you hearing my thoughts.'

Conner shrugged. 'I come from a time where most people can either stop you from doing that or feed you false information. I'm not used to it being so easy.'

Adam laughed scornfully. '*A time?*' he said. 'Do you really expect me to believe that you and your...what did you call it...a *cage*...came from the future?'

'You have no idea how little I care what you believe, Captain. The Cage isn't mine, nor do I have anything to do with its operation. You already know there's a countdown timer and it's ticking away oblivious to your ignorance. I can help you avoid what's going to happen. All you have to do is take me to those coordinates. Then I'll be on my merry way.' He even managed a smile.

The captain took a closer look at the coordinates, the sector number registering with him. 'This is...way too far for this bucket. Even if we made it, it'd take...' he shrugged, 'years!'

'Pushing this bucket like normal, it'd take decades, actually. But, like I said, I gave your ship an upgrade. We time-travellers have some tricks up our sleeves.' Conner leaned forward on the desk: 'Trust me, Adam. We can make the journey in a matter of days.'

Adam stared at him for a moment, thinking him insane: 'Days.'

'Days.'

'And before we make this magical journey...any chance you could tell us what's gonna happen? Seeing as you're from the future and all.'

Conner's smile evaporated. 'I wish it were a laughing matter, Captain.' He stood up and turned his back to Adam. 'A sickness starts soon,' he began solemnly. 'A type of...radiation from the Cage. Your guys start attacking, but they'll be wasting their time.' Echad was rapt, his stomach fluttering as he leaned back. The man's tone chilled him as he continued: 'The Cage won't even need to respond, and it'll exhaust your military just trying to scratch the surface. Gradually, as the timer runs down and the people on Earth accept that there's nothing they can do, they'll realise what's going to happen. But it'll be too late, cos they were too stubborn to evacuate.'

He turned around to face Adam, who knew with all his heart that he was hearing the truth. 'So, what happens?' the captain asked. 'When the timer runs out, I mean.'

Conner held his gaze. 'Activation.'

Ω

The damaged station needed to be moved outside the Cage. Two large military vessels docked with it and, upon securing their hulls to the station to prevent tearing it apart, they fired their engines and slowly accelerated. Ten minutes later, the station was at a safe distance, and the staff in the Operations Area were able to look back at the Cage. 'My God!' gasped General Matthews, as he walked closer to the window. He could see a flashing blue object suspended between the uppermost points of the northern array, and he pointed at it, saying, 'Get me a better look at that.'

Imaging software activated across the window, the scene still visible beyond it. Matthews focused his attention on the blue object as he said, 'Enhance section Alpha-6.' A green square appeared around the object and the image was enlarged. The general stared at it for a moment. 'It looks different, right?' he mused aloud.

'Different, Sir?' asked a man to his right, a Lieutenant immediately subordinate to Matthews.

'The metal...the design,' Matthews suggested. 'It looks different, don't you think? Could this be the thing that launched from the surface?'

The Lieutenant nodded. 'I suppose it must be. Some sort of beacon?'

'My thoughts exactly. Meaning it might have guided this thing here.'

'I'll get a team on it,' said the Lieutenant, not a fan of playing catch-up. 'If we can determine the range and frequency of the signal, we should be able to find out where it came from.'

'Good man.' Matthews took one last glance at the image on the screen and then gestured for another officer to follow him as he walked towards one of the exits: 'I want to talk to the guy who saw this...beacon.'

Ω

Lieutenant Morris paced the bridge as the two men spoke in the Captain's Briefing Room. A message came up from Sandra and her team and one of the crew passed it on: 'They want to go back out to get the corporal's body.'

Helen knew Echad would not authorise it, but she could not leave one of their crew – dead or alive – on that thing. She nodded. ‘Tell them to be quick about it. Any doubts as to the location of Will’s body and they’re back without delay.’

The minutes passed. Helen was about to approach the Briefing Room when both men exited. She watched as Echad walked directly to the Navigation post and handed the officer there an imager. ‘Punch in these coordinates,’ he ordered. ‘Prep for Drive.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ the officer replied.

Lieutenant Morris watched in amazement. Was he really doing what this murderer demanded? She noticed that the man was watching her, and when she thought something particularly offensive about him, he grinned knowingly as the captain approached her. Once more, he led her away from the rest of the crew. ‘Helen, I need you to do something for me,’ he said quietly, ‘and you’re not going to like it.’

‘Didn’t think so,’ she remarked.

He nodded, refraining from rebuke. ‘I want you to take our guest here down to Med Ops and get Doc to run a DNA comparison.’

‘You think he’s telling the truth?’

‘I don’t know, but something about all this feels...’ he struggled for the word and gave up trying. ‘Do this for me,’ he resumed, ‘and don’t bother trying to hide what you’re thinking from him. It’s a waste of time.’

She sighed and grudgingly agreed, glancing at Conner before heading for the door. He followed her.

‘And Lieutenant?’

She turned back to the captain. ‘His safety...is our safety. Understand?’

‘No,’ she replied, turning away.

Ω

With his back to the wall, Cana settled down on his low bunk for some sleep, reminded for some strange reason of a particularly uncomfortable camping trip he had endured as a child. Of course, this was no pleasant respite from mundanity; it was mundanity gone mad. Scores of men and women who had once enjoyed private quarters were now packed into makeshift dormitories. The lights were low, and Cana could see figures walking from bunk to bunk. They were leaning in close to some survivors here and there and they appeared to be consoling them. It was strange, and Cana wondered what they might say to him. Lyons called him in a sharp whisper from the next bunk and he turned to him. ‘What?’ he whispered back.

‘How come you get the corner bunk?’

Cana smiled. ‘I’m truly blessed, Lyons. You know that.’

‘Come on, man. I can’t sleep with space on either side of me.’

Cana blinked, fitting this piece into the Lyons enigma. ‘You serious?’ he asked.

‘Yeah. Ever since I was a kid. Have to be against the wall.’ He was quiet for a moment, perhaps recalling the reason. ‘You’ll swap, right?’

With a sigh, Cana swung his legs out and yawned, reaching down for his uniform. ‘Don’t worry, I won’t steal your clothes,’ said Lyons as he brushed past Cana and lay down. He edged his back against the wall and said, ‘Much better. Thanks, kid.’

Cana looked at him for a minute, leaving his clothes where they lay and thinking, ‘*Kid? Seriously?*’ Then he got into Lyons’ bunk and was asleep within minutes:

The broken world in the alien system whispered to him as countless masses of land collided and fused in an attempt at re-creation. ‘Come to me, Cana,’ it said. ‘Give me life.’ From deep within the darkness of what would become the core of the planet, two giant red eyes observed him. ‘Come, Cana,’ the voice whispered. ‘You can worship me.’ The eyes exploded into scores of burning metal tendrils, dripping molten rock torn from the formation of the world. They

snapped at Cana's naked flesh like whips of fire, searing his face and his arms and legs. 'You cannot escape me, Cana,' the voice whispered again, harsher this time, threatening. 'I am your GOD!'

He was rescued from his nightmare by shouts, which were immediately followed by a number of gunshots. The lights came on full and Cana bolted upright, looking around. At the opposite end of the room, General Matthews and a squad of soldiers were standing over the bodies of five black-clothed men. 'How did this happen?' the General snapped. 'Who *are* these people?'

It was then that Cana remembered the men going from bunk to bunk. He also noticed that Lyons was unusually quiet. When he turned to him, he saw why. The man's face was grey and his lifeless eyes stared right through Cana, who shouted out in fright and scrambled across his bunk to jump to his feet on the cold floor. 'It's alright, son,' said a familiar voice. It was the older soldier to whom they had spoken only hours before. 'It's over now.'

Looking around, Cana could see the sheets being drawn back from the dead men and women all around the room. It was noted that there was a single puncture wound in the neck of each victim. Those who had escaped the attack, like Cana, stood as he did, scared and confused. He found himself turning back to Lyons and then focusing upon his own uniform, discarded as it was with his nametag clearly visible. It was then he realised what had happened. 'It should have been me,' he gasped.

The soldier placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Don't think like that, son. Be thankful it wasn't.'

Cana stepped back from him, looking around in fear. 'No...no...' he stammered, 'you don't understand. We swapped bunks.' He walked along the lines of beds, seeing many faces that he recognised, now pale and motionless in death. 'I know them,' he said as a chill ran through him. 'I know these people.'

'What are you talking about?' Matthews demanded as he closed in on Cana. The officer with Matthews leaned in: 'That's him, Sir,' he supplied. 'The one who saw the beacon.'

All eyes were now on Cana, and he felt panic rush through him. 'Everyone here...' he eventually replied. 'All the dead. I know them. They're all members of the Church.'

'And which church would that be?' Matthews asked knowingly.

Cana hesitated, aware of the can of worms he was about to open. But perhaps that was already done. 'The Church of the New Elect,' he explained.

Matthews nodded, stepping closer to Cana and saying, 'You saw the beacon.'

'The what?' Cana looked at the waiting faces. 'Oh, you mean the thing that hit us? It came up from the hurricane over the Solomons. They tried to stop it, but it just kept coming.'

'It was launched from a tract of newly exposed land off the island of Malaita,' Matthews elaborated. 'There was an archaeological dig, and they seem to have stumbled across technology that didn't belong. You're right...countermeasures didn't work. But it didn't hit us. It was a beacon to guide the cage right to us, which destroyed a lot of our stations in the process. We're on one of the few left operational.'

Cana stared at him, unsure how to respond or what was expected of him. 'I don't know what to say, General,' he admitted finally. 'I don't understand any of this. I'm just a labourer up here...a serviceman.'

'You saw the beacon,' the General repeated, as if that explained everything. 'And now you're the only survivor of a massacre of your church members.'

'We swapped bunks!' Cana declared, pointing back at the far corner. 'It was only by chance!'

Matthews regarded him for a moment, breathing deeply as he thought about all this. 'I don't believe in chance,' he said. 'You're coming with me.'

