

KIRALAINE

... THE END OF EVERYTHING

CRAIG R. THORNE





In the year 2048, the Earth has recovered from devastating catastrophes earlier in the century, and now is a much more settled and peaceful place. Great financial resources in the U.S. have allowed for tremendous strides in scientific research, but there still has been no extraterrestrial visitation. A crack team has received signals from beyond known space and they prepare a dangerous voyage to intercept an unknown object calling itself "God."

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First Edition

Chapter 1

"My God, this is impossible!"

Dagin Chambers, chief of the Remote Probe Project at the prestigious Mikelson Institute, raised his eyebrows, and squinting from the bright Phoenix sunlight, glanced over at his colleague, Tom Williams, who had just spoken. Scientists didn't say things like that, not any more. The nuclear war, the volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, the rise and fall of the so-called "Antichrist," the incredible "rebound shift" of the Earth's axis in the early 21st century--all these events of the past 50 years had taught physicists such as Tom not to make such dramatic statements.

Dagin, still groggy from carousing at his 35th birthday party the previous night, hauled his legs off the table and slowly stood to his full six feet.

"What do you have, Tom?" Dagin tried not to sound as impatient as he usually felt these days, since his divorce.

Williams, his fingers a blur as they sped from one illuminated panel to the next, declined to answer.

"Come over here and see," Tom finally said.

Dagin sighed as he slowly walked over to the cluster of instruments that tracked the movements of the 12 state-of-the-art telescopes carefully situated in deep space.

"Vanguard acting up again?" Dagin was a top-notch astrophysicist, not a nuts-and-bolts technician. He didn't like it when some glitch interfered with his data.

Tom looked up from his wheelchair. "No, she's all right this time, but I still say we sent her out too far and too soon. Damn administrators."

"What is it, then? Brades wants me at a meeting in five minutes."

"This data is screwy. If it's anywhere near right, you don't want to tell Brades."

Dagin leaned over to check the readout, crinkling his nose at the lingering smell of Williams' cheap cigar. Tom was accurate. What was appearing on the screen was odd, all right. Probably due, he quickly reasoned, to some hardware malfunction on this end of the signal.

"Did you switch to the alternate frequencies?" Dagin liked Tom. Williams, although several years Dagin's senior, didn't resent Dagin's authority over him, and Tom always had time for a casual chat or some gentle humor as long as it didn't interfere with his research.

"Of course." Williams looked insulted. "Tried augmentation of the z-band, too. No difference. That object shouldn't be there."

Chambers rubbed his eyes. "Okay. We'll check it out later. But I've got to get to that meeting." When Tom didn't respond, Dagin added, "I think Brades has something up his sleeve again. Where's Cal?"

"He's checking something down in Stellar. Spends more time with those crackpot stargazers than he does with us."

"Call him on up, and tell him to run a systems check on the feeder and booster lines, then to do an internal integrity audit of the mother board."

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Williams smiled. "He knows what to do, Dagin."

Dagin waved his hand. "Yeah, I know. Too much on my mind. I'll be back in an hour."

Dagin turned and headed down the long hall toward the conference room. "Too much on my mind," he repeated to himself. He was still racked with guilt over the mysterious deaths of his parents, still blamed himself for that. Then Cathy left, and things had just gone downhill since then, these last six months. Even that small, jagged scar above his left eye served as a physical reminder of how some men could get so jealous when other men took liberties with their wives.

"Dr. Peters, please report to RPP immediately," the soft tone of the computer announced over the intercom.

Good. At least Tom's getting Cal to work on that glitch right away, Dagin thought. They made a good team, the three of them.

"Hi, Doc!" came a greeting from a side lounge.

"Hello, Soren. How you doing today?"

Soren Lancashire put down his mop and approached Dagin, smiling a greeting and extending his hand to shake. He was an imposingly tall young man, around 6'6", with deep blue eyes, dark hair, and a vague smile.

"Brades have you pretty busy these days, Soren?"

"Oh, yeah. He says if I keep doing better I can get some more important jobs soon. How's your work coming?"

"We're doing okay, Soren. But I have to get to a meeting now. Keep up the good work, and drop by the lab sometime."

Soren made Dagin nervous. The kid must be about 18, now. Why Brades kept him around was uncertain. Rumor had it that Brades felt guilty about something, perhaps

having to do with the disappearance two years ago of that husband/wife team of intuitive psychologists, Trevor Cozicki and Eleanor Ashley. It was said that Soren, their student, was a bizarre genius, but then something snapped, leaving him with the reasoning abilities of an eight-year-old. Well, he was a nice kid, and everyone here at "Space City," as the local desert-dwellers called it, enjoyed his cheerful manner and appreciated his janitorial efforts.

Dagin entered the elevator and in seconds was whisked up the tower to the administrative level, high above the desert floor.

The plush, spacious meeting room was slowly filling with various heads of departments and administrators from the entire Mikelson Institute, giving Dagin time to reflect on how all this had come to be. It was only the misfortunes of the past that had allowed them to construct and maintain such a vast complex filled with the best scientific minds not only of the United States, but of the world.

Without the wars, without the hundreds of millions of deaths caused by the shift, the plagues, and other natural calamities, there never would have been the tremendous resources available to subsidize such an enormous scientific community. Without starving millions, without the threat of war, with nations cooperating instead of competing, scientists had been able to drastically reduce the ills of the former generations. The amazing discoveries in medicine and agriculture had allowed scientists to concentrate fully upon countless pet projects, especially the exploration of space and the still-elusive search for extraterrestrial life.

Yet the relative peace the decimated Earth now enjoyed had been gained only by enforced social engineering. For those who were not scientists, the new Earth had become an

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agrarian community, where food, housing, and economic currencies were shared equally. Any funds generated beyond that were all poured into educational studies or projects devoted to the sciences. Minimal attention was paid to what had been called the "humanities" in university systems, though classic films and books were still widely viewed or read by the populace. Serious belief in theology had been entirely dismissed as the philosophy of a superstitious age, and social policies, as well as politics, were influenced by scientific hierarchies, which still, Dagin reflected, could be most annoying, even though governmental red tape was no longer a problem since nations and their militaries had been disbanded. There were also more grim reminders of the price that had been paid for peace, but Dagin didn't choose to consider such reminders now. After five years at the Institute he still recognized how fitting it was that Phoenix should be the site of the Institute, this new hope for the future of humanity, this rising from the ashes.

Finally, the participants were all seated. From the dais came the commanding voice of Dr. Nita Shavinsky, the Head Administrator of the Institute.

Dagin stifled a yawn. Meetings were boring to him, as well as to Tom and Cal. His team members were glad that Dagin, as Chief of their small division, was the one who always had to attend these useless functions. Dagin wasn't glad; he was a man of action.

It was the same old format. Shavinsky droned on about the mission of the Institute, spoke of some general goals and worthy objectives, mentioned funding, and encouraged each of the many divisions to renew their respective efforts,

particularly exhorting the so-called "SETI Squad" to get on the stick and to produce some tangible results.

It wasn't the fault of the Remote Probe Project, or even Von Brades, their division supervisor, that any aliens had yet to show themselves. Not that the terran scientists hadn't been trying fervently all these years to establish any type of contact with extraterrestrials. The ETs evidently hadn't wanted to make direct contact, even though many scientists had expected them to before the turn of the 21st century. So had almost everyone else, from the clergy to the old "New Agers" to the people on the street. But the aliens had wisely, Dagin mused, refused to come.

Then it began to happen again. Dagin felt a slight ringing in his ears, exactly like the previous three times. Immediately, he rose from his chair and quickly walked to the adjacent lounge area and seated himself as far behind a large potted plant as he could. He didn't want to be seen. Not if it was going to happen again, as it had these last few months.

The ringing soon escalated into a loud, discordant buzzing that seemed to fill his brain to bursting. He felt his heartbeat coursing through the vessels in his head, as though his blood wanted to explode through his skull, to escape his body. Then the screaming sound began, slowly at first, then rapidly intensifying to such a pitch that the pain became excruciating. Tears formed in Dagin's eyes, but just as he would never see a doctor (not even Tom, who was also an M.D.) neither would he now cry out or ask for assistance.

Then, as before, the pain and noise abruptly stopped. Dagin, panting, slowly stood and moved quietly to the drinking fountain. He wet his lips, then splashed some water on his brow to wash away the perspiration. "Damn stress,"

he muttered to himself, not at all convinced that was the sole cause.

"Chambers, I'd like to see you in my office," came a loud voice from behind in the main hallway.

Dagin turned in time to see Von Brades moving quickly away, amiably chatting with several other department heads.

"Asshole," Dagin thought to himself. He knew Brades was a first-rate physicist and planetary astronomer, but Chambers hadn't liked him since they first met five years earlier. Brades didn't like Dagin, either, and made no excuses for that feeling, even though Dagin could never figure out just why.

"He stole your idea on that auxiliary retrieval system, there's absolutely no doubt about it," Cal had assured Dagin.

Yes, he had, but Dagin couldn't prove it, and he didn't want to lose his job over flimsy evidence and personal animosity. Besides, Brades certainly came to the Institute with impressive credentials, having won honors at the Space Academy just as Dagin himself had. And Brades was a decent administrator in other ways too, but his insufferable ego and thirst for power alienated Dagin and most others subject to his authority. Dagin smiled inwardly at the thought of Brades marrying a petulant or power-hungry woman, perhaps even his ex, Cathy. That would serve them both right, or at least keep Brades from his excessive meddling with the RPP team.

His headache wasn't completely stabilized, but when Brades summoned people, it meant right now, so Dagin walked briskly back to the elevator and descended several flights to the floor reserved for top Mikelson officials.

Perhaps he might ask Tom about these cerebral vascular attacks, after all. But not today.

"Hello, Dr. Chambers," Mary Winthrop greeted him. "Dr. Brades said to go right on in. And watch it--it looks like a Code Three today," Mary smiled, her eyes dancing in mock concern.

"Thanks, kid" Dagin replied. He and Mary had long ago established their own system for dealing with Brades' moods. She was too good for Brades, but Dagin's RPP team already had an excellent receptionist in Matt Carpenter, and besides, trying to steal Mary would seem to Brades an outright act of defiance or insubordination.

Rarely did Dagin get a private audience with Brades, and when he did, it usually didn't auger well for his RPP team.

"Please come in, Dagin." Brades was smiling as he motioned Dagin to take a seat in an imported leather chair.

