



BEYOND PROVIDENCE

LAWRENCE
BURK

Beyond Providence

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Prologue

The third book of the *Alien Within* series, *Beyond Providence*, witnesses the evolution of humanity. The story continues in the year 2034, sixteen years from the day Hope was born. Hope was born with the DNA of her mother, her father, and an alien entity; a hybrid by one definition and superior being by another. It was foretold that she would meet another like her, and together, with the help of Hope's alien guardians, would begin the reformation of a new world civilization.

Imagine, every three thousand years, the earth undergoes a major change in its celestial balance. Catastrophic events such as earthquakes, floods, ice ages, asteroids, comets, fires, tectonic plate migration, and anything that could cause mass extinction events, come to pass. Imagine, there are multiple dimensions in the universe, and they periodically share the same space in time. Imagine, a comet's tail and the earth crossing paths with debris smashes into earth as meteorites for two days delivering a virus from parts unknown that threaten to wipe out humanity. Now imagine that only a merger between humans and beings from another dimension could repopulate the world post human extension. If you can imagine all of this, this story is ready to begin.

A comet, ironically named Providence, was due to pass by earth on its path through our solar system in one week's time. Its path would intersect Earth's orbit and pass within 120,000 miles, roughly half the distance from us and the moon. A major collision would be avoided but the shower of debris from the comet's tail would change the world forever.

Although Hope had special powers, granted to her by her superior genetics, and had the help of aliens themselves, she

was hopeless to stop the impending carnage. Instead, she had to focus on her destiny, to repopulate a post-apocalyptic world with a new species of humans capable of surviving in a world plagued with an alien virus.

Chapter One

Jack shuffled through his pocket for his house key while balancing Hope's birthday cake with his other hand. He opened the door quietly, careful not to bring attention to his arrival. He knew that Hope would know of his surprise, but even if only symbolically, he wanted the appearance of a surprise. It was her sixteenth birthday and for years this day had been heralded as a pivotal moment in her life. Jack didn't know what to expect, just that she was growing faster than he wanted. She was already ten times smarter than anyone he knew, and to put an asterisk on that, she was self-taught, with the exception of teachings from her alien guardians. Jack was very familiar with her guardians, Gee and Soo, who were present in his late wife's life prior to Hope being born, and since then, their contact had been solely with Hope.

He placed the cake on the kitchen table and walked down the hallway to Hope's room. He knocked on her door, "Hope, I'm home."

"Come in."

"Happy birthday sweetheart!"

"Thank you. Is that a chocolate cake I smell?"

"You know it is," he said. "Am I interrupting?"

"No, I was just talking to Gee and Soo, but it is definitely time for us to have that life changing discussion, Gee and Soo have warned us about for years."

"It sounds a little melodramatic when you say it that way."

"No, this is for real, and it is serious, real serious."

"Ok, what's going on?"

"Can we talk at the table over a piece of that cake?"

"Sure."

“Gee and Soo have been preparing me for years, as you know, for the day my destiny is revealed. That time has come. When the evening news comes on at six, we’ll learn of a comet passing near earth. That comet is going to change the world.”

“My God, is that what they told you?”

“Yes, there is more. The government is going to invoke Marshal Law, but it’s not going to matter because everyone that is not safely secured in an underground bunker will not survive. That is why it is imperative that we take a trip to Colorado to get you, Faith, Mr., and Mrs. Gordon on the list for the Harrington Suburban Project.”

“Slow down. Are you saying that the world is going to be wiped out?”

“In a roundabout kind of way, yes. Hold on, it’s time for the news, turn on the TV.”

Right at the top of the hour, without prelude, the news began with the comet as its top story. The news anchor opened with, “Good evening from the edge of earth. Tonight, we have a special report of a comet to visit our solar system in approximately one week. Astronomers from Nasa have been tracking a comet they’ve named *Providence*, travelling at over 78,000 miles an hour in a path from the Libra constellation through our solar system, for weeks now and can now confirm that it will pass in front of Earth’s orbit by approximately 120,000 miles averting a cataclysmic event. The comets brilliant tail and meteor shower are expected to be the most spectacular celestial event we will have ever witnessed.”

“The news is describing this as a spectacular event, what they don’t know and are not telling anyone, is that with this comet, comes destruction.”

“But it’s going to pass us by, right?”

“Yes, but think about it, at the comet’s speed and our speed in orbit, that comet is only going to be missing us by a couple hours. The news is trying to portray 120,000 miles as a long way away, the moon is twice that far from us. In a celestial scale, 120,000 miles is almost on top of us. The amount of debris we’re going to pass through will be massive, but most of all, and what nobody knows but Gee, Soo, and me, is that debris will be carrying a deadly virus. That is why it is so important that we go to Colorado.”

“I gave up a wondering a long time ago how Gee, Soo and you know all these things, so if you tell me we’re in danger, I believe you. What do we do now?”

“We’ll go to Colorado Springs, I’ll meet with the Air Force, use my powers of persuasion to secure a spot on the Harrington Suburban Project for you and the Gordons.”

“What’s the Harrington Suburban Project?”

“In case of nuclear war or catastrophic planetary impacts, the government has bunkers in the Cheyenne Mountains to house a few thousand people. Placement is strictly regulated by the government to ensure top minds in critical fields are preserved in case a new civilization would have to be formed. Precisely the scenario we face.”

“Alright, I guess we can hit the road in the morning. Doesn’t really make a lot of sense to go to work if the world’s coming to an end.”

“Dad, I really didn’t think you’d take this so calmly.”

“I’ve seen things with your mother that made no sense to me, yet it was real, and I had to accept that there are things in the universe I was not equipped to understand but I knew she was. Now you have that responsibility. If you tell me the sky is falling, I have to believe you.”

“First, you need to know that you’ll be ok but for ninety nine percent of the world it is going to be hell. We can feel bad about it, but it is not our fault and there is nothing we can do about it. We can’t tell anyone except the Gordons.”

“This is such a sad commentary on our lives to escape to safety and leave our friends behind to face annihilation.”

“Perhaps when we get to Colorado, I can have a list of people authorized for the project. If we can talk them into coming, they’ll be safe, if not at least you can go forward knowing you tried to save them. We’re going to have to fly, and it has to be right away.”

“I’ll sign in and book the flight right now then.”

“This is good cake. Thanks Dad.”

He just smiled. His daughter was only sixteen, had a master’s degree in molecular biology from MIT and her IQ was off the charts. She had the composure of a confident and fully mature woman and he depended on her much more than she did him.

Jack laid his tablet down, “Ok, we have a flight booked for the morning. We leave Gulfport at 8:20, layover in Dallas for an hour and arrive in Denver at 1:20. We’ll rent a car and drive down to Peterson AFB in Colorado Springs about seventy miles south. We won’t be flying back till the next afternoon, so we’ll have to find something to do for a few hours the next day.”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to develop a plan as we go. It would have been nice to have a few months to prepare, I’ll have to have a talk with Gee and Soo.”

“We’re here,” Gee said, “one week is all you need, any sooner would have only caused you more stress. This way, you’ll have to stay focused. Things will work out, just stay the course.”

Neither Hope nor Jack slept more than an hour that night. Hope had lived her short life forever, aware of who she was and that her destiny had been preordained. She had a depth of knowledge about the earth and universe no other shared thanks to the teachings of Gee and Soo over the years. Jack on the other hand was merely a mortal human, wrestling with the concept of aliens, a world at the brink of destruction and a daughter with the burden of humanity on her shoulders. Being a little overwhelmed would be a blessing. She would not be securing a spot in the mountain with her dad and was not ready to divulge the entire plan to him quite yet. Being immune to the virus, her work would be above ground and unfortunately for Jack, he would not survive top side with her. He must withdraw to the bunker.

Six days prior to impact, they arrive at Peterson Airforce Base at 3:30 in the afternoon. While at the pass and decal office, Hope used her extrasensory perception to identify the commander in charge of the Harrington Suburban Project and asks to meet with him concerning the approaching comet. They are given a pass to enter the base with directions to a central receiving office where a staff liaison will meet them. Upon driving up to the front of the building a young captain approached them, “Are you Mr. and Ms. Baker?”

“Yes, we are.”

“Please come with me, Colonel Newburn is expecting you.”

“This is his office,” the captain said as he opened the door. “Colonel, this is the Bakers.”

“Thank you, Captain, that’ll be all.”

He waited for him to leave. “I understand you have information about the comet?”

“Yes sir,” Hope jumped right in.

“No offense ma’am, but what credentials do you have to be able to offer anything to this subject?”

Jack took the opportunity to jump in this time, knowing this would probably be his only chance to speak. “Don’t let her youthful appearance fool you sir, she is a savant with a master’s in molecular biology from MIT.”

“My apologies, so what brings you to me?”

Using her ability to hypnotically persuade people, she explained. “The debris field of the comet that the earth will pass through, contains an alien virus that will threaten humanity and cause the government to enact the Harrington Suburban Project. Before that announcement is made, we need you to add these people to that list. They are essential to the reformation and must be granted access.”

Jack handed him the list. The list simply contained Jack and Hope’s name along with six of his closest friends, their phone numbers, and addresses. As far as the colonel was concerned, they were scientists and didn’t question it any further.

Hope asked, “Can you please make these changes while we wait?”

“Certainly,” he said.

“The information I just provided must be kept secret. It is for your personal knowledge in gratitude for your cooperation. Get your family business in order and we’ll see you in the Facility next week.”

Jack thought it was funny. He knew Hope had these powers but rarely seen her use them, to see the colonel follow her lead amused him. After leaving the base, Jack asked Hope, “How can we be sure he’s not going to change the list and take us off, or whether he’ll keep it a secret?”

“My words were burned into his subconscious, they have become an inalienable fact, he is powerless to change it. As far as keeping it a secret, it doesn’t matter. People wouldn’t believe it and it wouldn’t change the events anyway. I only told him of the virus, so he could prepare his family.”

They had about twenty-two hours before their flight home and without much sleep the night before they were very tired. They got a room for the night and conveniently slept till ten and by the time they checked out it was an hour and a half past their required check out time. The clerk brought up the checkout time and with nothing more than a look from Hope the clerk happily said that she would waive the additional day’s charge. They decided to wait out the remaining time at the airport and drove back to Denver.

With a couple hours to kill, they thought they would relax at one of the cafés and grab a bite to eat. On their way through the terminal Hope was overwhelmed by a feeling she could only associate with being in Gee and Soo’s presence. She stopped, turned toward the escalator, and saw a young man standing still just staring at her. She knew he was looking at her, she could feel it, there was a powerful connection she’d never felt before. Gee appeared. “Hope, he is the one.”

“The one?”

“You recall us telling you, one day you’ll meet your other half and fulfill your destiny? He is your other half. Meet with him.”

She started walking toward him, then Jack asked, “Where are you going?”

“I’m sorry dad, can you give me a moment? There’s something I need to verify.”

As she approached the young man, his stare didn’t falter, he stood fast with an awe inspired looked on his face,

which could be because she was a beautiful young woman and he was by all accounts a normal young man, with hormones or perhaps he was under a spell.

“Hi, my name is Hope.”

“I’m Justice. I wasn’t sure why they wanted me to come here today until I saw you.”

“They, do you mean Gee and Soo?” She asked.

“Yes. They didn’t tell me much about you at all, other than one day we would meet and change the world.”

“Yeah, change the world in a nonchalant manner of speaking. That’s Gee and Soo alright.”

“Can you tell what I’m thinking?”

“I have to concentrate a little but yes, and I can tell you know what I’m thinking so before we go investigating each other’s minds, let me introduce you to my dad.”

Hope waved Jack over, “Dad, this is Justice, the boy I told you I would meet one day.”

“It’s good to meet you Justice, we were about to get a bite to eat, would you care to join us?”

He looked at Hope, then back at Jack, “Sure, that sounds wonderful.”

They ordered sandwiches and a drink at the café discussed their, not so by chance meeting. Jack admitted he did not communicate with Gee and Soo but knew that Hope did. Justice replied similarly, “My parents never saw or heard Gee and Soo. They thought there was something wrong with me when I talked to them about it. After a while, I figured it was best to pretend that I had been unbalanced and the voices finally went away, and I was ok now rather than continue to try and convince them. How is it you believe Hope?”

“Hope’s mother, my wife, had contact with Gee and Soo long before Hope was born so by the time that Hope came along, I already knew what I was in for.”

Hope asked Justice, “Where are you staying?”

“I still live at home down near Pueblo. Of course, that will change in a week or so as you know.”

“Do you know what’s expected of us?” Hope asked.

“In my briefs, I’m told you and I must repopulate the world.”

To hear a young man, tell his daughter they were going to repopulate the world gave Jack shivers down his spine. It was not a conversation a father feels comfortable talking about. Justice and Hope both picked up on that.

“Mr.,” Justice stopped to read his mind for a second, “Baker, excuse me, what I mean to say is that with Hope’s microbiology background and my robotics engineering background we will find a way to mass produce a new race of humans in the aftermath of our impending catastrophe.”

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“I guess you and Hope are two feathers from the same bird.”

“What of your parents, Justice?” Jack asked.

“They are just average people, a throwback to the wild and crazy world we live in today. They would have absolutely no understanding of the future. They live their lives, mostly in denial of anything they don’t understand.”

“We were just down at Peterson Airforce Base getting put on the list to go take refuge in a bunker deep in the mountains. When the virus breaks out, we will be summoned to check in, if we knew of you then, we could have had you and

your family put on the list. If Gee and Soo advised you to be here, why now, why not when we arrived?"

"No, it was not meant to be. Unfortunately, my and my family's fate is different. Theirs' will be like that of billions of other people. I on the other hand, will be staying to complete a very important mission for humanity, as will Hope.

"Dad," Hope stepped in, "There's no good time to tell you this, so you might as well hear it from me now. Justice and I won't be going to the shelter with you when that time comes."

"What do mean?"

"Justice and I are immune to the virus. Our work will be up here."