Ω

Cassandra listened to the reports spreading across the Net. A warrant had been issued for the arrest of Captain Echad and there was talk of betrayal and collusion. Of course, what she was

hearing was no more than rumour and speculation, but it would not be long before the truth was out. 'They'll connect me to Echad, and they'll come looking for me,' she told Nell quietly as they walked along the eastern colonnade of the Council Buildings.

Nell offered a perfunctory smile to a passing colleague, before leaning in and responding to Cassandra in hushed tones: 'So, what are you going to do?'

There was a beeping sound in Cassandra's ear and she raised a hand to silence Nell as she pressed the subdermal button on her earlobe. 'Do you have it?' she asked the unseen caller without delay. 'And did you activate it?' The reply clearly pleased her: 'Then they'll be here soon. You know what to do.' She pressed the button again to end the call and Nell asked, 'What's going on, Cass? What are you up to?'

'We can't wait any longer,' Cassandra replied. 'Get our transport arranged. We're going up to the Nostradamus within the hour.'

'That's too soon!' argued Nell. 'I need to say Goodbye to my family.'

'There's no time for that.' Cassandra's voice was cold and uncaring.

'Well, I'm *making* time, Cass.'

She turned on her. 'Have you any idea what will happen here, Nell?' she snapped. 'I've got secrets to protect, but if we hang around here too long, they'll grab Captain Echad and he'll tell them why he let that man on his ship. Both of us will be implicated in this – don't doubt that for one second. And if you're out playing happy families when they come looking for you, the parents you adore so much will be brought in with you!'

That got her attention. 'You're a cruel bitch when you want to be, you know that?'

Cassandra sighed, drawing Nell into her arms as she purred in her ear, 'We'll get away from here, Nell, and then we can sort things out. There's no point in us all dying.'

'I'm scared for them, Cass. Dad's been sick for years now. He won't survive anything else. If this is an attack...'

'Shh! Don't think about that now.' Cassandra held her head and looked in her eyes. 'One thing at a time, okay? Think of it this way...if we can get the guy who arrived on the cage, we might be able to turn things around.' She kissed her softly on the lips, and Nell smiled: 'Do you think that's possible?' she asked hopefully.

Cassandra nodded. 'I do,' she replied, turning swiftly from Nell's adoration.

Ω

On the Nostradamus, there was some difficulty dealing with Conner's demands, which Adam discovered as he approached the Navigation officer. 'Why don't I hear Drive protocols?' he demanded.

The officer pointed defensively at his imager, saying, 'Ah...I thought I should check –'

'I know,' Adam cut in. 'It's the far side of Garran territory. Just punch it and bear with me.' Garran. He had not thought about that species for a long time. Or had he ever? Something was not right about all this.

'O-kay.' Setting aside that hardly insignificant fact, the Nav officer pressed on: 'There's something else, though.'

'This better be good,' said Adam as he leaned in. However, the readings and the images spoke for themselves. 'Have you double-checked this?'

'Triple, Sir.'

Adam pointed to the column of figures on the right-hand side. 'The fifth planet of this system should be a dead world the Jaevisk keep tabs on. Why would he want to go there?' Again, that name – Jaevisk. He knew who they were. But he also knew he should not. He knew they were a powerful, seemingly nomadic species; and yet he knew nothing about them. What was going on? Was this still a dream?

The young man gestured to one of his colleagues, saying, 'Julia activated the Observation Post on Pluto. The A.I. couldn't explain it.' An Artificial Intelligence oversaw the operations on many deep-space Observation Posts, massive telescopes accessed remotely.

Julia nodded in confirmation: 'We're running the logs backwards to find the first readings. Could take a while. Oh...maybe not.'

'What have you got?' asked Adam.

Julia scanned the readings, clearly stunned: 'Wow! This is...strange. According to this, the planet's...changed. Very recently. Like you said, Captain, it should be a dead world.'

'And now?' Adam pressed.

'It's like it...exploded!' she replied. 'There's debris everywhere, but...' She moved the static images on to a larger screen for Adam and he could see the problem. 'The debris field isn't expanding,' he noted.

'No, Sir. It's gravitating inwards, almost like...'

'Like the planet's forming rather than exploding.'

'There's molten rock...gravitational activity...' She pointed to some sensor readings. 'There's an increase in mass in the centre of the debris field, and a build-up in electromagnetism.'

Adam took a deep breath and stared at the evolving images for a moment. 'When did this...change start?' he asked, his heart pounding. 'Was it about the same time the cage got here?'

Everyone on the bridge was listening and watching. Silence descended as Julia performed the necessary calculations, allowing for the distance of the alien planet from Earth and the time it took for information to reach the Observation Post. She leaned back in her chair, finally revealing, 'It happened immediately before it arrived.' The crew began muttering amongst themselves and speculating, before Julia straightened and announced, 'There's an image log coming in from the Ob Post, Sir.'

Adam stepped in closer as Julia brought up the images of the silent world, around which could be seen hundreds of alien Warships. 'This was taken just before the planet changed,' Julia explained, speaking quietly. 'You can see the...the Jaevisk vigil.' The silence of the bridge amplified her voice: 'More images are coming in. Close sequence.'

'Put them up,' Adam told her, turning away and waiting. In the centre of the bridge, a holographic platform activated, and the first image of the alien world surrounded by Jaevisk Warships rotated for all to see. Adam recognised the ships, yet they were also unknown to him.

The scores of images were displayed in static sequence, and everyone watched in horror, recognising the relative time as just prior to the terrible situation in which they found themselves. The components of the Cage appeared around the planet and the tiny lights of the Warships were seen in progression to move farther away from the event. The pieces of the Cage closed in on the planet, and then appeared to retreat just as rapidly. There was a flash of light, and once it died out, the Cage was gone, leaving behind a boiling and tumultuous field of rock and fire.

'And then it came here,' said Adam. 'It immediately came here.' Was this the secret to how Conner could get them to that planet so quickly? He turned to the terrified crew. 'Whatever we just witnessed could easily happen here,' he told them, 'and if that countdown timer's anything to go by, we've about nine days till it does.'

'So, what do we do?' asked Julia.

Echad thought for a moment, then looked back to his Navigation officer. The young man nodded as the captain said, 'We go out there and get some answers.'

Helen walked the unwanted guest towards Med Ops. She tried to empty her mind, considering the peculiar invasive talent of the man next to her. He deliberately kept pace with her until their footfalls were reminiscent of parading soldiers. She was sure he did this only to infuriate her.

'I'm not the bad guy here,' he said, after a long silence.

'I'll be sure to tell Will when he rises from the dead.'

'Stranger things have happened.'

Helen stopped suddenly, turning to slam him against the wall. 'Why don't you quit the crap and tell me what you want?' She pressed her right forearm against his throat, but she felt something press into her abdomen. Looking down, she saw her gun in his left hand. 'How...?'

She stepped back, but he reversed the weapon and handed it to her. 'I'm not the bad guy,' he repeated.

'Then who is?'

He chuckled ironically. 'Where do I start?'

'At the beginning?' she suggested.

'To be honest, I'm no longer sure when all this began.'

She looked at him for a moment, tempted to argue, but instead resigned herself to her orders. 'Eventually, you're gonna pay for what you've done.' She walked away and he swiftly caught up with her.

'Eventually,' he agreed.

Ω

Crackling bursts of energy began whipping around the Cage and winding their way downwards from the northern polar array. Collected and dispersed by the pyramid sections, this energy was converted to fuel whose waste was expelled into space as the Cage matched Earth's rotation. From the underside of the pyramid sections, hundreds of beams fired towards the planet, all directed towards the centre of the world. The world reacted, releasing a shockwave from its core, a powerful electromagnetic pulse. With this first pulse, information was being gathered on Station 6, and an officer at one of the Science posts relayed it to General Matthews. 'Seems to be using the planet's magnetic field to maintain synchronicity,' she explained. 'But there's something else in the readings. Something hitching a ride to the surface.'

Matthews stood on the metal bridge spanning the lower levels of the Operations Area. Cana stood alongside him, feeling considerably useless. 'Can you be more specific?' the General asked.

'Yes, Sir. I can show you, although there won't be much detail.' She activated a viewer above her station, within which a greyish gas could be seen emanating from the Cage: 'Our Nanites are identifying it as a picobot swarm,' she explained, 'but way beyond anything they can build. Readings say they're inert, though.'

'So, what's the point?' asked Matthews.

'Hard to say, but...' There was a sudden flash of light, as if the clouds of countless picobots had ignited. 'What was *that*?' The officer checked her readings again: 'They're...no longer inert. Looks like the EM pulse woke them up!'

'A bit out of character for an EM pulse,' Matthews noted.

'Extremely.'

'Launch collectors. We won't be able to see these things soon, let alone track them. We need to know what they're programmed to do.'

'Yes, Sir.'

Matthews headed back to his office, with Cana in close pursuit. 'General, do you really need me up here?' he asked.

'I don't know yet,' Matthews replied. 'But until I do...you stay.'

Tense minutes passed as the General waited for a report on the picobots. Cana remained silent, stealing furtive glances at Matthews in the hope that he might engage the man in pointless conversation to pass the time. Matthews did not once look at him, engrossed as he was in his observation of the staff. Eventually, the Science officer came up the steps from her post and approached Matthews' office. 'We can't determine precisely what they're programmed to do, Sir,' she explained, handing the General an imager and adding, 'at least...not yet. But the nanos are reporting what appears to be a detection system.'

'To detect what?'

'It seems designed to seek out a very...specific element.'

Matthews looked at her for a moment, noticing that she appeared uncomfortable with what she had learned. He glanced at the imager. 'Rubidium,' he said quietly, shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders, clearly unfamiliar with the element. Matthews was surprised to see Cana reacting to this information in much the same way as the young woman. 'I'm sorry...am I missing something here?' he asked them suspiciously.

They both snapped out of their mysterious reflection. Cana looked away, while the officer replied, 'No, Sir, of course not. We'll have to identify the specific isotope of Rubidium in question. Until then, we can't really speculate on their purpose.'

'So, why do I get the feeling that you...*both* of you...' he turned to look at Cana, who had moved closer to the door, 'are already speculating?'