"I'll get right to the point, since I noticed you missed the last part of the meeting."

Dagin winced. Didn't this robot miss anything?

"Shavinsky and the Council are, as I am, concerned with the lack of apparent progress in our SETI Squad, and heads are about to roll. Mine isn't going to be one of them. Therefore, I'm taking certain measures to insure that we produce what the Council desires and what will help all of us in the long run. In particular, I need your team's cooperation."

Brades pulled out a bottle of brandy, and without offering any to Dagin, poured himself a small sample and sniffed it, as he awaited Dagin's response.

Dagin folded his arms across his chest and looked Brades straight in the eyes. "We're doing the best we can. It takes time for the scopes to get into optimum position. We

still can't find a way to boost the signals to speed up the process. I can't ask any more of my team than they're already giving. I even have to order Williams to take time off, as it is."

"I realize that, Dagin. You and your team are doing a good job. But we need more, and we need it soon."

Dagin was more exasperated than insulted. "All right. I'm open to suggestions. What can we do?"

"It's really not a suggestion. I'm bringing in a new team member for your project. Top, top quality. Had to pull every string I could to get this scientist, and the salary I had to offer offends even me. This colleague will join you next Monday, one week from today, so inform your team and make any necessary arrangements. Any questions?"

Of course there were, and Dagin wondered why Brades should ask such a stupid question. Was this a test?

"The team may want to know who this person is," Dagin replied, trying to sound disinterested.

"For various reasons, I don't want to reveal that until the person actually arrives."

Dagin despised games of this sort. When he wanted to know something, he expected, or demanded, if he could, an answer. He sensed that his persuasive or coercive efforts wouldn't work this time, so rather than irritating himself further, he decided to allow Brades his intrigue.

"Very well. Anything else?"

Dagin's scowl must have been apparent, for Brades softened somewhat as he stood to see Dagin out.

"You're all doing a fine job, Dr. Chambers. I'm not doing this to insult you. This new member should be an invaluable addition to the Institute, not merely to your section."

Dagin neither looked nor felt convinced.

"And, oh, I forgot to mention a minor point. This person will be appointed as co-leader with you. I expect your full cooperation, if not gratitude. Until Monday, then."

Dagin stalked from the office, not even acknowledging Mary.

It would be gratifying, he thought, to hit something, very hard.

Eight minutes later, he was furiously slamming a handball against the rec-room walls, issuing a stream of invectives as he mentally lectured his boss on appropriate professional manners. But such cathartic respite was always short-lived with Dagin.

Soon enough he found himself showered and somewhat calmed, but as he returned to the RPP lab and offices, he was still anxious and angry about what he had to tell his team.

On the way back, he again met Soren Lancashire, who this time was washing the picture windows overlooking Camelback Mountain. Soren was quite fond of looking out the windows, apparently lost in his own reveries. Brades had gently warned Soren that it would be better to daydream a bit less and tend to his work a bit more, and the young man always cheerfully agreed to do so, but it seemed he just couldn't help himself, sometimes. It was as though something out there in the vast, quiet expanse was calling to him, urging him to remember something.

Soren stopped his whistling as he greeted Dagin.

"Hi again, Doc! Do you think you'll like your new team, member? I like the quiet. Are you still going to let me visit?"

Dagin didn't seem to hear Soren, so Soren, not at all hurt by the apparent slight, quickly turned back to washing the windows.

Chapter 2

Dagin, lost in thought, at first did not acknowledge the implications of what Soren had said.

"What? What did you just say, Soren?"

Soren, taken aback, lowered his eyes and looked away. He figured he had said something he shouldn't have, but he didn't know what it was or why Dr. Chambers challenged him.

Since his mental collapse, and since no one had been able to locate his parents, Soren had become sort of a mascot around the Institute, and even though he could reason only with limited ability, he retained an acute awareness of the feelings and emotions of others.

Dagin persisted. "How do you know about our new team member? I barely know about it myself. Who told you that?"

Soren was flustered and afraid. He didn't want to get in trouble with Dr. Brades, and he didn't want his friend Dr. Chambers to be mad at him, either.

"I . . . I don't know," he stammered. "I guess I overheard Dr. Brades, I guess. I don't know. Please don't tell Dr. Brades I said anything, okay?"

Dagin stared at him. "Okay, Soren. And yes, if you want to come visit, that's fine with me. Better get back to work for now," Dagin said, walking away.

Dagin felt irritated with himself for not pressing Soren for more details. Either Brades told Soren, or he didn't. And if he did, why would he? And if Soren overheard him, who was

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Brades talking to? Perhaps the boy was merely guessing? No, that didn't make sense either. And what did he mean about liking it "quiet"?

"Hey, B'wana! What's the word from the lion's den?" Calvin Peters's greeting interrupted Dagin's thoughts as Dagin entered the RPP lab.

Cal was flat on his back on the floor, tinkering with some wiring behind Tom's instrument panel.

"Get up here and I'll tell you, Marty." Dagin sometimes called Cal by that nickname, for Cal had remarked more than once that he thought he himself was the reincarnation of Dr. Martin Luther King. Since Dagin was skeptical about anything with a metaphysical flavor, he sometimes teasingly reminded Cal of it.

"Tom, you too," Dagin said, for Williams was bent over the main monitoring array, intently assessing the readouts.

"Two things, so listen up." Dagin was serious, and both Tom and Cal knew it.

"First, they want hard data and they want it soon. Brades didn't say so, but I think they may pull the plug on us if we can't get something to please the Council. Second, Brades says we're getting some secret new team member next Monday to help us, since we can't seem to cut it by ourselves."

Tom and Cal noted the sneer in Dagin's delivery, but they were used to it when Brades' name was mentioned.

"What new team member?" Tom asked.

"Yeah, what do you mean 'secret'?" Cal added.

"That's all I have," Dagin said. "Well, he did mention that this hotshot is no stranger to big money, and implied that this may be a political appointment. Also, I've been demoted to co-leader of RPP--or this new guy's been promoted to that level, if you want to look at it that way."

Tom whistled. "Still playing games, aren't they? Now why should it be kept a secret? Are we that untrustworthy?"

"Screw it," Cal said. "We've got better things to do than play politics. We'll find out Monday, anyway."

"Did they offer any specific instructions as to what new directions, if any, our research is to proceed?" Tom asked.

Dagin smiled. Tom had a one-track mind. "No. But it seems that this new blood we're to get will have some ideas."

"Monday," Cal reminded them. "In the meantime, let's see what we can do with this aberration Tom's squawking about."

Dagin had temporarily forgotten that Tom was concerned about some readout on his panel. But Tom had a tendency, if not to overreact, then to be unduly affected by abnormalities.

"That's right. You said you were getting some odd data right before I had to go to the meeting. Found anything yet?"

"Only this," Cal said. "This board's clean. Everything, and I mean all of it, is functioning at peak capacity. I can't even find any dustballs back there. The data is accurate, at least on this end, so any glitch has to be originating out there, and by that, I mean it's definitely not Vanguard."

Vanguard. The huge, multi-billion dollar Remote Probe Telescope speeding at near light-speed velocity toward the outer fringes of the known universe. Conceived by the best minds in the world, built by the cooperative efforts of leading-edge Earth technologies, this grand experiment was to serve as the logical successor to the old Hubble telescope of decades past. If other sentient lifeforms would not come to Earth, then Earth would actively seek them, and Vanguard was the chosen emissary to any cosmic neighbors, Earth's universal ambassador.

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Vanguard was by far the most powerful of the 12 remote probe telescopes, but even with its speed, it remained painfully slow. The breakthrough to trans-light speed was promised any day. The math was there, the physics was there, the theories all but proven. Even the hardware was deliverable, yet science was still denied that one key element that unlocked one of the last great obstacles (some said "secrets") to intergalactic travel.

Yet Vanguard sped on. And despite some minor, unresolved deviations, invaluable data poured in at an astounding rate--enough to keep the scientists occupied for years to come.

"Not Vanguard, eh?" Dagin mused aloud. "Then let's see what you have on your scope, Tom. What's so 'impossible'?"

Encouraged and enthused, Tom motioned Dagin and Cal to his panel. Here, Tom clearly was the expert. "If this telemetry is valid, and Cal confirms that it is, then there's something going on out there that defies all known behavioral parameters for any physical object ever witnessed."

"Cut the drama, Tom," Cal urged. "What's the bottom line?"

"Whoa," Dagin breathed out. Suddenly he began to see what Tom was trying to tell them. But it couldn't be.

Cal, too, caught the significance. "Any Messier or NGC designation on that thing, Tom?"

"How could there be? It wasn't even there until three hours ago. Maybe I'll accept the Nobel, or even a Linder award," Tom joked, "unless you guys want some recognition, too."

Dagin didn't feel frivolous. "Tom, did you run a red-shift on that? Is there any new information?"

"Can you give us any estimate on the distance?" Cal asked.

"Sure, while you were at the meeting. It's incredible! It's off the scale. Way off. If my extrapolations are anywhere near accurate, that thing's over 20 billion light years away. And get this," Tom added, handing Dagin a slip of paper with some figures scribbled on it, "the relative luminosity defies, by multiples, any known values!"

Dagin and Cal scanned the figures. Sure enough, if all this were true, then Tom was on to something here, something unprecedented in the annals of previous scientific inquiry. But all three men were trained to be suspicious of any preliminary indications. They couldn't, of course, verify any of Tom's startling data without the extensive, exhaustive, rigorous scrutiny the scientific community would certainly demand.

"What the . . . ?" Tom began, glancing over at the huge RPP plasma screen. A sudden message, written in English, had appeared on it.

"Who's messing with us?" Cal asked, scowling and looking around the room.

"Let's read what it says," Dagin said, scanning the words, as Tom pressed a computer key for a printout.

"Picture a group of children playing on some monkey bars," Dagin read silently, "or in a cage. They can weave in and out, crawl up and down through the metal bars in delightful abandon. Now there is plenty of space between the bars for their bodies to pass through. A bird may even fly through such a structure, and certain invisible matter, such as gamma waves, may also pass through the same area of the cage the bird has flown through."

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Now shrink the cage, perhaps to one tenth its former dimension. The children can no longer squeeze through, although the bird may still be able to do so. Continuing, imagine the structure to be microscopic. As far as the children are concerned, the monkey cage no longer exists, for they cannot see it or play on it. But it is still there, and microscopic children could play on it or move through it, but they are in a world unknown to the human child. Extending this idea, shrink the structure completely out of physical existence. It may be gone as far as you can comprehend, but it still exists in what humans conceive of as another dimension, an alien system. It would take up no space in your reality, but is nevertheless now incipient in other dimensions.