"Immune? How can you be immune?"

"Genetics, dad. Our DNA has an alien twist to it. Justice and I are technically, part alien, we are hybrids, surprise!"

"Now it all makes sense. I wish someone would have told me years ago. I've suspected, but because I was never told, I assumed I was just being paranoid."

"It ok, you are my dad, you've always been my dad and you will always be my dad, I just have some alien DNA that make me special, and you have the biggest heart of them all, that makes you special."

Justice asked Hope, "From what Gee has told me, from start to finish, the virus takes about one day to its worse. No warm-blooded animal that encounters it can survive. What have they told you?"

"Pretty much the same. I expect airborne, insect transmission, ingestion, and any physical contact to transmit the virus. How much we're introduced to, the gestation period, the radical reproductive cycle and its resilience will tell us more, but for that, we'll have to wait. Its shelf life will also be a major

factor as to how long of a quarantine the lucky few will have to endure.”

“Wow look at the time,” Jack said. “We have to make our way to our gate; the flight will be boarding in about fifteen minutes. We need to swap phone numbers. Justice, we’ll be coming back in about six days, we’ll need to meet again.”

“Call me first thing in the morning,” Hope said as she gave him her phone number. “We have much to talk about and a lot of planning to do.”

Justice told Hope, “I will.” “Mr. Baker,” he said. “It’s been good to meet you; you should be very proud of Hope.”

“That sounds a little odd, Justice, you just met her.”

“I know, but I feel I’ve known her my entire life, and I think you’re more understanding than my parents, therefore, I think you should be proud of her,” he said with a smile.

“Yeah, that sounds like something Hope would say too. It has been my pleasure. See you next week.”

“Call me,” she said as they walked away.

Justice was almost as tall as Jack, and had a very youthful smooth, clear-skinned face. A handsome lad with medium length brown hair. Hope would not admit it, but her hormones were telling her things as well. There was a connection between the two, they both felt it, and having felt it, made them long to be back with each other even more compelling. There was much to contemplate on their flight home. Notifying the close friends of a future they would have to trust them with. Do you take all your money out of the bank? What do you take into a fallout shelter? How do you say goodbye to the other people in your life you know will perish, or do you say goodbye at all? Hope didn’t have these burdens; she took special care growing up not to get too close to people. Jack on the other hand, had a relatively comfortable life that

will be cut short and altered in a negative way. For Jack, it was the beginning of the end. For Hope, it was the beginning of the beginning.

Their return flight brought them to New Orleans, and they called Phil, Jack's friend, for a ride back to Gulfport.

"Thanks for the ride," Jack said.

"No problem partner," he said in his best John Wayne impersonation.

"Instead of John Wayne, can we do Rod Serling?"

"Twilight Zone? Ok, what's the story?"

Jack said, "Imagine you had either a couple weeks to live, or you went away somewhere and started over."

Before he answered Hope said, "Uncle Phil, before you start the car and we hit the road, look at me." He did, and she caught his full attention. "There's a comet coming in about a week, it will bring with it total devastation. Life as we all know will end and a new one will begin. Listen to Dad."

"Sorry dad, just trying to help."

"Thanks Hope, I need all the help I can get, I guess we all do."

"What's this world coming to an end stuff?" Phil asked.

"It's true buddy. The comet will look spectacular as it cruises through space beside us but in its tail, a deadly virus will be released, and mankind as we know it will cease to exist. That's why we went to Colorado.

"That was actually going to be my first question. What's in Colorado?"

"A state-of-the-art fallout shelter. I put you, Jennie, and Faith on the list. When the government figures out that an unmanageable virus is going to wipe out humanity, they will enact the Succession Protocol and open the bunker in the Cheyenne Mountains for selected people to take refuge. The

Airforce will call and give you specific instructions on where and when to go. When you get that call, you must go. We can go together, but you must be ready to go. Can you do that?"

"Yes, I think I can, but how do you know this and what is the Succession Protocol?"

"Let me explain, dad," she said. "I know things Uncle Phil. I know you had peaches in your cereal this morning, I know Aunt Jennie was frisky with you last night, and I know you have exactly eighty-seven cents in your left front pocket."

"How on earth can you know this?"

"On earth, I can't, in another dimension I can. I'm telling you I know things, and this is the most important decision you will ever make. I want Faith to be around when we complete our mission, and we can all live together again. It will take years, but we will survive and be together again. As far as the Succession Protocol goes, the government has an established plan of governance succession and hierarchy in the event a new government must be formed due to natural or unnatural catastrophe. Along with the government, society will have to be preserved in such a way to maintain order, discipline, and an avenue of rebuilding civilization. All the guidelines are laid out in the secret document, but they failed to account for everything so we're going to have to stay flexible."

Phil said, "This is so much to take in."

"Just wait, Phil," Jack said, "We still have to tell Jennie."

"Ooo, she's not going to like this at all. We just repainted the house instead of going on a vacation back to the Bahamas where we went on our honeymoon. Do you remember that, Jack?"

"No dunderhead, I don't remember my honeymoon."

“What kind of crap do I have to put up with,” Jack mumbled to himself sarcastically.

Hope asked, “Are you guys always smacking each other?”

“Yeah, I guess we are,” Jack said with a laugh. “Can’t help myself, he’s, my Charlie Brown.”

“Yeah, and your dad’s my Dennis the Menace,” Phil said.

“I don’t think I want to understand all that. Please don’t feel the need to explain.”

“Ok, we need to get back. We have a lot of planning to do. I still have to talk with Frank and Mark and Pops.”

“Let me talk to grandpa, while you talk with your friends.”

“Ok. Just remember, he’s had what he would call a wonderful life, so respect him enough to let him make his own decision, don’t hypnotize him.”

“I won’t.”

Phil asked, “Hypnotize?”

“Yeah, Uncle Phil, that’s another thing, I can do that too.”

“You didn’t hypnotize me, did you?”

“It doesn’t matter, meatball,” Jack said, “You have a wife and child to think about, Pops just has himself.”

“I’m not saying I would prefer to stay, but why couldn’t I have the chance to make up my own mind?”

“Ok then,” Jack said, “Choose, you coming? Or are you staying?”

“Let me think, I guess I’ll go.”

“Do you hear that Hope, he guesses he’ll go.”

“You guys sound like an old married couple, you know that.”

Jack and Phil looked at each other and laughed. “You’re the wife, Jack said to Phil.”

“Incorrigible, that what you are,” she said. There was more laughter, then back to a serious tone.

“As you and Jennie plan for the trip, remember, any documents you find important, make sure to pack them. Take about a week’s worth of clothes, anything of value you want to preserve or can barter with in the future and forget about all the material things in your life. One large suitcase each should be all anyone should need.”

Phil said, “Can we wait to take about planning until after we talk with Jennie? I’d like to know more of what you know about the comet?”

“The comet’s as old as the galaxy. It’s been travelling through space for billions of years. It’s on an unknown orbit and had probably been slingshot around a distant star and is now on a roue course. It appears to have been busted up a bit as it collided with the Kuiper Belt and now it has a fifty-thousand-mile tail following it through space, but the important thing about it is its carbon makeup. Scientists can’t explain how the comet has a higher carbon makeup than the earth.”

“If it has never been here before, how can they tell what its carbon content is?” Phil asked, “and how do you know all this?”

“It’s not important how I know, as long as the scientists know. Using Astro spectrometry, they can tell a lot about the makeup of celestial bodies including the elements that make up that body. This comet screams of carbon with a considerable amount of ammonia. It is far too cold for life, but to a space virus, our nice warm planet becomes Shangri-La.”

Phil had questions all the way home. Jack was content to let Hope do all the talking. He just wanted to sit back and

reflect on his life. The good times, the bad, the happy the sad, he used to say. The best and happiest time of his life lasted less than a year, back when his beloved Lisa was still with him. Jack raised Hope alone, or so he would tell people, but he had help and he knew it. Gee and Soo taught her more than Jack ever could and, in many ways, Jack was grateful but in other ways, made him feel inferior. Phil took them back to the airport where they flew out from and told them, "I'll call you in the morning after I talk with Jennie."

"I think I should talk to her," Hope said.

"No, it's my responsibility, if it doesn't go well, I'll call you."

The story line is told to Jennie and Frank and Mark with the same disbelief until Hope steps in and explains it with a more persuasive signature. Pops was different. She told her dad that she would let his dad choose his own facts. The only problem with that was, she knew he would not leave on his own.

While Jack was off talking to Frank and Mark, Hope drove over to Pops house. To keep her promise to her dad but still convince Pops to come along, Hope would have to master psychology very quickly. "Hi grandpa," she said.

"Hey, kiddo. What have you been up to?"

"You know, the same old stuff, finding boyfriends, coercing the military, planning for the end of the world. How about you?"

"It not that exciting but my wild days are over, it's your turn."

"Can I ask you something grandpa?"

"Sure, fire away."

"Why didn't you remarry after grandma passed?"

"She was everything, no one could replace her, so I didn't see a need to look."

“No one ever would, but that didn’t mean you had to be alone.”

“I know but having anyone around close to that kind of relationship, always made me do a comparison. As hard as I tried not to let it happen, it always came down to a replacement. I tried, I just couldn’t get close to anyone after that, and I’m ok with that. I have the best memories.”

“I’m sure you do. What about tomorrow’s memories?”

“What do you mean?”

“What will you do today to give yourself another memory?”

Pops thought about it for a moment, “Where are you going with all this sweetheart?”

“I’m just being a teen grandpa. I love you and don’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

“Honey, nothing’s going to happen to me.”

“Grandpa, it’s time for me to come clean. If you knew without a doubt that something very terrible was going to happen, would you warn the people you love?”

“Of course, I would.”

“If you knew the end of the world was coming and you had a choice to go into a bunker in the mountains and live or stay out in the world and perish, would you take shelter?”

“What kind of a question is that?”

“There’s no nice way to say this, but the comet that’s coming is bringing with it a virus that will kill everything. Dad and I just got back from Colorado where we reserved spots in an underground bunker in the Cheyenne Mountains. You have a reservation. I am here to talk you into coming.”

“You think a virus is coming and will wipe us out?”

“Yep.”

“I don’t know what to say. Is this one of those punk things like candid camera?”

“Candid camera?”

“It’s an old TV show, never mind. You’ve never went out in left field before; I don’t know where you are coming from.”

“I’m not coming from anywhere, I’m here and this is real. Do you know why my mom had tattoos of aliens on her back?”

“She said they were to keep her company during difficult times after her dad died.”

“Why aliens, why not dolphins or horses?”

“Because those were the dreams she had.”

“Grandpa, sometimes dreams are real in a different dimension, and I have been there. I need you to believe me, the world will soon be in an awfully bad state, and I don’t want to see you suffer the virus. I want you to consider coming with us to Colorado if there is a plague.”

“Ok sweetheart, I’ll consider it,” he said, but she knew he was just appeasing her. She wanted desperately to use her powers but honoring his wishes was more important than honoring her own. She left with the feeling that all she had done was to fuel the memories that would remind him, the best of his life is long gone.

Chapter Two

“Welcome back to breaking news from the edge of the solar system,” the round the clock news coverage continued. “Nasa updated their orbital calculations and predicted massive numbers of small meteors are blasting through our atmosphere. They continue to search for signals and evidence of larger objects in the tail but so far, they cannot confirm there are. Doctor Emmitt Erliage, from Cambridge University, predicts the night sky on the fifth of June will look like a computer simulation with hundreds of meteorites burning up in the atmosphere, and even more spectacular on the sixth.”

Hope had a hard time listening to all the speculation and inaccuracy of the so-called experts. The closer it came, the more tense everyone became. The group talked together every day except for Pops. Hope got a little sharp with Jack the day before they were to leave. “Look at everyone here. You’re talking to everyone about our plans but grandpa. You wouldn’t let me convince him.”

“You tried though, didn’t you?”

“Of course, but you knew he wouldn’t want to come. Don’t you want him to come?”

“I do, but I think he deserves to be able to decide for himself.”

“Will you at least talk to him one more time, for me?”

“Ok, where’s my phone?”

“No, it’s got to be in person. If he says no, we’re going to need to tell him goodbye forever and you don’t do that over the phone.”

They drove back to Pops house and found him braiding a lanyard for a bosun pipe. It was intricately made of a fine grade, tightly braided nylon line, and included beautiful fender

hitching at the neck join and star knots as well as multiple Turk's Head knots.

"Great timing son," Pops said, "I'm glad you came, I'm putting the finishing touches on this pipe."

"It's beautiful dad, but you know why we're here, don't you?"

"I think so. Let me ask you Jack, do you really believe the end is coming?"

"Yes, I do."

"How long do you plan on staying in the ground?"

"I don't know, as long as it takes, I guess."

"Count me out son. You know the hurt; I know you do. We all loved Lisa, none more than you. And just like your mother when she left a part of me went with her."

"Do you still miss her?"

"Of course, I do."

"I'm sorry to tell you, in twenty years you're still going to miss her. I don't plan to miss your mother for another twenty years while being buried in the ground. If this comet brings the wrath of God with it, I will bear witness and be thankful for the time I had, and maybe, just maybe find the peace I've been waiting for."

Hope stayed silent while listening to Pops explain but she didn't understand him not wanting to continue.

"We got you put on the list because we wanted you to be with us. Your granddaughter wants you to survive and wants me to talk you into it. You don't know this, but she's part alien, that's why she's so smart. She could have easily hypnotized you to make you come but I wouldn't let her. I wanted you to be able to make your own decision, I fear that was a bad call."

"Thank you, son. You made the right call. I would never have been happy in a bunker waiting for the world to be safe

and for your information, I knew she was an angel. I knew her mom was an angel. My heart broke for you when Lisa passed but she left something for you.” He went back to his room and came out with the painting of him and Jack on the boat. “Take this with you, it’s a masterpiece work of art the future will need. I’ll be with you in the bunker after all.”

“Tears started down Hope’s face as she realized that someone else’s wishes, and dreams are as important to them as our own are to us.”