Cana caught his suspicious glare and reddened like a guilty child. 'I'm just scared, General,' Cana lied. He laughed nervously, saying, 'I wouldn't know where to begin speculating!'

Matthews looked back to the officer. 'And you?'

'Ah...the same, Sir. I'm not sure what we're dealing with here.'

Matthews nodded slowly, far from believing her, but any further attention from the General was diverted towards Cana as he resumed his approach towards the door. 'And where do you think you're going?'

'If it's okay with you, General, I'd like to try get in touch with my family. They'll be worried.' Cana held Matthews' glare for a moment, waiting as he eventually conceded. 'Don't take too long,' he told him. 'We're not finished here, and those people in the dorms killed more than just the ones you saw.'

'What?'

'I've lost thirty-seven officers because of this little cull that went on up here,' the General explained. 'I want answers.'

Cana nodded. 'I'll let you know if I get any,' he said. 'I promise.'

With Cana gone, Matthews emerged from his office with the Science officer behind him. 'We'll talk later,' he told her quietly, before issuing orders to those around him. 'Contact the Mars shipyards. I want everything ready for an assault on this thing. Run evacuation scenarios for Earth. Military and government first.'

A senior officer approached the General and reported, 'Sir, a ship called Nostradamus broke from recon. Central's a bit late flagging it, but they said something about flouting orders and recalling their team early. There's a warrant for the captain, Adam Echad.'

'Do we know where he's going?'

'They haven't submitted coordinates. Apparently, Councillor Messina's connected, but Central are keeping tight-lipped.'

'Can't be good, then,' agreed Matthews. He looked out of the enormous curved window, seeing his world obscured by the disconnected alien structure. 'This isn't exactly the time for keeping secrets. Are they outside of our weapons reach yet?'

'I'm afraid so, Sir,' the man replied. 'They're in a hurry, wherever they're going.'

'Tap their Nav system before it's too late. I want to know what they're up to.'

'Team Three are on it. Do you want a long-range lock?'

Matthews shook his head. 'Not yet,' he replied, gesturing towards Team Three. 'Let's figure out what's going on first.'

As he and Matthews approached the team, the General asked, 'You guys got something for me?'

A young woman with a look of confusion on her face replied, 'We got their Nav system, Sir, and it looks like they've plotted for a system out beyond Garran territory. Like, we're talking years away! Someone's trying to shut us out, though. Think it's Central.'

'Surprise, surprise,' Matthews remarked. 'Keep on it.'

'Yes, Sir,' she replied.

'Ninety seconds of long-range remaining, Sir,' the Senior officer reminded Matthews.

Matthews shook his head. 'How long till we get backup from Mars?'

'Twenty minutes, Sir.'

An alarm sounded and Matthews looked out the window again. 'What now?' he shouted.

'Gravity shift on Venus close orbit, Sir!' came the immediate reply from a man in Team Three. 'Looks like a Jaevisk vortex!'

Matthews felt his mouth go dry. 'Battle stations, everyone! How many ships?'

'Just one, Sir.'

Matthews addressed the entire staff when he said, 'I don't need to tell you that our priorities have changed!'

The alarm resumed, and Matthews listened as the various team commanders reported: 'Another Warship, Sir, shadowing the Mars fleet.'

'Another one, Sir. Just crossed lunar orbit.'

'I've got another one, General. Hundred thousand kay out, heading for the south pole of the cage.'

The station trembled as a Jaevisk vortex occurred within a few thousand kilometres and a massive vessel gradually materialised as if emerging from black fog, until it could be seen in all its terrible glory beyond the main window of the station. It was reminiscent of a massive golden hornet which had consumed too much and taken to the air. The Jaevisk Warship, however, did not appear unwieldy or overfed. It was a gargantuan engine of destruction. As if to emphasise this capability, hundreds of fighter craft erupted from the outer hull of the vessel. They moved outwards from the Warship, setting up a perimeter.

The Senior officer was quickly at Matthews' side: 'Sir, we've got battleships coming up through the cage all across the north eastern quadra-sphere.'

Matthews managed to maintain his balance on the still trembling station as he regarded the alien ship. 'Well,' he said, as the alarms stopped once more, 'at least we're not on our own up here.'

Ω

Cassandra leaned back in her chair with her eyes closed. 'This can't be happening,' she groaned. 'I needed to avoid suspicion at all costs, and now this!'

Nell was beginning to wonder whether she cared about Cassandra's problems. She looked away, where she could see a number of civilian ships, public and private, launching from the port. Many people were taking the initiative and leaving the planet, reluctant to wait for state-arranged evacuation and conscious of escaping the panic which would ensue when the government finally got around to it. 'What difference does it make?' Nell asked dejectedly. 'We could easily get on one of those ships out there and disappear with some wealthy civilians. You're not that famous that they'd recognise you!'

Cassandra opened her eyes and glared at her partner. 'This isn't a good time to insult me, Nell.'

'Well, I'm sure you'll let me know when the time's right.' She rose from her seat opposite Cassandra. 'Perhaps I could schedule it for you? *Today Nell will tell me how despicable I am!*'

Cassandra laughed with genuine amusement, but it faded as she saw Nell's expression harden. She sighed. 'Oh, I'm sorry, Nell...really.' She gestured towards the vacant chair.

'Please, sit down and I'll explain, because with or without you, I intend to be off this planet within the hour.'

'But I thought you wanted to get on the Nostradamus.' Nell reluctantly sat down. 'That horse has bolted, case you hadn't noticed.'

'I'll find a way of following it. But first I have to go up to a military station outside the cage.'

'What?' Nell threw her hands up. 'For God's sake, *why?*'

Cassandra sighed again. 'There's something I have to do. It might just save millions of lives.'

'How altruistic of you,' Nell mocked. 'The great Councillor Messina wants to be the heroine. How does that fit into your scheming? You must have an angle.'

'This crisis is really bringing out the worst in you, Nell.'

'And the best in you, Cass. Get to the point, please. I want to see my parents.'

'Okay. Now that the Nostradamus is gone and I'm stuck here, I need to take control of things. There are now hundreds of thousands of Jaevisk soldiers in orbit. They followed a signal from a device taken from the man who arrived on the cage.'

Nell was stunned. 'The same guy who's on the Nostradamus?'

'Yes. I was told he would remove it shortly after he arrived. He did. And we took it from him.'

'Who's 'we'?'

'You're better off in the dark, Nell. Trust me.'

Nell chuckled scornfully. 'Yeah, right. So, what happens now? Your crazy church is gonna save the day?'

'I'll ignore that...for now. I have to go and speak to the Jaevisk. If you want to know any more, you should come with me.'

'Like the dutiful pet that I am?'

Cassandra actually looked hurt. 'I need you with me, Nell. You keep me strong.'

'Only because I appear so weak around you.'

'Perhaps, but that doesn't discount the fact. Without you, I can't do this.' She stood and came around the table to take Nell's hand. 'Please, Nell. Come with me.' Her lower lip was trembling and she leaned in close to Nell so that she could whisper in her ear, 'I'm frightened.'

Nell's eyes widened and she felt her emotions stirring. She nodded. 'I'll come with you,' she said quietly. 'I love you.' Cassandra held her head close for another few seconds. When she drew back, all traces of weakness were gone. 'I know,' she replied.

Ω

In Med Ops on the Nostradamus, the doctor was looking closely at the wound on the back of Conner's head. 'You say you pulled this device out yourself?' he mused. 'What did you use?'

Lying face-down on the surgical table, all Conner could see was the floor and the shoes of the confused doctor. 'You wouldn't believe me.'

The doctor looked back at Helen, who grinned. 'The captain believes this guy's psychic or telepathic or whatever you call it.' Her grin faded. 'Although something made my gun snap out of my hand.'

The doctor nodded. 'I heard about that. Some form of telekinesis, I'd imagine.'

'Yeah, *imagine* is definitely the right word!' Helen approached the table. 'He's not to be trusted, okay? Fix him up, get me the test results and we'll throw him in a cell.'

'Not if you want to live, you won't,' Conner mumbled. 'You also need me to speed up the ship.'

'Shut it!' Helen snapped. 'We'll find Valentina, kick you out an airlock, and turn back home before you know it.'

Conner remained quiet, but he smiled knowingly. The doctor examined the wound again. 'There's no sign of any instrument being used here.' With a light and magnifying lens in his hands, he shook his head, clearly impressed. 'Perfectly clean opening. It's as if the flesh opened itself.'

'How's that possible?' asked Helen. 'I mean, isn't telekinesis just fantasy?'

He shrugged. 'Space travel was once just fantasy,' he reminded her. 'Never be so swift to dismiss new ideas...' he reached for a laser bond and smiled as he showed it to her, '...or advancements.' So saying, he sealed the wound within seconds and stepped back. 'Okay, I'll just take a blood sample and then we're done.'

When the blood was in the hypovac, Conner turned over and sat up slowly, feeling slightly dizzy. He looked at the doctor, who turned away before he could be questioned. Conner was about to enquire about what he had just done, but something changed his mind. 'They're at Earth,' he said instead, staring at Helen. 'We're running out of time.'

'Who's at Earth?' she asked. 'The Jaevisk?'

He nodded. 'Someone or something brought them there. Probably that Councillor who wanted me kept on board.'

Helen found herself drawn in, intrigued by the implications. 'What would she want with the Jaevisk?'

'I'm not entirely sure,' he admitted. 'She must know something about the Cage...or something else.' He thought for a moment, lowering his head. Helen stayed silent, glancing at the doctor, who shrugged. When Conner looked up, his eyes were haunted. 'The virus...' he began. 'She knew it was coming!'

'What?' Helen asked. 'The cage?'

He jumped down from the table, walking away with his hand over his open mouth. 'This is it,' he muttered through his fingers. 'This is why they gave it to me. They needed it brought back. He must be behind Omega!'

'You need to start making sense...' Helen threatened.

Conner turned around to face them both. 'The device I had in my head had a number of functions...most of which are redundant for me...but I was told that it would protect me from the radiation on Kiranis. But I never got there, so I took it out, presuming it had served its purpose. It had, but...I think I know what its true purpose is. And it has nothing to do with radiation.'