Now think of the human children, the bird, and the cage in their normal size and picture a living creature of incredibly huge proportions. This being is so gigantic that the children and their tiny play structure would be to it like the smallest of atoms. In fact, the world these children inhabit is no more than a stray molecule, at best. Earth itself could pass through the body of this being with neither being even slightly aware of the intrusion.

If you were to raise such normal children in a planetarium, they would observe an artificial sunset, and at night they would see stars in the sky. If the children were never to venture outside the planetarium, they would accept all this as a reality, completely ignorant that a real Sun and real stars existed just outside the confines of the planetarium. In your own planetarium, the physical world, you are not unlike these unknowing children in my hypothetical situation.

Space is merely an idea, and if you were smaller than the smallest atom yet still in command of your present faculties and sensory devices, you could travel through a piece of

matter you call a 'boulder' and not even notice that it existed"--Lyrrh.

"A bogus message like this," Dagin said, disgustedly looking at the screen, "is one reason why I won't be mentioning any of this to Brades. Someone is yanking our chain."

Tom looked hurt. "Even if someone has hacked into our computers, this data from space is solid, Dagin. It's real. I'd stake my reputation on it. Besides, maybe this Lyrrh message is somehow related to the object we're recording."

"Seems more related to science-fiction," Cal said, gazing at the screen.

Tom's face turned red. "Look, Cal, I'm hardly so irresponsible as to believe any of this 100%. You should know me better. But we have to consider all possibilities here."

"All right, you two," Dagin interceded. "We'll get a printout of the 'alien' message and then review Tom's other data. I don't have the time or desire to play games with Brades, or 'Lyrrh,' or whomever. I'm going to lunch. Either of you guys want to come?"

"No thanks," Tom replied. "I'll stick around here."

"I'm going to meet Sheryll for Chinese," Cal said. "She's bringing Anson, too. We figure a three-year-old ought to learn how to handle chopsticks. Always good for a few laughs, anyway."

Dagin shook his head. He didn't miss not being a parent. He and Cathy had talked about it often enough, but there never seemed to be a good time to have a child. Just as well, he figured. He was much too busy these days to assume that chore.

"Tom, should I bring you anything?" Dagin asked.

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Tom, his eyes glued to his panel, waved his hand. "No thanks. I have fruit in my bag."

Cal joined Dagin in the walk to the elevators. For a few moments, they walked in silence, then Dagin spoke.

"So what do you think of Tom's 'discovery'?"

"Let's just say I'm not going to waste quality family time rushing off to find out who hacked in that message," Cal replied.

"Yeah," Dagin agreed. "So how's it going with Sheryll?"

"It's still strained, Dagin," Cal replied. "I can't figure it out, and neither can she. We love and respect one another, but something isn't right. We tried counseling. Didn't work."

"Anything I can do to help? I'm a pretty good listener."

"Not right now, thanks. We're still working on it."

Dagin felt relieved. He was uncomfortable with personal situations such as Cal's, but he thought he should offer. His own separation and divorce were still too fresh in his mind, and his love life since had been less than spectacular. Cathy had wanted him to be more ambitious, she said, and to attempt to move into the higher levels of administration at Space City. But he hadn't wanted that, not then, not now.

After parting from Cal, Dagin descended to the underground "solarworm" train that ran between the Institute and town. It was always good to escape the searing desert heat. In a matter of minutes he was in the cool shade of one of his favorite watering holes, gulping down a beer and ordering a meal.

He didn't like what was going on. These latest bizarre developments in the RPP lab and news about an elusive new team member seemed to summarize his life. He thought about his parents. His mother, a renowned geologist; his father, an international concert pianist. Now both of them

were prematurely dead, due to a freak accident. Soon after, Cathy left him and those damn headaches began. And his work situation could only be described as frustrating. Some days he wished he had chosen a different lifestyle. Maybe he should have gone into space salvage, as Brades once sardonically suggested. Less hassle, certainly more excitement, limited responsibilities.

But he had always been encouraged, if not instructed, to use his "brains," to apply his skills in "important" ways. So he went to the Space Academy, as had Tom and Cal and most of the other scientists at the Institute. Perhaps it was for the best, after all. But he wondered about the "what ifs."

When Dagin returned to the lab, he found Tom snoozing at his console, one arm dangling over his wheelchair. Dagin noticed that Tom had been writing a letter to his foster child who lived in what was left of Peru. Kids again. But Tom really was a kind man, Dagin reflected.

"Where do we go from here?" Cal asked as he entered the lab.

"Lunch didn't go well?"

"So-so. Anson can sense what's going on. The egg rolls were great, and we had the room with the best view."

Cal didn't seem to want to talk about it, so Dagin didn't push. They had enough to worry about.

Dagin gently tugged at Tom's shoulder, and said "Lunchtime's over."

Tom woke with a start and said, "Sorry. Guess I haven't been getting enough sleep." He gathered his letter-writing materials and stashed them in one of his drawers, next to his uneaten lunch.

"So where do we stand?" Dagin began. "I want all of our other projects put on hold. We need to figure out what you've come across, Tom. I want to know what this is."

"What about Brades?" Tom asked. "What if he finds out?"

Cal sighed. Tom was so damn timid, at times.

"He doesn't have to know," Dagin answered. "Besides, we can handle our regular workload while we check out this new data." He paused, taking a sip of his cold coffee. "Tom, fill us in with exact details. Cal, (who was fiddling with some wiring) pay attention."

"I noticed the event just before you left for the meeting. Cal was down in Stellar. That was at 0850 this morning. The data came in and I put it on the screen, boosted, augmented, enhanced. Then that message came . . ."

"Forget the hacker's message," Dagin interrupted. "Let's stick to the observed data from deep space."

"Did you immediately run the shift on it?" Cal asked Tom.

Tom looked impatient. "Yes. To repeat, whatever it is, it's out there farther than anything ever known. I showed you the luminosity figures, and if correct, which I swear they are, then the object's putting out 1000 times more light than the brightest quasar yet discovered."

"Speculation, folks. Is it a quasar?" Dagin asked.

"I think so," Tom said. "If not, I don't have any idea what else it could be. But how it could have escaped detection . . ."

Cal cleared his throat. "I don't see how it could have appeared out of nowhere, and why at this time? Did you log it in? If this really is anything of significance, then you'll need to be on official record as the discoverer."

Tom nodded. "It's in the computer. I hope Brades doesn't review the records soon. In the past, he hasn't done so,

except at the end of every month, and that's three weeks away."

"It's probably been there all along," Dagin said. "As with most discoveries, we simply hadn't found it until a certain time had elapsed. That's no secret, just basic science. Vanguard reported it--right, Tom?"

Tom regarded Vanguard as his own, much as a parent would a child. Since their entire team and support personnel came on board together a little over five years ago specifically for this project, Tom had held Vanguard in near-reverence.

"Yes. Naturally, we would predict that, since it's the most powerful of the scopes. I don't know if it means anything; it's probably coincidental, but the object is directly in Vanguard's projected flight path. In 20 billion years they can shake hands, if Vanguard is anything more than space dust by then."

"I'd like to determine its relative mass," Dagin said. "The apparent magnitude and luminosity might be deceptive, and red shifts are hardly irrefutable or conclusive in a case like this. If it's really out there over five billion light years farther than the known universe, then it must be like a . . . well, I don't know. There's nothing out there to compare it to. We can't get a fix on it because of the lack of neighboring, known objects that we could use for any type of analysis. If we can get an exact line on its location, we can try to extrapolate some sort of data based on the nearest known phenomena, but I'm not holding my breath. I'm in over my head on this one."

"We all are," Cal agreed.

"So what's next?" asked Tom.

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"I'm going to re-orient the other scopes to see if we can get some data that way. Perhaps we can triangulate, or determine if the event is emitting energy in all directions rather than just unidirectionally to Vanguard. Since this situation defies the parameters of our science, I'm willing to assume whatever risks necessary to shed a little light on what this is."

"Brades will have our balls for that," Cal said. "You know damn well you can't fiddle with the hardware without some kind of authorization from the Council and other administrators. But I'm in. What does it really matter, anyway?"

Tom looked uneasy. He didn't like going against authority, and he loved his job. They could all be compromised, even destroyed professionally if Brades found out, and already the RPP team was bucking protocol by not immediately reporting this information.

"I don't know," Tom feebly replied. "I don't mind holding off any official announcement, but repositioning the scopes seems irresponsible. Why jeopardize our positions? Is it necessary to be so secretive, or is this personal, Dagin?"

Dagin glared at Tom for just an instant before responding. "It's not about my dislike of Brades, if that's what you mean. I'll take full responsibility and testify as to any reservations or objections you have noted," Dagin sharply replied. "I just want some answers, Tom, and Brades will only tie us up in red tape if we report this."

"Or take the credit himself," Cal said.

"Yeah, I guess," Tom said, reluctantly.

Three hours later, as the team was deep in its work, each member concentrating on his specific tasks, Dagin decided to call a break. They all knew the possible significance of

what they were pursuing, and the censure they might face if they were proven irresponsible in their actions. It created pressure, and Dagin was wise enough a leader to recognize the need for an occasional interruption.

"Do you have to smoke that rank thing?" Cal protested as Tom lit up his cigar in the RPP lounge. Tom merely smiled and flipped on the smokesucker unit that altered smoke particles into negative ions.

"We're looking pretty good at this point," Dagin said. "I have the other 11 scopes in line, so now we have only to wait."

"There are still some figures I want to go over," Tom added, "but everything looks to be in order."

The group fell silent. Five years now they had been working together. Five years of intense, demanding, careful work. It was almost like a marriage, and like Cal's own marriage, things didn't always work so well.

"What about this new member?" Cal said. "As big a deal as they're making of it, it seems like they're bringing Bill McFallon himself on board, not that it wouldn't be interesting to work with him."

"No, it can't be McFallon," Tom answered. "We're too small a unit for that."

"That reminds me," Dagin said. "You know Soren, the janitor kid? He seems to know something about it, but he won't tell me anything because he's afraid of Brades. Apparently, he overheard some conversation. Some security they have here."