She leaned against him and gave him a hug. I love you grandpa and if you’re not coming this will be our last goodbye. In a couple of weeks people everywhere will get sick and die and sooner or later it will find you too. I didn’t want that for you.”

“I know sweetheart, I love you too. Find a boy, fall in love, have a family, then do all you can for them. Here, this bosun pipe is for you, a reminder of the independent nature we share. Learn how to pipe someone ashore and when you feel I am gone, stand tall and pipe me ashore.”

Jack had tears in his eyes now. “So, you knew about the aliens?”

“Not exactly, but it didn’t take a genius. Lisa had two tattoos of aliens on her back and would occasionally talk to them. She could coerce people just by looking at them, paint a masterpiece in a day, and as best I can remember, hadn’t been sick a day in her life, Hope is no different. There has to be something to it.”

“I didn’t think you paid that close attention.”

“You kids take care of yourselves,” and he started singing, “Don’t cry for me Argentina.”

They parted, each with a smile of love to hide the sadness and a lump in their throat. Hope cried most of the way

home and she realized her pain was her feeling a loss, something Gee, and Soo could understand but not feel themselves. Even after years of association with Lisa and Hope, emotion was alien to them. Even so, they were wise enough to human behavior to offer Hope a little solace, “Your grandfather is not a selfish man, nor does he fear the inevitable. Instead, he faces the world for what it is, and you should too. Be brave like him, and do the things you have to do, rather than the things you want to do. I am sure he feels like he’s doing the right thing, honor that.”

For beings without emotion, Hope thought they understood quite well. “Thank you Gee.”

They made their plans to travel in advance of the impact because after the impact they didn’t think they could get there amidst the chaos. They would hit the road in two vehicles in case one broke down, Phil’s Yukon and Frank’s Escalade because either vehicle could carry everyone if the other broke down. They needed to be on the road no later than one a.m. and drive about seven hundred miles per day. Everyone would meet at Phil’s house at midnight to go over their final preparation check list.

On the way home Jack stopped at the bank and withdrew all but five dollars from his savings and checking. In his mind, keeping the accounts open was a way for him to express confidence that he’d be back.

Hope researched bosun pipes on her internet phone app and by the time they drove up to the house Jack was half bonkers from the screechy trilling of the pipe. “What’s wrong with that whistle?” Jack asked.

“It’s a pipe, not a whistle. Grandpa didn’t put enough bees wax in it and it’s out of tune. If I can find a candle, I can fix it.”

“Thank you, it was hurting my ears.”

With just eight hours before everyone was to meet at Phil’s house Jack got a call from Mark. “I decided I’m going to stay.”

“You can’t stay, you won’t survive the plague.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Maybe it won’t bring a virus, maybe the comet will hit us directly. It doesn’t matter. It is what it is. We have to play the hand that’s dealt us. I am prepared to hide in a bunker. I can’t do it, sorry, but I’m staying.”

By now, after dealing with Pops, the thought that as bad as things were to come, some people were comfortable with what they have had in their life, that they can now, with peace, decide that was enough. Jack admitted to himself that after losing Lisa, he felt he had had enough as well. “I wish you would reconsider because I’m selfish and want you to be around a while. We are going to leave right at one in the morning. If you’re not here I will try to understand and will think of you. You’ll have another chance when the Airforce calls, by then you’ll know how deadly serious this is. Reconsider.”

“You guys take care. Bye.”

Jack knew this would be tough, he’s faced tough things before and even with losing someone you love it doesn’t make it any easier when you lose another. He knew he’d never see Pops and Mark again, that he’d be trapped alone in the bunker. Yes, he would have a couple friends but none of his family. Lisa has passed, Pops is saying goodbye, and Hope is out trying to save the world. Suddenly Jack felt like he didn’t want to go either. But he couldn’t do that to Hope. He would be her only family left, he couldn’t make her an orphan, especially in a post-apocalyptic world.

Midnight came fast. Jack and Hope arrived right before Frank and parked all the way up to the front of Phil’s house, in

the grass to leave room for Frank. Phil met Jack at the door. “I hope you got everything.”

“I think so. Got one extra thing. Pops wanted me to bring this painting to the bunker with me.”

“Ok, whose riding with whom?” Phil asked.

Jack said, “Let’s wait for Frank. Mark called and told me he’s not coming.”

“What! Why isn’t he coming?”

“He just didn’t want to.”

“Aunt Jennie, do you need any help?” Hope asked as she walked toward her in the doorway.

“Did you just say Mark wasn’t coming? What about Frank?” Jennie asked.

“It’s true, Mark decided not to go. After that, I called Frank to make sure he was still coming, and he said he was, so he should be here any minute.”

“Jack, are we doing the right thing?”

“We must be doing the right thing; they would never lie to us.”

“Who is, they?”

“We’ll tell you all about it on the way there.”

Headlights turned the corner down the street. “There’s Frank,” Phil said.

“I’ll ride with Frank for a while and Hope can ride with you for a while. Hope has one suitcase, I have one suitcase, if you have more than one suitcase each, you should probably consider something to lighten the load,” Jack said.

They loaded the vehicles and went back to the kitchen, sipped on some coffee, and laid out the plan on how they would follow each other and where the recommended stops should be along the way. All the way through Louisiana Hope told Phil and Jennie the real story of her mom and her own true identity.

It would have been easy for Hope to hypnotize them, but she didn't have to. They knew Lisa very well and that could be the missing piece that makes everything about Lisa understandable. How she grew, the artistic natural talent, never being sick and nothing but wonderful to everyone.

Jack telling Frank wasn't as easy. "Ok, I'll tell you what, the next time we stop for something to eat, ask her questions about what you're thinking. She will read your mind, and the next thing you know, you will believe every word that comes out of her mouth. It's impossible to disagree with her if she doesn't want you to."

Before they got too far out from Dallas they stopped for brunch. Frank wasted no time talking with Hope. "Your dad says you can read my mind."

"I can tell you things too. Watch my lips not move. My favorite color is blue," she thought.

"Your lips didn't move, but I heard you clear as a bell, your favorite color is blue. How did you do that?"

"Dad wasn't lying to you," Hope told Frank. "I have some alien ancestry. Weren't you ever curious how mom was able to captivate so many people with her art, how she was never sick, where my IQ came from? Don't worry Uncle Frank, everything's going to be all right."

"You're right Jack, I believe her, now what?"

"If you weren't so sure about all of this, why didn't you say something earlier?"

"I thought if anything else it'd be a nice vacation away from the ho hum."

"You mean you agreed to come, but didn't believe anything was going to happen?"

"Sorry Jack, that's pretty close. I thought, maybe something could happen, but more likely not."

Well, I hope you're prepared not to go back for a while. The quarantine is likely to last a few years," Jack said.

"Years? You're kidding right?"

Hope joined in again, "This is apocalyptic bad uncle Frank. There's a virus coming, I'm sorry but all the people you worked with, won't be there when you make it back."

Jennie said, "I told all my friends we were going on vacation and told them all goodbye, to them it's a temporary goodbye but I knew the truth and it was the hardest thing I ever had to do, try to say goodbye to someone you love forever and not cry. I cried my eyes out every time I hung up the phone."

"It's you, me, Jennie, Faith and Jack," Phil said.

"You forgot Hope."

"No, I didn't," he told Frank. "You need to tell them, Hope."

"I am immune to the virus; I'll be up here with a friend and a couple aliens trying to rebuild so everyone will have a world to come home to."

"This is too much. I Need a drink. You guys figure out whose driving because I won't be in any shape to be behind the wheel," and he waved a waiter over. "Can you bring me two beers?"

"What kind sir?"

"I don't care, the most expensive stuff you got."

Everyone took a moment to think about everything, then Hope offered her hand to Jennie on her left and Jack to her right. "Ok guys, this is a hint, take a hand." They all joined hands around the table, even Frank and Hope said. "The right thing is rarely the easy thing, and we are doing the right thing. We could give up and end our existence, or we can fight to preserve it. We're here together to support each other, can we take a moment to reflect on the love we have for life and each other?"

The first words Faith spoke since leaving home followed Hope's request without pause. "I didn't say goodbye to any of my friends. When I was told there was going to be a virus that would kill a lot of people and we had to go to a safe place for a while, I didn't think it was going to be for a long time, and I didn't think everyone I know might die. How can my best friend be an alien and not tell me? You guys better do a better job talking to me or I'm going to turn into a major bitch."

"Faith! Language please," Jennie said.

"I'm sorry Faith, I should have told you," Hope said. "No one would ever have known if it wasn't for the world coming to an end and all."

Frank drank both beers before the brunch order came and ordered two more.

"Is the beer working?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, actually I think it is. I wonder if they'll have beer in the bunker?"

"Damn I hope so," Jack said.

"Maybe they're better at planning the end of the world better than they are planning the other things they're in charge of." Phil suggested.

"Ah shit, we're screwed," Frank said.

They left the diner just before eleven and talked on the way to Oklahoma City, where they intended to stop for the night, about changing drivers and continuing to Colorado. Jack and Phil both wanted to stick to the original plan. "There's no need to make plans if you're not going to use them. Getting there any earlier is not going to help us. As it is, we're going to have to stay in a hotel till we get the call and that may take a week or more," Jack said.

They arrived in Oklahoma City around three in the afternoon, ordered pizza for delivery and went over their plans again and again. Hope had so much on her plate she knew she couldn't know all she needed to do until the virus was physically examined. We did worry about it a little. She had no guarantees of immunization, only Gee and Soo's assertion. "Gee, how will Justice and I manage all the aspects of our mission alone? We'll have support service requirements that I don't believe we'll be able to provide and maintain, like electricity, fuel, food not to mention the heavy work."

"We will bridge the dimension and be physically there to assist. We will help with all these things. Justice has already been working on the software upgrades for the robotics for over a year. Once the event begins, retrofitting a robot crew to build robots can begin."

Hope was curious about the robots, she knew she wouldn't be able to rely on people, but the extent of the robot's viability and purpose was an unfamiliar subject.

Their plan had them leaving Oklahoma City at three in the morning to get to Colorado Springs by five in the evening the day before impact. They would have about twenty hours from the first meteors until the earth rotated their location in the path. From there it was anyone's guess how long it would take to enact the Harrington Suburban Project. They would be ready, already in Colorado Springs and the first to arrive. As far as plans go, they thought theirs was as solid as could be.

Hope call Justice to update him on their arrival. "Hey, we're going to be arriving in Colorado Springs around five in the evening," she said.

"Let me know when you get there, and I'll meet you at your hotel. I only live an hour away."

“Gee said you’ve been working on something for a year already?”

“I’m actually a computer science and robotic consultant for the Robotics Laboratory at Colorado State University in Pueblo. I’ve been secretly working on programing robots to build other robots. Gee and Soo didn’t tell you?”

“No.”

“Did they tell you about the Genetics Laboratory, in Aurora?”

“No.”

“Did they tell you anything?”

“It doesn’t seem so, but I’m going to be telling them something. So, what about the Genetics lab?”

“They got state of the art equipment that you’re supposed to be doing your research with. I’m supposed to help you redesign the facility to become a nursery among other things.”

“Thanks for the info, I’m going to talk with them now, I’ll call you again tomorrow when we’re close.”

“Why have you kept me in the dark?” Hope asked Gee.

“We only told you what you needed to know at the time, everything will be known in time.”

“You saw fit to tell Justice of the Genetics lab but not me.”

“Yes, he needed to know what he was going to be programming the robots for. You wouldn’t have been able to do anything with that information at the time, so we saw no need to burden you with more than you needed to know at the time. Just as there was no need for Justice to know all the work you will be doing. There is still much more for both of you to know, but this is not the time. Be patient child, there is much to do.”

“Sorry, I just don’t like surprises.”

“Don’t look at it as a surprise. Look at it as a well thought out plan and have a little faith in us.”

“Ok, I’ll try.”

The drive to Colorado Springs seemed the fastest, they had so much on their minds time just seemed to fly by. They arrived about twenty after five. Phil took responsibility for being on schedule and Jack reminded him he missed his deadline by twenty minutes. Jennie told Hope, as the two bickered, “Men never grow up, they’ll be like this their whole life.”

Hope laughed, seeing a little bit of child in her dad made her remember him playing games with her when she was young, and life was good and carefree. She thought to herself, “I hope he never changes.”

“Justice,” Hope said on the phone. “We just rolled into town; we’re getting a couple rooms at the Colorado Springs Marriot on Tech Center Drive. Call me back when you get here, and I’ll come down to meet you.”

“Ok, I’ll be there in about forty-five minutes.”

Frank asked. “Why are we staying at one of the more expensive hotels?”

Jack said, “Because money doesn’t matter, and we should enjoy as much comfort as we can while we can.”

“I get that, but I don’t have a lot of money.”

“Don’t worry about it. I cleared out my savings and you know; Lisa left us well off. Let’s just relax a bit, there will be plenty of things for us to get stressed out about, let’s not make money one of them.”

“In that case, what about that minibar?”

“We don’t have to be fools about it,” Jack gave Frank sixty dollars. “Why don’t you find a cheaper place to get a bottle or two? Don’t get lost.”

“I’ll be back in a few.”

Phil asked, “What do you guys want to do for dinner?”

“I’m sure they have a nice restaurant here, why don’t we go down there when Frank gets back?”

Hope asked, “Can we wait on Justice, he should be here by a quarter after six?”

“Sure, we’ll wait.”

Faith appeared to have withdrawn much more than anyone had noticed. Everyone was so busy thinking, planning, and talking about adult issues and the end of the world, no one really paid attention to the fact that one of them was only sixteen. Hope didn’t count because she was probably more mature than any of them. Hope saw it though. “Faith, when Justice gets here, come downstairs with me to meet him.”

“Ok, but why doesn’t he just come up here?”

“Because he’s supposed to be my other half, a mate, a boyfriend, something to that effect and I’d like to get to know him before all hell breaks loose.”

“Who arranged for him to be your boyfriend?”