Helen glanced at the doctor. 'Any signs of radiation sickness?'

The doctor shook his head. 'Nothing at all.'

'There wouldn't be,' said Conner. 'I don't think I was ever in any danger from emissions. At least, not down on the planet.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's the Cage itself that's the danger. For a number of reasons. I remember learning about a terrible infection that swept across Earth just after the Cage arrived. A virus released by the Cage was designed to kill millions, but...' He cradled his head in shock, and said, 'They thought that an alien device implanted in the brains of the victims would be the cure.'

'Your device,' the doctor provided.

Conner nodded. 'That's not what it's for. At least...'

'Well, what *is* it for?' Helen asked him. 'Or are you just guessing?'

'I'm *guessing*...' he replied, 'that it's necessary to have one of those things in your head if you want to survive the trip in the Cage. I just travelled across space and time and didn't even get a nosebleed!' He was pacing now, turning it over in his head. 'My people must have known this. I trusted them! Someone came up to the Cage to get that thing from me, so you can be sure they've got plans for it.'

'Someone like Councillor Messina?' Helen suggested.

'She might honestly believe it's about protecting the people of Earth from the virus,' Conner conceded. 'He must have told her as much. Why else would she take it?'

'Who are you talking about? Who told her?'

He dismissed that. 'This is complicated enough without you knowing that.'

'Look...what if you're wrong? What if it does save lives on Earth? You said yourself that you didn't get to your destination, so how do you know you didn't need protection from anything there?'

Conner shrugged. 'Maybe. Either way, Messina's using the Jaevisk to get what she wants. You've no idea what she's drawing you all into.'

'So, tell me.'

Conner hesitated, recalling what he had learned of Earth's history. He was reluctant to reveal any more of the future to these people. 'What the hell,' he said. 'It won't make any difference now. It's the reason I'm taking you away from Earth, anyway. That thing in my head had Jaevisk components. And whether you believe me or not, I've come here from the future.'

'So, Councillor Messina will be giving the Jaevisk their own technology centuries before they actually invent it?'

'Paradoxes aside, yes, that's basically what's going to happen. There's more to it than that, though. I don't really know why, but the Garran are part of all this as well.'

Helen took a deep breath. 'They won't be too pleased about us chatting with their old nemesis, will they?'

Conner smiled thinly. 'That's putting it mildly.'

Ω

Cana waited as the connection was made. Communication traffic was slow and restricted, and carefully monitored right now. If Cana's assumptions were correct, however, it would make little difference if he were discovered. A man in his forties was displayed on screen. 'Cana,' the man said, surprised. 'What's going on? You're taking a huge risk by contacting me.'

'I know, Presbyterian.' He hesitated, before saying, 'I think it's happening. I think this is it.'

'And I think you're over-reacting. As...momentous as this cage is, it doesn't exactly fit the bill for salvation and rejuvenation, does it? Although one might associate this with apocalyptic imaginings at a stretch, but –'

'It's not the cage itself, Presbyterian,' Cana interrupted. 'It's what's happening as a result of it being here. The structure's stabilisation mechanism causes an electromagnetic pulse from the planet's core.'

The man sat up straight and moved closer to the screen. 'It's dangerous?'

'Possibly, Presbyterian...to us. The Church, I mean. Tiny creatures called picobots are being released into the atmosphere and activated by the EM shockwave.'

'And how is this related to the Church?'

Cana hesitated. 'They're designed to find Rubidium.'

The Church official visibly paled, missing a breath. 'What possible reason...I mean...who would do this?'

'Could it be the Garran?'

'No,' the Presbyterian replied dismissively. 'They're not capable of constructing something on this scale. What we're looking at here is something completely beyond the capabilities of any race we've encountered.'

'Even the Jaevisk? They're here, you know. Just showed up without warning.'

'They've a habit of doing that. Still, I don't think this...cage is theirs. I've been in touch with friends in MI. They still describe this thing as completely alien, but what has them most concerned are the human aspects of its design. I presume you heard about the countdown?'

Cana nodded. 'It's in our numeric system.'

'Now *that* makes me uncomfortable!' He sat back again. 'Anyway, these...picobots? What are we to expect?'

'We don't know yet, but they must be designed to...infect us or something. Maybe i-i-if Church members...*inhale* them or...'

Cana gasped with zealous panic. 'There's no way of knowing *what* will happen!'

'Just because we have high levels of Rubidium doesn't mean that no one else will be targeted. Everyone has Rubidium in their bodies, Cana. And it hasn't caused problems for us before.'

Cana nodded, controlling himself. 'I know,' he said. 'The Rubidium has always been resilient to biological agents, but this could be different. And if it makes a lot of us sick, we won't be able to control who attends to them, and then we'll have a whole new problem to deal with!'

'Cana, don't you think we've had the best Nano-surgeons on the case? Nothing has been effective in adversely manipulating the Rubidium levels...or manipulating them in any way, for that matter. What makes you think these machines will fare any better?'

'Because all of this is too coincidental to be...' he shrugged, 'coincidence!'

'And you see this as the time of our *salvation*? Intergalactic robots sent to kill us all?'

'It depends who built the cage, Presbyter,' Cana argued, resenting the sarcasm. 'The picobots may not be designed to kill us. But...things have happened up here that suggest someone on Earth knows what's going on. I thought maybe you'd be able to get some answers.'

'What do you mean...things have happened?'

'Almost every Church member up here has been murdered.'

'What?' the Presbyter gasped, his eyes alight. 'Why?'

'Why else? We're outside the cage! Someone doesn't want us to escape our fate.' Cana laughed ironically. 'And I think the Church itself is responsible!'

'That's preposterous! How can you say such a thing?'

'Because I recognised some of the men and women responsible for the murders.'

The Presbyter understood the implications but needed to hear it before accepting it: 'What are you saying, Cana?'

'They were Church members,' Cana replied.

The Presbyter fell silent. 'We should end this conversation,' he said finally.

Cana heard knocking on the door behind him. 'It's too late now,' he said. 'Can I ask you a question, Presbyter?'

'Of course.'

'Who's the most powerful member of the Church? Can you think of anyone who would be able to organise something on this scale? Someone of influence? Someone in government, perhaps?'

The Presbyter thought for a moment, and then nodded. 'There is one person,' he replied. The knocking on the door behind Cana was more forceful, and he leaned closer to hear the name. 'She kept it secret for a long time. No one knew her parentage. She came to the Church voluntarily a few years ago.'

'Who?'

'We must be careful, Cana. Where are we heading with all this?'

'Who is it, Presbyter? Who could do this?'

The Presbyter reached out to sever the Com link. 'Messina,' he replied. The screen went blank and the door burst open behind Cana. He turned around to see the General and two soldiers in the room. 'Seems you have some answers,' said Matthews.

Ω

A discreetly chartered civilian streamship passed through the Cage, its occupants looking out at a pyramid section as they passed by. Reminiscent of the ancient 'Stepped Pyramid' of Saqqara, these hexagonal engines were enormous, and a chill ran through Cassandra as she witnessed the situation into which her most secret confidant had plunged her. The metal of the pyramid was battle-worn, pitted with impact marks and scars, but it was difficult to tell whose technology was truly behind this monstrosity.

The streamship pilot avoided the clearly futile manoeuvres of the defensive fleet and approached the only fully operational military station in orbit, and it was dwarfed by the

battleships surrounding and docked with the huge station. But still the nearby Jaevisk Warship belittled all, adjusting the hierarchy as it seemed to glare hungrily at the station on which General Matthews awaited his visitor.

Cassandra discreetly took Nell's hand, surprising her partner again with her apparent vulnerability. Neither woman said anything, for the danger was clear. One did not summon the Warships of the Jaevisk Society without cause or recompense. The very fact that they arrived in five separate vortices, expending massive amounts of energy, was testament to the significance of the signal used to attract them.

The shuttle docked in the station, and Councillor Messina and her assistant were escorted to the Operations Area. The elevator took them upwards through nearly two hundred levels before it slowed gradually and then came to a stop. Nell watched Cassandra as she visibly drew herself up and took a deep breath, releasing it as the doors opened. She wasted no time, recognising General Matthews immediately and asserting her authority: 'Inform the Jaevisk that I'm here, General.'

Although Matthews was curious as to her presence and her potential involvement with recent events on his station, he set his concerns aside as he nodded and politely replied, 'Of course, Councillor.' He gestured that she accompany him to the central bridge, a walkway spanning the circular expanse of the Operations Area, beneath which several teams were posted at their stations. Faces clearly seen looked up to witness the impending exchange. Although most did not know she was a member of the Church of the New Elect, many things were known about Councillor Messina and she attracted considerable attention wherever she went. She was a woman known for always being one step ahead of her political rivals. One story claimed that, as the time for the quadrennial government rotations approached, she had betrayed her entire national constituency to ensure that the one to which she was due to be appointed would benefit financially. Her successor tried to prosecute her, but she had so much incriminating information about the man that he promptly withdrew his complaint.

At Messina's command, the Jaevisk were informed. Within seconds, a perfectly formed holographic image of a huge Jaevisk appeared beside the General on the metal bridge. Accurately displayed, it was over two and a half metres tall, with a long muzzle-like head. Its yellow, almost gold skin appeared rough and reptilian and was interspersed with black tattoos. It was partially armoured in interconnecting leather and metal, which left small patches of its lean, muscular body exposed. Halfway down its spine, its armour concealed two distinct bulges nearly a metre in length.

Many stories were told of Jaevisk origins, of a selection of worlds upon which they might possibly have evolved before their technology took them not only away from their home but also across countless systems as their nomadic impulses maintained their hunger for exploration and discovery. It was said that they had first-hand knowledge of other galaxies; that their culture was highly spiritualistic and ritualistic; that they were cunning warmongers; that they were zealously protective of their families, their leaders, their secrets...but much of what Humankind had learned of the Jaevisk Society had come from the Garran. This did not bode well for veracity.