Tom brightened. "Oh, yeah. Soren's a good kid. He's the one who was supposed to be a genius of some sort. Studied with those two, what did they call themselves, 'Intuitive

Psychologists,' Cozicki and his wife Eleanor, didn't he? Until his mind snapped."

"Yeah. Brades keeps him around now since they disappeared on that mission a couple of years ago," Dagin replied. "Rumor has it Brades owed them some kind of favor."

Suddenly, the door to the lounge flew open and in stormed Dr. Von Brades. He immediately sat at the head of their table and announced in a barely controlled tone: "Gentlemen, we have some business to discuss."

"I get the feeling that you aren't happy here," Brades continued. "You must not be, to risk your positions in this manner."

Dagin resented this kind of hostile, uninvited intrusion. "What's the problem, Brades?"

"Did you honestly think you could neglect informing me about turning the telescopes? And why haven't I heard about the event you discovered this morning?"

Tom turned pale, and Cal looked away.

Dagin glared at Brades then said in a flat voice, "How did you know that?"

Brades chuckled. "I'll be frank with you. You've been under constant surveillance from your first day here. But don't be shocked; everyone has, myself included."

"You patched in our instrument readouts and verified with a remote tracking station," Cal guessed. "Australians?"

"Chinese," Brades snapped. "You're in trouble, boys, and I'm sure you'll see your errors by Monday. Until then, you're all taking a vacation, and that's an order." He stood abruptly, and left.

Chapter 3

The last few days of "vacation" time had not been productive for Dagin Chambers. He rolled over in his bed to check the time. He still had two hours before he needed to be at work. And today they were to meet this godsend new colleague who would lead them to dizzying heights of scientific inquiry and discovery.

Not that Dagin felt bitter or envious. Well, maybe he did, just a little. No, it was more the way he was treated by those in supposed authority over him. He never elected to use the word "superiors" to describe them, for that would be too ironic.

Dagin, along with Tom and Cal, had attended a solarball game on Saturday and had lost more than he wanted to betting on his team. Afterward, they had gone to a local pub to discuss their situation, and each found that the others had also received an official notice, signed by both Shavinsky and Brades, to the effect that no further punitive measures would be implemented against them other than a formal reprimand to be entered in their permanent personnel files. They could have been relieved of duty, if the administrators had chosen, so Dagin figured that his team was either too valuable to dismiss, at least at this time, or that they were needed for something as yet undefined. He didn't trust the current system, but was curious enough and stubborn enough to ride it out, to beat them at their own game, whatever it was.

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Also, neither Dagin, Tom, nor Cal could figure out who this new member might be, precisely why he was needed, and why Brades was being so secretive. It would be strange to welcome a new man to their team, after all these years of just the three of them, especially under the recent, strained circumstances and with the turmoil created by this latest discovery.

"Good morning, Dr. Chambers," a spritely voice said as Dagin left his modest duplex. "Looks like a hot one for today."

"Hello Weasel." Dagin thought that was really an unfortunate and unattractive nickname for such an ingratiating fellow, but that's what the gentle gardener and handyman preferred to be called by "all my friends." But Weasel was right; it did seem as though it would be hot today. The axis shift hadn't changed the weather patterns nearly as much in the American Southwest as it had in many other areas of the world, but that was all right for Dagin, since he loved the desert and everything about it, including the heat.

Dagin didn't stop to talk, but walked quickly to his tiny, personal hovercraft. He could have taken a larger vehicle from the motor pool, but he generally disdained the "perks" that by his station and profession were summarily accorded him. As he entered the cockpit, he glanced northwest, toward the Vultures.

Those mountains claimed the lives of his parents, and Dagin still punished himself for that. If only he had double-checked their magnapod's ancillary drive as he always did, they would still be alive. Instead, a simple picnic and collecting trip had ended in disaster. "It wasn't your fault. There was nothing you could have done." He'd heard that a

hundred times, and he still didn't believe it, nor did he find solace in the well-meaning words of his friends.

The trip to Space City was uneventful, but Dagin was cheered somewhat by the scenery. He felt at home here, and he was glad that this area of the United States, unlike the Eastern and Western seaboard, was relatively unaffected, at least topographically, by the axis shift and the lingering effects of the brief nuclear skirmishes.

Since the change from fossil fuels to solar and fuel cells, supplemented by the still-imperfect fusion generators, the world had cleaner air to breathe once again, even though there were many hundreds of millions fewer to breathe it. Dagin thought of all the wasted technology that his grandparents had tolerated, even encouraged, and how he almost-perversely kept returning to the museum to view the primitive internal combustion vehicles they used in those days before magnetic propulsion and solar energy became commonplace. If the world hadn't suffered all the misfortune it endured after the first quarter of the century, there's no telling how much further along science could have been by now.

Dagin eased his hovercraft into his assigned area and jumped out. There was no need to secure it, since the Mind Police had few suspects to chase these days. Would-be criminals, if indeed anyone chose to pursue that occupation, were so intimidated by the certain punishment of their brains being "adjusted" that no one was foolish enough to even consider breaking any major laws.

"About time you got here," Tom greeted his team leader, even though Dagin was a good half hour ahead of his usual arrival time. Dagin figured, correctly, that Tom was as concerned as he about what the day was bound to present

them, not that either would admit it. Both preferred to ease into such situations, to emotionally prepare for these kinds of personal confrontations.

"I want to finish off a couple of things before our new whiz kid gets here," Dagin said.

"Just don't ask me to dust the place," Tom joked.

"What time did Brades say he'd bring the new guy around?"

"I think he said nine o'clock," Tom replied. "That gives us an hour and a half. But I think we're just a whistlestop this morning. They usually give new personnel the grand tour of the complex before they ask them to report officially to duty. Say, I don't see any red carpet. Where you going to put him?"

"In the old records room. They cleaned it out over the weekend, and it has all the functional hookups."

"That's right. I'd forgotten about it, since I never go in there anymore. It even has a window, not that he'll have much time to stare out of it."

"I couldn't care less about that," Dagin said tersely. "Just so the work gets done and gets done right. He can stand on his head buck naked while eating lunch, if that's what it takes."

Tom whistled. "I can see you're in a warm and gracious mood. What if the guy's all right? Why not give him at least a fighting chance before you banish him to the pits of hell?"

"Yeah, you're right." Dagin picked up a donut and took a small bite. "But I don't like the way they went about this. I guess politicians always do it that way, don't they?"

Just then the two were interrupted by loud, rasping coughing coming from down the hall. Cal entered, wiping his eyes.

"Got to quit smoking, Cal," Tom said, smiling. "Either that, or at least change brands."

"It's my damn allergies. Even here in the desert I can't seem to shake them. Must be the creosote. It's worse in the early morning. Clears up by noon, anyway."

Tom wasn't so sure. He made a mental note to give Cal a quick medical checkup in the near future, just to be safe.

Cal poured himself a cup of coffee. "When's our surprise package due in? I'd hate to be in the bathroom for that event."

"In about an hour" Dagin answered. "In the meantime, let's see if we received any more data from Tom's event since our 'vacation.' Tom, check the printouts, and Cal, can you run over to Stellar to see if they have anything on it? I'll bet they're pretty excited about this. But you ought to know since you spend so much time down there," Dagin chided.

Cal was a crackerjack stellar astronomer as well as a computer systems expert. How he was ever assigned to the RPP lab instead of to the team in Stellar was beyond Dagin's reasoning, but he was quite thankful that Cal was a part of this team.

"Yeah, okay," Cal said. "Maybe they did get something more. I have to agree with Tom that it's some sort of quasar. Either that, or we have a weird nova or supernova out there."

"Or maybe it's gone," Dagin pondered aloud. "We haven't heard a thing from anyone, anywhere about it these last few days, though of course that may be by design."

"Do I hear you saying you don't trust Brades?" Tom asked.

"Does it show?" Dagin didn't bother to hide his sarcasm.

Cal chuckled. "I'll try to get back before our guest arrives. Anything else you need?"

Dagin shook his head. "Not unless you can find some nubile wench to bring me Brades' head on a platter."

Tom didn't like to hear that kind of talk, and lately he had become concerned about Dagin's mental and emotional health, at least to a small degree. Okay, he thought, a physical for Cal, then some counseling or referral for Dagin. But that would have to wait. More important research at hand.

Tom wheeled himself over to his panel and was instantly engrossed in his work. Dagin, heading for his office, paused to look at his friend and colleague. Good old Tom. Honest and reliable as the day is long. Too bad he couldn't loosen up a bit and get out for some wild and reckless times every now and again. But then he wouldn't be the Tom that Dagin knew, so Dagin quickly passed off his musing and checked the clock on the lab wall. He had just under an hour before their visitors were to arrive.

Suddenly, Matt Carpenter, office manager for RPP, burst in on Tom and Dagin. He looked exasperated.

"Brades is here," he announced. "With Shavinsky and your new team member. I stalled them for a moment, but they're going to be here in a matter of seconds."

Dagin heard Shavinsky's laugh and the more serious tone of Von Brades, explaining technical details about the RPP as the trio made its way into the RPP lab area.

"Damn it all," Dagin muttered to Tom. "That bastard's come an hour early. He did that on purpose, bless him to hell."

Tom rolled his eyes. "Cut the paranoia, chief. At least until we find out what all this is about."

Dagin relented. He moved toward the door to greet them.

"Ah, here's Dr. Chambers now," Brades gushed. "And Dr. Williams, too. Gentlemen, allow me to introduce your new colleague and co-leader, Dr. Jade Pleasant."

Jade Pleasant! Dagin felt as though a neurolaser had hit him full stun. Okay, he had probably been a bit sexist in assuming his new co-leader would be a man, but then male scientists still did outnumber female scientists these days. But of the top female scientists possible, why her? A dozen thoughts raced though his mind, and he was only vaguely aware of his response.

"Dr. Pleasant." Dagin wasn't smiling as he spoke and nodded curtly to her in acknowledgement. She didn't extend her hand, and was equally as taciturn as she nodded back at him.

Tom smiled up from his wheelchair. "Welcome aboard, Dr. Pleasant. We hope you'll enjoy working with us at Space City."

Brades frowned at Tom, as though he wished Tom hadn't referred to the Institute by a nickname she might not recognize.

"Thank you, Dr. Williams. We have much to do, I am told." Her voice was feminine, but somehow cold and distant.

"Don't you have another person working here?" Nita Shavinsky asked, casting a look around the lab.

"Yes," Brades answered for Dagin. "Dr. Calvin Peters. Is he available, Dr. Chambers, or was he not informed?"