“I know this is all hard for you to understand, but some things happen without a lot of reason. Take for example, you meet a boy who is smart, good-looking, nice and by all accounts seems perfect, but for some reason you don’t like him, like Robert, remember. That intuition can’t be explained it just is. Gee and Soo told me Justice was the one, I’ll just have to see how it turns out.”

“Better you than me, I hate blind dates. You’ve already met him, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, for a short spell. But, you know, I’ve never had a boyfriend before, I don’t know what we would talk about. I just know what’s coming ahead.”

“Feelings, that’s all they talk about, probably because they don’t understand them and think we believe everything they say. Just take whatever they say with a grain of salt and stay focused.”

“That sounds like experience.” Hope said.

“I’ve had my share of romance; I’ll keep you straight.”

Hope wasn’t worried about a relationship but felt good letting Faith think she was useful and important. She felt bad for Faith having her youth being taken away by circumstance. Hope hadn’t felt youthful since she was ten, so it didn’t have the same effect on her.

Hope’s phone rang, “I’m down in the lobby,” Justice said.

“I’ll be right there.”

“Dad, I’m going to meet Justice down in the lobby. What about a text when you’re ready for dinner and we’ll meet you there?”

“Mom, I’m going with Hope.” Faith said.

Jennie started to say something, and Phil interrupted, “Let her go, not too many chances left to be a kid.”

“Ok, honey. We’ll meet you in the restaurant.”

Faith met Justice and it was nothing like she thought it would be. Justice and Hope seemed so old to her as they conversed about their mission. Nothing at all like teenagers, she felt out of place and inferior in their presence. Justice was handsome and tall for a sixteen-year-old, but not someone she would have gushed over. Seeing Hope and Justice together made it easier for her to see that they were a perfect match, a

part of intellectuals sharing similar situations. In a jealous kind of way, she was happy for them.

They talked of their credentials and academic achievements and a little of their upbringing as outcasts, but knew the conversation excluded Faith and tried to change the subject back to what others would consider normal but couldn't. Realizing the awkward position Hope and Justice were in, gave Faith a little comfort knowing she was the normal one, so she just smiled at them as they nervously tried to include her in their discussions.

"We'll have power and hopefully a signal in the bunker, maybe you can call me from time to time." Faith said.

"Of course, I'm not sure about a signal but I'll periodically try to get updates to you."

Justice added, "We may have to revert to ham radio, but I'm sure we'll be able get news back and forth."

Hope got the text from Jack that they were on their way to the restaurant. "It's time to go to the restaurant. Come have dinner with us," Hope said to Justice.

They spent the rest of the evening trying to avoid the stressful discussions of their plight and focused on appreciating each other's company and friendship. They knew that come morning there would be nothing but coverage of the comet on TV, so tonight they wanted to try and enjoy one last day free of the pending catastrophe. Frank and Jack shared a room, Phil and Jennie shared a room and Hope and Faith shared a room. Frank drank till he fell asleep, Jack reminisced about his days and time with Lisa, Phil and Jennie made love like it was their first time and Hope and Faith talked about boys until two in the morning.

Chapter Three

Jack's phone alarm woke him at six, he got up and woke everyone else. By seven thirty they were down in the restaurant for breakfast. Hope was getting updates from Gee and Soo on the comet as well as communication from Justice. She was now holding conversations with her dad and crew, Gee and Soo, and Justice at the same time. Holding multiple conversations soon became natural as the event drew nearer.

"We have about three and a half hours before the impacts begin. They won't be over us for another 16 hours or so," Hope told everyone.

Jack asked, "I didn't hear the news didn't say anything about a time."

"No, I'm getting info from Gee and Soo."

"Oh, that makes sense. By the way, how much will Gee, and Soo be involved?"

"They're here for the long haul. They'll be helping Justice and me with about everything we do."

"That makes me feel a little better."

Faith asked, "How come we can't see them?"

"Because they're really not here. It's a little complicated, but they are in another dimension. They talk to me like a daydream or a spirit."

"If they're not really here, why are people afraid of them?"

"They can cross over to our world but it's not that easy, it takes a lot out of them, and generally they're not supposed to."

"Why aren't they supposed to," Jennie asked.

"Everything in the universe has a balance and when things get out of balance, things happen to make it get back into

balance. Much like this comet, chances are somewhere, something happened that wasn't supposed to, and now a correction is being made, but I couldn't begin to think of what destroying humanity could be retribution for. Anyway, whenever the aliens come into our world, they have to be careful not to alter our history."

"Tell them I said hi," Faith said.

"Do they know how long we'll be in the bunker?" Frank asked.

"I'll ask," Hope said, "They said the bunker will be sealed tight for a few years, anything other than that they cannot say."

The waitress came around and took their order. After breakfast they went back to their rooms and by ten o'clock everyone migrated to Jack's room. All the major stations were running special broadcasting of the comet. The photos from the Monroe Telescope, Hubble's successor, showed spectacular images of the comet and its enormous tail, it also shown the path through the solar system and how close the earth was to a direct impact that would have been as big or bigger than the Chicxulub impact. The comet missed earth by a half hour and flew passed earth 122,000 miles away dragging a tail 50,000 miles long behind it.

The first on air photos came in from Seoul, South Korea at 12.30 p.m., June 6th EST, showing the comet streak through the sky with a bright white tail that stretched halfway across the sky. It was the most spectacular look at a real comet we had ever witnessed and the news outlets were gushing in awe at its sight and touted the upcoming meteor shower with equal enthusiasm. The hazards were downplayed in the media as nonscientific fear mongering from doomsday cults and the likes. By eleven o'clock the meteors arrived and blasted

through the sky from east to west while the earth began to pass through the comet's tail. As the earth's rotation turned toward the comet, the meteor volume rose, and the sky lit up with multitudes of bright white flashes in the sky like sparks from a sparkler as the meteors burned up in the atmosphere. As predicted, there were very few that were large enough to impact the ground. These images were seen worldwide on every news outlet in every country, it was extremely rare for any group of people not to know about it.

"How come nobody's talking about the virus?" Faith asked.

"They don't know about it yet, they'll have to wait for people to start getting sick," Hope said.

Phil asked, "How long do you think it'll take?"

"Gee just told me it'll take a few hours before the first cases show up in the emergency rooms and several more before they figure out that there's an outbreak."

"I hope they call us in time." Phil said.

"Isn't it ironic that the meteor shower starts on the same day as D day?" Jack asked. "I wonder if there's a connection?" He rhetorically asked Hope.

"Interesting, but it's just a coincidence."

"At 5:00 p.m., June 6th EST, the meteor shower brightened the sky over India," WBC TV and Radio station announces. "Good day from New Delhi, India, I'm John Walters and here we stand witness to a cosmic ballet of dancing lights throughout the sky as meteors shower the earth with debris from Comet Providence."

While New Delhi is now witnessing the meteor shower, the hospitals in Seoul are starting to receive their first cases involving the virus. After the emergency rooms in every hospital in Seoul began to fill up with people, coming in with a

high fever but no other discernable symptoms, the Health Department Commissioner contacted the Center for Disease Center in Atlanta requesting assistance in determining what the cause.

By the time, the meteor shower arrived in London, over 100,000 people have died in Korea and another 82,000 in Japan, the CDC couldn't keep it a secret any longer. With the Japanese and Korean news agencies reporting on the sickness and deaths, the CDC was under pressure to warn of a mysterious virus spreading from the east, making its way west at a rapid pace, directly corresponding to the timeline of the meteors. A widespread Public Service Announcement began running on all television and radio stations warning people not to go outside during the shower and to be prepared to seek immediate medical attention if they acquire a fever greater than one hundred. The CDC also requested all medical institutions, hospitals, clinics, urgent and primary care facilities to prepare themselves for an onslaught of patients. Because they had no idea what they were up against, the CDC verified the county's stockpile of antibiotics and contacted pharmaceutical companies with special provisions to mass produce as much as they could in the shortest amount of time possible, and because they didn't know what effect a specific antibiotic would have on the virus, all variations were included in the requested order. They figured they could adjust the order as they learned more about the virus. For the pharmaceutical companies, this was a major cash cow, with full expectation of driving the cost sky high.

Tokyo reported that during the high influx of patients, doctors, nurses, and staff became infected. Within hours, it was reported that all the emergency rooms were full and an estimated one million people had been infected. The Board of

Health contacted the World Health Organization and insisted it be classified as an epidemic and asked for assistance. In turn, the WHO contacted the CDC and between the two, had every medical research facility worldwide working on finding answers. Beijing reported over 62,000 dead after six hours, and 150,000 dead after eight hours. However, they were able to provide an important revelation, it was mainly the very old, very young and people with weakened immune systems that were dying, mostly from complications of high fever. An hour later, Seoul and Tokyo confirmed similar results. This didn't change its classification because statistically millions of people would die from this outbreak which was now being classified as a pandemic.

"It's begun." Jack said, as the news agencies began reporting on illnesses.

"How long till it gets here?" Jennie asked.

"About seven hours," Hope said.

"I hope they call us before it gets here." Frank said.

At 3:00 a.m. June 7th the showers hit New York. By now it was estimated that over 1,260,000 people have died and over a twenty-three million people reported infected as far as and the CDC was no closer to finding a preventative measure to the outbreak other than stay inside, where masks and full coverage clothing. Expecting the worse, the President of the United States enacted the Succession Protocol. Key members of the government were directed to take refuge in various secured bunkers, preselected personnel on a secret location revolving schedule would establish command structures while a skeleton crew, headed by the Director of the Federal Emergency Management Administration would maintain a bare governmental organization to aid with the implementation of a modified Marshall Law Order and vital public service

requirements. The Harrison Suburban Project was called into action and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs assumed command of the nation for operational control. The President still had policy and nuclear weapons control, but the operation of the country was now under the Pentagon's control with close coordination FEMA. It was estimated that the Succession Protocol would only last a few days or weeks until the national health risks were sustainably under control.

At 5:16 p.m., June 7th, 2034, the Harrison Suburban Project was enacted, at 5:18 Jack got his call to report to Peterson Airforce Base, within a minute Phil and Frank received their call.

Hope called Justice, "They just called to report to the base."

"Ok, I'll meet you at the main gate, when they go in you can stay with me."

"We've got two vehicles. How about I come down, pick you up and you can bring one of them back for us?"

"Ok, I'm about forty minutes south on Interstate 25, call me when you're close to Pueblo, and I'll direct you to my house."

"Dad. I'm going to go pick up Justice, so he can bring the other vehicle back. We'll probably use his house as our home base while we are not in the lab."

Jack said, "Alright everyone, I guess this is it. Let's get everything ready and when Hope gets back, we'll drive to the base. I'll bet they're not ready for people to show up this quick."

"You know, the news reported a lot of people dying but they were mostly sick, old, or very young. Don't you think we'd be ok?" Phil inquired.

"I don't know, but if they enacted the project, they must know a little more than what's being reported," Jack said.

“They do,” Hope said. “Check the news, Tokyo is now reporting they’ve isolated what the virus is predominantly attacking, in a nutshell, it’s a lot like a genocidal biological attack, the virus has the potential to cause extinction by attrition.”

Jacked turned the TV up and a banner across the top of the screen read. “By Direction of the President of the United States, a modified Marshall Law Order is now in effect.” At the bottom of the screen, a caption read, “The Center of Disease Control Reports” and the reporter began covering news being reported from around the world then to the reports and requirements of the Marshall Law order. While Jack and the gang were catching up on all the latest news Hope took Frank’s Escalade and headed south.

Justice gave her directions to his house, and she met his parents. She then understood Justice’s position concerning them. They were glued to the TV in a state of apocalyptic shock blaming the devil and arguing with Justice about going outside. He understood there was no talking to them. He had many powers from his DNA as Hope did, but telepathy transmission wasn’t one of them. He could only project to Hope because she was able to receive. One thing he excelled at much more than Hope was his mathematical formulation and calculations. With that understanding, she realized Justice was different than other boys and was probably why she was starting to become more attracted to him.

They made it back to the Marriot right about the time the meteor shower began. “I thought the roads would be packed with people making last ditch efforts to go somewhere, but there’s nobody out there except military vehicles, hundreds of trucks big and small.”

“I hope the Marshall Law doesn’t make it too hard to get on base. Does everyone have proper identification?”

One by one they all reported yes. “I guess we should go,” Jack said. “Before we do, Hope, I love you so much and I’m worried for you. Promise you’ll be careful and have Gee and Soo help protect you.” A tear slowly rolled down his cheek. He felt as though he’d never see her again and the pain was familiar. He was crushed when Lisa died, and this felt the same.”

“Please try not to worry. I’ will be fine and we will be together again, I promise. I have been told this and I believe it, I want you to believe it too.”

Justice looked on in curiosity, he didn’t have a relationship with his parents or anyone else that involved much loving emotion, the concept confused him, but at the same time, he envied those who had.

By the time they arrived at the Airforce base, the sky was flashing with meteor burst making the evening sky look like a Christmas snow globe. If it weren’t so dangerous it would have been an awesome sight. They had three levels of barricades to drive around and two check points before reaching the gate. Armed soldiers guard the entrance to the base and an airman with a clip board became the most important person in the immediate life. “Name please?” he said.

“Jack Baker.”

“Social Security number?”

“425-00-4999”

Frank went next, then Phil, Jennie and finally Faith.

“What’s your name?” He said to Hope.

“My name is Hope Baker, and this is Justice Southerland. Neither of us will be staying, we’re here to take possession of the vehicles.

“Very well, you are cleared to enter, please exit the vehicle, and bring your belongings. There’s a bus standing by to transport you to the facility. We will have to inspect your things so if you have any contraband, please leave it in your vehicle. Follow me.”

Hope and Justice turned the vehicles around, drove back away from the barricades and parked along the side of the road where they could see them enter the bus and drive away. Before Hope and Justice drove away, they could see the airmen donning chemical warfare gear as if they were going to war. That’s when it really hit home to Phil and Jennie how serious the situation was as they looked out the bus windows, waving to Hope.

