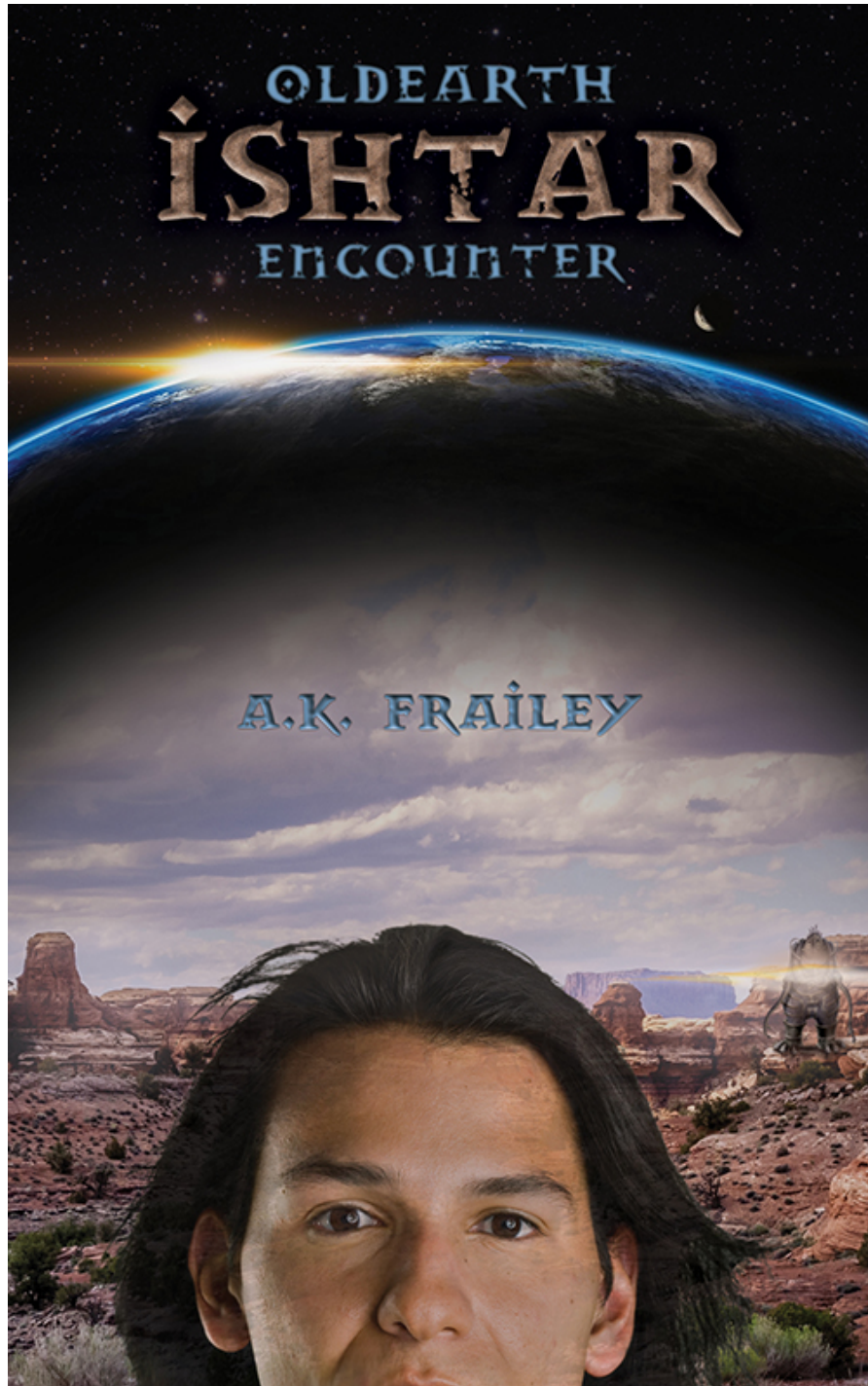


OldEarth Ishtar Encounter

Sample Chapter



<https://amzn.to/2OAKDQF>

PROLOGUE

—TEMPLE CITY—

WORTHY OF RENOWNED

Chai's fingers stuck together as he clutched a bloodstained knife at his side. His unruly black hair, muscled build, wide stance, and flashing black eyes proclaimed his dominance. He swept a long flowing cape over his shoulders and watched an enormous shadow slither forward. His heart pounded. The deed had been done.

The body of a young man was lowered into the pit.