Cassandra announced herself, stepping past the General and approaching the hologram: 'I am Councillor Cassandra Messina.'

'We are aware,' the Jaevisk replied, the station's automated translator working to the slightest of delays as the alien language died away. 'Present your request and your means of summoning.'

Momentarily thrown off her guard, Cassandra blinked before reasserting herself: 'If you're aware of who I am, then surely I deserve a bit more respect.' She was playing a dangerous game, but she was convinced she had the upper hand.

'You are as consequential as any other Human,' came the curt reply.

'Really?' Cassandra sounded mildly amused, but she ignored the insult and, removing something from a pocket in her robe, she offered it up to the hologram for examination. There

was a tense silence as the creature stared at the tiny metal disc. The image abruptly flickered as the hologram was replaced by its originating counterpart, and the alien suddenly reached out, taking the device from Cassandra's hands. She stepped back, momentarily shocked.

Around the giant room, men and women of the security forces raised and cocked their weapons in perfect unison. General Matthews raised his hand to sway their enthusiasm as the Jaevisk turned the device over in its huge hands, its eyes filled with poorly disguised wonder. Then it looked back up at the Humans. 'This interests us,' it confessed. 'How does this relate to our presence here?'

Cassandra turned back to Nell for a moment, who could see her concern. 'There are...Jaevisk elements in the device,' Cassandra pointed out with confusion in her voice, focusing once again on the alien. 'Aren't you aware of *that*?'

'We are aware,' the Jaevisk lied, drawing itself up to full height as it noted the sarcasm. It did not return the disc. 'This is the device used to summon us.'

Cassandra nodded. 'We require a considerable amount of these,' she explained. 'It is vital that we receive them as soon as possible.'

'Does your life depend on this, Councillor Cassandra Messina?' Even without appreciating Jaevisk intonation, the monotone words of the computer translator somehow managed to relay the threatening undertones of the question.

'More than just mine,' Cassandra replied, 'which is why I'm here.' Standing immediately behind her, Nell found herself wondering at the veracity of that statement, but recognised her cue as the Jaevisk said, 'Explain.'

Cassandra turned and nodded to Nell, gesturing that she interject. 'At last count,' Nell began, 'nine million, six hundred and thirty-eight thousand, four hundred and three people had presented symptoms of a feverish illness. This is a result of a specifically engineered picotech virus released from the structure surrounding our planet. The symptoms are expected to worsen.'

'You believe that these devices will relieve your people of their symptoms,' the Jaevisk realised.

Cassandra noted that there was no reference to the cage as she replied, 'We believe they will save millions of lives.'

The alien glanced down at the device, as it asked, 'What evidence do you have to support this?'

'We'd prefer not to discuss that,' said Cassandra.

'As you wish,' replied the Jaevisk after a slight pause. 'Our courtesy is warranted by the suffering of your people. We will examine this device thoroughly in order to replicate it accurately.'

'Before you do...' Cassandra stepped closer, 'there is something else we require.'

'You ask much,' noted the Jaevisk, 'even for a Human elevated above others.'

'I appreciate that,' she admitted, 'but we believe that a common goal would be in the best interests of both our world and the Jaevisk Society.'

There was a short silence. Then, 'Explain.'

Cassandra could feel her heart pounding in her chest. She paused a moment to compose herself. What she was about to say would shock those around her and she felt light-headed and nervous. 'Our deep-space scopes monitored the appearance of a small craft at the fifth planet of the Kiranis system, emerging through a kind of rift.' Cassandra could feel the tension in the room, knowing that all eyes were burning through her for keeping this secret. Nell moved closer and discreetly placed a hand on Cassandra's back. Cassandra felt the benefit of the calming hand and continued: 'The scopes followed this craft as it travelled at immense speed towards the Sieltor system. We believe it will reach its destination within a matter of hours.'

'The vessel is piloted by a single Garran,' the Jaevisk interrupted.

Now it was Cassandra's turn to be surprised. 'You know about it?'

'We also monitor that system.'

‘So, you know that this...cage came from there? That this...Garran ship appeared at the same time as the cage arrived?’

‘We are aware.’

Now was the time. This was where lines were crossed, where requests for help increased in significance. Cassandra took a deep breath before declaring, ‘Then it’s clear to us that the Garran are connected to this structure in some way.’ Her lies rolled easily from her tongue. ‘They may lack the capability to construct it, but they’re involved.’

‘You seek revenge on the Garran,’ the Jaevisk realised, ignoring the subtle inference of blame and the question of how the other race could be connected.

‘We intend to speak with Governor Ben-Hadad regarding extradition proceedings,’ Cassandra responded with diplomatic caution. ‘We feel it is our right to interrogate this Garran pilot. If we’re unsuccessful...’ she shrugged, ‘we’ll consider military action.’

‘Military action against the Garran will fail without assistance,’ noted the Jaevisk. ‘Their forces significantly outnumber your own. If you decide that military action is a necessity, we will consider our position.’

Cassandra smiled, exhaling gratefully. ‘Then you’ll help us?’

‘We will consider our position,’ the Jaevisk repeated. ‘Firstly, there is the matter of replicating this device.’ The Jaevisk looked down again at the object in its hand and was silent for a moment, as if awaiting instruction. Eventually, it raised its head and said, ‘They will be delivered to you by an Axcebian Transport. Following this, we will contact you. You must do nothing to alert the Garran to your intentions until we speak again.’

Cassandra’s smile faded. ‘How long will *that* be?’ She turned to look at Nell, whose suspicion was evident, before regarding the Jaevisk again. ‘We’ve no intention of sitting on our hands while this thing kills millions of people and they just watch!’

‘You must follow our instructions,’ the alien pressed. ‘If you do not, you will need someone else to relieve you of your suffering.’ Calling their bluff, the Jaevisk even went so far as to hold out the metal device in its golden palm. Had anyone tried to take it, things would have been somewhat different.

Cassandra and Nell moved away and spoke amongst themselves. Other people were growing increasingly suspicious as the Jaevisk resumed its examination of the circular device in its huge hands. After a tense minute or two, Councillor Messina turned back to the alien. ‘We...will wait,’ Messina agreed, sealing the fate of all Humanity.

‘You are now allied to us,’ the Jaevisk replied. There was no mistaking the semantics. ‘The Axcebian vessel will arrive in three days’ time.’

‘How can we trust the Axcebians not to tell the Garran about this?’ General Matthews interrupted, perhaps forgetting his place. Indeed, Cassandra snapped, ‘That’s enough, General!’ but he ignored her. ‘How do you know they’re not connected to this attack?’ he continued. ‘They deal regularly with the Garran.’

‘You will leave such matters of...faith...to us,’ came the cryptic reply. ‘We are friends now.’ The Jaevisk suddenly vanished, leaving a bewildered and unsettled gathering questioning the path upon which they tread.

Ω

‘It’s done,’ said Conner. ‘The Jaevisk have the disc.’

‘So, what do we do now?’ asked Helen.

The doctor came out of his office, and announced, ‘I have the results.’

Conner was smiling as he turned to the doctor and said, ‘There’s no need to be so afraid of the implications.’

‘Don’t tell me he’s telling the truth,’ Helen pleaded.

The doctor nodded. 'He's definitely related to the captain, that's for sure. Whether he came from the future or not is beyond these tests. Although there are some quantum level processes I could apply if I had the time...'

'You don't,' said Conner sharply. 'Your people have just resigned themselves to the will of the Jaevisk Society and they'll draw you into something so big your heads will be spinning for years to come.'

Helen stared at him for a moment. 'Where are you taking us?' she asked. 'What's out at that system that's so important? And how the hell are we travelling so fast without being torn to pieces? We're getting nothing but random backfire on sensors, but the distance ratios are crazy!'

'Don't worry about the journey. I've got that covered.'

'Got it covered? What are you talking about?'

'One thing at a time, Helen. You can dig out images from scopes monitoring the system. You'll see that the Jaevisk have had Warships out there for a long time.'

'Do they have something to do with what happened to that planet out there? I mean, you said the cage wasn't theirs, but are they behind the attack on Earth in some other way?'

'They're not behind the Cage, no, but that doesn't mean they won't see it as an opportunity. As for that planet...well, there's no way they would do something like that.' He walked past her, heading for the exit. 'Kiranis is their world.'

Ω

'Captain, the rotation checks are...oh, my God!'

Adam turned around sharply. 'What is it?'

'Commander Miller and her team!' the officer gasped. 'We left them behind!'

'What are you talking about?' Adam snapped, walking up to him. 'I spoke to Sandra myself when she boarded.'

Another officer interrupted. 'The Lieutenant gave permission to retrieve the corporal's body, Sir.'

'What? And no one thought to *inform me*?'

'I...was distracted, Captain.'

Adam stared at her for a moment. 'Get a message to Central Command. You are now personally responsible for the safe return to Earth of that team. Is that understood?'

'Yes, Sir. Sorry, Sir. At this distance, the message will take -'

'I don't care how long it takes. Next time you get distracted, you'll be relieved of duty. Get to work.' Adam watched the young woman rush back to her station. He was desperate to find Valentina and hold her in his arms, to be sure she was safe. Incompetent staff did little for his confidence in the situation, and he found himself recalling his dream of a skeleton crew. At least they did what they were told.

Ω

Matthews sipped a drink and gestured to a chair as Cana was shown into the General's quarters. 'Take a seat,' said the General.

Cana did so and looked around. Shifting imagers on the walls displayed Earth from orbit; passing military and civilian vessels; and the many damaged stations and satellites which had filled the orbital belt before the arrival of the Cage. What caught Cana's eye, however, was a painting, a stunning canvas with Jerusalem's 'Dome of the Rock' in the centre. One word was repeated in beautiful calligraphy, in Arabic at the top left, Hebrew at the top right and in English at the bottom centre. That word was '*Peace*'. Cana smiled. 'This is...beautiful,' he said, turning to the General. 'I didn't take you for a religious man.'

Matthews shrugged. 'One doesn't have to subscribe to organisations to have faith.'

'And do you have faith?' Cana asked he sat down and reached for a drink offered by the General.