By this time, the meteor shower was in full display. Little bursts, big bursts, the normally dark Colorado evening was littered with red and white streaks across the sky, some so close a swooshing sound could be heard as they went by. When the wind blew right, they could smell a slight odor of what reminded them of burnt garbage or decay. It was ominously clear the world was in real danger.

Before getting on the bus, Jack gave all the money he had left on him, totaling almost nineteen-thousand dollars to Hope, knowing she would need it. In the back of his mind, he didn’t think he’d ever see Hope again and thought his end would be sealed in the mountains. The only thing he felt he had left was his confidence that Hope would be ok, if not for that he wouldn’t have gone to the bunker.

Hope and Justice drove back to the hotel. Though Jack and Phil turned in their keys and Jack thought he paid for all three rooms but Hope purposely failed to turn in the key to the room. She talked to the lady at the check in counter, “Mr. Baker checked out of room 412 in error, we’ll be staying a few more

nights.” With Hopes’ persuasive powers, she was gaining more and more confidence with every decision. She told Justice, “We’ll keep the room open for a while. It’s roughly halfway between the Genetics lab and the robotics lab, I think it’ll be a better home base. I’m sorry about your parents.”

“That’s ok. Gee already told me their time will be coming quick. I do agree about the room though, but I’ll go home and try to make my parents as comfortable as I can while they’re still here. You don’t have to come if you don’t want, I can meet you back here.”

“No, that’s ok, I’ll go with you. We need to stick together and protect each other; it’s going to get ugly out there pretty quick.”

“Ok, how about we stay here tonight and go down to my house in the morning?” Justice asked.

“That sounds good. I’ll have to get up to Aurora to start working on an antivirus and a process to incubate large quantities of embryos at a time. I’m also going to have to get Gee and Soo here in person, so they can remove one of my ovaries.”

“You’re going to have an ovary removed?”

“Where do you think, the eggs are going to come from?”

“I just think about it. How long will it take you to recover?”

“I’ll be fine, they said I’d hardly notice.”

“That’s good. I’ve got to get started at the Robotics lab soon too. I must create some robots that can build other robots. There’s going to be a lot of dead bodies to dispose of contagious bodies. There’s not going to be enough people or resources to handle it and if it’s not handled, the amount of decease from decomposing bodies would be catastrophic itself. I don’t think

I got a fair shake on this deal. You get to create life while I have to destroy the remains of life.”

“You get to play a part in the creation,” Hope said, trying to ease the mood a bit.

“I hope they’re more like you than me.”

“Imagine the best of you and the best of me, that will be our children, all 2000 of them.”

“Yeah, that reminds me, I have to develop and program nanny bots. I’ll need your help with the programing. What are we going to name them? One, two, three...?”

“That’s funny, we’ll have to think about it.”

They settled down for the evening after getting a bite to eat and began writing down notes for their plan. The more they thought of it, the more questions came up. Checking back to the news they learned the virus was very deadly but not necessarily a death sentence. After eighteen hours, reports from Seoul and Tokyo confirmed about ten percent of the infected people have died within the first twelve hours but if they make it past twelve hours their temperatures began to drop back down closer to one hundred degrees.

The reports they were receiving were truly shortsighted. Very few reports were coming out of Russia, the middle east or Africa. “Gee, what’s really happening out there,” Hope asked.

“About 12 percent of the population will die, another 24 percent will develop terminal illnesses and 90 percent of the remaining population will have been exposed and ultimately rendered sterilized. The remaining 6.4 percent of the entire world population unaffected will still be at risk for the duration of their lives.”

“When will they realize all this?”

“They won’t. There will not be enough educated people left to effectively manage a civilization. In sixty years, the

world's population of humans will almost completely be gone. The only ones left will be isolated groups and clans as it was 20,000 years ago. We advise you to understand the things you need to do and do not pay any attention to human reporting, they do not know what we know, and you must stay together."

"But we have work to be done in different places," she said.

"Take all the equipment you need from the north, the university in the south has all the space you need."

"Justice, we have our first change of plan."

"What's that?" he said.

Gee wants us to stay together and set up shop down in Pueblo, and I need to gather the equipment I need from the Genetics lab to take down to CSU with you."

"The university is definitely big enough; they do have a nice chemistry lab that could prove adequate."

"We could probably set ourselves up with faculty housing right on campus."

"I'll bet we could. Your telepathic powers are going to come in very handy," Justice said.

"How is it you don't have full telepathy?"

"I don't know, maybe I do, but never tried. I hear things just fine but never tried to tell anyone something."

"We'll work on it sometime. Believe me, it comes in real handy when you want or need something," she said.

It was getting late. Police cars, fire trucks and ambulance sirens were sounding their importance to the dire situation out in the public as the virus began to affect the many that failed to heed the warnings about being outside during the meteor showers. There were two beds in the room, they had determined who would take which one, but as it got later, and they got more tired they ended up dozing off and laying together

on top of the covers. Hope woke in the middle of the night and realized she was lying next to Justice and suddenly felt empowered to be an independent woman. With a new sense of togetherness, she laid back down gently, careful not to wake him, and laid her arm across his chest. In a twilight waken state, he put his hand on her arm and fell back to sleep.

When they woke in the morning, they wasted no time taking turns in the shower and getting ready to head over to Justice's house. When they got there, they noticed the streets were bare, meteors were still bursting in the air not as many as the night before, and it was eerily quiet, no cars, planes, trains, birds, dogs, or kids. Justice opened the front door and called to his parents, "Mom, Dad, I'm home."

No answer. "That's their car out front, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Mom, Dad," he called out again, and again there was no answer. They started walking through the house calling out, "Hello."

Justice looked out the back window, "There they are, they're outback." He opened the back door, "I'm home, what are you doing here?" Just as he asked, he noticed the shovel lying on the ground and what appeared to be a grave. He knew then his dog had died and turned to Hope, "It's my dog, he must have died."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Are you guys feeling, ok?" Justice asked.

"Hold it son, just a moment, we're about to pray and say goodbye to Dunny," his dad said.

Hope whispered to Justice, "Do you see that?"

"See what?" He whispered back.

"They have like a spotted red haze about them."

It took him a minute to focus and concentrate, then finally, he saw it, "What is that?"

“I believe its low dose radiation, I see a red hue, feel heat and energy,” she said.

“That has got to have something to do with the virus. Radiated virus, from the far reaches in space, what could go wrong?”

They said a prayer for Dunny and turned toward Justice. “Where were you last night?” his mom asked.

“Mom, Dad, this is Hope. We were together, she had to say goodbye to her dad, so I kept her company. Are you feeling, ok?”

“Not really, we’re both coming down with a cold or something,” she said.

“Where you outside last night?”

“Only to look for Dunny, he ran off for a while last night. Did you see all the lights in the sky?”

Justice looked back at Hope, “I think they’re infected.”

“Mom, Dad, we need to drive you to the hospital right now.”

“What are you talking about, we don’t need to go to the hospital,” his dad said.

“Yes Dad, you do. There’s something in the air from the meteors last night that’s making people real sick, and many have already died.”

“We saw that on the news. If God wants us dead, we’re going to die. If he wants us to live, we’ll live, it’s his will son, we’ve been trying to tell you for years, you just must have faith,” his dad said.

Justice looked back at Hope, she looked at him with an understanding nod and Justice simply said, “Ok, is there anything you need, help with the dishes or laundry or something to eat?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Southerland, how old was your dog?”

“About four,” Mrs. Southerland said.”

“That’s kind of young for a dog to die, what killed him?”

“We figure he got into something when he run off, maybe someone poisoned him.”

“No ma’am, that was a virus, the same virus I’m afraid you and Mr. Southerland have.”

Hope could hear Justice’s mind telling her not to persuade them to go to the hospital, that their faith was more important to them than anything she could tell them.

“Do you go to church Hope?” Mrs. Southerland asked.

Justice just bowed his head thinking, “Oh no, here it comes.”

“No ma’am, I worship from home.”

“You can’t worship from home; you have to worship from the house of God.”

“My mom died when I was born and ever sense, I’ve been talking to God and he told me I could talk to him anytime I want, and I do, as a matter of fact I talk to him so much I just call him Gee for short.”

“Blasphemy.”

“Not at all, he told me its ok, because we couldn’t pronounce his real name anyway.” On that note she gave Mrs. Southerland a little persuasive mental nudge.

“Well, I guess that kind of makes sense and who am I to say that someone else can’t talk to God.”

Justice’s face went from grimace to grin. “Ok, enough about God, we know he works in mysterious ways which reminds me, what do you want me and Hope to do if you get real sick?”

His dad said, "If we get real sick, you can take us to the doctor but we ain't going to get real sick, you might get real sick, but we'll be just fine."

Justice's mom asked him, "Where did you meet?"

"At the airport in Colorado Springs," he said.

"What on earth were you doing up there?"

"Hope flew in with her family that are going away for a while, and she asked if I would drive one of their vehicles back."

"That explains why your car was here, but you weren't."

Justice looked back at Hope and could hear her thinking to him, "Nice, you didn't lie, and you didn't tell her, that's a gift."

He thought back, "You see what I've had to deal with, the truth doesn't always set you free."

"It has been a pleasure to meet you Mr. and Mrs. Southerland, but I have an errand to run."

"Nonsense, you just got here, stay and have a cup of tea," she said.

"Hope looked at Justice again, gave him a little smile, sure, a cup of tea sounds lovely."

"Are you from England? We have a lady from England that goes to our church that talks like that. Everything's either lovely or bloody."

"No ma'am, never been out of Mississippi till this trip here."

"You're from Mississippi," turning to her husband, "Did you hear that Bobby, she's from Mississippi, isn't that where you lived before moving here?"

"Sure was, were in Mississippi do you live?" he asked.

"Down on the coast just north of Biloxi."

“I lived in Hattiesburg for about five years but I’m originally from Huntsville, Alabama.”

“What made you move all the way out here.”

He looked at his wife, “I was married once before, to a girl in the Air Force, she got stationed out here, I came with her, she got transferred and left me here and ran off with another guy.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. If she hadn’t left me, I’d have never met Lucy.”

“Cream and sugar in your tea Hope?” Lucy asked.

“Yes please, just a little.”

Justice said, “Hope is a scientist.”

“She is? She’s kind of young.” Lucy said.

“So am I.”

“Oh, you’re smart like Justice?”

Hope smiled, “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Do you work with robots too?”

“No, I’m a Microbiologist.”

She could tell they didn’t know what microbiology was and decided to change the subject. “Was Justice a handful growing up?”

“Not at all, he stayed in his room all day reading and scribbling stuff in notebooks. We’d call him for dinner and back to the books he’d go. We got some pictures; do you want to see them?”

Hope could hear Justice again, “You’re sneaky.”

She winked at him.

About an hour after they got there, Bobby and Lucy’s temperatures had risen to 101 and they could feel the sickness setting in good. “I’ve got a terrible headache Lucy, where’s the aspirin?”

“I ain’t feeling too good either. I’ll bring us both some aspirin,” she said.

“Do you have a thermometer?” Hope asked.

“I better take our temperatures too.” She came back from the back room, gave Bobby some aspirin and run the thermometer across his forehead, “101, daddy you better go lay down, you got a fever.” She ran it across her brow, “100.5, I got one too. Sorry kids, we’re going to go lay down for a while. Justice, take care of her, she’s nice, then she whispered to him, I think she likes you, I seen the way she looks at you, I like her.”

After they left the room, Hope said, “I’m sorry Justice, but you know they only have about four hours and their temperatures are either going to start coming back down or it’ll continue till you know what.”

“Yes, I know. I don’t have a good feeling about it.”

“If I was in a lab and had a sample of the virus, I might be able to come up with something to help.”

“Don’t feel too bad, didn’t Gee say there was nothing we could do about it?”

“Not in those words. They implied there was nothing we could do but I think its because they want me to focus on reproduction.”

Gee appeared, “No I meant there’s nothing you can do. If the virus finds a host, it will begin to multiply and won’t stop until it matures. So, now you worship me?”

“Very funny, after sixteen years you finally developed a sense of humor?”

“No, I thought you were serious.”

“Now I think that’s funny.”

Justice asked, “Are you talking to Gee?”

“Yes.”

“Gee, why can’t I influence other people’s minds like Hope?”

“Because you never tried. Both of you have far more abilities than you can imagine. As we undertake this mission, you need to expand your mind and concentrate, you’re only operating at about thirty percent or so. You’re going to need a lot of help from the people left behind.”

Hope and Justice took turns checking on Lucy and Bob. At one point, their temperature got to 105. Hope stood at the foot of their bed and felt a subtle wave of energy toward her from them. She felt as though she was absorbing the energy. She thought, “Maybe that’s way I’m immune. I’m absorbing the energy, something humans can’t do.” Lucy’s and Bob’s fevers eventually dropped back down around one hundred.

“I felt energy coming from them, I’m positive it was radiation. That’s the mystery equation in our genetic makeup, why we’re not affected. We can handle radiation in ways humans cannot, that must also be factored into treatment. Do you know any physicists? she asked.

“You know, that makes perfect sense. How could they not know of the radiation?”

“They know of it, it’s panic enough that people are dying, and millions are getting sick, but they tell the people stay inside, and the people think they can beat this virus. They don’t want the public to know, because if they knew of the radiation, it would be Armageddon.”

Justice replied, “So, I guess it’s good they don’t know. We should keep it that way.”

“My point in this observation is the use and effects of the radiation. We need another team member, one who knows radiation.” She called out to Gee, “You’re it. We need another mind on this issue, and your it.”

“I’m glad you took my advice and opened your senses. Your ability to withstand the effects of low-level radiation is genetic. Our ancestors came from a solar system whose star blew up and blasted pieces of their planet all through space. This comet was once a piece of our ancestor’s home. Were you aware that you saved their lives when you absorbed their radiation?”

“I felt it but wasn’t sure.”

