

WAYNE MEYERS

A woman with long, wavy brown hair and striking purple eyes is shown from the chest up. She is wearing a dark, possibly black, garment. Her right hand is held out, palm facing forward, with five glowing green rings of energy around her fingers. Bright green lightning bolts emanate from these rings, crackling across the background. The background is a dark, moody cityscape at night, with some lights visible in the distance. The overall tone is mysterious and sci-fi.

Visitor

Visitor
(Preview)

Wayne Meyers

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PROLOGUE: VEERA

Veera's secret headquarters

Veera was old. Far older than society permitted most of her people to grow. She glared at the server trembling before her desk, his knees threatening to buckle at any moment.

The over-inquisitive fool had dared to wonder about her age while delivering her midday meal. It mattered not he had tried to shield himself from her superior brain, for Veera forcibly mindswept his thoughts from his head. She required followers who supported her without question, especially here, in her secret lair, where the future of the galaxy tipped in her favor. Veera never took chances with such things and monitored their thoughts regularly.

"Do you know how I lived to be this age?" Veera asked. She ignored the widening stain on his pants as he wet himself.

"N-n-no my queen," the server said. He kept his face pointed toward the ground, the chattering of his teeth amusing her.

Veera stepped out from behind her desk and strolled toward the groveling server. "I've spent many fortunes on the black market having my internal organs replaced with more efficient, artificial creations. Our people possess the technology to live forever, but the fools waste it over ancient idealistic principles." Backward thinking Purist fools!

The server dropped his face to the plush flooring. "Yes, my queen."

Veera placed her foot on top of his head and pushed his face deeper into the carpet. "You wanted to know how I old I am. I will grace you with the answer: I have lived for four hundred and fifty cycles through my own resources, ingenuity, and tenacious resolve to expand beyond the limitations imposed upon me by those who failed to value their own self-worth!"

A muffled groan was all she could make out. She reached down and yanked the server's face up by his hair, leaving her shoe firmly across the back of his neck. Hovering close to his face, her voice trickled venom. "Do I not look beautiful for my age, oh curious lump of excrement? Is not my face young and flawless in appearance? Do you not find each and every lock of my hair lustrous

and appealing?”

The server whimpered in her grasp, his neck threatening to break. Veera removed her foot and wrenched him up by his hair until his face was level with hers, his body dangling above the floor.

She stood tall and straight while staring deep into his eyes, enjoying the squirming helplessness and fear. The mangled black glow emanating from his body, indicating his extreme distress, excited her further. She held his face so close to hers she could taste his breath. She chilled her harsh, cold voice further.

“My eyes may be new, but you do see the ancient wisdom residing within, do you not?”

The server, trembling in her grasp, did his best to nod.

Veera chuckled as she dropped the wretch, who collapsed at her feet, sobbing.

Knowledge seeped into her brain, reports from her assistants of the revolution she'd engineered. Her glow of exultation burst from every pore in strands of brilliant green, projecting outward like spines. Her plans had succeeded. She laughed, throwing her arms up in the air and twirling about her office. The server crawled toward the doorway, hoping to escape.

She stepped in front of the exit, looking down at him with her hands on her hips. “Do you know why I always obtain my desires, excrement? It's because I never leave anything to chance, not even the most minute possibility.”

She knelt down and grasped the server's chin to hold his face steady, forcing him to look at her. “My revolution is now underway, from the largest system to the smallest asteroid. I've disabled every Purist spaceship and broken their communications, isolating each planet to their own leadership. Yornacut itself is now under siege by my strongest attack force, and once they crumble, every other system in our galaxy shall follow suit. I will be the only voice any Quenterian heeds for the next million cycles, or longer if I so desire.”

The server attempted a smile that came off crooked and mocking, displeasing her. She took his face in both hands and touched her forehead to his, her face hardening. “When the interstellar dust settles and my Society of Progressives are in power, we shall experience great changes, and the defeated Purists shall beg me for crumbs of glory.”

She waited for his accolades, but realized he was unconscious. Her hands had squeezed his head too tightly.

She laughed, standing up and letting him fall in a heap. “Oops.”

It was a masterstroke plan that the overconfident Purist simpletons had never anticipated. She had effectively cleared the path to conquer Yornacut, home planet to the Purist government's offices and legislators who ultimately ruled her

people—the center of the Center. Her loyal governmental agents and followers in other systems would smooth over the transition of power once her modest fleet crushed Yornacut’s substantial planetary defenses. The masses would have no understanding what this meant until far too late for their whiny voices to make any difference. All computational models indicated that in order for Veera’s plan to succeed, she had to seat herself on Yornacut before communications and space travel resumed, enabling reinforcements to chase off her fleet.

Of course, she had an alternative plan in place, though it was riskier and would require a tactical demonstration. Veera preferred certainty to theatrics.

The server retched, struggling to his hands and knees. Veera sat on top of her desk and watched, curious if he would achieve his footing. He did not, but collapsed panting instead.

“My age is what it is because I refused to die. Three-hundred-fifty cycles ago, simply because I had supposedly lived what they deemed an acceptable life span, the Purist laws would have condemned my brilliance to death. I defied them!

“When the chest pains became unbearable, I visited the private lab of a sympathetic surgeon with a minor financial problem. He operated on me with stolen instruments to repair the blockages in my natural heart. I lived.

“The Purists held their iron grip so long they’d forgotten to explain why they mattered. The masses were ready for something different. Like a flame to tinder my vision spread, while the Purist leaders watched in dismay how their people embraced me.

“Thanks to further clandestine surgeries, my body remained youthfully vibrant. The Purist leaders noticed my failure to age and ruled my existence a gross violation of their antiquated codes and rules. I was sentenced to be executed, the first such case of its kind in the history of our people. Murdered! They hoped to end this threat to their way of life with my death, then dismantle the vast organization I’d spent a lifetime assembling.”

Veera paced back and forth across the office floor, caught up in her memories. Reliving the indignities of that time maintained her resolve. “I allowed everything to proceed as they had planned, but at the last minute, substituted a fresh corpse while my trusted followers secreted me away. In this manner, the Purists believed they had disposed of me while I became a martyr to billions of people—a victim of harsh, unreasonable, antiquated rules that violated an individual’s right to life. My followers tripled, but without a leader to manipulate and channel their aggression, the flame threatened to consume itself. They needed me to guide them.

“After another specialized surgery that altered my appearance and voice, I

emerged as a young but enthusiastic champion against governmental tyranny, founded the formal Society of Progressive Thinking, and utilized my previous identity to recruit sympathetic followers in swelling numbers.”

Veera folded her arms and stared at her viewscreen, scrutinizing the local news reports. The commentator expressed confusion and concern that their ships would no longer fly, and their long-range communications systems no longer functioned. Was it a mass technological failure? Solar flare? Were the Radicals or some other disgruntled organization behind it? “No you fools, not disgruntled, but unblinded!”

Veera smiled. The Society had flourished beneath her watchful eyes as she waited patiently for the proper moment to strike. In the meantime, she used her skills of manipulation and coercion to place people into crucial positions of government, military, and scientific endeavors. She also made certain they properly groomed their replacements, to perpetuate her grip on the strings of society indefinitely. Veera didn’t plan on dying again, but knew that others would before everything was ready.

Once again, the dismayed government noticed a person had aged beyond the permitted life span, but rather than repeat the error of their predecessors, the current regime’s officials agreed to overlook this transgression. Veera had become far too powerful to martyr. They were terrified of what might happen should they attempt to execute her now. Free from their meddling, Veera went on to increase her reach to the furthest ends of the populated galaxy, collecting new recruits and allies in droves until she felt she was ready to succeed.

That exhilarating moment was now close at hand. She raised her fist to the ceiling and cackled.

Sensing a communication from one of her aides, Veera allowed the sender to reach her mind. *“Your Eminence, an urgent message from Commander Ector.”*

She didn’t wait, but extracted the message forcibly and cut communications.

Commander Ector had intercepted a transmission from one of the many spaceships incapacitated by the navigational virus. The Mission Commander of this observation vessel had permitted one of his crew to go loose upon the seedling planet known to the natives as Earth.

Veera frowned as the full implications sank in. First off, the fools had violated their own codes against interference with a seeded planet—something she hadn’t believed they would do for any reason. Still, other than serving as a curious point of support to her Society’s beliefs, it didn’t offer much interest. The presence of one of her people on a seeded planet, on the other hand, gave her pause.

The girl’s name was Aldrea, daughter of the crew’s Observation Commander,

a prominent supporter of the Purist government. An enemy.

Veera's obsession with detail ensured her plans were invariably foolproof, but such an ability to perceive all the possible outcomes of a situation meant that dangers were imbued with more potential than they deserved. This girl's presence concerned her.

She pulled up data on the planet in question. The girl was marooned on a planet filled with primitive, arrogant creatures possessing an innate tendency toward violence. With Aldrea's technical assistance, they had the potential to master interstellar space flight equipped with sophisticated weaponry. The incentive to do so was already part of their violent nature. If nothing else, Aldrea could warn the seedlings about Veera's plans of conquest—if the girl figured things out—complicating what should become a simplistic breed-and-abduct operation in the near future. On the extreme side, Aldrea could organize Earth's seedlings into an offensive attack unit, perhaps spreading the same advanced technology to other seeded planets as well, creating aggravation if not inciting outright rebellion. Veera was not one who dismissed the motive of revenge lightly; indeed, it was the strongest incentive for action in existence, as far as she was concerned.

She had not reached the threshold of victory through poor planning or taking unnecessary chances. A blazing fire began with a spark.

"Dispatch a trusted resource to the seedling planet in question. Locate the girl and terminate her. Avoid confrontation, but if necessary, eliminate any seedling who gets in the way."

She dismissed the matter from her mind. There were more pressing issues at hand, such as preparing her first communication introducing herself as Empress.

A whimper caught her ear just as she returned to her desk. Ah, yes, the curious server upon whom she'd graciously bestowed her biography. Sadly for him, it was lethal knowledge. Her followers thought her a mysterious, powerful demigod, a trust she could ill afford to fracture.

The only organ Veera possessed from her original body was her brain. While her people possessed basic telepathic capabilities, she had learned that those powers enhanced over time. The older she grew, the more potent her mind became. She had funded covert scientific experiments to augment the powers of her mind through implanted cranial receptors with corresponding amplifiers hidden within the structure of her desk. This forbidden technology enabled mental feats no other being was capable of. Power and mystery did not engender trust, but she would settle for awe and compliance.

For now, it was going to help her eliminate a useless pile of excrement.

Closing her eyes, Veera reached out with her mind until she'd snared his.

Then, like squeezing a lump of butter, she squashed his involuntary reflex controls until his heart and lungs ceased to function. She deflected a desperate mental attempt to block her, enjoying herself. It wasn't often she indulged herself in life's little treasures. She would make this last as long as possible.

Somehow the fool found the will to rise to his feet and stagger toward her.

Pity, he was forcing the end too soon.

She stood still, allowing him to come closer. His choice to fight was amusing and curious. Why didn't he try to run? Still, she wouldn't stop him.

The server couldn't know about the radius of defense that projected invisibly outward from the queen. The moment the server stepped over this threshold, a thermal-laser stabbed his head with an intense ray of heat. He collapsed to the ground for a final time, his brain destroyed. Veera's desk housed many deadly secrets.

Her body pulsed with a purple-red glow. She twirled again, bathed in her own light, invulnerable and unstoppable.

CHAPTER ONE: DOUG

Adirondack Mountains, New York

Douglas Keller plodded along the rock-strewn trail, enjoying flashes of warmth from the sun poking through gaps in the swaying leaves. He considered how people took the brilliant orb's light and heat for granted, then laughed at his whimsy. If nothing else, this little vacation had freed his mind from the mundanity of his day job, but once back home, it wouldn't take long before his hectic life consumed him again. That was okay, though. Doug enjoyed keeping busy, and had plenty of tasks to occupy his mind besides what might happen if the sun went away.

He whistled as he walked, cheerfully swatting away clouds of gnats and the occasional mosquito. Other than a dull ache in the back of his head, he felt awesome. He rubbed the sore spot, expecting it to hurt from his touch, but it didn't. He must have slept on a rock or something last night.

Doug paused, sensing something wrong, as though an important event on the edge of his mind was struggling to emerge. All he'd done in the last week was hike trails in the Adirondack Mountains. What could possibly have happened, except maybe a mosquito bite or poison ivy rash?

Well, there *had* been that encounter with a black bear he'd surprised in a clearing, but Doug wasn't sure which one of them took off faster. Forgetting everything the ranger drilled into him before starting his hike a week ago, Doug had run as fast as he could in the opposite direction from the bear, only realizing the bear did the same when he looked back over his shoulder to see how close he was to being eaten.

Doug indulged in a chuckle as he imagined relaying this story to the physics students once he was back in the classroom. For the past four years of graduate school, working towards a doctorate in Material Sciences, he'd subsidized his tuition by taking a post as an assistant professor. It was enjoyable work but he longed to teach his own class. Starting September, he would be. Now if he could only come up with some catchy connection between a fleeing bear and the composite materials on NASA's latest space shuttle, he'd have the perfect lead

into the syllabus.

But what happened after I turned to look at the bear?

Doug tilted his head as he paused in mid-stride, the wind-rustled leaves and symphony of bird vocalizations fading into the background. His hand rubbed the back of his head again, and he was still surprised it didn't hurt. Then, a falling sensation made him dizzy, forcing him to bend over with his hands on his knees until the vertigo passed. He breathed slowly while his vision cleared and waited, listening for...something. More birds singing, more creatures rustling through the woods around him. Nothing different from what he'd already heard throughout the past week, repeated over and over again, until it faded from conscious thought.

Doug straightened, shrugged, and resumed hiking. Probably an allergy attack, and he was out of medicine. He expected to arrive back at the campground he'd started from before nightfall, and return home in the morning. One more day without popping an antihistamine wouldn't kill him.

He couldn't wait for this hike to end. Doug was so looking forward to settling down in front of his TV with a cold soda. Now that whatever compulsion to leave the comforts of his Long Island home had been appeased, Doug swore he'd never take another vacation again. He wouldn't even be here in the first place if not for the constant nagging by his best friend Ken to "get out of his lab and breathe some fresh air for a change." Doug should have known better than to take recreational advice from an avid outdoorsman, but Ken made it sound too awesome to resist. In hindsight, the fact that Ken made tons of money selling Jaguars should have given Doug pause, but by the time his friend's pitch was over, Doug couldn't wait to sample fresh air by the bucket.

Well, Doug was so done with fresh air at this point he looked forward to sucking in Manhattan's polluted smog and even unwashed taxi drivers. All fresh air did was make him sneeze—hard. He sighed, wiping his nose with a tattered handkerchief his mother had shoved in his shirt pocket before he drove off. The surrounding chirps and scuttles continued despite the loud noise he'd made. Even out here in the middle of nowhere he was barely noticed. Story of his life.

Pulling off the Yankees baseball cap plastered to his head, Doug knelt beside a small creek to splash some cold mountain water over his face. Closing his eyes to avoid the bright sunlight reflecting from the water's surface, he imagined he heard steam hiss as the water struck his skin. His eyes opened, revealing his rippling reflection, then widened further when he noticed his shirt was spattered with dried blood.

What happened after I turned to look at the bear?