"We didn't expect you for another hour," Dagin said, dryly.

"Well, you can meet him later this afternoon, or tomorrow," Shavinsky said. "Meanwhile, Dr. Brades, we must take Dr. Pleasant on the rest of the tour. Then we have all that darned paperwork to fill out back in my suite." She smiled, almost too automatically, Dagin thought, as she added "It was nice to meet you once again. We expect some big things from you, now!"

Dagin could see Brades curl his lips at Shavinsky, behind her back. Brades wanted her job, and Dagin figured he'd have it before too long. It annoyed Dagin that they were actually competent people, as both scientists and administrators.

For just an instant, it seemed to Dagin, Pleasant caught his glance as the group left the room. Her green eyes were as stunning as the rest of her, but they too were distant, as though she were somewhere far away, with little use for any of these niceties. Somehow, Dagin liked that.

"Matt, get me the file on Dr. Pleasant, right now," Dagin snapped into the interoffice videophone. "And I want a paper printout, not an electronic display."

"Don't know if I can, chief," Matt replied. "For one thing, we may not have it yet, and for another, it's confidential, as you know. That's an 'eyes-only' document, even at your level."

Dagin was in no mood for such an answer. "You've got five minutes, Mr. Carpenter. Do what you have to, but get it."

"I'll do what I can. Maybe call in a favor from one of the guys in records."

Dagin turned to face Tom, who was pushing himself back and forth in his chair, obviously amused at the whole situation.

"What's so funny? Don't tell me you like all this?"

"Oh, it doesn't really matter so much to me," Tom said. "But you should have seen your face when you first saw her. Excuse my French, but you looked as though you'd shit a brick!"

Dagin scowled. "Do you know the book on her, Tom? Do you realize what a bitch we've just inherited? There's not one respectable scientific community on the planet that would welcome her under any conditions. She's bad news, across the board."

"Dagin, almost all of that is pure hearsay, and you're good enough a scientist to know that and not to condemn her on such circumstantial evidence. From what I understand, from what is actually on the record, she's the top exobiologist in the world."

"Maybe so, but that doesn't excuse her professional conduct."

At that point Matt Carpenter entered with a thick brown file in his hands. Without a word, he handed it to Dagin and left.

"That was fast," Tom said. "Thanks, Matt" he yelled after him.

Dagin didn't say anything to Matt, for he was scanning the information as rapidly as his fingers could turn the pages.

"Well, fill me in" Tom said. "Just give me the high spots."

Dagin preferred that Tom read it himself, but he began talking in a clipped, hurried fashion.

"Born, Mars Colony, 2016. (Dagin noted that she was three years his junior). Parents, now deceased, were farmers, returned to Earth when she was 10. Became U.S. citizen after completion of preliminary studies. Selected for Space Academy. Received Collingsworth Humanitarian

Award, Linder award, and many others. Thesis was groundbreaking and visionary, and upon publication became seminal work in her field."

"Stop, you're killing me," Tom protested.

"Graduated 2039 with highest distinction ever awarded at Academy. Attracted attention of Dr. William McFallon."

"Didn't she end up marrying him?" Tom interrupted. "I wasn't kidding when I told Cal it couldn't be McFallon. Looks like we got the next best thing."

"Married McFallon a year after leaving the Academy," Dagin continued. "Joined McFallon's team. Daughter Kesta born following year. Separated in 2044, McFallon retaining custody of daughter. Founded independent research team staffed by unorthodox scholars and scientists. Currently operating from unspecified location, but believed to be in remote area of Indian subcontinent. No research published in the last four years. Minimal contact with established scientific community. Believed to be working in former SETI field, no confirmation. That's the gist of it," Dagin concluded.

"Quite a dossier," Tom said.

"Yeah," Dagin said, musing.

"So why are you so willing to believe the worst of her?"

"I've known and trusted my sources for many years, and they believe she's trouble. They think she's belligerent, uncompromising, excessively demanding."

"And you, of course, believe them? That sounds fair."

"Yes, I do believe them, not that I have to answer to you about it. I've followed her career path to some degree, including the rather suspicious circumstances of her custody fight. Sure, I'll give her a chance, but I do so with definite reservations."

The two fell silent for a few moments, each lost in thought.

"Well," Tom added, "she's certainly a fetching woman, if little else. Or do you have a problem with that, too?" Tom grinned, knowing Dagin's weaknesses all too well.

Dagin was not to be humored. "That's of little consequence. I have enough to be concerned about without having to monitor the hormones of every male in this section. Besides, as far as I know she has no use for men and their affections, if anyone were masochistic enough to approach her in the first place. But even if she did, I say she's off limits in anything but the most professional way, and that's a rumor I would encourage you to spread," he said tersely.

"Sounds like a cheap romantic fiction" Tom said, smiling. "Next thing you know I'll be throwing rice at your wedding. You're so pitifully predicatable."

"Bullcrap, and that's enough time spent on discussing our esteemed new colleague," Dagin shot back. "Now get me some results on your latest discovery. Surely something has happened over these last few days that we can work with. I want some answers about what that thing is out there, or even if it's out there at all."

Tom could see Dagin really was at the breaking point, so he backed off just as Cal entered and asked, "What's up, compadres?"

Chapter 4

Dagin looked blankly at Cal. "Oh, right, guess you haven't heard the latest. Get some coffee and sit down; you'll love it."

Cal looked puzzled. "You mean you have more information on the object? Matt told me you were on the warpath, but didn't say why."

For a moment, Dagin considered Cal's words. He was, and had been, "on the warpath" for several months now. That wasn't like him. It was effecting his leadership, all this stress. His parents, his divorce, those numbing, debilitating headaches, and now this new female icon that he had to contend with. Perhaps he needed a short vacation. Time to get it all in perspective. Later.

Cal cleared his throat, poured some hot coffee into the mug his son had made for him, put his cowboy-booted feet up on Dagin's desk and waited expectantly for what Dagin had to say. "Our new team member just came to visit with Brades, and---"

"What? You mean they've been here already? I understood it wouldn't be for at least another hour," Cal angrily interrupted.

"Shavinsky was here, too. Care to guess the identity of your new co-leader, or should we just wait until this afternoon?"

"Can't be that bad," Cal responded. "Who is it?"

Dagin paused briefly, for effect. "Jade Pleasant."

"Jade Pleasant!?" exclaimed Cal. "Say it ain't so! Here's another fine mess we've gotten ourselves into. What in the world is she doing here? I thought she was buried in the Far East, or something."

Dagin looked at Tom as if to say, "See, told you so."

"That lady can make more trouble than a mama skunk after a raw-boned coon dog on a full moon August night. Is the brass out of its collective mind, bringing her here?" Cal asked.

Tom shook his head. "You guys sure are open-minded. Am I the only one who doesn't know anything about this nefarious young lady? Could it be that she hasn't had a fair shake?"

"She's had them," Cal snorted. "At least from what I've read and heard. She's damn good at what she does, I'll give her that."

"All right," Dagin interceded. "We'll see what this is all about soon enough." He was trying to calm down and to be objective. "Let's give her the benefit of the doubt, at least until we can be more definite about what the game is. I don't buy this explanation that she's really needed here. They're setting us up for something, but I can't figure what. Pleasant must have some kind of key role, so we'll just see what it is."

"Was she sent here to spy on us?" Cal asked.

"You think we're that dangerous?" Dagin grinned at Cal.

"Maybe Brades does. Anyway, he didn't get rid of us, so we must be needed for something. Maybe Dr. Jade is supposed to be our kick in the butt catalyst to lead us to some kind of magnificent discovery."

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"Nothing we can resolve now," said Dagin. "So let's get back to work, gentlemen. What did you find out over in Stellar, Cal?"

"All they could, or would, tell me was that they too had confirmed the presence of the object, but didn't have any other data. They said they heard it would be up to our team to collect raw data first. I think they're playing it straight."

"Maybe Brades wants us to put our normal operations on temporary hold while we investigate this phenomenon," Dagin said. "So let's oblige him. Do you have anything else, Tom? Or is it all too soon?" Dagin realized they had barely returned to work since their forced hiatus. "Are the scopes still in order?"

"Looks like Brades has re-oriented the other eleven scopes back to their original positions. Must have done it over the weekend," Tom replied.

"Any of the technicians could have done that, but he would have had to put in the order," Dagin said. He felt angry, but tried to remain calm. "Of course he didn't inform me of that decision, but let's pass that off for now. He expects me to react."

"Yeah, remember, Big Brother is watching," Tom said sardonically.

How could Dagin have forgotten that Brades told him they were being monitored? For all he knew, the room might be bugged and Brades, Pleasant, and Shavinsky might be listening to them right now. Dagin furiously scribbled something down on a piece of paper and passed it to Cal.

The note said, "Can you hot-wire the signals from the other eleven scopes and direct additional energy to Vanguard without Brades' knowledge?"

Cal read it and nodded in the affirmative. He knew that Brades' board could pick up the discrepancy, and Brades would notice if he paid close attention to it. Cal also knew that the RPP team could always say it was some kind of undetermined interference, such as a solar flare. But they all knew quite well that Brades didn't miss much.

Cal said, "I'd better get back to work."

"Yeah, go ahead and do what you can, then," Dagin said agreeably. "We need to get all the data we can. Tom, maybe we should consult Brades to see if we can get more juice to channel into Vanguard. We can't speed her up, but we might be able to make her muscles bigger and her eyes sharper. Sound all right to you, Tom?" As he spoke, he scribbled out another note to Tom indicating that they needed to check for bugs.

Tom tried to suppress a smile, but Dagin had already caught it. Tom didn't answer, but he didn't need to. Vanguard was Tom's "baby." Giving her more nourishment and attention, whether it was by the book or not, could only please Tom no end.

Dagin ran his fingers through his dark hair, stretched, and walked slowly around the lab, checking readouts and poking at a few of the instruments, ostensibly "calibrating," but he was also checking for hidden mikes. In fact, he was bored. They would have to find a safe way to communicate information they didn't want to get back to Brades. Probably not in the office, he reflected. But until Tom could get fresh data, there wasn't really much for him to do.

He finished moving through the office, and finding no concealed bugs, briefly poked his head into Jade Pleasant's office to make sure it was in order for occupancy. It looked all right, and he didn't care that it was a little bigger than his.

KIRALAINÉ

There were already several large boxes in there with her name on them. He wondered how she would decorate it. He hated pink.