“Their lives may have been given a reprieve, but cancer and all the many other diseases, will plague them just the same. Between a foreign virus and radiation, planet earth is evolving, and we need to evolve with it.” Gee said.

“Justice asked Hope, “How do you feel, can you tell a difference because of the radiation?”

“Not at all. More alert if anything else.”

“Let me see if I can feel anything,” and he walked back to their room. He came back after five minutes confirming; he could feel it too. “I felt it too, if their temperatures went down because we absorbed their radiation, could we save other people too?”

“Gee told me we could ease the discomfort, but they’d still be subject to the inevitable diseases such as cancers and sterilization, and recommended we let the universe adjust itself. My concern about it is by my actions, have I caused a correction that could be worse than the original circumstance? Only time will tell, I guess.”

“It would make it so much easier if we had no conscious. How do you not help someone you know you could? That seems to defy humanity, not support it.” Justice said.

“I think you were given the name.” Hope said.

“My mom and dad seem like they’ll be ok, there is still time, do you want to go see where your lab will be?”

“Yes, I’m restless to get started. There’s a sense of urgency even though we’re going to be busy for the next sixteen years or maybe longer,” she said.

Chapter Four

They stopped at a gas station on the way down to the university, to fill up. “Getting fuel may become a challenge so we should stay topped off every chance we get,” Justice said. “If we can get by with just one trip from Aurora to here, we’d be the better for it.”

“There’s no one inside, the doors locked.”

“The automated pumps are still operational,” Justice said as he finished pumping. “I guess we got lucky this time. The next time they may not have any power, or the tanks could be empty. It still takes people to deliver the gas you know.”

“Did you notice all the dead animals,” she asked.

“Yeah, somehow, they’ve all got to be collected and disposed of. People are going to be worse.”

When they arrived on campus, they found a lot of cars parked all over the streets, like people just stepping out of a rolling vehicle and it stopped wherever it hit something. The tech building and robotics lab was deserted.

“This is good, we have it all to ourselves.”

“Yeah, but we have no physical help to collect and gather supplies, material, and parts. I think when you get your genetics lab set up, we’ll see the same obstacle. I’m not going to worry about it quite yet. This will be me lab, maybe we should go find our new home?”

“Good idea,” she said. “Let’s start at the admin building.”

They drove up to the front of the building and were met by the campus Provost Marshal. “What are you doing here, the campus is closed.”

Hope said, “The campus is open for government business, we are here to establish a base of operations for Operation Gifted Globe,” staring into the provost’s eyes.

“Yes ma’am, how can I be of assistance?”

“First of all, you have been infected?”

“I had a terrible fever yesterday but feel a little better today, so I don’t think so.”

“We need a residence. Where do we go?”

“I can help with that. I have spare keys to all the empty faculty houses, for security reasons, I’ll get you set up in a nice one. Follow me.”

Justice asked Hope on the way there, “What is Operation Gifted Globe?”

“Just having a little fun with psychology, she now thinks she part of a purpose, and we have an ally.”

“That’s smart.”

They pulled up to a two-story brick house with a semicircular drive. It had four bedrooms and 3600 square feet, much more than they needed, but for Hope it was perfect.

“Tomorrow I’m going to take a trip up to Aurora to get all the equipment I can, it a shame we don’t have a bigger truck.”

“Why don’t you ask the Provost?”

“Good idea.”

“Excuse me,” Hope said, “I never got your name.”

“Didn’t I tell you earlier? I’m sorry, my name is Connie Swift.”

“Connie, I’m Hope Baker and this is Justice Southerland, as I said before we’re here to conduct research and development for a cure for the virus.”

“Wow, you government types really do work fast, they just set up the reporting protocol for the Marshall Law headquarter yesterday afternoon.”

“Not exactly Connie. Our work is a couple steps above the typical chain of command at the local headquarters here. Our direction is coming straight from the top with the full support. However, our business is too important for anyone to know of, if our work is hindered in any way, millions of people could die. Can you help maintain our anonymity and provide support at the same time?”

She said, “Yes, I can.”

“Thank you. Do you have access to transportation, a large truck for example?”

“Yes, I can get you a truck, how about a 16-foot enclosed truck?”

“Perfect,” Hope said. “Can it be made available about seven in the morning?”

“Absolutely.”

After Connie showed her the house, she left them with the key and said she’d be back in the morning with a truck. Justice told Hope, “I’ve really got to practice that mind control, you do it so well you must have fun with it.”

“It’s a little like acting I guess; I get to be anyone I want. Now what about your equipment? Do you have everything you need?”

“There are a couple of engineers I was working with that could really help us out if I can get in touch with them and they’re not infected too bad. The software downloads will only take minutes, but the construction and assembly are what I could use their help with. It’s kind of funny, my master’s is in engineering, but my masterpiece will be in computer science.”

Hope said, “I know what you mean, I have a master’s in molecular biology but all I need to create my masterpiece is to sleep with you.”

His eyes got huge, he said, “Excuse me?”

“Well, you know what I mean. Our children, all 2000 lab grown mini-mes, will be my masterpiece.”

“I don’t know, now that you mentioned it, I kind of like the other way. I’ve never been down that road,” he said shyly.”

She walked over to him, put her arms around him and whispered in his ear, “Me neither, but I’m sure that’s one journey we’re meant to take together, but that timing is everything. She leaned back a bit, looked into his eyes, and gave him a little kiss as to somehow indicate it was all part of the plan.”

He was ok with that. Being a geek and a nerd his whole life, spared him much of the sexual frustration normal teen boys had, but not all, after all, biology and chemistry still ruled the roost and now he had something tangible to look forward to.”

She said, “We need to go back to your parents, check in on them and bring both vehicles down here tonight.”

“Ok, we’re about fifteen minutes away, it’s five o’clock, the curfew starts at six, that gives us just enough time to run into a grocery store and do some really fast shopping. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but all the fast-food places were closed down.”

“I did notice, but I missed the curfew part,” she said.

Justice looked a little confused, “You’re right, I don’t remember hearing anything, but a curfew starting at six seems like a fact.”

“It sounds like a matter of clairvoyance. I get it all the time. Sometimes you just know things. Let’s get going.”

On their way back in the other vehicle they saw quite a few military vehicles on the road, setting up check points and roadblocks. She knew the reports from the media were inaccurate, so she stopped at one of the check points to gather information.

“May I speak with your supervisor?”

“Yes ma’am,” he said, as he called for his lieutenant.

“How can I help ma’am?” the lieutenant asked.

“How many of your men have been infected?”

He would never have talked to her about such things, but under her control, there was no resistance and he openly disclosed whatever she requested. “We believe they have all been infected but have recovered.”

“Recovered completely?”

“No ma’am, it appears we are all still somewhat feverous, but we can still do our duty.”

“How are the dead being handled?”

“I’m not sure, if we run across people that have died, we call dispatch and they send a team and transport them to the civic center where they are identified, tagged, and bagged. From there, I couldn’t tell you.”

“Thank you, lieutenant, drink plenty of water, and have a good evening.”

Justice stopped behind her and waited. He was hoping someone would come talk to him, so he could practice telepathy but by the time he tried to project some communication toward one of the soldiers Hope was pulling away.

Back at their campus house they discussed the plan to get the equipment she needed from the genetics lab and the timing of the trip as they put in what little groceries, they were able to get.

At seven o'clock in the morning as promised, Connie delivered the truck. "Perfect," Hope said. "That's big enough for everything."

"Do you want me to drive the truck," Justice asked.

"Yes, please," she said. "Connie, what are your plans for the day, would you care to join us on a reconnaissance mission to the genetics lab up in Aurora?"

"That sounds interesting, we can talk along the way."

Hope already knew anything Connie may have wanted to ask, but Hope felt she needed an ally in the system and figured Connie was perfect for the job. "How are you feeling lately?"

"I've got a slight headache and feel a little crappy but nothing serious."

"Do you mind?" Hope rubbed her hands together and took Connie's hands in hers. "You will not remember this, but you will feel the need to support me in my mission regardless of whether you understand it or not, you are now part of a secret government program to heal the world." Upon taking her hands Hope absorbed enough of the radiation that was exacerbating the virus and causing her to feel ill. Though she is not free and clear of the virus and long-term damage is yet to be identified, at least the virus is no longer an immediate threat.

Justice practiced his telepathy by thinking to Hope, "Why did you tell her she was part of a government operation?"

Hope heard his inquiry. "Good, you can talk, she is obviously single, dedicated to order and loyalty, and has a need to be important and useful. I can't think of anyone else who would be more dedicated to helping use without constant hypnosis."

"I see," he said.

They left the campus in the Yukon with Justice following in the truck. Upon arriving at the genetics lab, they notice a lot more people out and about. People that have been exposed but have started the process of recession. For them, the frightening life or death scenario has passed but the lifelong battle with residual diseases, syndromes, and conditions has just begun. Justice backed the truck up to a side door at the lab while Hope and Connie walked through the front and found the Dean's office. The Dean did not make it through the night, but the Assistant Dean, Dr. Henry Willard, was more than glad to help with Hope's request. Being under a spell made it easy for Hope to convince him to allow and arrange for the procurement of the equipment she needed. When Connie observed their conversation, Hope realized she was going to have to be a little more open with Connie. From a backseat perspective, Connie didn't understand how Hope words were able to convince the Dean from relinquishing tens of thousands of dollars' worth of equipment without as much as a requisition, purchase order, or document of any kind.

Hope put her persuasive talents back on Connie for a bit, "Secret Government Business, the Dean was already given a heads up to help."

She got all the equipment she needed, the truck was loaded, but there was one last thing she could use. "Dr. Willard, my appointment requires me to do a wide variety of research and I could use some help. Do you have a couple of students to spare? Their work with me can be considered to satisfying their curriculum requirements."

"Sure, I can assign a couple students."

"Can I interview and pick my own?"

"Absolutely."

There were six volunteers. Hope talked with all of them at once then individually for about ten minutes each. Justice and Connie secured the equipment while Hope conducted her interviews. She was looking for two people that could stay and live on campus down in Pueblo that were single, not particularly interested in social activities that could interfere with the work and were in the top of their field with a specific aptitude for meiosis. She found the two she wanted. Both were female, both were about twenty, and neither had a family left to go back to.

Justice asked, “Why are they both girls?”

“Well, there was one boy that I liked but he had a girl from his class on his mind and I thought he wouldn’t be able to stay focused. I can’t afford to spend my time babysitting.”

“I was just wondering,” he said. “What will you have them do?”

“There’s much more to biology and genetics than a microscope. They will be operating all this equipment.”

“I thought that’s what you were going to do.”

“There is plenty of work to be done, a lot of what I’ll be doing involves alien technology that they don’t need to know about.”

“I’m going to need help myself, can you make yourself available if a little persuasion is needed?”

“Of course.”

It took a little over an hour to get back down the campus. Connie gave the key to the Microbiology lab to Hope and took the interns to their dorm. Donna was talkative, and Kayla rarely spoke, a contrast that would normally signal conflicting personalities but strange as it might have seemed, they got along extremely well and complimented each other’s strengths.

Justice backed the truck up to the Microbiology building. He stepped out of the truck, looked up at the building

and asked Hope, “If they have their own Microbiology Department, why did we get the equipment from Aurora?”

“You’ll see when we get in there, it’s also why I needed volunteers from Aurora.”

They walked into a huge empty room, nothing but some counter space, no chairs, desks, or even paint on the walls.

“What happened here, and how did you know?”

“Gee told me it was a fire, the whole building nearly burned down, they just got through cleaning it up and had started with the repairs.” Hope said.

“I should have known. You know, they’re not going to be able to finish if you’re working in it.”

“That’s right, they don’t need to finish. As long as we have dependable electricity, we’ll manage. You couldn’t bring the robotics lab to Aurora, so this is the next best thing.”

After they got all the equipment into the building, Hope called the Dean to meet with her at the admin building.

The Dean in turn called the Provost to meet him there as well.

“Ms. Swift, can you tell me why I’m here?”

“Dean Jones, this is Hope Baker,” she said.

“Excuse me Connie, may I?” Hope interrupted, focusing hard on hypnotizing him, “I’m a Microbiologist and I have been tasked with a great mission to cure the world of this terrible virus. I’ll need a considerable amount of help; can I count on you?”

“Of course, you can, anything you need, I’m at your disposal.”

After that brief meeting Hope, turned back to Connie, “I know you have questions, I promise to fill you in on everything tomorrow when we get the whole team together. Can you meet with us in the Microbiology lab in the morning?”

“Sure, I’ll be there.”

Hope was having some conflict with herself over what she would share with Connie. She felt comfortable talking with her and confident that she would be loyal to her. Though the reproduction of a child using the cells from their donor parents was legal, the government considered fertilization of multiple cells from the same donors to more than one surrogate as cloning which was still unlawful.

Hope met with Connie outside the lab, before they went inside to address her helpers, she told Connie, “I am much more than a Microbiologist, I have special abilities you won’t find in other people. I can’t get too elaborate; just know everything I do is for the good of humanity.”

“What kind of abilities?”

“Telepathy, increased hearing, sight, smell among other things.”

Connie looked at her all confused. Because Hope didn’t invoke her telepathy, Connie received information directly that was beyond normal understanding. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I am not a hundred percent human, I have a little alien DNA in me.”

“I’m not saying I don’t believe you, but what you’re suggesting sounds crazy.”

“I understand your reluctance, however, it’s important that you believe and accept me as I am.”

“Really, alien DNA? I’m compelled to help you with anything you need, I’m really not sure why and now I’m starting to question myself.”

“I could just have easily hypnotized you but then I’d always have to justify things every time they come up but if you already knew my truth, you’d already accepted it and make it

easier to get things done. I will show you this once, I'm positive it'll convince you. Ok?"

Hope asked Gee to appear before Connie to convince her. Gee advised that it was not a good idea, but Hope explained, "The world is on the brink of extinction, I need Connie to work with me one hundred percent, managing what she knows and what she can know is going to make it more difficult on me, besides, if it doesn't work out, I can always erase it from her mind."