Doug blinked several times while rubbing the back of his head, unable to

recall where the blood came from. Had he scratched himself on a thorn bush? He pulled the shirt over his head and felt his torso for a wound, then sat back on the grassy bank perplexed. He couldn't find a single scratch, although more blood clung to his chest. He splashed water and rubbed the dried blood from his skin. Turning his body sideways, he noticed even more clung to his back, and scrubbed that away too using a small branch on the areas his hands couldn't reach.

As the sluggish current carried away red swirls of dried blood, something caught his attention. It took him a moment to realize it was an unfamiliar smell. He sniffed the air, inhaling an intoxicating, exotic fragrance, which prompted him to search for its source. Seeing no flowers in the immediate area, Doug lifted the balled up shirt to his face, breathing in a scent unlike any other he'd ever known. It reminded him of lavender and jasmine with a hint of licorice, yet smelling it felt like seeing a fourth primary color. It was just so...alien to his nose.

Had he slept on a flowerbed? How had this scent infiltrated the fibers of his shirt? Doug strained to remember, but all he could recall was turning to look at the bear.

What happened after?

A surge of pain shot through his head as though a molten spike was pounding through its core, until he turned his thoughts elsewhere. With a grunt, Doug gave up remembering and after stuffing the bloody shirt in a side pocket, pulled on a semi-clean shirt from his pack. Sweat and grass stains abounded, but at least it wasn't covered in blood. What strange things being in the wilderness did to a person's sense of cleanliness.

Doug glanced at his watch. By this time tomorrow, he'd be in the lab at Columbia. He'd be able to analyze the blood to determine its origin, and hopefully find an answer. If not, he'd schedule a CT scan to make sure his brain wasn't harboring a tumor.

But first he needed to return to the campground. He looked for the blue markers on the trees along the trail to confirm his position, then resumed hiking, a growing excitement adding a spring to each step. He attributed this positive feeling to being psyched about retrieving his cell phone from his car, which Ken had forced him to promise to leave behind, just to make sure he actually relaxed instead of working. If he was honest with himself, after withdrawal anxiety faded by the second night while he sat by his campfire, Doug felt relieved the phone wasn't in his pocket. He knew he'd check emails and make phone calls to his colleagues at the lab, and his mother would check in on him every hour to make sure he was still alive, while his father yelled at her to

leave Doug alone in the background.

Doug smiled as he recalled her protestations when he explained this vacation to her in detail. No phones, out in the middle of the wilderness by himself communing with nature, and possibly deciding to remain there to become a hermit and live in a cave. Off the grid. Of course he was joking. Like anything could possibly stand in the way of his career as professor and scientist now that his doctorate was finally completed. But he loved to tease her.

It would be ironic if something happened to him after he promised his parents he'd be fine.

CHAPTER TWO: BILL

Pentagon

FBI Deputy Director Bill Hoffman tried to contain his irritation as he watched Dr. Cornelius Smith saunter into the executive conference room after calling this emergency meeting.

Smith's flushed face, bright eyes, and the way he marched rather than walked toward the podium clearly indicated he was excited. From his tight grip on a bundle of manila folders clutched to his chest as though they possessed the secret to eternal youth, Bill surmised they contained the reason behind this impromptu get together.

Bill rubbed his chin. The fact that the President had ordered all security agencies to provide representation indicated how important the matter was. All that remained was for Smith to begin, if he would only quicken his pace. Smith paused to fuss with his collar. Bill repressed a sigh; Smith was going to milk the spotlight for as long as possible.

Smith was the senior lead for satellite surveillance analysis. Bill couldn't recall whose department that put him under these days as congressional committees squabbled where to bury the budget, but his agents used them from time to time to gather intelligence data. If Smith was driving this, that meant a satellite had captured something significant to national security.

But what Bill couldn't quite figure out was why Smith seemed almost...eager. If some foreign power threatened US territories, why didn't Smith's body language convey fear, or at the least, apprehension, instead of anticipation? Bill glanced around. The other invitees were assembling around the massive oblong table, sitting on or standing behind plush, red velvet-trimmed armchairs. Resting on the mahogany top before each seat were notepads and crystal water glasses. Pitchers of ice water glistened as droplets merged into little pools on the glass surface covering the wood. The aroma of brewing coffee permeated the room.

Dr. Smith nodded his hellos before strutting to his place behind the podium. He continued to take his time, fussing with the position of the microphone even though it wasn't powered on. Trying not to think about the growing stack of

paperwork waiting back on his desk, Bill continued to look around the room.

His apprehension grew as he identified the other participants. They were all high-ranking officials such as Edward Swann, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, sitting closest to the podium wearing his usual pompous “I’m better than you” expression. Across from Swann sat National Security Advisor Brian Krawley, and his aide. Two three-star army generals and several members of the National Security Council, along with their own aides, completed the assemblage.

Bill was taken aback, realizing the only reason a person of his rank was sitting here was that his boss, the FBI Director, was on a golf course across the country. Something big was taking place, something that wouldn’t normally include a Deputy Director. His mouth suddenly dry, Bill reached for the water pitcher.

Smith cleared his throat from the podium. “Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. Please take your seats and we’ll get this show on the road.” Murmured responses emanated from the audience as they shuffled in their chairs, clutching coffee mugs and smartphones. Dr. Smith stood there beaming, basking in their attention. Bill felt like slapping him across the head. This wasn’t kindergarten, dumbass!

Brian Krawley rolled his eyes while tapping his Rolex. “I have other appointments on my calendar, so please do get started, Doctor.”

Smith offered a reassuring smile. “I promise we’ll finish up here soon enough.”

One attendee stood, his eyes gleaming. “Is it true? Do you really have concrete proof of extraterrestrial life?”

Bill’s jaw dropped. Was he joking?

Brian Krawley snorted. “What rubbish!”

“For heaven’s sake, contain your outbursts, please, or we’ll never get out of here.” Swann, the thin-faced, middle-aged CIA Director spoke with a soft but forceful voice. “Let’s hear the facts before leaping to conclusions. The President would not have insisted we all meet here today if he wasn’t reasonably certain of the validity behind Dr. Smith’s information.”

Bill restrained a smirk. The CIA Director and the National Security Advisor were renowned for their fiery clashes. This would be entertaining.

But much to Bill’s surprise, no rebuttal came. Glancing at Brian Krawley’s pale complexion and intertwined fingers, Bill realized despite his words to the contrary, the Security Advisor was taking this very seriously. Which meant the President was, too. Bill loosened his tie and sat up straighter in his chair. He despised politics, but accepted it as a necessary evil in order to do his job. He

had to be very careful what he said in front of these high-profile politicians. His boss had picked a great week to go away on a golf vacation. Bill hoped the FBI Director pulled his back teeing off, and spent the rest of it in traction.

“This won’t take very long, gentlemen,” Smith said. “I am responsible for collecting and analyzing the data obtained by our satellite network, from weather predictions to foreign surveillance. My team then analyzes the information before dispersing it to the appropriate parties.”

“We are all quite aware of who you are, Dr. Smith,” Brian Krawley said.

Smith nodded with pursed lips. He cleared his throat, coughed into his hand, then reached for a pitcher and filled his cup. As Smith sipped the cold water, Bill could see the advisor’s face reddening.

Finally, Smith resumed. “Very well. Last night at approximately seven-thirty p.m., Eastern Daylight Time, one of our satellites detected a small oblong object at approximately twenty thousand feet, which appeared to materialize out of nowhere.” He paused, glancing at each face around the table. “We tracked this object as far as the Adirondack Mountains before losing it once the tracking satellite orbited out of range. Never before have we come across anything like this. The object quite literally appeared out of thin air, guided itself to a specific area, and descended at what we’d call a reasonable landing velocity.”

“Bullshit,” the Security Advisor said. Even so, Bill noticed his expression remained thoughtful.

Bill decided he needed to offer something less volatile. “Are we absolutely certain this...object has indeed landed?”

“We lost track of it for a good half hour, Bill,” Smith said, “and when the next satellite passed over that region, there was no longer any sign of it in the air. The trees and mountainous terrain offer a multitude of hiding places, but even spotting an object that small in an open field could prove challenging depending on the undergrowth beneath it.”

Swann coughed, fiddling with his CIA badge card tied around his neck by a length of black lanyard. Bill watched his thumb circle the emblem of an eagle’s head above a red starburst. “So, it just disappeared from whence it came, eh?”

Smith bit his lower lip. “Not exactly.” His fingers drummed the stack of manila folders resting on top of the podium.

Bill again rubbed his chin between thumb and forefinger. “You’re holding something back, Dr. Smith.”

“Well, Bill, I see I can’t pull one over on the FBI,” Smith said, forcing a chuckle.

“Show us then,” Brian Krawley said. From his dispassionate tone, Bill gathered he already knew the contents.

Smith frowned before passing down the stack of manila folders. Bill had the impression Smith didn't appreciate being rushed. How often did a techie get to capture the attention of so many high-ranking politicians?

Bill opened his folder, which contained color copies of a grainy satellite photo. "What the hell?" The photo revealed a small, egg-shaped craft with open hatch revealing the anterior cockpit. Using the bed of flowers it lay within for scale, he estimated at most one person could fit inside the thing, if it wasn't entirely robotic. But if the hatch was open, something had emerged.

Bill couldn't accept the extraterrestrial theory that made Smith so animated, but a foreign power advancing technologically over the United States had him deeply concerned. A long-range pod capable of launching from the other side of the world, perhaps with pinpoint navigation? They could land a nuke on the White House lawn. It was sheer good fortune the satellites had captured any trace of it at all. How many others had landed without being detected? Why, they might have stumbled across the opening phase of a foreign invasion, or wide-scale terrorist attack.

Bill glanced around the table. Everyone's faces were scrunched in worry or disbelief.

Swann whistled. "You sure this wasn't photoshopped?"

Smith rolled his eyes. "From the satellite? I hardly think so."

Bill frowned. "It's too big to be a drone. When was the photo taken?"

"About two hours ago," Smith said. "I managed to get the President's attention for five minutes before he flew out to Los Angeles on Air Force One, and he ordered this meeting while in flight. He agrees with me that we need to move quickly, gentlemen, before whatever was in that capsule escapes the area."

"What do you want us to do, Dr. Smith?" one of the army generals asked. "Send troops into the Adirondack Mountains? Do you know how vast a range that is?"

Smith took another sip of water. "The purpose of this meeting is to determine the appropriate course of action. That's why we're all here."

The army general rose to his feet, the medals and decorations across his green uniform jacket rustling as he buttoned it shut. "All right, Dr. Smith, you have my attention now. Give me the coordinates and I'll get some choppers in the air, pronto."

"Hold it," the Security Advisor said. "I'm taking over."

The army general sank back into his seat as though deflating.

Bill enjoyed watching Swann's cheeks flush with irritation, but another glance around the room showed most of the others looking relieved to let someone else take charge rather than own responsibility for this unprecedented situation.

Bill had mixed feelings himself. True, responsibility was how careers ended, but it was also how they flourished. He glanced over at Swann and noted the man's clenched lips. He had a feeling Swann didn't intend to let Brian Krawley run away with all the glory.

The Security Advisor pounded a fist on the table. "How do we know this isn't some sort of prank? We would look mighty foolish flying squads of helicopters over civilian territory, only to find a forged spacecraft cardboard cutout! It's happened to us before and the public goes nuts about wasted tax dollars."

Most of the others nodded, perhaps remembering—as the Security Advisor undoubtedly did—that this was an election year, and what was bad for the President tended to trickle downhill...

Swann seized the opening to insert his own authority, as Bill had expected. "Prank or not, we have to do *something*. No, not with General Brown's troops, not initially. That would stir up too much interest from the press, but I have an agent in mind to lead this initiative. As for the other members of his team, well, all they would need to know is that they're searching for an escaped criminal from one of the New York state penitentiaries. Only my lead would understand they're looking for something else."

"How does the CIA find jurisdiction to become involved with a domestic prisoner escape?" Brian Krawley countered. "Why not the local police?"

Bill spoke up. "I'll loan you a team of special agents to assist in the search, taking direction from your lead agent. We should still ask for local police cooperation and some of General Brown's helicopters. We'll have to feed the press a story about an escaped prisoner, someone extremely dangerous who must be found at all costs before innocent people are hurt. We'll need some favors at one of those state prisons, say the Adirondack Correctional Facility in Ray Brook."

The National Security Advisor nodded his approval. "Agreed. We can't have them refuting our story while we conduct the search. Later we can issue a statement to the effect that we were fed incorrect information, call it a computer glitch or something—those always come in handy—and apologize for all the commotion we caused. We can't be criticized for taking all necessary actions to protect the public, and we'll find some clerk already skating on thin ice to take the fall as negligent in his or her duties. We kick them to the curb, the public has a few laughs about buggy computers then cheers us for firing someone over it, and life is good."

Bill's forehead creased. "I doubt if the prison board will be too happy about being blamed for an imaginary escaped convict, but I can address those details. I suspect a special grant will be forthcoming, perhaps along the lines of funding

an enhancement to their security procedures so it can be justified from your department. That should make them happy afterwards.”

The National Security advisor nodded. “Agreed.”

“Say he was in the process of being transferred to Attica,” Swann said, “because the Adirondack facility is for medium security offenders and you want to make it believable.”

Bill nodded. “More work for me but I agree with your logic, especially if the army is dispatching helicopters to assist with the search. The more afraid the civilians are, the better chance they’ll stay out of our way.”

“Good plan, gentlemen. I approve,” the Security Advisor said. He cracked his knuckles and prepared to rise.

Swann grinned. “I’ll get in touch with my agent immediately.”

Bill couldn’t let Swann take charge unchallenged. “Hold on, I have one more thing to say—if this does turn out to be true, then it’s an FBI issue, not CIA.” Bill’s eyes turned cold. “The FBI runs with it from there on.”

Swann bristled. “For Christ’s sake, Bill, this isn’t a case of kidnapping and crossing state lines. This could very easily be an extraterrestrial intelligence spying on the United States for malicious purposes, and the CIA is the best agency to handle that scenario. Our department has the resources and talent trained to deal with this the most effectively.”

“Wait one darned minute,” Smith said. He jabbed his finger toward the CIA and FBI agents. “You can’t turn this into some kind of a manhunt! This might be the single most important event in the entire history of mankind. It’s—it’s momentous! Incredible! We have to find out if someone—*something*—arrived here from outer space, yes, but not with professional assassins and rocket launching helicopters!”

Swann’s lips tightened. “With all due respect—”

Smith glared at Swann as he pounded his fist on the podium. “Not with soldiers. Not with policemen!”

“Settle down, Dr. Smith,” Brian Krawley said, looking bored. “Let’s not turn this into a pissing match, okay?”

Smith’s lower lip trembled. “But we should welcome them with open arms. We should invite them here to speak with the President and the world’s leading scientists to impart the wonders of their technology and culture to us. There is so much we could learn.”

“On that much we agree,” Swann said. “They should be brought here and interrogated thoroughly, but if they were so interested in imparting their marvels of technology they would have landed in the Capitol parking lot, not some remote mountain chain in upstate New York.”

Bill shook his head. "Let's complete our investigation before we have this conversation. Despite the visuals, this could still turn out to be a hoax or new model drone from a hostile country. We need to examine that pod."

Swann nodded. "I agree with Bill. Time is of the essence. Then we'll decide who remains in charge and what we're going to do."

"Good teamwork, gentlemen," Brian Krawley said in a loud voice, cutting off Smith's attempted rebuttal.

"I'll call my lead agent to head over there immediately, then arrange for a helicopter so I can see this thing firsthand," Swann said.