For a horrifying moment, Chai stiffened as he beheld a vision: His mother's face as she lowered him onto his soft bed, cradling his body and crooning in her sweet voice.

Chai froze. The knife slipped from his fingers and clattered on the stone floor.

A circle of robed figures turned toward him. He raised his head, searching wildly for direction. The stone carving of his god—a man's head with the body of a great cat and the wings of an eagle—stood in the center of the cold room staring sightlessly through blood-red eyes.

Chai exhaled a long breath. Squaring his shoulders, he forced himself to look into the pit one final time. A dead body. No personality, no family, no loving mother—no grief.

The shadow followed the body into the black depths. A servant tiptoed near and retrieved the knife. Chai grunted, and the knife was slapped into his hand.

He held it aloft, his crimson sleeves flowing in rippled folds down his arms. His heart thudded against his chest. The dazzling fire flared in front of the stone god and burnished the blade a deep

bronze. A new vision framed itself in his mind. He sat on a high seat above every mortal man. Every being on Earth shrunk from him in terror. His will reigned supreme. He could feel a smile creep across his face, but the burning in his heart seared all joy.

As he stared at the stone figure, his vision widened. A wall of impenetrable mountains opposed him. Suddenly, he flew aloft and with a bird's-eye view, vast rolling hills and open grasslands slid away under him. Clans huddled against the foothills and nestled between the shoulders of the great mountains. Chai caught his breath. A great throng—people from all over the mountainsides, hills, and valleys—gathered. Finally, a conquest worthy of his skill!

He dragged his gaze from the vision and stared at reality. In utter silence, the pit consumed his offering. He lifted his gaze to the blood red eyes. “I will bring more...and become worthy of renown.”

With a guttural command and a sharp gesture, he ended the ceremony. His quick, sharp steps echoed through the dim temple hall. When he reached the open doorway, he halted on the threshold. Peering into the black night, a sensation so riotous it could not be controlled rose up inside him and demanded release.

He burst into wild laughter.

Chapter One

—Lux—

Test a Theory

Ark, his fleshy white potbellied body encased in a somber gray bio-suit and brown boots, stood aside from the main crowd in the domed Luxonian chamber. He blew bubbles through his breather helm, wrapped his four tentacles behind his back, and tried to ignore the bright light streaming in from above. Planet Lux has altogether too bright a sun. They ought to shield us from the blasted thing. He squinted and averted his eyes.

The Luxonian meeting hall, punctuated with purple- veined marble columns and glorious fountains shaped like creatures from every planet in the district, was filled to capacity with representatives from four races: Crestonian, Bhuaci, Luxonian, and Ingoti.

He studied a Luxonian Lightbird sculpture, as it appeared to fly into the air, spraying clear water from its beak. With a shrug, he shifted to the more fascinating Crestonian Sandfish, spouting green liquid from its razor-toothed jaws. A shiver rolled down his spine.

Dragging his gaze away, Ark nonchalantly shifted his stance and waited for his superior to approach. It would never do to appear hasty.

Ungle, a Crestonian with bright red cilia swaying on top of his plump head and dressed in a spring-green bio-suit and matching boots, meandered the circuit of the room with two tentacles wrapped behind his back in a contemplative manner. A third tentacle held a long-stemmed glass filled to the brim with blue gelatinous goo. With his last tentacle, he shook appendages—or mechanical armatures—as the occasion required, with various Luxonian and alien representatives. His perpetual smile never

wavered.

Ark slumped and caught the eye of a young Luxonian who stared directly at him. Ark patted his breathing helm as if stifling a yawn.

The Luxonian's gaze delved deeper, his obvious curiosity breaking to the surface.

Annoyance broke Ark's placid mood. He discharged a narrow-eyed glare at the Luxonian, who soon turned away. Idiot.

"So you finally made it."

Ark's head jerked so hard as he twisted around to face his superior that he felt a crackling in the bone holding his spine erect. Blast. I'll have a muscle spasm from that. He clasped Ungle's tentacle from which dangled a gaudy bracelet. Ark blinked and swallowed. Better not expect me to kiss that thing—like some weird Bhuaci sign of obeisance.

"Not for kissing, just admiring."

Ark swallowed convulsively. Uh-oh. Ungle laughed, nearly spraying liquid over the top of his breathing helm. "I can't read your mind—but really—Ark, you've become practically translucent. Been among humans too long in my opinion."