"I'm going out for some 'R-time,'" Dagin announced, but Tom was buried in his work, and Cal only waved his hand briefly.

They were allowed, even encouraged, to take all the recreational time they desired during their normal working hours, for it was recognized that most Mikelson personnel were under considerable stress, not so much by mandate, but rather by personal design. They were all achievers, often volatile, subject to creative outbursts and childish tantrums. But they were on the leading edge of current human knowledge, so unusual behavior was tolerated, if not expected.

After clearing security, Dagin immediately left the hard pavement surrounding the complex and felt his feet sink into the warm desert sand. He removed his boots, placing them on a prominent rock, and surveyed the immediate area. The blue sky, the clean air, the beauty of the rocks and plants and even the lizards doing their "pushups" energized and refreshed him. As he walked into the nearby saguaro forest, he was soothed by the warmth of the morning sun, and he tried to focus only on the moment.

"Good morning, Dr. Chambers," came a voice from behind him.

Startled, Dagin turned instantly to face the intruder.

"Hello, Soren. What are you doing out here?"

"They said it was okay if I come out here, sometimes. I really like it here, don't you? I like to draw my pictures. I like the flowers." Soren held up a sketch pad for Dagin to see.

Dagin nodded, but didn't ask to see any of Soren's sketches. Dagin often spoke of how the desert underwhelmed rather than overwhelmed him, despite the presence of the mountains. He truly appreciated the tiny worlds all around him, the daily eco-dramas that most people simply ignored.

But he was uncomfortable with Soren's presence. He was a good kid, as far as Dagin knew, but Soren made him feel, well, he didn't actually know how he made him feel. But it was odd, in some way, as though Soren knew something about him. And Soren's sketches bothered him. Whenever he happened to see one of them, he wondered if Soren were "damaged" at all. They were too good. Or perhaps, Dagin speculated, he was merely repulsed by challenged people who showed some small degree of talent, although he hoped he wasn't. Soren was tested at well above the genius level before whatever it was happened to his mind.

Dagin remained quiet, half expecting and fully hoping that Soren would move on, get back to his drawings or to work . . . to leave him alone.

"Dr. Chambers, what's the matter with me?"

"What do you mean?" Dagin didn't want to play therapist. He had enough problems of his own. Why did the kid feel so close to him that he could ask such a question?

"I didn't use to be dumb. I know I was smarter. But I don't know what happened. Why won't anyone tell me?"

Dagin didn't know, either. Besides, he didn't really care.

"I don't know, Soren. Didn't the doctors tell you?"

"I guess. I don't understand what they said. I don't remember very much. I remember my teachers, Dr. Ashley and Dr. Kopeckly. They were nice, but they went away. I don't know where they are now."

"Dr. Cozicki," Dagin corrected him. "They went on a space trip, Soren, and no one knows where they are."

Soren crinkled his nose. "I remember they told me about that. I wish the noises would go away."

Dagin snapped to attention. "Noises? What noises, Soren?"

"It hurts. It hurts in my ears. Like bees in my head." Soren reached over and flicked some morning dew off a prickly pear flower. It appeared he had nothing more to say.

"What else do you hear?" Dagin asked. "What do the noises sound like? When does all this happen? Have you told anyone else about them?"

Soren seemed not to hear. He sensed that Dagin wanted to know too much about the noises. He figured he'd better not say anything else. He didn't want to get into trouble.

Dagin persisted. "Soren, can't you tell me anything more about it?"

"I have to get back to work, Dr. Chambers," Soren said simply. "See you later."

Dagin watched as the young man disappeared over a ridge, then turned and slowly continued his desert walk. Could there be any connection between Soren's "noises" and his own piercing headaches? Was there something in the building itself, some chemical or airborne agent that triggered reactions in those with more sensitive immune systems? Or was this all simply coincidental--the psychopathology of a damaged kid's mind and the overstressed reactions of a hyperachieving scientist? Dagin didn't know, and that irritated him.

His heart was no longer in the desert or in his solitary walk; the meeting with Soren had thrown him off track. He returned to where he had left his boots, put them back on,

and made his way back to the Institute, determined to get on with business. He hoped that Tom and Cal had, by now, some further information. He thought briefly of trying a game of handball in the recreation area when he noticed Brades and Jade Pleasant walking toward the cafeteria, directly in his path, so he hesitated, hoping they didn't see him. But they were engrossed in their conversation, and she was talking with Brades, almost too amicably, Dagin thought. She wasn't supposed to be that friendly. Maybe his information was wrong, maybe she was playing politics. Too many maybes.

"Have a good walk, Dr. Chambers?" the security guard asked him as Dagin approached the entrance.

Dagin wasn't the type to make small talk, particularly with people he didn't know well. Feelings always seemed to get in the way of what he needed and wanted to do, although he did recognize their importance to his overall well-being.

"Yeah, a nice day."

The guard handed him a slim manila envelope. "Soren asked me to give you this when you came back. Probably one of his drawings, huh? Strange kid."

Dagin nodded in agreement, took the envelope, and headed back to the lab as he tore it open. He pulled out a pencil sketch of a saguaro with partially damaged, twisted limbs. "Not bad," he said aloud, to himself. He turned the paper over to see if there were a sketch on the other side. Instead, he found a single sentence from a computer printout with the typed message: "*The very room you occupy now was initially no more than a thought. There are no beginnings, no endings, no places to go or to be*"--Lyrrh.

Dagin took a long, hot shower, dressed, and headed back to the lab. He hadn't done much work this morning, and was ready to get at it, but when he entered the lab he saw he was alone, which puzzled him for a moment.

Cal had scribbled a note, "Out to lunch. Tom's gone to the club, and I'm going home. Back around two. We think we have something." Cal also had written the time, 12 noon.

That's right. Tom usually went to his "Prehistory" club every other Monday, and that took a couple of hours. But it wasn't usual for Cal to go home. Maybe he wanted to talk some more with Sheryll about their domestic situation.

Dagin was naturally curious about what his friends may have uncovered regarding the object, and he was eager to show them the note from Soren, or "Lyrrh."

On an impulse, Dagin decided to go to the front office to talk to Matt Carpenter about what had happened while the team had been gone.

"Matt, can I buy you lunch?" he asked.

Dagin wasn't hungry, but he knew he should eat. Besides, he owed the man an apology for his earlier anger. When Matt didn't respond, Dagin added, "I want to apologize for my previous behavior. I'm not usually so rude and demanding. A lot of stuff has been coming down, but I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

"I accept. It didn't seem like you," Matt replied, "but you're right. Something is happening here, and I'm not sure I like it."

Since Matt's arrival two years ago, Dagin had been impressed with Matt's candor and native ability to summarize a situation clearly and accurately. Why Matt had never finished his doctorate and entered the professional ranks was something of a mystery to Dagin. Sometimes it

seemed to Dagin that an excellent mind was going to waste, but then he also knew that one need not be a multi-degreed scientist to make worthwhile contributions. Besides, Matt was well-paid, his job was challenging though not all that stressful, and he seemed to be happy enough.

Dagin laughed. "You're like the company clerk in those old war movies. You probably know more about what's going on around here than all the brass combined."

Matt shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe. I have somewhat of a facility for keeping up on things. It'll be interesting to see what Jade Pleasant is here for, but it does seem as though there's something in the offing." And before Dagin could ask, Matt added, "I haven't figured it all out yet, chief, but I'll keep you posted."

At lunch, Dagin asked Matt what he knew, if anything, about these computer-generated messages, such as the one on the back of Soren's drawing.

"Not much. Just rumors." Matt replied.

"Rumors?"

"I've heard they're keeping a file somewhere of those kind of messages. Guess the kid accidentally got a piece of it while he was cleaning."

Dagin started to ask more, but noticed that Jade Pleasant was approaching their table. She was alone, her face expressionless. Despite his intentions to ignore her, Dagin stood up.

"Dr. Chambers," she began, not acknowledging Matt, "I need to meet with you in my office. Is two o'clock convenient?"

"Very well," Dagin replied crisply.

She turned abruptly and left without further conversation.

"Miss Personality," Matt said. "What fun she'll be."

"Yeah." Dagin remained standing for a moment, watching her. There was no denying her physical beauty--the way she moved, the pert flick of her auburn hair, the light, lingering scent of perfume. But he caught himself right away. He didn't need that, and he'd been with enough women to know she had too many issues and hidden agendas. Also, he still loved Cathy, though he didn't want to admit it. Besides, hadn't he declared Jade Pleasant off limits to the men?

"I have a few papers for you to check over and sign before you go, if you don't mind," Matt interrupted Dagin's thoughts.

"Huh? Oh, sure. Didn't she have to sign some papers, too? I thought she'd be hung up with that for the rest of the day."

"She finished earlier than expected. Brades called to tell me that we should have everything ready to receive her by mid-afternoon. She's probably ready for her shakedown with you, not that I envy not being a part of that."

Dagin breathed deeply. "Yeah, lucky me. We'll see if she wants to play hardball or not. Anything else I need on her?"

"Not that I know. I gave you all I could get, and as you must have seen, her records have some gaps. Incidentally, I need her file back before she gets in. They'd crucify me if they found out I gave you that information, not that it's all that revelatory."

"Thanks, Matt. Guess it's time to go, then, and get things done," Dagin said.

At two o'clock sharp, Dagin found himself outside Jade Pleasant's office. He hadn't noticed her come in, but he figured she must be inside. Her door was ajar, and though he

thought he knocked lightly, the door swung fully open. She was not there.

"Please go in," came her voice from behind him. Her cheeks looked as though she had just pinched them for color, and there were two fresh-looking ringlets of hair curling down around her ears. She wore no makeup, no rings, no jewelry at all, in fact.

She gestured for Dagin to take a seat, and he did so as soon as she was seated.

"Dr. Chambers, I'm sure you find this situation as awkward as I. I am here under strenuous protest. However, I have been persuaded that my presence is needed. I trust you will, too."

Her eyes scrutinized him, unblinking, trying to read him as she awaited his response. Dagin could see that she wanted directness. Very well, then hardball it was. He shifted into his most professional, detached mode.

"Dr. Pleasant, speaking, I believe, for the others, we were not adequately informed regarding the reasons for your presence. I want to assure you, however, that we know of your reputation, and we are impressed by it, even if we are not overly gracious in our acceptance of you into the team."

"Is that all?"