Bill held up his hands. "I'll have to pass for now. There's an important meeting I have to attend later today, but I'll have my agents meet your agent at the site with the appropriate forensics equipment, and report to him for instructions."

Smith cleared his throat. "I prefer to believe this visitor is friendly unless proven otherwise, but would like to point out one thing, gentlemen, before you take your leave. It appears you are about to conduct a manhunt, as though that is what you are preparing to find. But you're not searching for a man at all, at least no man like any here on Earth. You cannot expect your usual methods to be adequate or sufficient."

"Thank you, Dr. Smith, we'll take that advice to heart," the Security Advisor said. He turned back to the anxious faces surrounding the table. "Let's bag an extraterrestrial!"

CHAPTER THREE: DOUG

Adirondack Mountains, New York

Doug's head hurt worse, but inside now, not the back where he kept rubbing it without thinking. He wanted to brush it off as allergies but that didn't feel right, as though he knew what the actual problem was but couldn't put his finger on it. And thinking about it only aggravated the headache.

The sun hung low in the western sky when he arrived at the campground, which was centered in a large clearing. It contained a series of small cabins, a park ranger's office, and plenty of open space scattered with ash-seared, pole-mounted iron barbecue grills, splintery wooden picnic benches, and port-o-potty units. Numerous happy couples and families grilled their dinners, filling the air with the mouth-watering aromas of searing steaks, burgers, hotdogs and barbecue chicken. The pleasant sounds of animated conversations and children's laughter echoed across the clearing. Doug smiled at this snapshot of civilization after the past few days spent hiking alone, but his mood turned bittersweet. He was the only solo person in the bunch.

Doug was used to loneliness. An only child who found himself unwilling to commit to a serious relationship as an adult, Doug preferred to focus on his career. A significant other would only get in his way, as past girlfriends discovered after they had "the talk."

Doug shuddered. How he hated "the talk"!

It started off with "Doug, we've been dating for a long time now..." where "a long time" varied between two weeks and two years. Doug would explain that he'd meant what he said when they started dating, he wasn't looking for anything serious, and although someday he hoped to have a family—which was completely true—right now his career needed to come first. Next came the disbelief he could possibly put nanomaterials and polymers before them, followed by any combination of anger, tears, or resignation.

He hated making anyone cry, and was genuinely sorry things didn't work out as planned, even though their plans were made without his knowledge or consent. Lately, he felt it best if he abstained from dating completely to avoid

the unpleasantness of these miscommunications. If only they understood how he felt at some deeper level, since his carefully chosen words failed to convey the passion he reserved for his work....

A pair of unusual violet eyes and flowing locks of auburn hair flashed within his mind, startling him. Like the flick of a switch, they vanished as abruptly as they had appeared.

Doug stopped, rubbing the back of his head. "What the hell?"

The remnant of a wonderful dream, perhaps? A girl....

Yes, there had definitely been a girl in his dream, beautiful and exotic with the most amazing violet eyes he'd ever seen. He struggled to recall more, but that spike in his head threatened to return, forcing him to stop. Even so, he smelled lavender and jasmine and felt warm, smooth skin touching his face. She had been so beautiful.

Doug sighed. *If she were real, I wonder if she'd be thinking of me now like I'm thinking of—*

Doug gasped—his thoughts recoiled and it was like something akin to a door slamming in his mind. He blinked fast several times to help clear his head, uncertain what had just occurred. Fatigue? Sunstroke?

For one very bizarre moment, Doug could have sworn he had touched another person—not with his hands, something else. But what? What else was there?

A whiffle ball struck his face, jerking him back to his surroundings. He smiled at the youngsters who giggled apologies, tossed the ball back to them, and pushed the odd experience out of his mind. It hurt too much to think about.

Doug strolled around a crowd of raucous men wearing mud-stained purple jerseys, stepping over numerous empty beer bottles that littered the ground in their wake. The brazen stench of beer turned Doug's empty stomach sour. He'd never been much for drinking, not even in college where weeks were divided into the categories of "sober" and "drunk" instead of weekdays and weekends.

He made it through the human obstacle course to the door of the cabin with a large "Office" sign nailed across the top in crooked black lettering, only to find a much smaller handwritten sign taped to the door that read "No vacancy."

"Oh, great," Doug groaned. The shuttlebus to his car didn't leave until first light, so he was going to have to sleep on the ground yet again. At the edge of the clearing, he located an empty wooden picnic table, and collapsed on the attached bench with a sigh of relief, burying his face against his arms.

After a short rest, Doug tossed his pack on the ground, marveling at the intricate web of footprints etched into the hard-packed dirt around him. He found himself contemplating who had made each footprint, what had brought

them to this place, and how long ago they'd passed here. These were odd thoughts for someone who barely noticed if the toilet seat was down before sitting on it.

A quick dig into his pack located the portable camping stove and small propane tank, which he assembled and lit with a lighter. He had a few cans of pork and beans left, some dried beef, and plenty of trail mix.

"Yuck." He checked a side pocket but only extracted his bloody shirt which he quickly shoved back before the headache could start up again.

Doug made a face, wishing he'd actually tasted the stuff before trusting Ken's accolades. There was nothing less satisfying than chewing through stale nuts and petrified fruit. If he hadn't been terrified of starving to death, he would have thrown every baggie away his first night on the trail.

Doug surveyed the rest area while his beans simmered in a small pot, but all he could think about was how good it would feel to go home again. The parking lot where his car waited sat only a bus ride away. Doug couldn't wait to turn the AC up full blast before making a beeline for the nearest greasy spoon, order cheeseburgers and other unhealthy food, and wash them down with icy mugs of soda. After that, it was back home to his normal routine, but at least he felt much better now than before he'd left. Vacation accomplished. Nailed it.

Doug paused as he pondered his state of mind. Actually, he really did feel much better! Maybe Ken was a genius instead of a sadist, and there was something to this outdoor life stuff after all. He even felt excited about writing, a passion he'd harbored since a boy, but could never focus on as an adult. Well, if he ever found time in between teaching and lab work, maybe he'd give it a go. The last thing he'd written had been his doctorate dissertation, where Doug discovered he had a flair for telling a story, even if it was non-fiction.

The beans started to boil over, so Doug yanked the pot from the mini-grill and placed it on the table, hoping it wouldn't ignite. While he waited for his beans to cool, he watched a father playing catch with two young boys while their mother unpacked containers from a wicker picnic basket. Doug recalled similar trips with his parents and how much fun they'd always had. His mother constantly fussed he was going to get sunburned if he didn't let her put on plenty of sunscreen, while his father offered ridiculous camping advice they both knew made no sense, like fireflies could spark kindling if your lighter didn't work.

This father scooped up his shrieking boys and carried them over to their picnic table, laughing almost as loud as they were. Doug smiled as he brushed a stray lock of hair from his eyes, wondering if he would ever become a father, and if so, what would his children be like? Did he want boys or girls? Maybe one

of each? Would they giggle with delight when he played with them, too?

But not now. There'd be plenty of time for all that after his career ambitions achieved fruition, and things were just starting to take off. After all, he was only twenty-eight, with the rest of his life ahead of him for stuff like that.

With a wistful sigh, Doug turned his attention to dinner, spooning pork and beans onto a tin plate, when a familiar yet grossly out of place sound roared by overhead. He looked up to see a helicopter materializing in the twilight, beaming a bright spotlight down into the clearing. The manhole-sized searchlight flitted from table to table, generating choruses of protest from each target before the helicopter ambled away, its beam of light swinging back and forth below. The roaring of the rotors faded from Doug's ears about the same time yellow and white spots stopped flashing in front of his eyes.

His heart was pounding in his chest, but he couldn't understand why he'd become so anxious. It was just a stupid helicopter.

"What the hell was that all about?" a camper said. Everyone else milled about looking puzzled or scratching their heads.

A beefy man stared where the helicopter had faded off past the horizon. "That was an army chopper. Why in tarnation would an army chopper be flying out here?"

The ranger stepped out of his cabin and called everyone over, holding his hat in two hands and shuffling back and forth from foot to foot. The crowd gathered before him.

"Folks, I received a phone call from my boss about that helicopter. Something's up, something serious. All I can tell you is he's asking everyone to remain here until tomorrow morning, including me." The ranger loosened his brown tie, sweat beading up across his forehead.

"What on earth for?" demanded one of the frat guys. His friends cheered, toasting him with beer bottles.

An older man wearing a designer sweatshirt raised his hand. "The boy has a valid question. You can't tell us to stay here without a reason." The beer bottles pointed in his direction along with a resounding hoot.

The ranger's eyes darted back and forth as his finger slipped under his shirt collar, opening the top button. "I really can't say, my boss didn't know. But that's the message, folks. I'm sorry."

For several moments the crowd looked stunned, glancing back and forth at each other as though seeking approval to be outraged. When they saw their own frustration reflected back, they began to murmur to one another. After another moment, the bolder people took heart and began to shout.

"You can't keep us here!" a tall woman said. "I have to get home."

“What is this, some sort of joke?” an elderly man said. “Some people have jobs to get back to, you know!”

“This is our vacation! We don’t have to listen to you, you’re just a ranger, not a cop. Right?”

Doug lost track of all the hostile comments fired at the ranger, who held his hands up, palms facing toward the crowd, looking flustered. His mouth opened and closed without saying anything. Doug felt sorry for the man. Still, he didn’t like the sound of this either. What possible reason could they have for locking down the campsite? Hopefully they’d have this cleared up by morning. He wanted to get home too.

“Hey, listen up everyone, the news!” a heavysset man said. The crowd huddled around his picnic table, where a digital tablet broadcast a live news video feed. Doug pushed through the crowd until he was close enough to hear.

“...an anonymous but trusted source has revealed that an extremely dangerous convict escaped from this prison and is roaming free somewhere in the region. However, local prison officials have denied any such occurrence took place. The identity of the alleged escapee, a convicted rapist and murderer, has not been revealed. The FBI and local militia have joined the search and police are urging people in the area to remain in their homes, not to panic, and await further information.”

“Strange,” Doug said to himself, his stomach in knots. But his apprehension wasn’t from fear that this dangerous character was anywhere nearby, though the families around him looked worried. They peered into the darkening forest yelling for their children to return to their tables or cabins, or clutched them if they were within arm’s grasp.

No, something else troubled Doug, a foreboding sensation as though.... He rubbed the back of his head. It had been so bizarre. The helicopter’s beam had seized on him just for a moment, no longer than a second, but he’d felt horribly exposed, like how a fox might feel when the hounds caught its scent and began the chase.

“Quick, let’s pack up and go,” one woman said.

“Best thing to do is stay together,” another man said. “Besides, it’s getting dark. D’you want to come across this guy all alone at night?”

The comments escalated. “Why don’t we have some protection here?”

Doug frowned. It seemed a mob mentality was taking hold with hysteria building as each person inflamed the next. He glanced at the ranger, whose scowl seemed to mirror Doug’s concerns. His fingers twitched against the holster looped through his belt.

“Hey, that guy’s all by himself!” One lanky woman pointed at Doug while

backing away.

“Yeah!”

Like a dry box of tinder, her accusation became the spark needed to ignite the crowd’s paranoia. Grateful for a target, they all turned toward Doug.

Doug’s eyebrows went up. “I didn’t escape from any prison! I’m just hiking along the trail, like all of you are.”

The people pulled together away from him, making it difficult to identify who was saying what in the twilight.

“He’s got a pack. Only a hiker would have one.”

“How do we know it was his...before today?”

“There was blood on his clothes, I saw him shove it back in his pack real quick!”

The ranger stepped between Doug and the grumbling crowd. “Now wait one minute, folks! Look, we can’t go around accusing every lone guy we see of being this escaped convict. Besides, in case you didn’t notice, they didn’t even bother to show a picture of him. That seems a little strange to me.”

The elderly man shrugged. “Whatever, Ranger Rick, I’m out of here at first light. An’ if anyone comes too close to my tent before then, I’ve got something bullet shaped for him to chew on.” He stared directly at Doug.

Doug’s eyes widened, but he didn’t know what to say. He had a feeling talking right now would only upset the mob more. He was very glad the person who had witnessed his bloody shirt went unheeded, but what if they pressed the matter? Would Doug lose the ranger’s protection and face the mercy of this enflamed crowd alone?

The ranger sighed. “I can’t force you to stay here, so if you want to leave then go right ahead.” He turned to Doug. “Look, sir, these people sure are riled up. You’d better camp away from that group there just to be on the safe side.”

Doug made a face. “Sure thing.” He didn’t want to be alone either, but he also didn’t want to get shot by some hot-headed redneck.

The ranger put a hand on Doug’s shoulder. “Listen, I’ll be staying in the office cabin tonight in case of any trouble. You pitch your tent next to my cabin so I can watch out for you. I doubt there’ll be any trouble once these folks settle down, but better safe than sorry.”

“Thanks.” Doug smiled before sitting back down to finish off his dinner, ignoring the fearful glances people shot toward him from the corner of their eyes. Having a bunch of strangers treat him as a pariah was unsettling, but a deeper current of angst throbbed inside him that he couldn’t quite place. He felt...hunted. He did his best to ignore it and act normal. After all, no one was after *him*. Unless his bloody shirt became visible...maybe after dark he could get

rid of it, but right now too many suspicious glares made that impossible.

Later on, Doug unrolled his sleeping bag over a patch of grass next to the office cabin and tried to fall asleep. Several people still shot him dirty looks by the flickering campfires, but they were appeased he was sleeping away from them. Doug figured in their minds, the ranger was keeping an eye on him to protect them, rather than the other way around.

As he dozed, an inexplicably familiar stranger's face danced within his mind, scared, lonely, and confused, her shimmering hand reaching toward him though the inky blackness of night.

CHAPTER FOUR: SWANN

Helicopter, en route: Adirondack Mountains, New York

About an hour after the emergency security meeting, Swann and his favorite agent, Sylvia Hines, hurried toward a waiting helicopter on the roof of CIA headquarters in Langley. They took their seats behind the pilot, facing backward across from two stone-faced secret service agents.

Swann tried to focus on his smartphone, though he found it difficult to keep his arm from Sylvia's shoulder when they sat this close together. How long had it been since they'd last hooked up now, a week? Two?

Swann bit his lip to forget how good the heat from Sylvia's thigh would feel if he slid just a little closer.

His wife had become clingy lately, making it harder to find time to sneak away. He wondered if she suspected anything, then chuckled. He was the Director of the CIA! He'd taken great care to make sure no one suspected anything between him and Sylvia. Confident in his subterfuge capabilities, Swann pushed the concern from his mind.

Swann reviewed the facts of this bizarre case as the motion of the helicopter lulled him into a semi-trance. Outlandish, yet if a buffoon like Smith could convince the President to convene an emergency meeting, there had to be something to it. An opportunity such as this did not arise often, and Swann had made it where he was today by leveraging the unordinary to his advantage. Had he acted too rashly in assuming responsibility? Or would the outcome of this case streamline his appointment to National Security Advisor if the President was re-elected? Even a different president would beg for his appointment.

The more Swann pondered the situation, the more excited he became. If he apprehended a genuine alien, preferably in the act of some malicious activity, he'd become the world's biggest hero. Hell, forget the National Security Advisor's job, he'd launch his own political career. Senator Swann? Vice-President Swann? Hell, President Swann! Had a nice ring, didn't it? This was a lucrative prospect—provided he obtained results. He was risking a lot against astronomical odds, but hey, no guts no glory.