'I have faith in mankind's ability to overcome anything that comes our way. Whether we do that by divine intervention or through our own means...' he shrugged again. 'Who am I to say?'

'Some might say that our own means are divine intervention at work. We don't need a lightning bolt to start a fire.'

Matthews chuckled softly. 'True. If we're designed to fend for ourselves, then our actions are a result of that design, and our abilities are indebted to our designer.'

Cana sipped the drink and held the General's gaze. 'But you don't believe that, do you?'

'People say a lot of things, son,' said Matthews, feeling every inch like the wise old man. 'If I say I believe, will you believe that I do? And if I say I don't, how do you know I'm telling the truth?'

'Why would you lie?'

'Because my mind is my own, and I feel no inclination to share it with others. Hierarchical religions suppress individuality.'

'That's a harsh statement to make!' Cana exclaimed. 'Some psychologists say that being part of something greater than yourself gives you a greater sense of purpose and potential. The possible chaos of a non-conformist or rebellious individuality would be kept in check by realising your place in a larger community.'

The General laughed again, but it was a darker thing. 'You're not on a recruitment drive, son, and I'll thank you to remember your place!'

Cana nodded, contrite, as Matthews resumed, 'Now, tell me about this man you were talking to. This...Presbyter.'

Cana relented, aware of his own place in this particular community. 'He's one of many Church leaders around the world. The title was taken as a tribute to the early leaders of the Christian movement. From your point of view, the Presbyter I spoke with was of no greater significance than any other. But he was my tutor for seven years, and I respect him.'

Matthews nodded. 'Tell me about the Rubidium. Is he in the same boat as you?'

'Every member of the Church has elevated levels of Rubidium in their body. We don't know why, but it's become something of an entry pass. Membership comes only with the Rubidium, and everyone with it...*everyone*...' Cana added pointedly, 'is a member of the Church.'

'I don't understand,' Matthews admitted, his eyebrows furrowed. 'Are you saying the Church tracks them down?'

'That's exactly what I'm saying, and it also monitors births. We've seen babies born to Church members whose levels are fine one day, and way up the next. For whatever reason, every member for as far back as we can examine has what should be dangerously high levels of Rubidium in their system.'

'But there's no negative reaction to it...medically, I mean?'

'No. Neither is there a perceivable benefit to any of us.' Cana laughed darkly. 'I sometimes have nightmares where I burst into flames and I'm breathing fire on everyone, roaring that it's all their fault.'

Matthews caught a glimpse of moisture at the edge of the young man's eyes. 'How has the Church kept this a secret?' he asked. 'I mean, surely it's shown in scans, or if you're in hospital for blood tests?'

'We're taught from a very early age to be careful about revealing this. If an accident happens, someone always covers it up or happens to bump into a fellow member. Private Church-assigned doctors deal with every sick member throughout their life. We've also spent a long, long time trying to find a way of reducing the levels to the norm. Radiation, lasers...even nanotechnology. Ironic, I know. Everything works only temporarily and the Rubidium re-asserts itself. It may be genetic modification, or natural mutation, but whatever it is...well...are you aware of our theology, General?'

Matthews said nothing but gestured for him to continue.

'Well, the Church...' Cana resumed, 'like most religions do when faced with questions they can't answer...integrated this particular problem into our theological framework. They concluded that every member is descended from one person who first showed signs of this...deformity, if you ask me.'

'You didn't sound so dismissive with the Presbyter, Cana. Matter of fact, I thought I was witnessing nothing short of religious zeal in that conversation.'

'Yes, well, until today, we had no idea of a purpose for the Rubidium, let alone that someone out there had a plan for us. It would be nice to think I'm not going to spontaneously combust one day.'

'So that's how you see it now? A plan...with theological undertones?'

Cana shrugged. 'If the Church of the New Elect actively seeks out people with these levels of Rubidium, then the consequences of having them must be important.'

Matthews thought for a moment. 'The New Elect,' he mused. 'Didn't the early Christians think of themselves as the new elect?'

'Yes, they did, but within the context of Judaism. It was a Jewish concept of being the people chosen to survive an apocalypse-type event which was appropriated by the Christian Church. They considered it a new covenant...a new testament.'

'So, you just usurped Christian theology?'

Cana laughed. 'That's putting it very simply, General. The Church believes that its members are chosen to guide Humanity towards the rejuvenation of Earth, a re-creation of our world, but not through some supernatural judgement of Humanity's good and evil.'

'You can't possibly think that a cage around the planet is the means by which the world will be re-created?' Matthews stood and stretched his tired body. 'And how could rejuvenation of the chosen begin with the specific targeting of them by a multitude of picobots?'

Cana smiled. 'God works in mysterious ways, General.'

'God?' Now Matthews smiled. 'I'm not completely ignorant of your theology, Cana. I happen to know that your Church doesn't believe in any form of personified deity, abstract or particular, and that even the notion of a single god escapes your theology.'

Cana finished his drink. 'Who have you been talking to, General? The Lieutenant from the bridge? Cos I can tell you that she -'

'Look, son, I've been doing this a long time,' Matthews interrupted, shaking his head. 'I have access to lines of information you can't imagine.' Placing his hands on either side of Cana's chair, he leaned close to him, staring into his eyes. 'Speaking of lines...' he whispered.

'Please, General...' Cana begged. 'Don't!'

Matthews conceded, moving away from the young man as he realised that he needed to hear no more. 'You can go now.'

Cana rose from his chair, considerably more subdued as he made his way to the door. Matthews had hinted at his knowledge of things which had long been kept from outsiders. And still he was not finished. 'One more question,' he said. Cana turned, waiting. 'If this attack is indeed part of the great plan for your Church, what will you do?'

'I don't understand,' Cana lied.

'Of course you do. You're up here, where this...virus won't get you. You said it yourself in your transmission. The people murdered up here were killed because it won't reach them. You'll survive whatever's going to happen.'

Cana lowered his gaze, desperate to obscure his panic. He had realised since learning of the Church's involvement in the murders that he would have to get down to Earth. He had to maintain his loyalty to the Church. 'Cana?' He looked up and saw the General gazing at the picture of Jerusalem. 'If it's what you think you have to do,' said Matthews, 'you can leave. There's a shuttle in a few hours.'

Without saying a word, Cana turned to the door and walked out. Matthews sighed as the door closed, keeping his eyes on the painting. 'Godspeed,' he whispered.

Back in Cassandra's apartment, Nell sat watching the woman she loved as she prayed. Kneeling on the floor beside the bed, eyes closed and hands clasped, Cassandra whispered her devotion like a bedtime child. Her devotion bordered on fanatic zeal lately, and Nell had for a long time dismissed it all as either fantasy or political exploitation. Cassandra had spent some time in the major religious regions of the world over the years, speaking of searching for answers and truth and guidance and other such arbitrary paradigms beloved by spiritual voters. However, things felt different today, and it was only now that Nell was beginning to believe that Cassandra's storehouse of knowledge extended beyond the grasp of even an influential and powerful member of the Council. 'I have some questions,' said Nell, breaking the meditative silence.

Cassandra opened her eyes, her gaze piercing Nell's soul. 'I thought you might.'

Nell walked to the bed and sat down as Cassandra rose from her knees. 'You really believe you're talking to God, don't you?'

Cassandra sat beside her. 'I know I am,' she declared. 'Everything He's told me has happened and I know that He'll continue to guide me through this.'

'Look, I don't know how these things usually work, and...no offence, Cass, but...what makes you worthy of divine intervention? You sent people up to the cage to get that little disc. I mean, how is it that a telepath didn't know he was being *watched*? And besides that...how did you know anything about him or what he had stuck in his head...or that he'd take it *out*?'

Cassandra smiled and nodded. 'You're right, Nell,' she said, putting her arm around her. 'God informs me and guides me and...intervenes to make sure I can do what He wants done.'

'And what does he want done?'

The arm was removed. 'I'd appreciate it if you dropped the sceptical tone, Nell.'

'It's a valid question,' Nell pressed. 'Or are you not privy to the consequences of your actions?'

She sniffed arrogantly and stood up. 'Mankind is incapable of grasping the enormity of such things, Nell. You and I are nothing but pawns in God's great scheme.'

Nell watched her walk away towards the bathroom. 'That's a loada crap if ever I heard it, Cass,' she called after her. 'Why would someone like you willingly do things without knowing or caring about the consequences?'

'Someone like me, Nell?' Cassandra called back above the sound of running water. 'Care to elaborate?'

'You've never done anything that didn't suit your own advancement in life. You forget how long I've known you...how long I've watched you.'

Cassandra emerged from the bathroom with a towel, drying her face and her hands. 'I don't forget anything, Nell,' she reminded her. 'That's my problem. In fact...' she threw the towel on the bed and walked past it, 'I remember you telling me I could do with some religion.'

'Very funny. You know what I meant. This is...'

'Is what, Nell?' snapped Cassandra, turning on her. 'This is *what*?'

Nell stood up straight, angry now. 'It's *frightening*, Cass! You're hearing voices and having visions, following the instructions of some imaginary person. You're making decisions that will affect billions of lives and you just dismiss it all as something none of us simple folk would understand. That's politics, *Councillor*, not religion!'

To Nell's surprise, Cassandra was temporarily lost for words. Of course, she was shocked by Nell's fervour, but the situation called for such emotion. However, Cassandra was the sort of person who sought at all times to do the opposite of what was expected. So, to Nell's greater surprise, she smiled and said, 'Politics and religion are one and the same, Nell. They both seek to tie the hands of the simple person by keeping the secrets of the world beyond their grasp. My situation, however, is different.'

'How?' Nell approached her and looked right in her eyes. 'Tell me how.'

Cassandra sighed, and her vulnerability showed again. This time, however, Nell was not sure she should believe it. 'I've been in politics a long time, Nell, as you well know. Rising to my position inevitably meant that others fell beneath me. But that's the beauty and the curse of success. You don't know what it's like to be so influential and powerful in your circle that others fear to contest you, and there is no one above you to put you in your place when you cross the line.'

Nell sneered and shook her head. 'How terrible for you,' she mocked.