"Let me be frank," Dagin continued. "Some of what we have heard about you is rather questionable. We are a team, we work quite well together, and I will tolerate no dissension. Personally, I want some explanation as to why you are here, and for how long."

"Let me be equally frank. I don't give a damn about your perceptions regarding me or your susceptibility to idle rumors. Further, I don't appreciate your adolescent male

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ego posturing. It is my understanding that I am to be regarded as a co-leader of this project and thus share authority with you, much, I am sure, to our mutual dissatisfaction. Beyond that, there's little that I think you need to know at this time."

"Is that all?" Dagin asked sardonically, mocking her earlier dismissive tone.

"No. I am more concerned with dissension emanating from you and your crew, not from myself. As to explanations as to my presence here, I'm sure your people, and this Brades person, have sufficiently outlined to you the nature of my potential contributions to the situation you face. Also, as we progress on the project, I think you will find that you need my expertise considerably more than I need yours, but I find it more expedient to cooperate with this effort for as minimal a time as possible rather than to be harassed in overt and covert ways by a pack of self-aggrandizing politicians."

"Then we do understand one another," Dagin said. In truth, he didn't know quite else how to respond. She was indeed formidable. He found her simultaneously intriguing and offensive.

"I hope we do." She stood, as did Dagin. "And one further consideration, Dr. Chambers. I'm an attractive woman. However, I will neither encourage nor tolerate any advances of any sort from any male in this section or in this Institute. I want that clearly understood."

Dagin purposefully let a disdainful smile play upon his lips. Then he replied tersely, "I don't think you'll have to worry about that, Dr. Pleasant. Was there anything else?"

She was completely unruffled by his demeanor. "Please review this file with your team," she said, with equal terseness.

"What's this?"

"Communications of unknown origin from someone calling itself 'Lyrrh'. I believe you received one before you were asked to temporarily vacate your offices."

"You think these are extraterrestrial, then?" Dagin asked.

"Brades does. I haven't determined that yet. But I think it expedient to call a staff meeting tomorrow morning at 0700. I'll need a complete report at that time both on this file and on anything else you can tell me."

Dagin took the file, nodded and left. He was not pleased by this kind of treatment, but there really was nothing more to say. Besides, he wanted to read whatever she'd given him before he went over it with the others.

Chapter 5

Dagin returned to his office, closed the door, and opened the file Jade Pleasant had given him. It was several pages of computer printout, and he noted the name Lyrrh at the end. This must have been the file that Matt Carpenter was talking about. The first pages were the same printouts that they had received the weekend before, but these others were new.

He began reading:

"Earth and human religious cultures. Perception #1: Religions are highly personal and strike to the very core of human belief. Humans are often sensitive about religion because of their fear, ignorance, and unwillingness to examine their personal systems of belief. This fear originates in what they feel is the unknown. In general, the unknown is virtually synonymous with death. Humans are so frightened of death, the extinction of what they are, that they usually do not want to discuss the subject. They often refuse to accept that only the physical body dies. The soul, the consciousness, is, of course, immortal. But humans are so blindly attached to the corporeal form that it is nearly impossible for them to envision life without it."

"Oh great," Dagin thought to himself, "Alien Theology 101."

Dagin had never been a real fan of any religion, for none of them, at least the ones he had studied, seemed to convincingly offer answers to the many questions he had posed in his mind. He quickly flipped through the subsequent pages to get a feeling for what the material

might have to say. The pages spoke in a somewhat rambling manner about the Christ spirit and how humans didn't really understand the events of those days, when supposedly Christ walked the Earth.

Dagin hadn't thought about "religion" in the old-fashioned sense of the word in a long time--and neither had most other humans since the limited nuclear war in the early part of the century which was initiated by the "unholy alliance" of various religious zealots coupled with the rise and fall of a particularly powerful religious leader who identified himself simply as "the One." Such events, when combined with the devastating volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, plagues and axis shift, had convinced those who survived not only that organized religion was now "dead," but that international cooperation was vital to planetary survival.

Reading rhetoric such as this made Dagin uneasy, and he wondered vaguely why Brades and the others thought it worthwhile to have the team focus on what seemed an obvious hoax. But there was still more of this strange message, whatever its origin, so curious, Dagin read on.

"Perception #2: There is one God. As to gender, this All-That-Is, or 'God,' if you prefer, is neither and both. God is an androgynous blending of forces which creates and sustains all energy. The distinction of separate genders is a current earthly paradigm, not necessarily of any particular use to sentient beings in other systems of consciousness. God is a gestalt of energy, a whole greater than the sum of its parts; God is an expression of vast and incredibly concentrated consciousness."

Dagin scowled. Where was this erratic message coming from--and why did it flip from generalized abstractions to a

directive issued to whomever was reading it? Was this Brades? This really didn't make much sense to him, yet it continued.

There are no accidents, for free will dictates those events that manifest in human reality. Most humans would protest this idea and try to think of exceptions, and it is natural that they should, for they have a limited understanding of the relationship between God, or the God concept, and the soul.

Humans are often so mesmerized and enamored with the physical self that they neglect and forget that they are essentially spiritual in nature and thereby intimately connected to the God concept. Many of your Western and Eastern philosophers and theologians have spoken of this intimate relation, and most humans feel it to be true at some level, yet it has remained, paradoxically and by their own choice, something beyond their comprehension.

Humans must yet learn that their personal identity is resilient and pervasive and that they are involved in both an exhilarating and cooperative effort to achieve a multitude of experiences in numerous realities and dimensions"--Lyrrh.

Dagin scowled again as he finished reading the printout. He felt unsettled by what he'd read--not because he believed it, but because it seemed an unnecessary complication. Also, he still couldn't figure out why Jade Pleasant had given him this file. Was this material being "leaked" as some sort of psychological exam for him and his crew?

Five minutes later, Cal and Tom joined Dagin in his office. They were anxious about his conversation with Dr. Pleasant, he knew, but they also had their own news, apparently, to share.

"First," Dagin began, "we're going to have a staff meeting at seven tomorrow morning. Jade Pleasant gave me this." He

handed Tom the file and continued, "Just a few more mysterious computer printouts like the ones we received the weekend before. I don't know why she and Brades think it's important, but you need to read these, too, before our briefing with her."

"Seven?" Cal protested. "We don't come in that early."

"Tomorrow, we do. I'll take care that we don't again."

Dagin resumed, "Second, somehow she thinks we know all about the reason for her presence here. But Brades still hasn't said a word to me, other than that he thinks we need a kick in the butt. I think there's more, but I didn't want her to know that our own leader hasn't confided in us. I guarantee we'll find out, though, tomorrow--either from her or from Brades himself."

"You may not have to wait that long," Tom said. "We might have something that helps clarify what we're facing."

"How's that? It must be pretty good to accomplish that."

It was Cal's turn to speak. "It looks as though Brades knew about this situation well before we did. Don't ask me how, though I could guess, but he did."

"That son of a bitch! That would explain why Pleasant was summoned, at least in part," Dagin said. "But what's her role? Why her?"

"There's more, Dagin," Tom said. "If Cal's boosted incoming signals are correct, and if my calculations are accurate, which, incidentally, they are beyond reasonable doubt, then we have a real crisis on our hands. And there is absolutely no way to stop it."

Another thought popped into Dagin's head before he responded to Tom, and he felt foolish for neglecting it.

"Have you guys even met her yet? I guess it was my duty to introduce you, but I was remiss in that." Dagin had

forgotten that Tom, but not Cal, had already been introduced to Jade.

"Yes," Tom answered, ignoring Dagin's error. "Just before you had your private meeting with her. She's abrupt, I'll give her that much."

"Faint praise, coming from you," Dagin said. "Cal?"

"I don't much care, as long as she keeps out of my face and does her job."

Dagin, was eager to hear what Tom saw as a "real crisis," but sometimes, he knew, Tom had a tendency to exaggerate, and Dagin was willing to suspend Tom's explanation until another, perhaps admittedly minor, problem was resolved. And that problem was Jade Pleasant. There were times, maybe too many of them, when his attention to detail was frustrating not only to himself, but to others as well. Yet he liked to make sure that minor issues were cleared up before he tackled major ones. "Let's get back to my question first, please. Why do you think Pleasant's been assigned to us? Even Matt Carpenter thinks it's strange."

"Get to the point, Dagin," Cal interrupted. "What's bothering you?"

"Look, we're an excellent research team--the best that money can buy, if you want to look at it in terms Brades understands. We know the math, the physics, planetary and stellar astronomy, engineering technology, and Tom even has an M.D. degree. What's lacking, at least in a scientific sense? In a hard scientific sense, I mean?"

"Biology," Tom said. "Other than my medical training. But we're terran-based, Dagin, and her primary area is exobiology. You think Brades has some sort of space travel plans for us?"

"Maybe," Dagin said, not wanting to mention his other suspicions about the Lyrrh messages. "I think even our new team member isn't completely aware of what Brades has planned."

"But we are, huh?" Cal said sarcastically. He wasn't convinced.

Tom was getting more and more agitated. He didn't want to talk about Jade Pleasant; he wanted to talk about his crisis. Even though Dagin was several years Tom's junior, Tom didn't like to interrupt Dagin's direction, and Tom was quite secure that Dagin had been selected as team leader. More than once, Tom had been impressed by Dagin's reasoning abilities, by Dagin's linking together of small details to clarify the broader picture. Never mind that Chambers' social skills and personal life were not exactly exemplary.

Suddenly, Dagin pitched forward, his face contorted in pain as he crashed to the floor, his hands covering his ears. He must have blacked out for a moment, for when he regained consciousness he could hear the sound of his own voice screaming in agony.

Then, immediately, the pain and noise in his head stopped. He blinked several times in rapid succession, and slowly the faces of his two friends came into focus.

"Holy shit, man!" Cal said. "What happened?"

"I don't know."

Cal helped him onto a chair, waiting for an explanation, as Tom pried into Dagin's eyes, holding them open with his fingers and focusing a bright lab light into them.

"Has this happened before?" Tom asked, backing away.

"Forget it. I'm okay." Dagin wanted to avoid directly answering Tom's question. He didn't want a medical profile drawn up on him.

"Forget it, hell! You're going on medical, and if you don't go to the MedPlex, I'll do it myself right here," Tom said.

"No you won't," Dagin firmly replied. "It was a freak occurrence. You know I have no physical anomalies, Tom, and the pain is completely over. I'm fine. Really."