Could an alien actually exist, let alone run amok around upstate New York? Swann frowned. Oh, hell, there *had* to be one. Nothing less would justify the extent of the manhunt he was about to release upon the unsuspecting civilians. Still, even if he apprehended some high-tech terrorist cell, it would be almost as good and totally worth it in the end.

His strategy was completely off the wall, and violated at least a dozen state and federal laws—not to mention the Constitution—but this wasn't the time to concern himself with trivialities. As long as it obtained results. The Patriot Act, when properly manipulated, carried a great deal of weight.

He glanced over at Sylvia and watched her stifling a yawn. She was amusing herself by smiling at the secret service agents Swann had drafted to accompany them. When she caught him frowning at her, she made a face and turned toward the window, where the rooftops of houses zoomed by far below.

Despite their affair, Sylvia remained a mystery to him, and sometimes Swann wondered who was using who. Still, she was an excellent agent he trusted implicitly, which was why he'd brought her along. He smirked. Any time together in a hotel was purely an unplanned bonus.

His lead agent, Devry Parsoweth, should have arrived on-site with Bill's FBI agents, heading the investigation until Swann arrived. Dev had helped Swann out on a number of special investigations with political ripples and always proved loyal and competent. He considered Dev and Sylvia his best people, and the only two he could trust with the future of his career.

Sylvia tapped her fingernails against her leg, making Swann wonder what she was thinking. Did she consider her life as a CIA field agent boring, spicing things up by sleeping with the boss? Swann felt sometimes she regretted their affair, but kept it going because it was easier to go along than end it. Their pillow talk typically involved Swann lamenting about his unappreciative wife and spoiled adult children, but when he asked Sylvia how she felt about her life, the answer was always the same. Silence.

Catching him sneaking glances at her now like some overgrown schoolboy, Sylvia turned toward him, raised her sunglasses, and arched an eyebrow. He grinned in return, prompting her to roll her eyes, but she was smiling as the frames dropped back to the bridge of her nose.

Since she was in one of her quiet moods, Swann tried to get her talking. "So, what do you think about this mission?"

Sylvia shrugged. "Sounds kinda silly to me, Swann. Not why I busted my ass through field training."

"Yeah, but think about the evidence, Sylvia." Swann pointed a finger toward her. "If you find whatever came out of that pod and save the world, do you

know what that makes you?”

Sylvia raised her sunglasses again. “I know you’ll take all the credit, so no one will notice me. As usual.” Sunglasses down.

Ouch. Swann’s smartphone began chirping before he could respond. He held it up to his ear. “Yeah?”

It was Dev, but the agent’s usual deep, calm voice sounded shrill. “It’s gone, Swann!”

Swann shook his head. “What’s gone, Dev, your sanity? Speak coherently, for Christ’s sake.”

“It was right here, Swann, the FBI guys had just started mapping out the surrounding area, when there came this sound like—like a soda bottle opening, a hiss of air, and the pod just wasn’t there.”

Sylvia’s sunglasses were up. “What’s gone?”

Swann contemplated this news with mixed feelings while Sylvia, impatient as ever, punched his arm.

“Easy, Syl, easy, you’ll hurt me.” Swann frowned, wondering if his instincts were on target, as fantastic as that might be. Sure, maybe this could have turned out to be a hoax or satellite camera malfunction, but things didn’t just disappear into thin air. He talked into the phone. “Hell, Dev, if it was anyone but you telling me this, I’d make sure you shared whatever you’re drinking. You sure about this, or you pulling my leg?”

“Scout’s honor.”

Swann acknowledged the sincerity within Devry’s voice. “We’ll be there soon. Make sure the site remains secure and the FBI guys do a thorough job. Swann out.” He disconnected the call.

Sylvia hit his arm again. “Tell me.”

Swann turned toward her. “The pod vanished, right in front of Dev’s eyes.”

“Bullshit. He’s putting you on.”

Swann shook his head. “Nah, Dev was telling the truth. I know when he’s lying, like that time he tried to call in sick from the ski lodge. That fake cough was downright criminal.”

Sylvia dropped her sunglasses back over her eyes. “You’re right, Devry can’t lie for shit. Well you said it was an *alien* pod, right? Easy come, easy go. Now what?”

Swann shrugged, tapping his phone against his leg. “Something came out before it vanished. I’ve got some things lined up to help us find out what.”

Sylvia sighed. “Please don’t go overboard again, Swann. The last time you put your ass in the fire you almost took out half of Delhi proving you were right.”

Swann glared at her. “I *was* right, though, wasn’t I?”

Sylvia looked out the window but didn't reply.

He laughed. "I was, you know I was. I'm always right, and that's why I'm the guy with the fancy title in front of my name."

Sylvia turned back toward him. "What title is that—asshole?"

Swann bristled, but before he could respond, the pilot turned his head over the bench that separated them and yelled over the roar of the rotors. "That's your site down below, you want me to land?"

Swann glanced out his window. "Yeah, but on the opposite end from where they put the stakes and ribbons. You can see them at the far end, over there."

The pilot gave him a thumbs up and turned back to his controls.

The helicopter gently touched down at the far end of a meadow strewn with patches of tall, swaying weeds and wildflowers that bent beneath the wind of the spinning rotors. They stepped away from the decelerating blades and surveyed the meadow in silence.

It was roughly the size of two football fields, surrounded on all sides by steep cliffs as though scooped out of rock by a gargantuan spoon. Swann searched for anything out of the ordinary, but saw nothing besides an issue of *National Geographic*.

Sylvia folded her arms across her chest. "Holy crap, Swann, if an alien landed here, how do we know what it even looks like? It could be disguised as...a rock or a tree."

Swann pursed his lips as he considered. She was right; they were dealing with an unprecedented situation and had to consider angles previously impossible. Sometimes Sylvia said things that revealed how intelligent she was within that sexy body. "We don't, Syl, but I'm working on the premise that it's humanoid in appearance. If they were smart enough to build a ship capable of space travel, I'm sure they can disguise themselves to look enough like us to fit in."

Devry jogged toward them from across the meadow, his long, powerful legs making quick progress. It never failed to impress Swann how fast the large-framed African American could move when he needed to. Why Dev wasn't making ten times the salary as an NFL linebacker remained a mystery. It sure wasn't so he could see Swann's handsome face every day.

Swann and Dev's friendship went back for many years, when Swann was an up-and-coming CIA executive in the Office of Transnational Issues and Dev a bright-eyed newbie fresh out of the Clandestine Service Program. Dev had a soft voice like butter on hot toast, but could be quite a handful when riled. Unfortunately, he didn't care what rank you held if you pissed him off, and Swann had to pull his balls from the fire quite a few times before he learned the golden rule of hierarchy—never mouth off to anyone ranked above you.

Devry was a good friend to have. As an agent, his loyalty was larger than his biceps, and as a friend, there wasn't much he wouldn't do if Swann asked him to, including covering for him on those nights he was working late—with Sylvia in a DC hotel room.

Devry arrived waving his arms, barely out of breath, his bald head gleaming beneath the overhead sun. "Big Kahuna! Am I glad you're here. This shit is freaking me out."

Devry had been born and raised in Hawaii before transferring to Virginia to work with the CIA. Swann thought if he had lived in Hawaii, he'd probably still be there, even if it meant making a living painting mermaids on seashells, but he was glad Devry worked for him.

"Those FBI clowns find anything to explain what happened?"

Devry nodded at Sylvia, who barely waved back. Yeah, those two didn't like each other much. Swann never really understood why, but then he was usually too busy banging her to ask.

Dev grabbed Swann by both shoulders. "Guess what they found?"

"Their asses? I don't know, that's what I'm paying you for. Tell me."

Dev squeezed Swann's shoulders harder and lowered his already soft voice a notch. "Something definitely stepped out of that ship before it vanished. We're sure now."

Swann brightened. "How do you know?"

His agent grinned. "We found a footprint!"

Swann turned to Sylvia, grinning. "There you go, Syl. Not a rock or a tree, but something with at least one foot."

Sylvia shrugged, opting to remain silent.

Devry shared Swann's excitement. "What now, Big Kahuna? We gotta find him."

Swann extricated himself from Dev's grip, patted his agent on the back to show his appreciation, then turned to stare at the survey site across the meadow. "Oh, we will, Dev, we will. I've taken great pains to make sure whoever stepped out of that pod will be caught. I've got the net cast so tight that even a flea on a flea's ass won't make it through. Unless he disappeared like that pod did, we're going to bring him in, dead or alive."

CHAPTER FIVE: DOUG

Adirondack Mountains, New York

A cry of distress jerked Doug awake. He scoured the darkness for some sign of the person who had called out, but found only sleeping campers lying next to dying campfires. He turned his attention further away to the nearby woods.

Nothing there either...wait. There, to the left, just within the perimeter of the forest—there was something *glowing*. Was that...was that a person?

His heart in his throat, Doug decided to wake the ranger.

“No!”

Doug blinked, unsure where that had come from. Surely alerting the ranger was the right course of action? He had certainly wanted to a moment earlier, but now he wavered, half out of his sleeping bag.

Did he hear a sigh?

“Remember me, Douglas. I cannot block your memories any longer, regardless. It isn’t working.”

Illumination surged through him, as though heavy curtains opened from within a dark room. The girl from last night? Wait...it *hadn’t* been a dream?

Without thinking further, Doug slipped out of his sleeping bag, pulled on his heavy hiking boots, and hurried across the campground around the sleeping bodies. The mountain night air, still cool in mid-June, blew through his t-shirt and sweatpants, making him shiver. He was pulled unrelentingly toward her. She was real!

Memories seeped into Doug’s consciousness like frames from an old black and white movie, jittery and incomplete. He remembered falling down a ravine, his head turned around at the disappearing bear, tumbling through branches and pinecones until his head struck something.

Hard.

Doug rubbed the back of his head, remembering the hot stickiness and nauseating stench of copper. He wasn’t sure what happened next, except he had felt cold. Very cold. And his shirt had become sodden with blood.

He was close to the woods now, to the place where the glowing figure stood.

As he neared, the wraithlike creature turned and glided deeper into the woods. Doug hesitated, glancing first at the trees before him, and then the cabins behind, illuminated by the faint light from a slivered moon. The wind grew cold, stirring up leaves and branches, and muting other sounds with rustlings and ghostly whispers. What was he doing, following specters into the darkness of the woods? Was he seeing things? Was he chasing a will-o'-the-wisp off the edge of a cliff? He wrestled with his memories, uncertain exactly what had happened and what had not.

A voice called out from the darkness. "Just a little further, Douglas, away from view of the other seedlings."

It was the same musical, slightly gruff inflection from last night. Doug's legs moved him deeper until the woods concealed him from camp.

"Who are you?" Doug asked. He looked around frantically, but could not see anyone. An owl hooted from a far-off perch. "Where are you?"

"I am right here." She stepped out from behind a tree directly in front of him, surrounded by a shimmering aura of yellow light he figured came from some high-tech fiber optic gadget, maybe a belt or necklace, and put it aside for the moment to focus on her face.

Recognition set in, and Doug found himself unable to speak or even catch his breath with the confirmation she had not been just a dream. She was as beautiful as he remembered, if not more so. He recalled her hovering over him, holding his face in her soft hands, her skin burning hot.

"You *are* real." He reached out a trembling hand to touch her. She allowed his fingertips to rest against her bare shoulder. The warmth of her skin amazed him, like a heating pad at its highest setting. The analytical part of his mind raced furiously as he tried to formulate an explanation, while his fingers relished the contact.

She was still wearing that odd arrangement of scarves—he remembered them now from last night—as though a network of silken belts intertwined about her body. She stared at his hand with a confused look on her face, seemingly surprised by her own tolerance.

Then she giggled—a nervous reflex? He felt compelled to gaze into her eyes, those amazing, large, strangely violet eyes.

Her smile turned mischievous. "Don't stare too long."

Doug pulled back with a start. How long had he been entranced? It seemed only a moment, yet from the ache in his knees it felt like he'd been standing still for a while.

Doug struggled to take control of the situation. "What's your name?"

"I am Aldrea." She continued to smile at him.

His knees trembled with excitement. How could he possibly have forgotten last night? He was speechless. She was really...real.

She arched an eyebrow. "Are you finished feeling my shoulder?"

"Huh?" Doug was surprised to find his hand still lingered there. He pulled it back to his side and looked down at his feet, immersed in pinecones. "Sorry."

She giggled. "No, you are not, not in the slightest."

"No, I guess I'm not." He found his eyes rising back to her face. Her beauty and confidence intimidated him, yet it felt right to stand close to her, to look at her. He knew she was a woman he could never lie to, even unintentionally.

She nodded. "No, you cannot, I will always know when you are."

"How did you—" Doug started, but she cut him off.

"Listen to me carefully. I need your help, Douglas, and since I have saved your life, I feel justified in asking. After all, if not for me, you would no longer be here, would you?"

Doug realized she was right.

Her eyes glanced down. "I tried to force you to forget but—never mind that. We have not much time before they come. Will you help me?"

Doug frowned. He had no idea who she was, only that somehow she had saved him from bleeding to death yesterday after he fell. Yet, he felt so close to her, so connected, now that he could remember.

She *had* saved his life, he was certain of that much.

Doug nodded. "Of course, but how?"

"Just behave in a normal manner," Aldrea said. She frowned at him. "I must be your—how do you word it—friend of girl?" She looked confused, knitting her brows in concentration before brightening. "Oh, girlfriend. For some reason you have suppressed that word in your mind. Because of...Dana? She was not worth it—trust me. I have known a thousand women just like her in as many places, and the best of them are not worth the hoof of a groutsnap."

"Dana?" Doug frowned. Dana had been his last girlfriend, the one who invited him over while she was in bed with another guy after they'd had "the talk". That one ended with *him* breaking up with *her*. But how had this Aldrea known about Dana? And what the heck was a groutsnap? An image of a strange four-legged creature, a cross between a cow and a deer, flashed into his head.

Aldrea pointed a delicate finger at him. "Listen carefully, Douglas. In a moment or two we are going to be overrun by a large number of your militants, who will then proceed to interrogate everyone at this campsite. If I remain here, they will take one look and decide there is something odd about me, then they will take me away, especially after I offer no documentation to confirm my point of origin."

“There’s nothing odd about you, unless beauty is considered strange.” Doug felt his face redden, and was grateful for the darkness. Where had that come from? He’d never been much of a flirt, but felt comfortable with this amazing woman, even if he didn’t quite understand any of this.

Aldrea smiled, and the glow hovering about her body flared a bright pink before it disappeared. Doug blinked, thinking his vision had blurred. He could have sworn the light emanated directly from her skin.

Her eyes turned pensive beneath the splinter of moonlight. “Thank you for the compliment, but I am not in a position to take any chances, so any action that will”—she paused for a second, eyes closed—“hedge my bets, should be taken.”

Doug shrugged, not quite sure she was serious. The analytical part of his brain screamed wacko, but something about what happened last night, the details still jelling within his head, compelled him to help her. He decided to play it off casually. “Okay, so you’re my girlfriend. Does that mean I can I kiss you?”

Aldrea’s glow reappeared, flickering crimson. “Only if absolutely necessary. Douglas, you cannot possibly understand my situation, but I know that you are a good and decent seed—er, person. I would never think to ask this of you, only I am so tired, Douglas, so very tired.”

“Tired? Why are you tired?” Doug was surprised he felt so concerned, but he did.

Aldrea sighed. “I spent half a...Terran day in an exhausted slumber from repairing the damage to your head, which is why I am still here behind your militants’ search screen. If I had let you die I would have made it well beyond their roadblocks, and could have reached some measure of safety, or at least anonymity, without help from you or anyone else. But if you do not wish to assist me now, that is understandable, and I will leave.”