"Stand by." Gee said.

"Connie, I'm going to show you something you cannot tell anyone, if you even think that you would not be able to keep it secret, I need to know. Are you ready?"

"Yes," she said, not knowing what to expect.

Within a minute, a glowing orb fell from above about the size of a bowling ball. It was completely silent, glowed bright like a car headlight and hovered in front of them. Gee materialized between them and the orb, put his hand out and grabbed the orb. As soon as he touched it, it quit glowing. "This will be your first assignment." He told Hope. "You must precisely extract one point two five milliliters per sample to account for 2000 samples. There will be enough left for you to be able to synthetically reproduce, that you will use for another function that I will discuss later in private."

He handed the orb to Hope and vanished as quickly as he came.

For the thirty second duration of his visit, Connie stood in total shock. She wasn't sure she saw what she thought she saw.

"Did I just see that? Is that for real?"

"It most certainly was. That was Gee, he is my mentor, my contact, my friend. He is the source of my alien DNA, and

we have a tremendous responsibility ahead of us.” She handed the orb to Connie to feel for herself what alien technology was like. The orb was weightless, gray in color and appeared to be filled with a smoky liquid.

Hope put her hand out to receive the orb back, “I better secure this in a safe place as she opened a backpack and placed the orb inside.

Connie said, “I’ve never been one to disbelieve in aliens, but never witnessing for myself, I had some doubt. No longer. I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.”

“This is top secret, no one can know what our research is other than trying to find a cure for the virus, the fate of humanity depends on it. Can I trust you?” Hope was careful not to mention anything about repopulation, she only referenced the virus.

Naturally, Connie said yes, but wondered to herself how dangerous this could be, she was going to have to stay alert.

Even though she told Connie of her secret, she still used her powers when she told her, “I don’t plan on telling my helpers much, please do not talk to them about these things.

They walked into the lab and Hope gathered her helpers and told them, “I need you to get all the equipment set up and operational. Once everything is set up, we’ll need supplies, I have a list on the counter by the PCR workstation. Once we have all the supplies including cryogenics, let me know so we can start on our first assignment.”

Donna asked, “Why are we down here instead of up in Aurora?”

“This is the only place authorized to do the research that we have to do. As a matter of fact, you must be sworn to secrecy, do either of you have anything in your background that would disqualify you from holding a security clearance?” They

had no clue what was required for obtaining a clearance, so Hope was able to easily manipulate them. Her telepathic abilities didn't hurt either when she mentioned that if anyone asked them what they were doing in the lab, their answer was to be, 'research into a cure for the virus.'

Meanwhile Justice was able to get in touch with the two guys in the robotics lab he wanted to recruit. After the reports of a virus circulated most of the departments on campus simply failed to return so the Dean officially closed the campus. Those that wanted to stay could, but it was voluntary, those that left could return later without penalty. Jim and Gary shared an apartment in town, they also shared the virus. They came back to campus to find the campus empty but saw a car in front of the robotics lab and stopped in. Justice watched them come through the door hunched over like they had a back injury and asked, "Are you alright? You don't look too good."

"We're just getting over the flu or something."

Justice knew it was the virus. "I've got a trick to feel better after catching it, come on over."

Justice put his right hand on Gary's arm and his left on Jim and started absorbing the radiation from them, almost instantaneously relieving them of the fever and drained sluggish feeling.

"Wow, that was fantastic, how did you do that?"

"Mind over matter. I'm glad you didn't leave town, we have a new assignment for the government, approved by CSU, that's of the top-secret nature. Are you in?"

"Hell Yeah!" Jim exclaimed.

"I'm in," Gary said. "What is it?"

"Your familiar with the virus spreading around the world? Well, thousands of people have died, it's very

contagious, and we're going to build robots to collect dead bodies." Justice said.

"Awesome," Jim said.

"That's not all," Justice continued, "We are talking thousands of bodies, we're going to have to mass produce two different bots, one for handling the other for mobilization and transport. In order to do that, our piece de resistance will be the creation of robots to build the robots."

Gary said, "That's years of engineering design and programing."

"I've already written all the programing and have the engineering design ready to upload to the server for the robot builders. The first thing I need you to do is plagiarize the T-7 dual arm and OSP-12 track bot designed to combine them for the design of handlers. After that we'll use the T-3 single arm and retrofit a conveyor system on a gurney frame for transport with dual OSP-12 tracks. We'll deal with programing after the production begins."

"How did you get this gig?" Gary asked.

"My girlfriend." It made Justice feel good to tell someone he had a girlfriend, he'd never had one before, "She's a Microbiologist on a mission to save the world and has friends in very high places."

Jim said, "We need to keep notes man, this is some far-out shit, the stuff of movies."

Justice and Hope both had TVs mounted in their labs to keep up with the latest news of the virus. Only three television stations were broadcasting live and all they covered was news of the virus, riots, chaos, and public service announcements. By day three they estimated over twenty-three million people have died. The only good news was that the rate at which people were dying dropped a little from tens of thousands per hour to

thousands. Every hospital, every morgue, everywhere, dead bodies started to pile up and emergency destruction order was issued by the Department of Health and supervised by National Guard units in their prospective locations. The more people handling the bodies, the more sickness and death followed.

On the TV behind Justice, the news reported, “There have been many reports of people living in rural areas around the country that have been burying their family members on their private property. The CDC and Department of Health warn against burying virus victims, just as back in the days of the Plague, the only way to properly dispose of a body infected with the virus is incineration. If you have family that have perished, please do not bury them, call your local health department, police, or fire station to find where to take the body or have them picked up. Foreign new stations report piles of bodies, huge pits and mass graves being used to dispose of the dead. Health officials are concerned these practices will perpetuate the virus for generations to come.”

“We are really under the gun to get this going. Are you ready to start?” Justice asked.

“Let’s do this,” Jim said.

Talking to Gary, Justice said, “I’m going to upload the schematics for our robot building robots, we’ll call Adam and you and Jim start identifying all the parts and equipment we need to build two Adams, one transport and one handler. I’ve got a few very important phone calls to make.”

As soon as he walked away, he contacted Gee. “I’m going to call four of the top robotics companies and offer them the opportunity to mass produce these robots. The demand far exceeds our ability to produce, when I get them on the phone can you help convincing them to accept?”

“You can do this; all you have to do is try. Whether you’re face to face or miles apart, your concentration is all you need. They will follow you off a cliff if you so will it.”

Justice called iRobot first, “Hello may I speak with your Chief Executive Officer?” The whole time he spoke, he concentrated on persuading the person on the phone to transfer the call.

“Mr. John Robinson, there’s a Mr. Southerland from the robotics lab at Colorado State University on the line for you.”

“Take a message,”

“He said he would give his program to Google for free and run us out of business if you’re too busy for him.”

“Very well, patch him through.” Many top executives simply feel they are too important to talk to normal people and their arrogance comes out especially when confronted with conflict. In addition, he took offense at having his putting practice interrupted. “John Robinson, may I help you,” he said with a tone of disgust in his voice.

“No. but I can help you,” Justice said. “I’m an engineer at the Colorado State University Robotics Lab in Pueblo, no doubt you’ve witnessed the news reports of the trouble the world is having with disposing of the bodies of the infected dead? I’ve developed robots to collect the bodies and want to give you the rights to produce and sell them, I am not asking for anything. Are you interested?”

“You mean to say, you have designs and programs for robots to collect the dead infected bodies that you will give to us for free?”

“That’s correct, are you interested?”

“Yes, what’s the catch?”

“There is no catch, not everyone in the world is looking to make a profit but I know you are, it’s the nature of business

and I trust that you'll do a good job. Keep in mind as you price your services that I will also be providing these drawings and software to your competitors. Are you still interested?" By now, Justice had the feel for mentally influencing someone. It gave him a sense of superiority unlike the normal intellectual superiority he felt from his IQ, this was much more empowering and gave him reason to air on the side of caution.

"Yes Mr. Southerland, we're interested."

"Good I'll send you the files electronically within the hour, just leave me your electronic address. There're a couple items left to address. The programming software is voice command operated, the first voice addressing programing will be considered the master programing authority, if a new person must be appointed as master programming authority, the unit will have to be reprogrammed. Programming instructions are the first three pages of the diagram file. The other item is the biomatrix sensing processor which will be sent to you separately in about two days, the programming is nearly complete. If you have any question please call me any time, your secretary has my number and it's in the documents I'll be sending."

"One down, three to go," he told himself. He then called Google, Northrop Grumman and Touch Bionics and gave them the same opportunity. They each accepted.

Hope could tell Donna and Kayla still had a bit of a fever. She touched Kayla and absorbed her radiation, then put her hand in Donna's arm and took hers. "What did you do?" Donna asked.

"Do you feel better?"

"Yes, how did you do that?"

"It's nothing," Hope now had to make her forget she had a fever to keep her focused on their work.

By three o'clock Kayla and Donna found all the supplies on Hope's list and had them stored away on stockroom shelves. Hope asked them, "The pizza place just off campus opened back up this afternoon, do you want pizza before we get started?"

"I love pizza," Kayla said.

"How long are we going to be working?" Donna asked.

"Do you have somewhere to be?" Hope asked.

"No, I was going to call home and see how my mom is doing."

"We will be working long and late but that doesn't mean we have to stop living. Take care of the things that are important. You call home anytime you want, now is a good time."

After pizza, Hope pulled the orb out of her backpack and gave Donna and Kayla specific directions, "We need to draw exactly one milliliter of the contents of this orb and insert it in a 1.8 milliliter cryotube. We need two thousand samples then extract the remaining contents in fifteen milliliter centrifuge tubes. Take your time, be precise and let me know when you're done." She then handed the orb over to Donna.

"Wow, this is as light as a feather. Are you sure there's anything in it?"

"Yes, there's stuff in it alright, just be careful to keep it sterile and don't waste any." Hope said.

"How do I get it out?" Donna asked.

"Use a one inch 20-gauge needle with a 20-milliliter syringe and insert it from the bottom. I'm going to see the county coroner and bring back some samples of the virus."

Chapter Five

The coroner met Hope at the morgue who was returning with six more bodies. The coroner looked completely exhausted; Hope didn't think he was going to make it through the day. "You haven't been wearing any protection handling these bodies, have you?"

"I was till I got sick then I figured it didn't matter anymore."

"Here," she said as she took his hand, "you'll feel better in just a few minutes."

"What was that? What did you do?"

"I took quite a bit of radiation from you; you have radiation poisoning, and the virus has damaged your liver and spleen. Now concentrate on the job at hand, do not concern yourself with my actions and when I'm gone, forget I was here."

She took more radiation from him than she had taken from anyone else at a single time and could feel the effects. She suddenly realized that though she could absorb the radiation she was not totally immune. "Gee, what happens to me and the radiation I absorb?"

"The radiation is absorbed into a gland you have next to the basal ganglia in your brain, in small doses it can enhance many of your abilities, in large doses you can overload the gland, if it ruptures, you risk radiation poisoning like humans."

"What do I do if I get too much?"

"Give it something else."

"It's that easy?"

"Yes, just touch something and discharge it, of course there's a little concentration involved."

Hope collected blood samples, mouth and nasal swabs, tissue samples from heart, kidney, liver, and lungs from three

of the victims. Before she left, she put her hand on one of the cadavers and discharged all the radiation she had collected to date and instantly felt relieved. On her way out of the door she told the coroner to wear his protective gear and clothing.

When she arrived back at the lab, Donna and Kayla were just finishing the extractions. It was almost ten at night and they were getting tired. Hope told them, “When you finish, store the samples in the short test sample cabinet and go get some rest. Come back in whenever you’re well rested, don’t hurry in, it’s important that you are one hundred percent for tomorrow, these samples contain the virus, and we’ll need to take extra caution working with them.” She didn’t mention the radiation hazard, it wouldn’t have mattered, they didn’t have the protective gear anyway, but what they did have was Hope to absorb the radiation.

She locked up the virus samples and went home to find Justice making a sandwich. He asked, “Are you hungry?”

“Starved, I don’t remember eating today.” Hope said.

“I think we need to take better care of ourselves.”

“I think you’re right. Thanks for the sandwich.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I have good news.”

Justice said, “I do too, you first.”

“I found out from Gee the radiation we absorb has its limits, too much is a very bad thing, but we also can cleanse the radiation from our bodies. We have a gland in our brain that stores it and can increase our abilities, but too much could cause a rupture and poison us. To prevent that, we can discharge it by touching something or someone, and transfer it directly to the object or person.”

“That’s great, I was wondering about that. My news is that I’ve determined my helpers and I couldn’t possibly produce

the volume of robots required, so I contacted four of the county's leading robotics companies to build them for us. I sent them the diagrams and software, they get to make a little profit from world governments and major corporations, and the mission will have its best chance for success."

"If you're outsourcing the robots, have you just worked yourself out of a job?"

"Oh, no. We're still going to build what we can. I named my robot building robot, Adam, after the biblical figure, as he is the first. I plan to create different programs for him, there's no doubt he will be a major part of the future. Who's going to teach our children, clean our homes, drive, and fly us where we need to go, computers, robots, and virtual programs? The possibilities for Adam are endless. By my calculations, the population will have been cut in half by the time our children reach procreation age, and by the third generation there won't be any humans left."

"You know, if I were normal, I don't think I could handle all this." Hope said.

"What do you mean?"

"We're different, we have some alien DNA in us. I'm not sure about you, but I grew up predominantly isolated from the normal activities of children because I was always years ahead of kids my age. Not having to see all my friends die, basically because I don't have any, protects me somewhat that normal people don't have the luxury of."

"I understand, I didn't have any friends growing up either, but now we have each other," he said.

"Yes, we do," she said as she looked into his eyes. She wondered what a traditional boyfriend or girlfriend relation would be like, and not having someone close to confide with made her feel a little sad. She thought of talking with Donna

and Kayla, but Justice wasn't a normal boy either, so dancing to their own song may as well be the best thing for them. "Justice, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Will you hold me for a minute, just to see what it's like."