Tom could see that Dagin was serious and not about to be swayed. Dagin's motor skills and speech were back in order, and his coordination was apparently unaffected, and Tom had not observed any immediate post-attack deviations. Tom also knew that going on profile might have negative consequences for Dagin and the current project.

"You know I have the authority, Dagin," Tom said. "But I'll let it pass this once, and only this once. We'll call it stress. If it ever happens again, even the slightest hint of it, you're going to have to undergo a full medical. Understood?"

Dagin grinned. "Understood, Mom." He sensed Tom didn't fully buy his explanation, but he was relieved that Tom respected him enough to let him try to handle it on his own. At the same time, he had no idea how he could hide it from Tom should it occur again, at least where Tom could see it or hear about it.

Cal, ostensibly still agitated from the experience, pulled out his handkerchief and coughed into it forcefully.

"And Cal, I definitely want to take a look at your throat sometime. That cough sounds pretty raw, and I'm getting tired of hearing it, too," Tom added. "I can't have you two falling to pieces on me now. We have too many things to do."

Dagin settled into a chair, drinking some water Cal had brought over to him. He was scared, but he wouldn't show

it. He made a special effort to continue his observations, as if nothing at all had just happened.

"As I was saying, I think we're in for a wild ride. Think about it. This is the premier research facility in the world, and consider the Institute's main goal: we're to search for signs of extraterrestrial intelligence and lifeforms. And we were just assigned Jade Pleasant, who somehow is supposed to fit into this mission."

"And my discovery of the object, which now appears not to have been my discovery at all, coincides with her arrival," Tom added, trying more aggressively to change the subject back to that discovery and his most recent findings.

"So you think Brades and the other honchos tie this object in with some form of alien intelligence?" Cal asked.

"It's not behaving like any known phenomena anyone has ever discovered," Dagin said. "It's too far away, it's too bright, it's too big. It's unique and that makes it suspect. Perhaps what we're looking at is no more than a chimera, of sorts, a camouflage. It may be simply a test of our relative state of scientific achievement. Those messages from Lyrrh and the file I gave you is not, I believe, from an alien, but Brades claims, according to Pleasant, that it remains a possibility. So the short answer to your question, Cal, is 'Yes'--and 'No'."

"Great," Cal said, mulling over what Dagin had just said.

"But why didn't Brades tell us about all this?" Tom asked.

Cal laughed. "Sometimes you're just too nice, Tom. Makes you sound naive. Brades is a hot dog. It's his ego. A simple power play."

"Maybe even more, Cal" Dagin said. "He could be testing us. Ever since we failed to report immediately on the discovery and since we turned the scopes he's been on our

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backs, and I guess I really can't blame him. Now, what is this crisis you have lined up for me, Tom?"

"Let me start," said Cal. "I was able to redirect some of the energy from the other skybirds over to Vanguard, and I think I was undetected. And that's when things started to get really interesting. In fact, it may be that the theory about possible communication with aliens has some merit because as far as I can determine, all the instrumental data I have now is correct. Go ahead, Tom, tell him what you have."

Chapter 6

"Dagin, there can be virtually no doubt, and I realize that's a risky statement to make. But look at these figures and tell me what you see," Tom said, handing Dagin several sheets.

Dagin studied the data for several moments, moving across the room to cross-check with instrumental readouts.

"If I'm reading this right, the object has blue-shifted. It's coming straight toward us. That is interesting. Anything else?" Dagin could barely conceal his excitement.

Tom beamed. He was enjoying this. "You bet."

He handed Dagin another printout.

Dagin arched his left eyebrow and glanced back at Tom.

"You're telling me that this object is moving at (he looked down at the sheet again) over ten thousand times the speed of light?"

"And increasing exponentially. It's actually multiplying its velocity at a staggering rate, even as we speak."

"What kind of rate?"

"I can't get a fix on that yet, but if it keeps it up, it could reach the limits of our previously-known universe in a matter of a few months--or sooner. It's incredible!"

Dagin paused for a moment, his mind weighing a whirlwind of possibilities.

"Obviously," he said, thinking aloud, "this defies any physical principles known to our science. Any speculations?"

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"I like to keep things in a clear perspective," Cal said. "What we have here is an unknown object that appeared seemingly out of nowhere. It's a good five billion light years farther away than anything yet discovered, so far out that there's nothing else anywhere near it. It even seems to predate the age of the known universe by a significant factor. It's much brighter than anything we know of, we are able to get a fix on it, and now it's heading our way, or at least in our general direction. And it's coming faster and faster all the time. Sound like a reasonable assessment?"

"Yes," Dagin replied, as Tom nodded agreement. "Let's plot it up."

Dagin moved to a map of the universe secured above his desk. Taking out a marking pen and straightedge, he quickly drew a line from Earth to Vanguard to the apparent location of the object, extrapolating his figures and marking where the object would be, which of course would fall well beyond the confines of the map.

"It's in a direct line with both Vanguard and us, and that may or may not be a coincidence. As you know, Vanguard's been on its way for less than five years, just after we all came on board here to monitor this project. It's traveled only a tiny fraction of the distance to that object. For all practical purposes, then, Vanguard's data is already five years old by the time we get it, so of course we're getting info on that object that happened five years ago, in real time. Therefore, we can conclude that the object, to the best of our knowledge, was 20 billion light years distant five terran years ago, when Vanguard first discovered it and signaled us. That presents a question."

"Right," Tom said. "What has been occurring with the object during the last five years, as we await Vanguard's signals?"

"Given the new data," Dagin continued, "that is, what we've learned since last week when you first noted it, Tom, it has not only assumed an apparent movement in our direction, but has done so with an incredible and ever-increasing acceleration, just as Cal said. What other tricks is she going to pull?"

"I wonder," Cal said, "if the signals might have been sent out some time before the object itself became visible."

"It's possible, I suppose, but why did that pop into your head?" Dagin asked.

"It just struck me. I suppose because the whole thing is so darn screwy," Cal replied. "It's got me thinking screwy, too."

"Now, I imagine, Tom, that you've determined that it's increasing in velocity because of the added signal strength?" Dagin asked.

"Yes. When Cal gave me the extra juice, it augmented the signal from Vanguard sufficiently to allow further interpretation of precisely what we're receiving. In effect, the information was already there, but we simply didn't have the firepower to read it. Makes you wonder what else we could get with even more power, eh?"

"Sure does. Do we have any idea at this point what the size of this baby might be? All I can surmise now is that it must be big--again, magnitudes of any known object," Dagin said.

"Probably," Tom agreed. "If it behaves with any semblance of natural law, it would appear to dwarf the

largest quasar. But we still can't determine its mass until we get more data."

"Or it might be the damned brightest asteroid-sized hunk of matter ever discovered," Cal said, grinning as he tossed a piece of wadded paper into Dagin's wastebasket, ten feet away.

"Well, aren't you Mr. Hypothetical today?" Tom teased him. "But you're right. We don't know much for certain."

"And let's not forget that," Dagin warned. "We simply don't know what we have here, and I think we need to exercise a little humility in light of that."

"What do you think Brades knows about all this?" Tom asked.

"Most of it, except that I've juiced up the signal to Big V," Cal volunteered. "He's been a step ahead of us most of the way. Makes you wonder how he's doing it."

"Yes, it does," Dagin said. "He's tapping into information from some source. We've checked for bugs. We didn't find any, but even if there were some here, he'd know only what we know. But he knows more. I'm not sure he received it from the Chinese, either. They generally don't share knowledge, not since the nuclear wars. He hasn't augmented Vanguard's signals, or Cal would know it."

"Could Pleasant be feeding him something?" Cal ventured.

"I doubt it," Dagin replied. "She doesn't have the resources, financially or personnel-wise, no matter how secretive her own research has been there in India. It's a conundrum."

"Well, the best we can do now is to sit and wait for more data to come in from Vanguard," Tom said. "Our receiver, with Cal's modifications, is doubtlessly the strongest on the

planet, so there's no way the Chinese or anybody else will be able to scoop us on what's happening. Brades has no access to data that we don't have, and as far as we know, he now has less."

"So it would seem," Dagin said. "But I'm not convinced that he isn't getting it somewhere else. Oh, just to be sure, Tom, I assume that the 'crisis' you referred to was that the object is on a collision course with Earth?"

"Well, yes, primarily. That, and the fact that there are too many unanswered questions. I know I can get carried away, and sure, the event may not be here for a billion years, if it even still exists. But with its ability to accelerate, well, it could get here much sooner. Stranger things have happened."

"No they haven't," Cal said grinning. "You old fusser. Always looking to stir up some excitement."

Dagin stood and stretched. "Okay, enough. You guys can clown around on your own time. I need to finish off a couple of pieces of paperwork, then I'm going home. And don't forget the briefing tomorrow."

"Do you think Dr. Pleasant should have been included in this conversation?" Tom asked. "After all, she's on our team now, and she does have a need to know."

"She's had enough to get used to today," Dagin replied. "Besides, much of what we said was conjectural, and she strikes me as the type who demands only facts. Further, she'll get all this in a more distilled format tomorrow. But yes, we should get used to including her from now on, though we may have to make these sessions more formal. She has been appointed co-leader, and personal feelings aside, we have to respect that."

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Several hours later, still in her office at the Institute, Jade Pleasant was entering the last sentence in her personal log. Her room was dark, save for the light from a tiny reading lamp on her desk, and the light of the full moon bathed her in a soft, silver glow.

Suddenly, the overhead lights were thrown on and a male figure stood in the doorway, staring quizzically at her.

"I beg your pardon," she said, startled. "Who are you, and what do you want? Haven't you heard of knocking?"

"Hi. I'm Soren. I have to sweep now, okay? Are you going up in the spaceship, too?"

"No, that is not okay, and I don't know what you're talking about. Please excuse me, and come back to sweep later."

Soren left, and Jade Pleasant arose and walked over to turn off the lights. She returned to her desk and slowly closed her notebook, then placed it in her desk, under lock and key. She turned off the little desk lamp and silently pressed a framed photograph to her breast, whispering, "Goodbye, my love."



In the year 2048, the Earth has recovered from devastating catastrophes earlier in the century, and now is a much more settled and peaceful place. Great financial resources in the U.S. have allowed for tremendous strides in scientific research, but there still has been no extraterrestrial visitation. A crack team has received signals from beyond known space and they prepare a dangerous voyage to intercept an unknown object calling itself "God."

KIRALAINE

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