“Wait a minute,” Doug said. “I’ll help you, and I *do* appreciate that you saved my life. I was only joking about the kissing thing, that’s just my sense of humor, you know? I’ll help you.”

“Sense of humor?” She closed her eyes again, revealing long, full lashes. “Oh, yes, I thought so, but please, no joking now—my life is in danger. You can exercise your sense of humor to me after we return to Long Island.”

Doug’s mouth opened. This was getting bizarre. “How do you know where I live? Now look, I said I’d help you and I will, partly because you saved me last night, and also because it seems...right. But what the heck is this all about? Who are you? Where are you from? Why are these soldiers searching for you? You can’t be that escaped prisoner that’s all over the news?”

Aldrea put her hand up to his cheek, a soft, warm touch that sent electric

currents sparking throughout his body. “You will not believe me even if I tell you, and besides, there is no time right now. Trust me, Douglas, and I will tell you all, but not here, not when they might interrogate you before we reach safety. Perhaps later when we arrive at your home I may share more with you.”

“You’re...*staying* with me?” Doug said. His jaw dropped at the thought. Did he need to have “the talk” before the relationship even began?

Her head drooped. “For now, until I am safe, and perhaps until I can settle on this—in your town. I will need help at first. You are honest. Most seedlings are not—believe me, I know, I have studied you.”

“Seedlings?” Doug recalled she had used that term before. It had to be some foreign idiom. His brows furrowed. Her accent was a bit choppy, as though English were not her primary language, so she was probably from some other country. But which one? And why was she here?

“No, I am not from a different Terran geo-political boundary.”

Doug thought that was a strange way for an American to talk, but whatever. People visited or emigrated from all over the world. He tried again. “So you’re from a different state?”

“I am not from *this* geo-political boundary either. I am from...somewhere else.” Her eyes turned upward.

Doug’s spine twisted into ice as he realized two things at the same time. First, it was apparent she believed she wasn’t from Earth, if he grasped the meaning behind her strange choice of vocabulary.

But far more eerie than where she thought she came from, which Doug could attribute to some delusional disorder, was the realization he had not spoken his first question aloud.

She smiled at him, her eyes glistening with mischievous amusement. “No, you did not.” Then, with a graceful spin, she made a complete rotation while glowing a pleasant buttery-yellow. Without a doubt, her own body was the source of illumination.

Doug gaped at her, finally beginning to understand, or at least allowing himself to speculate, about Aldrea’s origin. Something tickling the back of his mind helped him believe, although the enormity of what he was thinking defied all logic. Could it be she wasn’t...from this world? Had she actually read his mind?

She arched an eyebrow. “No, I am not, and yes, I did, although not by choice.”

Doug’s body stiffened. “But that isn’t possible.”

Aldrea appeared on the verge of saying more when a series of rumblings and blinding searchlights tore apart the tranquility of the night. Army jeeps bounced

by between the trees, heading toward the rest area, each filled with grim-faced soldiers carrying rifles. One jeep driver noticed them and immediately roared over while his front passenger beamed a powerful spotlight directly into their eyes. Doug instinctively grabbed Aldrea's small soft hand, pulling her close against him. She did not resist, but pressed her inexplicably warm body against his with perfect symmetry. He almost forgot what was happening as radiant heat flushed through his body, erasing the night chill from his bones, but with a concerted effort he managed to focus back to the crisis at hand.

A hazy figure behind the light barked out an order. "Identify yourselves."

Doug shielded his eyes with his free hand. "Hey, what is all this? Can't a guy have a little privacy with his girlfriend?"

A man sitting in the rear seat barked an order. "Relax, Private." The light moved down to the ground at their feet. "Sorry, you two, my men are a little jumpy tonight."

Doug made out an older soldier with a lot of metal hanging from his uniform. "What's going on here? Since when is it an act of war to wander off into the woods for a little fun?"

Aldrea flashed Doug a bemused look but said nothing, her raised eyebrows indicating his effortless transition into the role of boyfriend impressed her.

The soldier stepped out of the jeep and approached them. "There's an escaped convict in the area."

From the three-striped emblem on his uniform, Doug decided the soldier was a sergeant. "Escaped convict? Here?" Doug shrugged his shoulders. "I know there was some excitement going on back at the camp earlier but we didn't pay too much attention to it."

"Well, it's a serious matter." The sergeant stepped closer. "I'll need to see some ID from both of you, and then we're giving everyone a free ride out of the mountains. When the fugitive has been captured, you can return."

Doug frowned. He knew Aldrea didn't have any identification, or at least the kind the soldier wanted to see. "Well, I have my wallet with me but my girlfriend didn't bother bringing her purse along. She lives with me, though."

The sergeant shrugged. "Very well, you can take that up with the people at the interview camp several miles from here. No one leaves the mountains until they give you the golden seal of approval."

Doug tilted his head. "What are you talking about? You can't interrogate us, that's illegal. It's obvious we're not escaped convicts."

The sergeant stared him down. "I have my orders. You'll just have to take that up with the folks waiting below, and you'll be free to complain to your lawyer or congressman once they've released you. We'll swing over by the camp

to grab your things. Come on.” He motioned to the soldier next to the driver to get out and sat there, pointing to the empty rear seats.

Doug noticed other soldiers taking up positions in a perimeter around the campground. There was no possible way he could lead the girl out of this. They were heading for the interview camp, whatever that was, like it or not. She was not a menace, and all of these men with flashlights and guns only meant to hurt her. He refused to let that happen.

“Write a letter? An excellent idea, *Corporal*,” Doug said. “We’ll do exactly that. Come on, honey.” He pulled Aldrea into the back of the jeep next to him. Although her body trembled, her eyes remained steadfast and firm.

After retrieving Doug’s pack from the camp amidst the chaos and outrage from all directions, their jeep turned sharply away from camp and over an uneven trail.

Doug squeezed Aldrea’s hand gently with a confident smile. She wore a brave face, but he could feel her fear as thick as mud. He glanced at the stoic soldiers in the front seat, worried if he said anything to comfort her, they might overhear despite the roar of the engine. Then Doug wondered if she would be able to hear his thoughts as she had earlier. He felt like an idiot, but turned to make sure she saw his face so she’d know he was up to something.

“Trust me, I’ll get you through this.”

*“But the papers they want to see, I do not have any identification. If they try to verify what we tell them by contacting my parents”—*here her thoughts choked with inexplicable sorrow.

Then Doug nearly jumped out of the jeep when he realized she hadn’t replied out loud, but he had heard her voice inside his head. His stomach twisted into knots. Not only was he transmitting, but receiving as well!

Doug took a deep breath. He could handle this. *“So...is this what telepathy feels like?”*

The girl rolled her eyes. *“It is not a big deal, really.”*

Doug sure thought it was. The scientist inside him overcame his initial alarm. *“What else can you do?”*

“Never mind,” she thought back. *“Tell me what will I do if they try to determine where I live or where I come from?”*

“Don’t worry.” Doug glanced at the soldiers in the front to confirm they were oblivious to this exchange of dialogue. Being able to have a conversation without actually speaking was kind of cool. *“I’ll...I’ll bluff them past that. We’ll pretend you’re an orphan if we have to, but I’ll get you through this, I promise.”*

Two iridescent teardrops slid down her cheeks as she bowed her head against his shoulder, the bouncing of the jeep making it difficult to avoid jostling her.

"I'm sorry." A wave of loneliness and grief washed over Doug's mind like a physical blow, almost overwhelming his senses before it abruptly stopped. Aldrea straightened, but kept her hand on his arm. *"I must be strong so their sacrifice will not be in vain. I owe it to them to live the life they gifted me."*

Doug didn't understand what she was talking about, but sensed not to press her. There would be time for explanations later if he could get her past the upcoming hurdle. She turned to meet his worried gaze, and he saw that her eyes appeared calmer, though awfully sad. She was clearly struggling with some terrible occurrence that had recently wounded her, but he left her to her thoughts, preoccupied with his own.

It was obvious to him the army wasn't searching for an escaped convict, but for Aldrea. What exactly she was and where she had come from still wasn't clear to Doug, but despite the uncertainty he knew he wanted to do his best to protect her. He could not explain this to himself other than noting he was aware, at some deep-rooted level, that Aldrea was no danger to anyone, let alone the government. If he didn't help her, it was very possible she would be cruelly and perhaps fatally interrogated. If some alien power *had* sent her here for a malevolent purpose, Doug was certain she would not need his help at all, and perhaps more important, she never would have bothered to save his life.

He closed his eyes thinking about the map he'd studied before coming out here. The Adirondack Mountains of New York consisted of around six million acres just south of Canada and north of Albany, stretching west toward Utica. The search process would incite a great deal of speculation and outrage from the public, requiring numerous army reserve troops to handle it. There would be confused and angry people across the region undergoing similar screenings, so mistakes were bound to take place. No matter how meticulous the army tried to be, with a search scope of this size, there had to be a way to bluff Aldrea through this.

He turned to the quiet girl sitting next to him, her body still pressed against his, emanating warmth as though she were part furnace. Thanks goodness she appeared able to control that little glowing habit she had, otherwise they might as well try and make a run for it. Why did she appear so fragile and melancholy? Why did he care what happened to her so much?

Doug bit his lip as an ominous thought struck him. She clearly had mental powers he didn't understand. Was she capable of forcing him to do things against his will?

Somehow, he didn't think so, but the suspicion lingered. How could he be certain? He stared off into the darkness, trying to ignore the uncomfortable bouncing as the army jeep took them closer to discovery. He wiped his clammy

hands on his sweatpants.

He glanced over at Aldrea, where the soft curves of her face pressed against his shoulder before sliding into her slender neck. She appeared so normal, other than the subtlest discrepancies in features, such as a smallness to her earlobes and the impression that perhaps her cheekbones weren't supposed to be quite as high as they were. Her eye color was certainly odd, but he could say she was wearing color contacts, and a fever explained the intense warmth of her body, which hopefully didn't exceed the human norm by a factor this excuse would not cover.

Eyebrows furrowed in concentration, Doug struggled to formulate a plan to save the life of the girl who had saved his, as the jeep sped them through the night toward the interrogation camp.

CHAPTER SIX: ALDREA/DOUG

Adirondack Mountains, New York

Aldrea allowed herself to drift away for the first time since that horrible moment when she awoke in the escape pod and realized her parents were gone forever.

She still sensed Douglas' thoughts and emotions in the background despite her best efforts to shield her mind from them. His thoughts were comforting—which paradoxically made her uneasy. How could a mere seedling have this effect on her?

His shoulder was cool against her face, and solid. She felt safer now since landing on this world—so familiar from the observation post on an orbiting ship, yet scary and intimidating up close on the ground. Watching the seedlings' interactions and progressions from a safe distance was very different from riding behind their armed, barbaric soldiers in a primitive transportational mechanism that struck every bump and cranny until her teeth rattled. Yet now that Douglas had agreed to help her, she felt less alone and cautiously optimistic. She allowed a slight smile to flit across her face as she burrowed deeper against his shoulder.

The jeep left the woods and pulled onto a paved road filled with an endless chain of open-topped army transport trucks bearing other reluctant passengers. Their driver managed to squeeze in between two transports, yelling “Hang tight!” over the roar of engines and shouting people. The tang of diesel overwhelmed Aldrea's sensitive olfactory organ, and she wrinkled her nose in a manner she knew Douglas found...cute. Despite everything, his goofy smile made her laugh, and for a moment, she forgot she was newly orphaned and stranded on a primitive world very far from home.

They reached an enormous compound surrounded by wire fencing twice her height, gated in the middle of each of its four sides, with mounted spotlights bright enough to transform night into day. From the way the fence tilted in many places, it was obvious they had erected it in a hurry. The engines of the trucks, leaving as quickly as they emptied, competed with rows of noisy generators strung together with thick black cables crisscrossing over the hard-packed dirt ground. Aldrea sniffed at the primitive technology. How wasteful.

About the size of a football stadium, the fenced in space contained banks of trailers and armed soldiers trying to maintain control over the growing crowds of people herded from the trucks. Load after load of disheveled, sleepy-eyed men, women, children, and screaming babies joined the chaos, clutching bags and backpacks with no clue what was going on.

As Aldrea stood with Douglas in one corner of the compound waiting for instructions on where to go next, her anxiety grew. They would want to examine her. They would want to speak to people back in Long Island, who supposedly knew her. They would want her social security number. They would want to see her clothes in Doug's pack. They would want to know where she had procured the odd outfit she was wearing.

And when she couldn't satisfy any of these requests? Her thoughts raced. They would put her aside for closer inspection. Perhaps there would be a few others standing with her, drifters or hermits roused out of mountain huts or ditches, but all attention would come back to her once they ran a simple blood or DNA test. She knew the invasive extraction of biological matter required some form of legal document, but saw this as a delay, not protection. Then they would lock her away. She would be subjected to further intrusive tests, torture, and interrogation, reducing her to a mindless vegetable. There would be nowhere to run, nothing she could do to escape, and no hope of rescue.

Never before in her life had she ever felt this desolate and alone. It took exceptional willpower to keep from bursting into tears, and more importantly, to contain her glowing reflex from outshining the spotlights that burned down on her head. She dug her nails into the palms of her hands and tried not to scream.

* * * * *

Doug ran interview scenarios through his head as the soldiers guided another load of campers from another truck, pressing them close against the previous arrivals. The overpowering odor of unwashed bodies made him gag.

As the reality of the situation sank in, Doug realized that by pretending to be Aldrea's boyfriend, he had put himself at risk. His plans as a professor, his blossoming lab work, his hopes and dreams—all dashed apart like an atom undergoing fusion if he couldn't make this work. At this point, he had as much reason to save Aldrea for his own benefit as well as hers.

With this realization first and foremost in his head, he continued to wrack his brains to formulate a plan to help Aldrea avoid detection. How was he going to bluff these government types waiting to speak with them in the trailers? Surely they were experts in the finer arts of interrogating aliens.

Doug's head snapped up. Wait a second. There couldn't be experts in this type of interrogation. They had never had an alien among them before, unless you believed the stories in those gossip magazines—which he didn't—so how could they possibly be experts?

"Please stop using that word. It sounds so ugly when you think it like that."

Doug almost jumped into the air, restraining himself with the barest thread of self-control. *"Can't you warn me before you do that?"*

Aldrea flinched as though he had struck her. Her lower lip quivered just the tiniest bit, making him feel like a real jerk. Still, it wasn't cool for her to snatch the thoughts out of his head like that! There were things circulating in there he definitely didn't want her to know, private things, personal things. Her raised eyebrows indicated she already knew. Doug's face flushed and he looked down at the ground.

"What word would you prefer?" He said this aloud, but in a tender tone that surprised him as it left his mouth. It certainly didn't reflect his conflicted state of mind. Why did he feel so attached to her?

She smiled and lowered her eyes to her small, clasped hands hooked together over her tiny belly. Once again, the raw beauty of her face took away his breath.

"Why not simply consider me...a visitor? It sounds much nicer. And I cannot help reading your outmost thoughts even though I've been trying desperately not to. My people do not consider overhearing thoughts very polite. But if you had the slightest ability to shield your mind, I would not be able to pick up anything, so you cannot blame me completely."

Doug raised his head. *"So this is my fault somehow?"*

Aldrea shrugged. *"Well, that part is, though I cannot determine why I am unable to get you out of my head after I—that is..."*

"After you what, exactly?"