A Luxonian waiter in humanoid form, as befits the theme of the meeting, and dressed in an embroidered gold tunic and lavender leggings, glided in close. With a bow, he offered a tray of pink, blue, and green drinks.

Ark glanced at Ungle.

Ungle poured blue goo into his breathing helm, slurped, and shivered. "Not bad. But I'd recommend the green. Not authentic green, you understand, but less of a kick than the blue."

Ark swiped a blue drink off the tray and poured it daintily into his breathing helm. Like a connoisseur savoring an ancient wine, Ark sipped his liquid while his gaze wandered the room.

Ungle waved the servant away.

Ark turned to his superior. “You were the first to recommend Earth observation. Have you changed your mind?”

“Not at all. I think humanity will have a great deal to offer—in time. But I also realize there are many complications that must be considered—”

A bell tinkled.

“Bothmal those bells!” Ungle tapped Ark on the shoulder. “Meet me in my chambers after the meeting.”

“You aren’t staying for the Balatin Reenactment Festival?”

Ungle gurgled. “I’m a Crestonian. Science, not pleasure, dictates my schedule.”

Ark took the hint.

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Ark settled in a plump chair and hated the hiss of his bio- suit as it wedged between the stiff arms. Dark waters, I’ll never get up without help.

The Crestonian chambers included a mini-pool built into the back wall, cushy, white furniture, and a simple cleansing and dressing closet.

Ark glanced over as Ungle tapped a console, lighting up a holopad.

“Pay attention now. I’ve done careful research, and I think I have just the solution we need.”

Ark grunted as he tried to wiggle out of the chair.

“What...is...the...problem?” Popping like a cork, he sprang to his feet.

Ungle straightened, and a hologram of the Luxonian guardian stationed on Earth—Teal—appeared before them. His slim, well-balanced figure, straight light brown hair, piercing blue eyes, and firm jaw emphasized his determined personality.

Ark shrugged and clumped forward, his embarrassment forgotten. “Teal?” His gaze swiveled to Ungle.

“As I mentioned earlier, science dictates the direction of my life. I believe that humanity has a great deal to offer Crestonian studies. Not the least of which is their obsession with good and evil.”

Ark wrapped his tentacles behind his back, arched his neck forward, and meandered in close. “Surely, we understand the concept as well as anyone. Why—?”

“We don’t experience the polar opposites as humans do. It makes quite a difference. Consider—” Ungle tapped the console. Teal dissolved, and Chai appeared beautifully dressed in crimson robes embroidered in gold. “A dangerous—by all human standards—evil force controls this man. It’s a force I’ve rarely encountered before. Yet, this human believes he’ll benefit from the experience.”

Ark’s tentacles wiggled nervously behind his back. “What does he have to do with Teal?”

“This being—calls himself Chai—will cross paths with the one you call Ishtar. It doesn’t take serious extrapolation of data to figure this out. Their paths must intersect.”

“So—”

“Teal will be watching. He’ll care what happens. He might even attempt to interfere.”

“That goes against all his training.”

Ungle shrugged. “Given proper motivation, we all go against our training. Don’t be obtuse, Ark.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to see the natural exchange between Chai and Ishtar. I want to witness a soul damned to—”

“Hell?”

“Yes, I believe that is the term.”

“You want me to keep an eye on Teal—is that it?”

Chuckling, Ungle tapped the console. “Not primarily. I want you to keep your eye on her.”

The holographic image of Chai dissolved, and Sienna, a Luxonian beauty with reddish hair, golden eyes, and a slim figure appeared in all her radiant glory on the holopad.

“Sienna? She cares for Teal, but—”

“She’s a Luxonian with a healer’s soul. She wants to help so badly; she could do a great deal of harm in the process.” Ungle tapped the screen and Chai, Teal, and Sienna appeared together on the holopad facing away from one another. “They’re each convinced that they know what’s best for humanity. I’m convinced that they have no idea what’s in store for them.”

“And you want me to observe and collect data?”

“I want to test a theory—about good and evil.” Ark waited. Ungle smirked. “You’ll see.”

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Her nonfiction work focuses on the intersection of motherhood, widowhood, practicing gratitude, and rediscovering joy.

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She is currently finishing a new science fiction novel in the Newearth world and a historical fiction & science fiction blend in her OldEarth series. To check out her stories, novels, inspirational books, and her film and TV scripts, visit <https://akfrailey.com/>



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