Cassandra took her hand and kissed it, forgiving her attack. 'I finally found someone above me, Nell,' she explained with reverence in her voice. 'Someone whose power is beyond mine and whose understanding of the world is so far beyond my grasp that I shiver to think of the insignificance of my life.'

'And you enjoy that?'

'You know me, Nell. I'm a woman who needs to feel humbled from time to time. My position as Councillor doesn't allow that. But my work for God does.'

Nell stepped back. 'I don't believe that, Cass. Firstly, this path you took to find who you call God was through the Church of the New Elect, an organisation whose membership depends entirely upon that problem with your blood. We know they don't even think of their deity the way you do.'

'I'm not responsible for the path that led me to the truth.'

Nell laughed scornfully. 'More nonsense! I think your...*work* for God, if that's what you want to call it, gives you an even greater sense of superiority by singling you out from the rest of Humanity.'

Cassandra shrugged. 'Maybe,' she admitted candidly. 'It doesn't matter now.'

'It doesn't *matter*? Do you even *hear* what comes out of your mouth?'

'I want you to leave now, Nell.' Cassandra turned her back. 'If I need you, I'll call.'

'Don't bother,' said Nell, her face softened only by tears. 'I've had enough of being your plaything!' She could not see the tears on Cassandra's face. 'What worries me is that when history recounts what happened here, I'll be associated with *you*.' She laughed again. 'Of course, I'll be lucky to be in a footnote!' She headed towards the door, and Cassandra turned her head to watch her leave. She wanted to stop her. She wanted to call out and tell her how much she needed her and loved her. As Nell closed the door behind her, Cassandra said quietly, 'I'm so sorry, Nell.'

Ω

Doctor Parnell Warren was finishing some reports in his office when he was interrupted by a knock on the door. 'Come in,' he called.

A very tall woman, in her mid-thirties and dressed casually, entered the room and looked around. 'Good evening, Doctor.'

'Good evening,' he greeted her, looking up. She must have been close to two metres tall. 'My secretary's gone home, but if you'd like to make an appointment...'

'No, thank you, Doctor. I'm here to speak to you, not to be administered to.' She sat in the chair against the wall opposite the desk and looked around again as she crossed her long legs.

The doctor deactivated his imager as he asked, 'About something in particular?'

'About everything in particular, Doctor,' she replied with detached mystery. 'Are you familiar with a woman named Cassandra Messina?'

Doctor Warren held the woman in his gaze for a little while. 'Who are you?' he demanded eventually. 'What do you want?'

'I represent a group of people who are...interested in this situation in which we find ourselves.'

'Considering what's going on, that could mean anyone. I think you should leave.'

She ignored the suggestion. 'We understand you're due to be appointed to a new position, Doctor.'

'It's hardly that,' he argued. 'The Council need my assistance in combating this...attack.'

'Is this an attack, Doctor?'

'Don't patronise me. That thing up in orbit is due to...activate or whatever, and some kind of virus spewing out from it has infected people all over the world. Of course it's an attack!'

'Not everyone thinks as you do, Doctor. Some believe what's happening is a good thing.'

'I find that difficult to believe.'

She nodded slowly. 'Nevertheless, it's true. Anyway, I'm here to ask a favour of you.'

'A favour? This should be good!'

'Oh, it is. I want you to allow me in your operating room during the surgery on Councillor Messina.'

Warren rose from his chair, but the woman remained confidently seated. 'My appointment to that procedure hasn't been made public,' he declared.

'We're not the public, Doctor.'

He thought for a moment, wishing someone would walk in and disturb the conversation. 'There's no way I'd permit an unknown in my operating theatre.'

'I assure you that I know what I'm doing, and I won't compromise the procedure. I can also assure you, Doctor, that you don't want to go against us on this.'

'I don't even know who you are.'

'And it's going to stay that way. Bigger things are happening here, and you need to realise your role. There's always a larger picture, but ultimately it's comprised of smaller pieces.'

'An inspiring analogy, I'm sure. Perhaps if you enlightened me...?'

'Like I said, not everyone considers this virus an attack. The Church, for one.'

'Which Church? The New Elect?'

'Yes. They'll try to stop the procedure from taking place. Now, I don't need to tell you that millions of people will die if that happens.'

'We don't know that for sure.'

'We...do.'

Warren sat down again, deflated. 'Look, I haven't even seen this virus yet, and our picotech is still way behind the sort of capabilities I'm hearing reported. I don't know what I'm up against and the Jaevisk device I'm implanting in Messina's head has me at a loss.'

'Messina's done her homework. She acquired the device and gave it to the Jaevisk. Let her bear the brunt of the unknown. You and I have to make sure the procedure goes ahead. We can't let these people die.'

'How do I know I can trust you?'

She smiled sweetly. 'Don't worry, Doctor. We're the good guys.'

Ω

Cassandra dropped to her knees again beside her bed. Tears streamed down her face and she sobbed as she pleaded with her unseen guide. 'Tell me I did the right thing,' she called out. 'Tell me that hurting her like that was worth something.'

'It was,' a disembodied voice replied. It was a man's voice, deep and resounding, strong and sure. She felt calmed even as she heard it. 'But she still has a choice to make. Her love for you is strong.'

Cassandra nodded, smiling gratefully. 'And mine for her.'

'The virus has begun killing people and I can't protect you any longer. Many people know you're one of the New Elect, so suspicion will grow once the general population realise only members of the Church are afflicted and see that *you're* not suffering.'

She nodded again. 'I understand. When can I leave?'

'Not until the Jaevisk devices are here. You will volunteer to be the first subject, Cassandra, and you'll have the original disc inserted.'

'How will they be sure of that? What if the Jaevisk don't return the original?'

'They will. I've seen to it.'

Cassandra nodded once more, and she fell into silence for a time. The voice did not disturb her thoughts, but rather waited for her to articulate them. 'I'm...afraid,' she admitted. 'Nell was right. It's not like me to do things without considering the consequences.'

'And yet you accept that I cannot reveal them to you?'

'Yes. But perhaps you could...reveal yourself?'

'You believe I have form? Something you could perceive?'

'I'm...not sure. Do you?' There was no reply, but Cassandra sensed that something had changed in the room. There was a presence behind her, and she steeled herself, breathing deeply and slowly before turning. In the dim light of her apartment, from where she knelt in supplication, she saw at eye level an even darker material rippling in the faint breeze of the air-conditioning. She realised she was looking at black robes of some kind, and her eyes followed the material upwards until she could see two creatures there, seemingly moving within and upon the garment. They were dragons, one of gold, the other silver, and she was sure they watched her with their silken eyes. A hand was extended but she did not take it, choosing to rise to her feet of her own volition. Then she saw him.

'You're...a man,' she gasped. His dark eyes regarded her amidst a strong face with stubble-lined jaws that seemed to mimic curving incisors. His hair was shaved close to his scalp, but his soft lips and smile and the kindness even within those dark eyes belied the severity of his features. 'What did you expect?' he asked her playfully.

'I...don't know. God?'

'Did I say I was God, Cassandra?'

'No,' she admitted. 'But I just thought...' She smiled, embarrassed, but the smile swiftly faded. 'Then who are you?' she wondered, suddenly afraid. 'Oh, no. Nell was right.'

'Not exactly,' the man told her. 'She thought I was imaginary.'

'Aren't you?' Cassandra stepped back, feeling the bed against her legs. 'I mean, you must be. I've gone mad.'

He shook his head. 'Most people call me the Prophet. I'm from a world and a time that I'm trying to help you reach.'

'Me?'

'Everyone.'

'Why?'

'I can't tell you that.' The Prophet watched her as she backed away from him. She glanced at the wall, seeing that the air-conditioning control was switched off. 'You're not real,' she said. 'Nell was right. *I'm* right. I've gone insane!'

The Prophet laughed. 'Consider what you're saying, Cassandra. If everything I've told you has happened...and I'm not real...then you predicted it. Do you really believe you can see the future?'

She turned to face him. The full-length cloak of black still rippled as if blown by air. The dragons still played on it. 'That's more likely than a man turning up in my bedroom with dragons moving around on his clothes!' she snapped.

Again, the Prophet laughed. 'You're right, it is,' he said, 'so for now I'll let you go along with that hypothesis. Regardless, you need to listen to me, if only as the personification of your ability to tell the future. Shortly after the Jaevisk devices are active, you need to contact them and ask them to take you after the Nostradamus. You'll be in a hurry to leave, and you've already arranged to have the ship tracked. The Jaevisk will help you once you tell them who Captain Echad allowed on board.'

'What will happen when they find the Nostradamus?'

'Do you have faith in your significance, Cassandra?' the Prophet asked, ignoring her question. 'Do you believe that everything you're doing is for a greater good?'

Cassandra held his gaze, although she could not see his eyes from this side of the room. Doubt was creeping in and flooding her confidence, but she laughed inwardly and fought it back, no longer caring whether she was insane or whether God was testing her faith, for now there was no turning back. 'I believe,' she lied, just as there was a knock on her door.

The Prophet grinned, for he knew her thoughts. 'You will,' he promised her, before he vanished.

Ω

Sandra gave up listening to the static on her Com unit and swore. 'We should get to that control room we were in last time,' she suggested. 'We might be able to get Central on the line, cos we sure as hell aren't getting the Nostradamus.'

'This is *bull!*' snapped Joshua Colle, as he slammed the butt of his rifle against the wall. 'How could they just *forget* about us?'

'We don't know what happened,' Sandra reminded him calmly. 'That guy who killed Will had some sort of hold over the captain.'

'Yeah, well, Echad better have a good explanation when we see him again.'

Sandra turned to him. '*If* we see him again. Let's just focus on getting out of here, okay?'

Jason Archer was transfixed by something farther down the corridor. 'What the hell is that?' he said quietly, moving away with his rifle at the ready. A figure in the shadows darted out of sight, prompting Jason to shout, 'Hey!' before breaking into pursuit.

'Archer!' Sandra snapped as he ran off.

'Kid's gonna get us killed,' Colle remarked dryly as they set off after him.