Aldrea flashed him her adorable little half-smile. *"Well, I had to enter your mind in order to repair your brain. That is how healing works, of course."*

Doug made a face. *"Of course."*

Was that a nervous giggle she stifled? *"So, yes, I saw a few things you consider personal and private, but I have already forgotten them—mostly—and it is not something I expect I will need to do again anytime soon, therefore you need not worry."*

Doug sighed. *"I needn't, except that you can't stop reading my mind now."*

Aldrea threw up her hands. *"I have already explained to you it is not working."*

Doug smirked. *"How convenient."*

Aldrea glared at him. *"Convenient? Are you implying that I am doing it on purpose? Intentionally intruding upon your thoughts like some perverted mind ravager?"* The indignant outrage emanating from her caught Doug like a slap in the face, making him wince.

“Careful, you’re starting to glow.”

Aldrea’s hand flew to her mouth as though she had said something aloud she hadn’t meant to say. Her eyes flicked up and down her body, but when she realized Doug was lying, they narrowed and her clenched hands jutted against her hips. *“You invented that just to infuriate me!”*

Doug snickered. *“Not to infuriate, just to make you mad.”*

“What?” Aldrea’s face twisted and she glared at Doug with double the venom. *“It means the same thing!”*

“It does?” Well, non-scientific vocabulary had never been one of his better subjects.

Aldrea’s lips twitched as she folded her arms across her chest. *“That is true; you even failed your third grade spelling bee in the second round.”*

Doug’s mouth dropped open. *“Is there anything about me you don’t already know?”*

She laughed. *“Probably not, but it is not as though I enjoy knowing it.”*

Doug’s brows furrowed. *“Wait a minute, what is it about my memories that aren’t enjoyable?”*

Aldrea laughed aloud, a musical sound that melted Doug’s sense of mental violation. *“Speaking with honesty, nothing. I find you strangely endearing in a way I never suspected possible. It is simply considered bad manners for my people to intrude within the mind of another, except for—well, that isn’t important, since it has no relevancy here. But you would have died if I had not intruded. I simply had no choice. I am sorry if it upsets you, and I do understand why it would.”*

He conceded the point despite his reservations about having another person intimate with his most private thoughts and experiences, but he supposed he could deal with it for the time being, until she figured out how to fix it.

“Visitor, huh?” Doug said.

She nodded her head, her eyes sparkling.

Doug smiled at her despite himself. “You have a wonderful voice. You should use it more often.”

She glanced around nervously, but Doug figured everyone else looked too fatigued, worried or outraged to notice them. At least, he hoped so. If anyone from the campground where the army picked them up saw him with Aldrea, they might make comments about how he wasn’t alone anymore. That and the bloody shirt in his bag concerned him the most. The last thing he wanted now was undesirable attention.

Doug stared at Aldrea’s unique outfit with a critical eye, holding his chin between thumb and forefinger. “We’ll have to pretend you hang around the Village a lot.” Why was he only now realizing how outlandish her outfit was, as though he had considered it perfectly normal before? Thankfully, her shoes

consisted of a neutral beige fabric similar to canvas that did not appear out of the ordinary, though he was baffled how she had managed to slip them on since they molded so perfectly to her feet and closed tightly about her ankles.

“There isn’t much hope, is there?” Aldrea asked. She stared him in the eye. “I am just not the type to run and hide and avoid policemen and soldiers. I am not very clever about such things at all. I have been a good, law-abiding citizen my entire life.”

Doug could relate. “Don’t worry, I’ll come up with something. Say, how old are you, anyway?”

She reflected a moment. “Hm, I guess it would equate to around twenty-six of your solar years.”

There was a pause.

Doug cleared his throat, tired of waiting for her to ask him. “I’m twenty-eight.”

“I know,” Aldrea said.

Doug’s face flushed. “Ah, yes, so you do.”

He wasn’t sure what annoyed him more, her knowing his every thought and memory, or her nonchalant attitude about that knowledge. Was his life really that blasé? After a moment of candid reflection, he had to admit that it was. Well, up until now, at least.

He had been born in Seaford, Long Island, in the house where his parents still lived, though now he was paying off his own home in Smithtown. Both his parents came from poorer families and had worked hard all their lives to achieve the modest levels of success they enjoyed today, while providing a comfortable life for their only son until he was old enough to head out on his own. Yeah, Doug had to admit they had spoiled him, but now he paid his own way.

As for a social life, in addition to his main dude, Ken, he maintained a loose-knit circle of work acquaintances with whom he hit the bars on Friday or Saturday nights when they felt up to it. He also spent too much time surfing the internet researching random facts, like where the word “sandwich” originated from. John Montagu, the Earl of Sandwich, circa 1762.

Doug shrugged. Well, even if his life wasn’t as exciting as some secret agent’s, it suited him just fine.

The mood in the compound sobered further as more people were jammed inside. Strangers exchanged nervous glances, but no one said anything further about lawsuits, or demanded to be let loose. The presence of trucks, jeeps, and armed soldiers stationed around the perimeter of the fence had cowed them into a state of submission. Righteous fury was transitioning to fear.

Doug placed a protective arm around Aldrea’s shoulders and held her close

against him, staring with growing trepidation at the guards who surrounded the camp.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DOUG

Adirondack Mountains, New York

Doug yawned, shivering in the pre-dawn chill. “The line’s moving faster, we’re almost there.”

“Too fast,” Aldrea said. She pulled his black hoodie tighter around her shoulders like a cape, leaving the sleeves dangling against her sides. The bottom reached her knees, covering the majority of her odd-looking garment.

Doug folded his arms across his chest, pleased with the results. Sometimes the most effective solutions were the simplest. Now as long as they didn’t find his bloody shirt, since there was no visible head wound to corroborate the injury that caused it, they just might make it out of here together.

He continued to stare at her, no longer analyzing his makeshift clothing cover-up. Something stirred deep inside, some part of himself he hadn’t known existed until he looked at her just now. It took him a few moments to realize the difference. He no longer felt alone, and perhaps more importantly, he had not realized how alone he had felt. All those failed relationships, and “the talk”, were as much due to his reluctance to commit as anything else. It wasn’t that being alone bothered him, for he was comfortable in his own skin, but deep down inside he’d always wanted to open up to another person. Strange how he’d never realized this before now.

Aldrea glanced up and caught him staring, and flashed a mischievous smile his way before the worried expression returned.

The sun broke over the horizon as Doug and Aldrea reached the mobile command center serving as the interview station. Doug tossed his pack to the ground as the door to the converted bus hissed open. Hopefully they wouldn’t notice and search through his belongings where the blood-stained shirt might raise unnecessary attention. He took a deep breath. It was very possible that his entire future rested on whether or not he was able to bluff his way through this interview. His future, and hers.

After exchanging nervous glances, Doug took Aldrea’s hand and climbed the steps inside. He saw three men in suits, each sitting behind a different desk.

With tousled hair and bloodshot eyes, two of the men addressed groups of people clustered in front of their desks while typing away on laptop computers. The third man, his white hair plastered against his scalp, waved them over toward his open desk without looking up from his screen.

The stale air reeked of body odor and burned coffee, making Doug's queasy stomach worse. He scrunched up his nose. The deeper inside the bus he stepped, the worse it grew, until he could barely breathe. Behind him came Aldrea, taking slow, careful steps, as though afraid a steel trap would snare her ankle. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

Agitated conversation came from the other desks, but the silent presence of two soldiers standing at attention in the back of the bus made sure it did not go further. Doug and Aldrea came to a stop in front of the open desk and waited.

It was only when Doug wiped sweat from his brow onto the sleeve of his shirt that he noticed Aldrea did not seem to perspire at all.

Doug considered if protecting Aldrea from agents of his own country's government was the right course of action. Perhaps he should turn her in here and now. He wrestled silently between what he was doing, and how a loyal American should behave when aliens invaded, no matter how charming they appeared to be. But he already chose not to turn her in earlier, and now he was in too deep. If he did turn her in, chances were he'd be charged as an accomplice. His career at Columbia would be over, assuming the government let him loose to find out. Doug wasn't one of those conspiracy theorists, but with the NASA lab based at the university, he was sure his government would prefer to err on the side of paranoia.

Aldrea didn't say or think anything back, but from the way she looked down at her feet, she seemed resigned to accept whatever decision he made. He winced as he remembered she knew exactly what he was thinking. He avoided looking at her, biting his lip.

The white-haired man looked up from his chair—this was the moment to decide.

Doug rubbed the back of his head.

"Names, please."

Without hesitation, Doug stepped forward. "Say, what the hell is the meaning of this? I'm going to write my congressman! I'm going to call every reporter I can think of! I'm going to sue—"

The heavysset man looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here. A large belly pushed him away from the desk, forcing his pudgy arms to stretch forward in order to reach the keyboard. He waited for Doug to take a deep breath before replying. "Yes sir, I know, I've heard the same thing for the past five hours.

Believe you me buddy, this is not my idea of a fun way to spend the night. Let's get this over with as quickly as possible and I'll be happy to send you on your way to do those very things. In fact, I just might join up with you once I get off duty, unless I decide to quit first, then I'll be available sooner."

Mollified by the man's contrite attitude, in a calmer voice Doug asked, "Who are you working for?" He noted the man's black suit, white shirt, and loosened red tie.

"Agent Brockport, FBI, sir. Now, I'll need both your names, please."

FBI! "Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Keller." Doug squeezed Aldrea's hand, urging her to be quiet. "We're on vacation."

Agent Brockport began tapping at his keyboard using only his pointer fingers. "First name, miss?"

Doug spoke. "Aldrea Keller."

The agent looked up from Aldrea to Doug. "How do you spell that? A—L—D—R—?"

Doug closed his eyes. "Um...E—A."

"Address?"

Terrified the man would find no marital records under his own address, Doug gave the FBI agent his parents' Long Island address instead of his own. The first names wouldn't match, but the last name did. Was his shaky voice giving away how bad he was at this cloak and dagger stuff? The agent didn't *seem* suspicious...

The agent tapped on his keyboard. "Phone number?"

Doug turned over his cell phone number before he remembered the address on his bill wouldn't match his parents' address. Darn it! He shouldn't have tried to be so clever.

"Date of birth?"

Doug rattled off his birthday. More typing.

"Mrs. Keller?"

Aldrea's mouth opened, but no sound came out.

Doug squeezed her hand, thinking up a date with all his might and hoping she would be able to—

"Ow!" Aldrea recoiled, glaring at him. "*Too loud!*"

The agent half stood, leaning on the desk. "Are you okay, miss?"

"I—I squeezed her hand too hard," Doug said. He whispered an apology softly into her mind. "I have no idea how this works."

"Clearly," she replied and recited aloud the date and year Doug had thought up for her.

"Social security number?"

Doug provided his, then froze, wondering if the agent was collecting information or reviewing it in real time. A social security number could be searched quickly, perhaps even as they sat there, and if he gave the wrong one they'd know for sure something was up. What was he going to do? He couldn't say she didn't remember it, *everyone* knew their social security number.

The agent watched them, tapping his fingers against the top of the desk. His eyes were starting to narrow.

Doug swallowed hard, dreading the moment when Agent Brockport signaled the soldiers standing by to arrest them. He couldn't let Aldrea down, he just couldn't. There had to be some reasonable explanation why she didn't know her social security number.

Inspiration struck him. "She's from Canada!"

The agent tilted his head. "Sir?"

Doug cleared his throat and continued in a calmer voice. "She doesn't have one yet, she's from Canada. We just got married—we're on our honeymoon. We'll get her one as soon as we get home."

"Ah, I see." Agent Brockport leaned back and resumed typing into his computer. "Congratulations, folks."

Aldrea's enormous smile gave his stomach butterflies. "*Douglas, you are brilliant!*"

Doug's face burned a brighter shade of red. Inspired by Aldrea's compliment, he warmed to the fabrication. "We certainly didn't expect to be arrested by the United States army and FBI without any explanation on our *honeymoon*! This'll be a story for the kids someday, huh?"

Agent Brockport looked up at them with a conflicted expression. "Sir, I assure you that you are not being arrested. Look, I know this is inconvenient, but I have my orders, you understand? I'd rather be sitting down at the breakfast table with my wife, sipping bad coffee and reading the paper." He glanced behind him where a battered electric coffee pot sat, and gave a half-hearted chuckle. "Well, the bad coffee is still with me, at least."

Doug experienced a pang of sympathy when he noticed the agent's drooping eyelids. "You've been here all night, haven't you, getting yelled at by people like me?"

Agent Brockport flashed a smile. "Mr. Keller, you have no idea."

Doug felt terrible for being a royal pain in the ass. "What a waste of everyone's time. I'm sorry I snapped."

The agent's appreciation was palpable. He rolled his chair back and rubbed his bleary eyes. "Look, I can see you folks were just trying to enjoy your vacation...and that line's not getting any shorter. How about you two head out

to that bus idling behind us? It'll take you back to your car. I wish I could say you can return to the campsite, but I have to instruct everyone who doesn't actually live out here to head home immediately."

"Thank you very much," Doug said. He remained standing in front of the desk.

Agent Brockport laughed. "It's okay, Mr. and Mrs. Keller, you can go. I'm just collecting data for the analysts to crunch later. If there are any questions, we'll be in touch."

Amazed that he had actually pulled it off, Doug tried hard to keep the relief from appearing on his face. He wasted no time leading Aldrea out of the interview station where he retrieved his backpack.

"We did it." Doug put an arm about Aldrea's shoulders to make sure they appeared like a normal couple as they headed for the bus.

Aldrea sighed with relief and squeezed his arm with a trembling hand. "Now I may relax a bit. Thank you, Douglas, you did very well."

Doug beamed back at her. "I did, didn't I? Wow, didn't know I had that in me."

Aldrea smiled up at him. "You are far more capable than you believe, Douglas. Have faith in yourself, and you will see what I say is true." She patted the hand that drooped over her shoulder. "Can we stop pretending now?"

Doug found himself reluctant to release her. "Er, better wait a while in case they're secretly watching us. In fact it might help if we, you know, kissed or something."

Aldrea threw her head back and laughed. Doug was surprised at how good it felt to see her happy, even for a brief moment. Her eyes lit up and the faintest of illuminations emanated from her like the sun's corona. Fortunately, the brightening daylight concealed it from anyone who wasn't standing as close to her as Doug.

She flashed a smile that melted his heart. "You are very funny, Douglas Keller."

"Thanks."

"But no, I think that any kissing—or other activities—will remain reserved for your imagination."

Doug's face colored as he realized she'd seen all of his thoughts by now, including the most private ones.

As he started to retract his arm, she grabbed hold of his hand to stop him, taking his arm in her hands. He turned to her.

Aldrea looked back at him with an unreadable expression. "Douglas, you felt sorry for him, did you not?"

“Huh? The FBI agent?”

Aldrea nodded. “Yes, despite everything, including being forced into lying to protect someone you have only just met. I could feel your sympathy.”

Doug shrugged, looking away. “Well, he’s had a rough time of it, along with everyone else. Hard not to feel bad for him, considering.”

Doug glanced over at Aldrea, wondering if she thought him overly sensitive, but her eyes shone. He looked away, amazed how different she was from other women he’d known before he remembered that, in fact, she was completely different.

She did not release his arm until they reached the bus and sat down.

Neither spoke as the bus filled and bounced back toward the starting point of the hiking trail, some thirty miles away from the interview camp. As they put distance between themselves and the camp, Doug felt Aldrea’s tension drain away like an uncoiled spring, lightening his own mood. He pondered the surrealism of his situation, wondering more than anything else, why him?

“I am sorry if I make you feel uncomfortable,” Aldrea thought to him after a while. *“Observing is one thing, but living among you is something else entirely. This may actually be a useful experience for me—unprecedented—if I am ever rescued to share the data with my peers.”*

Doug found his interest piqued. “Observing?” Several passengers sitting near them turned his way. Doug lowered his voice to a whisper. “You’ve been watching us?”

Aldrea nodded. “Myself personally for many of your solar cycles, yes. My parents brought me along on their observation missions ever since I was old enough to understand and assist.”

Doug nodded, encouraging her to continue. The gleam in her eyes and emotions leaking into his mind told him this subject held a great deal of interest for her.

Aldrea clasped her hands together, warming to the topic. “Well, we have been watching the development of our seeded planets for millions of your solar cycles now, since their inception, although yours did not become interesting until two-hundred thousand cycles ago.”

Doug’s mouth dropped open. “You mean to tell me that you’re thousands of years old?” An alien—visitor—he could come to terms with, but an immortal one would be too much to digest, though a part of his mind was also examining how to accomplish such a feat.

Aldrea snorted. “No, that is impossible. I have told you how old I am already, silly one. I will most likely live to be around one hundred standard solar cycles if I can make it back to my world, where the medical resources are far more

advanced than yours. That would be about...oh, one hundred twenty of your own Terran years.”

Doug sat back in his seat, relieved. “Wait a second, though. You mean your people have been around for thousands of years yet your life spans aren’t much longer than ours? Why not?”

Aldrea appeared to repress a sigh. “Our standard unit of measurement is a bit longer than your solar orbits, but that aside, we have the ability to live for hundreds of your years, if we wanted to replace failing organs with genetically matched in-vitro duplicates. Complex surgeries on your world are simple routine procedures on mine. Yes, we could certainly last longer, but only specific, critical members of our society are permitted to do so, and even then, never beyond a certain duration.”

Doug remembered his life span had almost ended without Aldrea’s intervention. “Why?”

Aldrea shrugged. “Because we agreed as a race long, long ago to limit our life spans to a specific range, more for philosophical reasons than anything else. All living beings should have a finite cycle. We can physically perpetuate ourselves indefinitely but our—what you would call souls—cannot endure the continuous hardships and highlights of living in kind.”

Doug digested this, nodding. “You mean after a certain age a person wants to die?”

Aldrea smiled. “Exactly. So we computed a reasonable compromise and see to it that nature takes its course around that timeframe.”

“That could pose a real population problem if you didn’t, I guess.”

Aldrea shook her head. “Well, in a closed environment it would, but we have extensive space travel and it never becomes a problem to find a new bio-engineerable planet to colonize. We can alter the environment on almost any planet so that it supports our life form in an optimal manner.”

Doug enjoyed listening to her steady, self-assured voice. “Then why not live forever? I know I would. After all, who wants to die? Think of all the knowledge you could master. I can’t understand how you can impose a moratorium on a person’s life.”

Aldrea frowned. “You sound like the Radicals now.”

Doug sensed an emotional foreboding when she used this word. “The Radicals? Who are they, some kind of intra-stellar rock band?”

She smiled but her voice remained serious. “No, they are a large splinter faction of our political structure. Keep in mind that we have maintained a single system of government for nearly half a million cycles. We like it; it is stable and keeps most of our expanding population happy. However, a group of our

people who have always felt discontentment with our rules and codes has been growing in both size and displeasure for the past few thousand cycles. We call them the Radicals.”

Doug pursed his lips. “Let me guess, they want to use all your technological know-how to make life better for themselves.”

Aldrea shook her head again. “Worse than that, I am afraid.” A faint luminescence began to collect around her face until Doug thought a stern warning.

Aldrea sighed. “I’ll have to get used to restraining myself. My people utilize radiance as an additional dimension of body language, which helps others to understand one’s mood even if our words are poorly chosen. Sometimes it negates the need for speech or thoughts completely.”

“I’ll help you watch for it,” Doug said. He didn’t mind that she could glow with her emotions. Actually, he found it really cool. “So your people possess an innate bioluminescence linked to your emotional state. How does it work?”

Aldrea paused with her brow creased. “Well, I am not a physiologist, but the colors and intensity change depending on my mood, or to express emotion visually rather than think or speak it. If a Quenterian becomes angry, our facial expression would change like yours, our heartbeat would increase like yours, and our skin cells would emit the corresponding degree and hue of radiance along those same lines. With practice and concentration, we can control our radiance, just as we can maintain a straight face under incidents of duress.”

Doug frowned. “You mean, if someone was behaving badly and you disapproved, like a guy pushing his girlfriend around, you could project the appropriate color aura so they could see how you felt about it?”

Aldrea looked pleased that he understood. “Yes. Each subtle hue implies a different emotion or mood that one is currently experiencing. In addition, since one’s disposition is seldom simplistic, we combine different hues to create new tones that can convey intricate significances. The intensity of the color and even the contour of the aura around different areas of the body deliver supplementary meaning.”

Doug raised an eyebrow. “So...it takes a long time to learn what your pretty colors mean?”

Aldrea giggled. “You have the gist of it.”

“I wouldn’t mind learning what they mean once it’s safe to show me what they look like.”

Aldrea nodded. “Thank you. Anyway, the Radicals want us to be the unchallenged, superior race in the galaxy, and not simply the most advanced with what they deem ‘philanthropic qualities.’ Other than my people, the only

intelligent beings who share the galaxy with us are the seedlings. The Radicals want to rule and exploit the seedlings instead of observing them.”

There was that word again. “Seedlings?”

Aldrea looked down at her lap. “Oh yes, seedlings, the vernacular we use when referring to our descendants. Many cycles ago, we created intelligent life modeled from our own genes, each with subtle alterations. After we placed these seedlings on planets receptive to our life form, we left them alone to see how they would evolve under various environmental settings. The last seeding took place many thousands of your years ago, and in later cycles, we discarded the practice on the principle that we should not define life. We have since contented ourselves with observation instead.”

Doug sat up straight in his seat. “Wait a second. Are you telling me that humans are here because a long time ago your people created us out of some test tube?”

Aldrea bit her lip. “Not as crude as you are making it sound, but yes. We introduced your ancestors millions of years ago amongst the other evolving organisms to measure and observe your progression.”

Doug crossed his arms. This was ridiculous. “So we’re nothing more to you than some experiment?”

Aldrea smoothed a strand of hair off her forehead. “Please do not jump to conclusions. I know this sounds a little strange to you.”

Doug felt the vein in his temple throb as he struggled to maintain a quiet tone. “Strange? You’re lucky I’m not a religious kind of guy because I’d stand up right here on this bus and denounce you for blasphemy.” In only a few breaths, Aldrea had deprecated the entire human race into a batch of laboratory rats.

Aldrea folded her hands in her lap and studied them. “I am afraid that I have insulted you. I did not mean to. I was only trying to explain to you what the Radicals wish to change.”

“Say, if you seeded us, maybe someone else seeded you?”

Aldrea rolled her eyes. “My people have been around for countless cycles. We are the seeders, not the seeded.”

Doug sniffed. “That doesn’t mean you were first.”

Aldrea offered a reluctant nod. “Theoretically speaking, no. The universe is far older than even my people. But then, it took that long for us to evolve into intelligent beings capable of accomplishing great things, like seeding other worlds, and in current times, creating our own suns.”

Doug took a deep breath. Despite the significance of what she was claiming, he still wanted to hear the rest of her story. “Go on, then.”

Aldrea turned her gaze back to his face. “Very well, Douglas. As I mentioned,

the elders decided that we should stop creating intelligent forms of life based on ourselves. Consequentially no additional planets were seeded from that point forward. They agreed that the many altered worlds would be closely watched over time to appreciate the results.” She smiled with returning excitement. “You have to admit that it makes an interesting experiment to learn how each seeded world experienced growth differently based on their unique environment and cultural progress.”

Doug didn’t smile back, aghast, although a part of him did find the entire concept fascinating.

Aldrea coughed into her hand. “Some blossomed as the Earth has, while others did not. Some evolved based on fundamental principles such as logic and reason instead of power and might.”

Doug considered. The thought that humans had not evolved from apes was unsettling at first, until he said it over in his head a few times. Was it such a bad thing, after all? He shook off the conundrum. “So you’ve been here before, huh? Why did you decide to stop off here today? Or do you normally take a stroll on your little observation field trips?”

“No!” Aldrea’s face paled. “We never interfere; our only interest is scientific study. We record the statuses of your different governments, scientific achievements, cultural advances and backslides, and many other parameters, which are then cataloged within our databases for statistical modeling across multiple disciplines.”

“You never interfere? Ever?”

Aldrea shook her head. “No. Not even when you repeat past mistakes as though *this* time you will do better than someone who tried before. It is like watching an infant struggle to walk.”

Doug scratched the back of his head. “So if we were about to blow each other up with nuclear weapons you would tally up the final score, cross our name off your list for future visits, then move on to the next planet?”

Aldrea offered him a gentle smile, making him feel guilty for behaving like an ass. “Yes. After all, if you ever did reach that point we would much prefer that you blow yourselves up than someone else.”

Doug bit off a scathing reply, admitting to himself that Aldrea made sense. Still, it seemed so inhumane. But then, he had to keep reminding himself she wasn’t human.

“I wish that you would stop thinking that,” Aldrea said. “We are more human than you, if you think about it, since you originated from us. Whatever differences exist between us are really only from the thousands of years that we have evolutionized independently.”

“Gee, thanks.” Doug turned his head the other way, pouting. How could he deal with such a superior attitude when it was justified? Was any of this really true? This had to be some kind of elaborate hoax.

“Don’t you want to know about the Radicals?”

He found himself opening his mind to her automatically, relaxing whatever defenses existed in his poor, second-rate seedling body. He wondered if he really wanted to open up to her in this personal way, or if she were somehow exerting control over his mind.

She sighed. *“If I were manipulating your mind, assuming I had that capability, do you really think I would have needed you to get past those FBI agents? I could have simply forced them to ignore me.”*

Doug smiled despite himself, picturing Aldrea staring into the FBI agents’ eyes saying, “...you are in my power.”

She gave a little sigh, but he thought she appreciated the humor behind it, considering.

“Douglas, please. We consider *any* form of mind manipulation offensive, even in jest. Regardless, I am a telepath and a healer, but doubt I could ever exert my will upon another.”

He shrugged, but couldn’t dispute her logic. “All right then, let’s hear about the Radicals.” He turned back toward her.

Aldrea’s brilliant smile of victory didn’t bother his ego. A warm, tingly feeling washed over him in response to her surge of happiness.

She jumped back into her lecture. “The Radicals feel differently than the rest of us about the thousand-year-old codes and rules we live by. For instance, they believe we should use our technology not only to keep ourselves alive forever, or as close to it as possible, but also to genetically design special abilities that would enhance our current physical limitations, essentially mutating us into different beings based on whatever fancy we desired.”

Doug’s interest overflowed as he considered the technological advances her people must have achieved. Perhaps she already knew the answers to Doug’s current area of research involving the combination of two or more distinct substances and combining them at the molecular or subatomic level to create something better.

“Such as?”

“Oh, the ability to fly, or to remove the physical need for us to urinate.” Aldrea colored slightly. “Or the desire to have sex beyond procreation, which they claim interferes with our judgment. Love too, for that matter.”

“Can you really make people fly?” Doug said.

She shot him a scathing glare. “I mention how they wish to remove our desire

for sexual recreation and you are more interested in...flying?”

Doug's face reddened. “Well, wasn't really sure what to say about the sex thing, other than, I like it when I can get it. And flying would be really cool. What do you know about nanomaterials?”

Aldrea snorted. “Absolutely nothing. I am an Observer, remember? To resume, among their many petty grievances, the Radicals possess very dangerous desires, such as using our advanced technological powers to subjugate the seedlings and allocate them for functions the Radicals consider beneath themselves. To breed you exclusively for that purpose.”

Doug was shocked. “They want to *invade* us?”

Aldrea curled a lock of hair around her finger, frowning. “Your planet and other seedling worlds, yes. Their view is that seedlings should provide a great deal more to my people than statistical data from endless experiments. The scientific findings are interesting, but they feel you represent an untapped resource that is far more valuable.

“Personally, I think they are on a serious ego-building exercise in a time and system that does not allow such trivial desires to rule our intellectual and moral standards.” Aldrea shrugged. “In some ways we are closer to your people than you may realize. Technological advancement is not synonymous with behavioral development, I am afraid. We have just learned to control it better than you.”

Doug's forehead creased. “How so?”

“Behavior remains dependent upon disciplines of self-control and selflessness that must be strictly adhered to in order to facilitate advancement. Social stations may vary, but we do what we can to help each other along within our means. We do not permit personal animosity to overrule civil behavior.

“The emotions within us have not altered. We have not evolved to a point where we no longer feel jealousy or envy, disgust or revulsion, anger or fear. We continue to possess all of the same characteristics, but have achieved the ability to restrain ourselves from revealing these feelings to others, or perhaps more importantly, from allowing these feelings to alter our interactions with others.”

Doug nodded, grimacing as the bus bounced over a pothole. “Humans certainly have intolerance to spare.”

Aldrea's eyes brightened. “Perhaps through the efforts to enhance our character we earn the privilege to rise.”

“Huh?”

Aldrea sighed. “By mastering control of our baser instincts, we can change those instincts to make us better people.”

Doug snorted, thinking about all the jerks he'd dealt with over the years. “Humans have a long way to go in that department.”

Aldrea nodded. "The Radicals do as well."

Doug felt a chill run up and down his spine. "Well, what's stopping them from coming here and taking us all prisoner?"

Aldrea smiled as she soothed his mind with hers; it was similar in feeling to her placing a comforting arm about his shoulders. It felt so natural he didn't give it a second thought. "They would never be allowed to do so while the Purist Government rules, and why would that change after thousands of years of stability? They are nothing more than malcontents whose grievances must be heard according to the standards of our government."

Doug allowed himself to be consoled. He raised his voice over a crying baby sitting behind them. "Well, what about all of the UFO sightings we've had over the years? If your people never interfered with us, who's to say this Radical group of yours hasn't been kidnapping our people onto flying saucers and performing experiments on them? They don't appear to share your personal principles of integrity, such as they are."

"I admit that we do not maintain constant watch over all of the seedling planets; however the Radicals would not dare attempt such a drastic violation of our code and risk severe consequences if discovered." Her words sounded certain, but Doug thought she looked a little uneasy, as though considering the possibility for the first time. Her face turned toward the window. The lecture was over.

Doug wasn't finished. "You never did explain why you're here."

Her voice caught in her throat. "There was an accident."

Doug had never been very good at understanding women, but somehow he knew enough not to push the question further. The bus jostled forward, a sharp turn nearly throwing him into the aisle. He became aware of the other conversations taking place around them, mostly venting from last night's ordeal. Someone was munching on a bag of potato chips, reminding him how hungry he was.

Doug's conflicted emotions diverted his attention from Aldrea's silence. He assumed the stress of the night had caught up with her and the gentle rocking of the bus after it reached a smoother road lulled her to sleep. He took advantage of the break to assimilate all the things she had said to him, and though he still had at least a million questions to ask, the intensity of the few simple facts he'd learned so far already threatened to overwhelm him.

There were hundreds of other worlds like Earth out there, maybe thousands, all of them as ignorant as humans were about extraterrestrial life and their own origins...