'You were a cadet once,' Sandra reminded him.

When they caught up with him in the dark corridor, he was standing at a closed door, waiting for them. 'Someone went in here,' he whispered defensively, noting their angry glares.

'I don't care,' Sandra told him, her heart pounding. 'You don't run off like that...got it?'

He nodded. 'I just figured there's not supposed to be anyone else up here. We're the only recon team left.'

'Okay, so we've got another stowaway,' Sandra agreed. 'Let's see if this one can give us some answers.' The door opened as if on cue, and they stood looking at what had to be an elevator car.

'Oh, this looks like fun,' said Colle. As Sandra weighed their options, the corridor was sealed off on either side of them by swiftly descending doors. She and Colle looked at Jason, who sheepishly shrugged by way of an apology. Without another word, they entered the elevator and the car began its rapid ascent. With no display inside the elevator, there was no way to determine how they should proceed once they exited. It was a problem swiftly solved, and in the same way as before. Bulkhead doors to their right were sealed while the elevator closed behind them. Then Sandra heard whistling from down the corridor. 'This guy's playing with us.'

'He's certainly not leaving us any choices,' Colle agreed, looking into the dark corridor. He turned back to Sandra. 'You wanna keep going?' he asked her.

She did not, but Colle was right. There was little choice. 'What do you think, Jase?' she asked, turning to the youngest of them. 'Should we go on?'

He stared at her for a moment, uncomfortable with the burden of decision. 'I want to know what's going on,' he replied carefully. 'We could be near the top of this thing, for all we know, and that's where Central was focusing all their attention.'

Colle nodded. 'Sounds like a plan to me.'

There was the sound of someone whistling again, and they all heard it this time. 'We're being led around by the nose here, guys,' Sandra argued. 'You really think Whistlin' Dixie up there's on our side?'

Colle chuckled darkly. 'There's only one way to find out,' he said, as he pointedly brandished his gun and took the lead. 'Onwards and upwards!'

Ω

Cassandra opened the door and stepped back in shock or, at least, a sufficient pretence of shock, as soldiers pushed into her apartment. Closely followed by a tall, white-haired man in a pale blue uniform with gold stripes on the shoulders, the soldiers spread out to surround the Councillor. She looked around at them before turning to the older man. 'What is the meaning of this?' she snapped. 'Under whose authority do you burst into my home in the middle of the night?'

'Why...yours, Councillor,' the man replied with a casual smile. 'Or rather, the authority of the Council, by way of laws you set down. My name is –'

'I know who you are, Pontifex Harrogate. I attended your appointment ceremony.'

'Of course, that's right, you did.' Harrogate beamed, looking up at the ceiling as the memories came flooding back. 'Yes, I recall that wonderful red dress you wore that day.' He looked back at her. 'You were quite stunning.'

Cassandra attempted to dismiss his charms, but she failed and found herself grinning as she turned her back to pour herself a drink. 'Can I get you anything?' she asked.

'No, thank you, Councillor,' Harrogate replied. 'I'm quite run off my feet lately. I'm here to deliver a simple message, and I truly hope you'll appreciate its importance.'

Cassandra sipped her water and kept her back to him. 'I'm sure a man as eloquent as yourself will have no problem getting his point across.'

'Good of you to say, Councillor. With that in mind, I'll get straight to it.' He approached her and she turned to find herself looking at a completely different expression. He was glaring at her, clearly suppressing his distaste for her actions as he spoke: 'I am here as a representative of the Eurasian Council, in my full capacity as Pontifex. You, Councillor Cassandra Messina, are to remain in this property under armed guard until such time as you are brought to trial for treason.'

She held his fiery gaze with one of her own. 'My dealings with the Jaevisk Society will help save millions of lives,' she argued through gritted teeth. 'Your short-sightedness will do the opposite.'

'Your...dealings with the Jaevisk are another matter entirely, Councillor. Central monitored your communication with the captain of the Nostradamus. You ordered him to allow an invading force onto his ship, a man who murdered one of their men.'

Cassandra laughed at the Pontifex. 'An invading force?' she sneered. 'If it wasn't for that man and the technology we obtained from him, you'd have a lot more deaths on your hands.'

Harrogate stepped closer again. 'That man was in that...thing up there,' he reminded her angrily. 'He's inextricably linked to this attack and you facilitated his escape. Don't try our patience, Councillor. You're already facing severe penalties for your crimes, but execution is always an option.'

There was a moment of silence and Cassandra sipped her water again. 'How long will this...house arrest last?'

The Pontifex took a deep breath and stepped back, smoothing the front of his uniform and regaining his composure. He smiled calmly. 'As soon as this situation has passed, you'll face trial,' he promised her. 'I'm sure everything will proceed with the utmost concern for the law and the citizens of Earth.' He turned away from her, instructing the soldiers to station themselves outside. 'You will, of course, be permitted certain visitors, Councillor,' he called back to her. 'Please submit a list to my office, where it will undoubtedly struggle to reach the top of my to-do pile.'

'You're enjoying this, aren't you, John?'

Pontifex Harrogate stopped and waited for the soldiers to exit before turning to reply, 'Please, Councillor, I'm simply doing my job.'

Cassandra smiled thinly. 'Oh, I'm sure there's a certain satisfaction in this for you.'

Harrogate moved back to stand close to her. 'Councillor Messina...' he said, leaning in so he could whisper in her ear, 'you have no idea.'

Ω

Colle and the others had reached the apex of the Cage section they were exploring, but the enclosed corridors of the structure did not allow them the luxury of that knowledge. After spending the better part of an hour feeling like lab rats in a twisted experiment, they found themselves standing in front of a huge door with a two-metre-tall glass panel in the centre. On the other side was the figure they had been pursuing, a tall man in a long black cloak who simply stood with his back to them, waiting. 'What now?' asked Archer.

Sandra kept looking through the glass. 'This is just creepy,' she said.

'There's no entry panel,' remarked Colle. 'I don't see how we get this door open.'

'He'll open it,' Sandra said, nodding with conviction as she turned from the glass to face them. 'He wants us in there with him.'

'Well...*that's* enough reason to go in!' said Colle, sarcastically.

Sandra's eyebrows rose as she looked at him. 'What happened to onwards and upwards?'

He grinned. 'Changed my mind. Downwards and backwards sounds much more appealing.'

The door hissed and there was the sound of mechanised bolts sliding open. As the door began to rise, Colle took another look through the window. 'What a surprise...he's gone,' he said. 'Friggin' cat and mouse is starting to piss me off!'

Sandra gestured for them to move back as the door opened. Before it had ascended half way, they were able to enter the room. Sandra took point, switching on her rifle-mounted flashlight to illuminate the dimly lit room as she moved in. 'Wait,' said Archer, and they turned to him. 'What if this door closes behind us? What if we're trapped in here?'

'Valid question,' said Colle. Sandra turned around and nodded in agreement. 'Hey...I'm open to suggestions,' she told them.

Colle looked into the room, still standing on the threshold as the door completed its ascent. 'I got nothing,' he admitted. 'Everything's closed behind us and seeing this through still seems like the only way to figure out what's going on.'

'Yeah,' said Sandra, moving farther in. She turned to her left and then her right, shining the flashlight. 'Looks like there are a few more exits, but this room sure goes on. It's enormous.' She turned around as Jason entered the room and the two of them waited for Colle. He took a deep breath. 'Ever get the feeling your entire life's about to change?' he asked, taking a few steps forward. The door slammed shut behind him and Sandra and Jason ran back to it. Colle did not even turn around. It was not until every possible exit from the room was sealed and the lighting level ascended that he realised just how profound his observation had been.

The figure in the black cloak was standing on a platform opposite them, at the centre of a vast square room in which myriad forms of equipment for monitoring, controlling and maintaining the operations of the Cage were arrayed. The distant walls to the left and right of the team were completely transparent, and they realised that only an energy field separated them from the vacuum of space.

The man had short black hair, black stubble-lined jaws, and dark eyes. He wore a full-length cloak upon which two dragons played, and he smiled at the three soldiers and the weapons and lights pointed at him. With outstretched arms, he drew their attention to the room and the strange equipment therein, saying proudly, 'Welcome to your future.'

Ω

On the Nostradamus, Adam turned as Lieutenant Morris returned to the bridge with their guest in tow. She glanced at Adam, nodded, and walked to the Briefing Room. Conner made to follow her, but then stopped. ‘Captain,’ he called.

Adam looked at him in silence, and Conner nodded. ‘I know,’ he assured the captain. ‘I’ll bring you to her now.’

Helen had stopped outside the door of the Briefing Room. ‘What’s happening?’ she asked, addressing the crew member at the back of the bridge. Adam turned to her. ‘Well, before we rushed off at speeds a comet would be proud of, they were trying to find the recon team you left behind. Maybe you’d be so good as to see if you can contribute anything.’

Helen stood with her eyes wide and mouth open, surprising herself by not responding as the two men left the bridge. The Communications Officer called her: ‘Lieutenant?’

‘Yes, Kel,’ she replied, turning to her. ‘What’s happening?’

‘I don’t know how at this distance, but we’re still pinging Central, like the com’s holding a relative delay. They had thermal reads on the team up until...I dunno, maybe five or six minutes ago, their time.’

‘What sort of delay are we talking about?’

‘Approaching eleven minutes now. But we’re about to leave Sector Green, and then the path clears for what Nav is calling Stage Two of this guy’s flight plan. I don’t know how much out of sync we’ll be when that happens.’

Helen pressed two fingers against her right temple. ‘You think we’ve lost them?’

‘No way to tell, Lieutenant. Central losing them on thermal doesn’t mean much on its own. It’s just...’ Kel hesitated.

‘What?’ Helen made her way to the Com station, and Kel handed her an imager as she explained, ‘We just got this. They’re about to start nuclear strikes on the cage.’

Helen read the reports from the military grapevine. ‘That’s it, then,’ she said, returning the imager, ‘we’ve lost them.’ As she made her way back to her command chair, she heard the captain’s accusations and quietly corrected herself: ‘I’ve lost them.’

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.



Temple Dark Books