Doug stared blankly at the back of the head of a woman sitting in front of

him. After some time he realized, from the heat pressed against his fingers, that Aldrea had taken his hand in her own while she slept.

He watched her chest slowly rise and fall. It felt perfectly normal to hold the hand of this mysterious “visitor” from another world.

And that scared him more than anything she had revealed.

CHAPTER EIGHT: BILL

Albany, New York

Bill smiled at a contrite looking Swann over the top of a foaming mug, his index finger making circles in the condensation on the table. It was late afternoon in a nondescript Albany bar close to Swann's hotel. He'd received the call from his boss, the FBI Director, early that morning. Debrief Edward Swann, take back the investigation, and defuse the political time bomb Swann had initiated. Piece of cake.

Oh, and he had reminded Bill with a less than pleasant tone, that he was on vacation, so please handle this mess and stop the National Security Advisor from interrupting his golf game.

Sheesh.

Swann cleared his throat, looking down at the olive-capped toothpick of his martini that twirled between thumb and forefinger. "Okay Bill, this is your assignment now." The CIA Director was unable to meet Bill's eyes.

Bill glared at Swann. "When I told my Division Chief to cooperate with you fully, I had no idea you intended to use them as agents of fascism."

Swann gulped down half of his beer. "Sorry, Bill. The President already reamed me out for that, but our National Security Advisor was on board until the heat crashed down, and then his balls became fireproof Teflon. Oh, and guess what? He couldn't remember a damned thing."

Bill repressed a surge of sympathy for his senior counterpart. Swann deserved everything he got. Even Bill had been shocked to learn how far Swann had taken the alien manhunt, and he had been anticipating something off the wall. In fact, he'd counted on it in order to ensure his department would end up with exclusive authority, and remove all interference from the CIA. But the degree to which Swann had asserted his authority boggled Bill's mind. Interrogation camps? Forced civilian evacuations from their homes and vacations? Either Swann had gone completely nuts, or he actually believed a threat existed severe enough to justify his actions, regardless of the consequences. Watching him now, Bill didn't believe Swann was crazy. His posture and lack of eye contact

demonstrated frustration and embarrassment, not insanity or burnout.

Bill rubbed his chin. There was no way around it, Swann had swallowed Dr. Smith's bullshit story hook, line, and sinker.

Imagine: believing something intelligent from another planet had actually landed on Earth. The satellite images, the missing pod, the footprint embedded in a muddy puddle near where the pod had been, and the strange sample of cloth caught on a thorn bush nearby—all had realistic explanations. Bill intended to keep an open mind while pursuing all possible leads, but an alien invader from another world sat far behind more likely culprits such as China or another superpower engaged in some covert technological experiment.

"Don't feel bad," Bill said. "If there really is anything to this, we'll find it." *We* meaning him, not Swann, of course.

Swann ran a hand through his tangled hair. "For Christ's sake, Bill, I know you're eating all this up, I'm not stupid. Please conduct a thorough search. You can still get my ass out of this fire, not to mention save the world from an alien presence."

Bill couldn't repress a sneer.

Swann's mouth dropped. "You think this is all a hoax, don't you?"

Bill drummed his fingers on the wooden tabletop. "Frankly, Swann, I'm surprised a seasoned veteran such as yourself was taken in so easily. You must have been a real sci-fi buff when you were a kid."

Swann's hands balled into fists. Firm conviction. "Considering the evidence, don't you think that we have at least the possibility of a situation here? Even if it wasn't an extraterrestrial, it could be some foreign power testing out their latest spy drone. That would explain why it landed in such a remote location, and why they destroyed it once they realized we found it."

Bill shrugged. "It's possible, I'll grant you that, but it wouldn't justify what went on here last night, would it? I mean, I've been doing some poking around, and I can guarantee there are at least thirty legitimate lawsuits against the United States Army, FBI, and federal government being filed even as we speak. This is a hell of a mess, Swann, and because you misused my agents, *my* boss has made it *my* mess. I'm going to be digging out of *your* sack of crap instead of investigating this case. Everyone is condemning the government—the papers, the televisions, the damned internet. Twitter's server almost crashed from the overload! They're calling for a complete repeal of the Patriot Act and every politician who wants to sit another term is screaming that the other one is responsible. There's total chaos in the Pentagon, and it's all because of *you*."

Swann tugged at the knot of his tie. "Damn it, Bill, I *know* something came out of that pod! We simply have to find it. Once we do, that will justify

everything.”

Bill watched the sweat collect on Swann’s brow. He was growing desperate; unless they turned up an extraterrestrial soon, the CIA Director’s career was finished. The bloodsuckers in Washington might even take it further and file criminal charges as well. The public enjoyed a scapegoat at the top, and it would divert attention away from the President. All of which Swann must have known would happen, so why had he started this? There was no damned alien!

Swann glared at him. “You will look for an alien, won’t you, Bill?”

Bill drummed his fingers harder on the table, staring over Swann’s head at the top shelf liquor bottles. “I once had a case where everyone thought the husband murdered his wife and dragged their kids across three states. Nastiest SOB I ever met, but after I sat down across from him for five minutes, I believed his innocence. My boss took heat from the DA and almost fired me over it, but I didn’t waver; I held out until the facts supported my position. After I proved him innocent and he walked, he spit on my shoes on the courthouse steps.”

Swann tilted his head, looking puzzled. “Am I the SOB in this lovely fireside story?”

Bill shook his head. “The point is, I don’t care who you are, I’ll do my job. I don’t cut corners, and I don’t play favorites.”

Swann pounded the table. “Come on, Bill, take me seriously. We’re not talking about some marital dispute here, this is serious shit.”

Bill ground his teeth together. “Why do I bother? I just told you I would take this seriously.”

Swann shook his head. “No, you’re treating this like a typical, normal, nothing-to-see-here-so-move-along FBI case. This is different, and that’s why I did what I did.”

It was Bill’s turn to pound the table. “Swann, you screwed up!”

“Screw that!” Swann leaned forward over the table. “My ass is on the line, Bill, my proverbial ass. I’m running on fumes right now. After working all night long I had to suck up to the governor this morning—”

“You never bothered to include him in your plans, Swann. He was livid when he found out the truth,” Bill said.

Swann wasn’t moved. “His mansion is bigger than mine, screw him too. If I told him what I was doing, he would have thrown a fit.”

“So maybe that was a hint you should have tried a different angle.”

Swann folded his arms across his chest and sat back in his seat. “Look, I did what I had to do. This is the thanks I get for trying to perform my patriotic duty. God bless America.”

Bill noted Swann’s body language and the firm set of his jaw. “You have

some god complex, you know that? Ends justify the means?”

Swann leaned back across the table and spoke in a quiet voice. “If my methods bagged an extraterrestrial last night, you’d be shining my shoes right now instead of flaunting your shit-stained code of honor in my face.”

Bill maintained a calm demeanor despite the surge of anger inside. “But they didn’t.”

Swann collapsed back in his chair. “The answer is there, I know it is. Maybe if you did your job without those self-righteous blinders, you’d find it.”

“We’ll see,” Bill said.

Swann stared at Bill for a minute or two, toying with the handle on his mug. “If you don’t, I will.”

Bill laughed. “Stay out of my investigation, Swann, or I’ll arrest you myself.”

Swann shrugged. “Find my alien, and you won’t have to.”

This was going nowhere, and Bill had tons of cleanup to do on top of leading this investigation. He drained the rest of his beer in one gulp then rose to his feet, staring down at Swann’s pleading face with disgust. He hated incompetence of any sort, and here was a man who oozed it from every pore, from a position of considerable power. Still, up close and personal, seeing Swann squirm just didn’t give Bill the satisfaction he’d expected it to.

Bill hoped the President demanded Swann’s resignation before the end of the week. Swann would probably go to jail once an official congressional investigation began, which wouldn’t be long now.

Somewhere within this tangled mess, the outraged public was also blasting them for not finding the dangerous convict who had sparked the overzealous episode.

As Bill stared down at Swann, the television audio caught his attention and he turned to the flat screen mounted over the bar behind him. “...and the lack of response from the White House on this situation has been absolutely astounding, Ted. However, the President is expected to make a statement later tonight, after which several heads of governmental agencies yet unnamed are expected to receive their mandatory resignation orders.”

Bill turned back to see Swann’s miserable face look even sadder, but couldn’t resist leaving one last dig.

“And one more thing, Swann. Take this as a word of advice from a friend—lose the girl. Everyone knows about you and Sylvia, and it’s only a matter of time before it gets back to your wife. At least you’ll be able to tell her it’s over on your own terms, which might be the one thing that saves your marriage. Assuming you give a crap about anyone besides yourself, that is.”

Swann stared him in the eye. “Anything else, tough guy?”

Bill shook his head. “Yeah. You’re worse than that SOB in my fireside story. Much worse.”

Bill turned and left the bar, smiling. From the look on Swann’s openmouthed face, he might receive a bullet in the back of his head. Heck, was his marital advice unappreciated? He chuckled.

Bill didn’t do serious relationships. He was already in one—with his job. Nothing mattered more to Bill than making the streets of America safer, saving lives, and protecting the innocent. To avoid any complications, Bill usually found himself with women he would never love, making it easy to part ways when things turned serious. But that didn’t mean he was against marriage, only that he had his priorities in proper order. Swann needed to figure out his.

He headed to the local FBI office for an up-to-date report on the investigation. Bill wasn’t going to take the extraterrestrial premise seriously, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t conduct the same thorough investigation he always did. After all, *something* had been sitting in that meadow before it vanished, and someone had definitely come out of it. They weren’t from Alpha Centauri, but they needed to be found—legally and without violating the constitutional rights of American citizens.

“What have we got?” Bill asked Special Agent Martinez, who had coordinated the search of the area around the missing pod.

Martinez looked up from the mound of paperwork sitting on his desk. “Other than that scrap of cloth and the footprint, which could have been made by any human female, we found only one other thing of interest.” Martinez, a small, wiry man in his late thirties, pulled a tattered notepad covered with scribbles from a pocket inside his tweed sport coat.

Bill folded his arms over his chest. “What was that exactly? A discarded ray gun, perhaps?”

Martinez chuckled, shaking his head. “Nope, fresh blood stains against a large rock near the edge of the northwestern cliff overlooking the clearing where the pod was seen. Signs indicate someone took a tumble down a slope and slammed into the rock, which was the only thing keeping them from rolling down into the ravine.”

Bill perked up. If someone had been up there on the night this ship landed, maybe that person had seen something useful. “Too bad we didn’t know that earlier; we could have had our guys check around for someone with a bandaged wound.”

Martinez looked unhappy. “Well, maybe not. According to the amount of blood we found, this person should be dead, unless there was a doctor with a quart of plasma standing by. Whoever lost that much blood couldn’t possibly

have gotten up and walked away. They would have to be air-lifted out, and anyone with enough skill to patch them up would know they couldn't safely move them any other way."

Bill rubbed his chin. "Did you check with the nearby hospitals, doctor offices, the ranger stations?"

Martinez rocked back and forth in his chair. "Of course, boss, but there were no reports of an injured person requiring medical attention for a wound of that magnitude, just your run-of-the-mill dehydration, scratches, a suspected poisonous snake bite that turned out to be from a garter, and two twisted ankles."

Bill pressed his lips together. "Are you having samples of the blood tested in the lab?"

Martinez nodded. "Yes, we should have a gender and blood type by tomorrow morning, first thing."

Bill made a mental note to make a call and see if he could get the lab boys to rush this through.

Martinez cleared his throat as he stared at the notepad. "Oh yeah, we also found another one of those lady footprints near the bloodstains. I'll go type this up and make it nice and pretty for you."

Bill's head snapped up. "Martinez!"

"Yeah, boss?"

"Are you saying the footprint by the rock, it matched the one down where the pod vanished?"

Martinez nodded. "Perfectly. They came from the same shoe. We're trying to chase down the brand based on the tread, but so far no match. May be some custom job."

Bill frowned, but he supposed it made sense that if a woman was down in the meadow in such a deserted area, she would have climbed up or down to get there and to leave. Had she seen something and was running to escape when she slipped and hit the boulder? Had her body then been dragged away and disposed of?

Appearing to read Bill's mind, Martinez added, "No signs of anybody being lugged away. As best we could tell, two people left the blood scene on their own two feet, including the woman. There are some partial footprints leading away from the ravine to solid ground, then from there the ground gets too rocky to tell us much else."

Bill paced back and forth. "Did you scan the ground for a blood trail?"

Martinez shrugged. "There was no sign of any blood outside that area, and I had the boys search thoroughly, boss."

“Martinez, stay on top of this personally,” Bill said, “and let me know if anything else develops right away—immediately. Don’t forget to rush that torn scrap of fabric through forensics. I doubt it’ll turn up much, but you never know.”

Martinez nodded his head like a dashboard bobble on a four-wheeler. “Yes, boss.” He scurried from the office.

Bill sat down, considering the possibility of an authentic extraterrestrial presence for the first time. Two sets of footprints, a massive amount of blood, and a disappearing pod that popped out from the Twilight Zone. A foreign operative might have landed, killed a witness, then powerlifted him off, right? The pod could have flown away, even without satellite proof showing the object returning from wherever it came. All plausible, all possibilities.

He drummed his fingers on the desk, a strange feeling emanating from his gut. Bill always trusted his gut before, but right now, it sounded as crazy as Swann.

He pounded his fist down on the desktop, jarring the mouse off the pad, and discarding the alien theory as ludicrous, angry with himself for permitting it the tiniest shred of possibility. Damn Swann and his insane notions!

This had to be some foreign experiment. Period.

Bill ran his hands through his short-cut hair, his gut unappeased.

He intended to personally review all the data collected from the illegal interrogations Swann had engineered, and search for anything even slightly out of the ordinary. Uncovering the truth happened to be one of Bill’s specialties, earning him the nickname “Bulldog.” Once he sank his teeth into a case, he didn’t let go.

End of Preview

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Wow! What happens next?

To find out, please consider purchasing a full copy of VISITOR, available on [Amazon](#) and [Smashwords](#)!

I hope you enjoyed reading this preview. If you haven’t already, read my FREE

novella prequel [BIRTH OF A STAR](#), which shares an exciting adventure our favorite feisty Quenterian, Aldrea, experiences in her younger years—er, cycles.

If High Fantasy is your thing, take a look at my other novel, [THE SWORD AND THE RING](#).

Most of all, I'd love to hear from you, either through email, a comment on one of my blog posts, or on my [Facebook Author Page](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wayne discovered his love for writing at ten years old when he wrote a story about the flowers from his bed sheets coming to life. With a voracious appetite for science-fiction and fantasy, it was only natural he turned his pen toward these genres, creating bold new worlds filled with exciting, interesting characters doing incredible things.

VISITOR began as a vivid dream Wayne had as a teenager, haunting him until he finally wrote it down. After many years and meticulous edits, this story has the distinction of being Wayne's first published novel, with many more to come.

Wayne lives in Northeastern Pennsylvania with his family and cats, realizing his dreams one story at a time. He'd love to hear from you at <https://WayneMeyers.com/>, where you can find his social media links, and sign up for his mailing list.

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Writing a book takes many hours of tedious labor. Independent authors also take on less glamorous tasks such as promotion and marketing. If you enjoyed VISITOR, please consider leaving an honest review with your favorite retailer, and like and share the author's social media posts with your friends. There is no better way of saying "thank you"!

Thank *you* for reading my story. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I did writing it. I welcome your comments and questions on my website or social media pages.

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