She caught him off guard and made him nervous. "Ok, but don't judge me, I've never had a girlfriend before and I'm afraid to say, I don't know what to do."

"Me neither." They stood still holding each other for nearly a minute, long enough for the nervousness and jitters to subside and a warm feeling of acceptance and comfort to set in. "It's official" she said, "I think I know what Gee and Soo meant by having another half."

They woke on day four with reports around the country that looting, and anarchy has become prevalent, especially in heavily populated urban centers. Peoples' fevers dropped enough that they felt empowered to go out in the streets and take advantage of the situation. Decreased police presence and employment disruptions created an atmosphere of lawlessness for the many that found survival their immediate priority. With scores of dead bodies unable to be attended to lying in their homes because only the dead found in public were being dealt with as the cities exhaustedly attempted to dispose of them. It got so bad in some areas that people were taking their dead out of their homes and leaving them on the streets. The stench of rotting corps filled the air, smoke from burning piles of bodies outside the city limits filled the skies. In many cities, working for the city or county collecting dead animals and people became the number one source of employment. Suicide rates quadrupled but oddly enough, even though robbery and

mugging rates soared, murder rates across the country dropped dramatically.

It was clear to Justice that the production of his robots would be too late to prevent the wide spread of disease caused by the decomposition of the dead. As Hope pointed out to Justice, “The threat of disease is not for new diseases from the dead, but the virus that took their life is still active and had opportunity to multiply many times over. As long as bodies filled with the virus were present, the virus would continue to thrive, and creatures feeding on the decomposition would in addition, become carriers.”

“I’m concerned about these companies’ ability to produce and distribute the bots. Therefore, Gary, Jim and I are going to produce one set of robots for operation locally. In addition, do you think we should concentrate and work on sterilization process for our local community?”

“Absolutely,” she said, “Given time, none of these people will be around, but while they are, it would not only serve us well to try and keep them as healthy as we can, but it’s also the humane thing to do.”

“I agree, I was thinking the same. Ok, I guess you’ll work on the virus and detection, and I’ll work on the physical aspects of containment and disposal. I’ll see you later,” he said as he started to walk off, then stopped motionless for a second, turned around, walked back to Hope, and gave her a kiss.

With all the chaos and sadness surrounding them, Hope felt a ray of happiness she hadn’t felt before and for the first time in his life, Justice felt that he belonged.

For the next three weeks Justice, Jim and Gary worked diligently, piecing together a robot that could build and replicate itself. It was to be about three feet tall, have a short-based track for mobility rather than legs. Its heavy and low

center of gravity along with gyroscopic balance and twin hydraulic and magnetic arms would make it extremely easy to handle, lift and maneuver weights in excess of six hundred pounds. While Jim and Gary would do most of the mechanical engineering, Justice would put his magical touches to the software and the central processing module.

Kayla and Donna's first mission was to examine, identify and record all findings from their investigation of the virus to include a break down all biological traits, origins, and properties. While the girls were doing their research, Hope called on Gee to remove one of her ovaries. She did not fear the procedure, believing in Gee and Soo's technological and intellectually advanced abilities, it was easy for her to accept them. Soo opened a trifold pouch and took out a miniature wand. Gee stretched out his arm and Soo took the wand like a pencil and like a laser it spliced a one-inch V in Gee's forearm. No blood came out, under his skin was a translucent gel. "Doesn't that hurt?"

"It may if I allowed it, but that too can be controlled." Gee said.

"What is that?"

"That," Gee said, "is the meaning of life. That which sustains us, protects us, nourishes, and fixes us. This gel, you may call it, can bridge the impossible. Among those, observe," as he put his finger into the gel and rubbed a little on her lower back. Soo then took the wand and made a one-inch incision where the gel was, tuned the wand around and with the back end of the wand the ovary was raised to the surface and carefully secured inside a ball of Gee's gel. Soo then took the back of the wand again and closed Gee's arm and Hope's back with no scar, no blood, no pain. Gee said, "What do you think of that?"

Hope thought that was one of the most interesting things she'd ever witnessed. "What is that of your body you used on me? Is it fat? Is it tissue?"

Gee explained, "It is a subdural organ lining my entire body, it is more like plasma and is that which life and light began." He then handed Hope a small jar the size of a walnut filled with some of Gee's gel and told her to use it wisely."

"What shall I use it for?"

"You will figure that out."

Donna and Kayla continued to study the virus, Gary and Jim continued building Adam, and Hope and Justice took the opportunity to assess their priorities and plan for the future. They got together, and Hope explained to Justice that she would have two thousand test tubes, each with a milliliter of a clear liquid from the orb in it that would be a host blanket for her eggs. She would be placing one egg in each of the tubes inside the liquid, and later, insert a sperm into the egg and fertilize it. The procedure would also require her to put two drops of her blood in one thousand tubes and two drops of his blood in the other thousand. Those with her blood would all be similar, like clones of her, and those with his blood would all be like of him.

Hope told him, "We're going to be having a thousand little Justices and a thousand little Hopes."

"Just how are we going to take care of them? He asked.

"It dawned on me about the same time it dawned on you that there was simply too much to do and that we can't do it ourselves, that we're going to need some help. My plan is to inseminate two thousand girls from all over the county to be surrogates without their knowledge or consent," she said.

"Do you mean just like in abduction cases?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. In looking at the big picture, there are a couple truths you cannot ignore. One is that

all these humans will be gone, another is that believing that the child is theirs, they we care for it properly, the child will be better equipped than human babies to survive and lastly, the liquid from the orb was created with the DNA of Gee and Soo and will keep the mother healthy while she carries the child.”

“How will you administer the insemination?” He asked.”

“I’m not exactly sure yet. Once I’ve separated the eggs and placed them in their test tube homes, we’ll need to get a sample for you. After that, I inject your sperm in the egg, wait one day then put them in the deep freezer. The orb’s liquid will prevent them from freezing but with keep them in suspended animation until they are warmed back up to room temperature.”

“Where are you going to find these surrogates?”

“I’m not, Soo and Gee are going to handle it. They will travel all over the county and like a dream, the girls will be totally clueless as to the events that led to pregnancy. After that, the regeneration of earth’s population is basically complete. By the time they are old enough to procreate they should have the ability to locate each other and start the chain reaction of ancestral progression and repopulation.”

“I’m afraid my commitments will take much longer, about everything humans do will have to be replicated by robots or discontinued, I may be working for a very long time, unless of course I can program Adam to be proactive in the development and make calculated discussions in developing new programs. I’d have to be careful about what I allow them to program,” he said.

Hope said, “Before we go down the road of abduction, I think you and I should bear the first of our new race together. We should call ourselves Homo Melius, loosely translated, better humans. What do you think?”

“Think about what, a new race, or us procreating?”

“Either both, what do you think?”

“I think yes and yes,” he said.

That was enough for Hope, those words were all she needed to take that final step into the matriarchal position she was born to be in. She looked deep into his eyes, and he into hers, as she said, “Soo took an ovary from me earlier, but my other one is ovulating, now is the time for us to commit. She drew him near like a magnet and made his transition to adulthood official. Their evening was fruitful, and their child would in fact become the first born of a new generation, a new species, in a new world.

After two weeks, Hope had all two thousand samples fertilized and suspended. She had given them to Gee and Soo and so, the process began. Gee and Soo visited fifty cities, and on the outskirts of each forty girls between the ages of twenty and twenty-five would find themselves with child.

When Hope began this journey, she didn’t know how she was going to manage her task. She lived day to day, wondering what she should do next, and the thought of life unfolding in front of her with the answer staring her in the face was something she couldn’t have counted on. Gee and Soo were one step ahead of her the whole time and she realized that. Part of her wanted to be upset that they didn’t fill her in on everything up front, and another part of her was incredibly happy to know that they always had her back and had a master plan that was working exactly like they planned. Now that the seed had been planted, she could get back to the lab, back to the virus and back to planning her future.

Justice got his first Adam built and programed. Adam’s first program was to build an identical Adam who could build another Adam, and another. One would be programmed for

education and knowledge. Another would be built for household and utility functions and maintenance. The other two would be used for security. It was in this capacity that Hope and Justice knew the military industrial complex would undoubtedly acquire plans and specs from the robotics companies mass producing the robots and reprogram them in a way as a military would. So, as an added precaution, Justice decided to equip his two security Adams to be able to electronically disable any object operating electronically within a twenty-yard radius. He developed an immensely powerful superconductor to provide Adam with unlimited power while giving it the ability to fry the electronics of anything nearby or provide power to a very high-powered laser. Neither of them had been through Armageddon before and didn't know what to expect.

Hope recommitted herself to focus on the virus. She studied Donna and Kayla's notes for two days, trying to figure out what the reproductive trigger was. Thinking that if she could interrupt the reproductive trigger, she could stop the spread. Her calculations always came back to the radiation. Every scenario and every test that had any chance of providing any relief was blown to pieces when the radiation was put into the equation and there was only one way to remove it from the equation, individually, one by one, with either herself or Justice taking the lead. It was far too much to be a viable answer to the problem. It was time to invoke Gee and Soo once more.

"Gee, do you care to elaborate a little on what and why I seem to be wasting my time on this virus?"

"In order for me to accommodate your inquiry, I would have to share some history with you. A history that you may not appreciate."

“I’m all ears. Nothing in life that I am familiar with is or will remain the same so finding out the past couldn’t change my perspective anymore.”

“Very well. Three million years ago this was our planet. We arrived as organisms, remnants of our former selves, that which remained of our planet after its destruction. Our star collapsed, and the violent blast blew our planet to pieces, sending us through the galaxy at half the speed of light. We were among the first to arrive. The shock wave dispersed smaller pieces at a faster rate and larger pieces at a lower rate. For the past three million years pieces of our once intelligent and thriving civilization would bombard other celestial bodies to include earth. In the waters and the deep our ancestors evolved.”

Hope interrupted, “Excuse me, if your planet was destroyed and you evolved for remnant organisms, how is it you know of its history?”

“Forgive me, I forgot you have not accessed the forces of universal knowledge. Every that is, everything that was, and everything there ever will be flows through the universe in waves as a thought. And every thought that anyone has ever had is still present and filling the quantum space around us. If you wanted to know what happened in the very spot where you are standing four hundred years ago, all you have to do is concentrate. You have our DNA, you have this power, you just haven’t developed it yet. Back to our history, we had an edge to the evolutionary challenges, our radioactive molecular alterations were the result of the explosion and the source of the intellectual mutation from which we derived. In our arrogance, we assumed we could create and control another species to work for us. Does any of this begin to sound familiar?”

“Yes, it does. Are you suggesting that you were once the gods of our past? The myths of the ancient worlds?”

“Yes and no. Yes, we created humans, no we did not do it to be worshiped. Yes, we enslaved you, but it was not us that tried to destroy you. We were hunted and forced into hiding. This and similar stories played out every three thousand years or so, but we always knew this planet would be ours again, with one small exception. We would not make it to the next level alone, one final evolutionary event would be what brings us home and that time has come, you are that event. In less than two hundred years we will be gone, humans will be gone, all that will remain is you. Pieces of our planet will continue to arrive, just like this virus, and alter life throughout the galaxy for thousands of years to come. You will need to be ready. Learn the universe.”

“Ok, the past belongs to you, and the future belongs to us, I’m asking about the present. What am I to do with this virus?”

“Nothing, there’s nothing you can do. It will destroy humanity and hundreds of species of warm-blooded animals. However, in time, an adaptation to the low-level radiation will enable other forms of animal life to rise from the ashes as you did. My people will have to retreat to another dimension, the one we’ve found refuge in. This dimension doesn’t afford us the opportunity to viably reproduce and would eventually result in our extinction. Soo and I only have about seventy years left to teach you anything we’re going to teach you before we leave you for good.”

“Are we that far behind that it’ll take you seventy years to prepare us?”

“No, technically you don’t need us anymore. The new generation has been established. Your offspring will create a

new civilization and in fifty thousand years our existence will be just another myth or fairy tale our descendants will tell their children.”

“So, what should we do now?”

“Find things in life to enjoy. Try not to concern yourselves with the plight of human suffrage. By the time your offspring are fifteen earth years old, their parents will have succumbed to disease and begun the disparaging process elimination. If you did absolutely nothing to combat the virus, or you did everything in your power to combat the virus, the result would be the same in thirty years. If it gives you meaning to help others, by all means, fulfill your needs. With respect to your participation in the future, your challenge has been met and you have succeeded. Though we don’t feel the emotions you have, we understand them more now because of you, your mother and grandfather. As such, it is our desire that you can experience the better of them while you can. It is reasonably assured that the bad ones will dominant your perspectives in the years to come, so as your people have recommended, you need to stop and smell the roses.”

“Thank you for your honesty, Gee. I will talk it over with Justice. I guess we still have a lot to think about.”

Hope explained the entire conversation with Justice and together came up with a few new priorities. Some of Justine’s priorities became, securing an area to live safely, away from densely populated areas. The more populated the area, the more trouble. Another would be to automate and as much of the human services as possible, like farming, manufacturing, textiles, and construction. Most of the infrastructure is already in place, when the factories and facilities finally close, his robots should be able to move in and restart operations. Hope’s priorities will shift from working on a cure for the virus to

learning more about the life-giving substance the orb provides. Synthesizing it and finding a creative way to use it will be her number one priority. The future benefits and advancement of their new race of humans is all that's left for her to achieve. Watching the destruction of humanity will be devastating. The grief, sorrow, sadness, and guilt could threaten their sanity if they let it. Hope began to realize Gee's advice to let it go and concentrate on finding whatever happiness she could to be the only viable solution to existing in this post-apocalyptic world.

Back at the lab, Hope gave Donna and Kayla new guidance. "We have samples of the substance from the orb left. The virus doesn't appear to be something we can control without some form of unknown intervention, but I believe this substance could be synthesized and used in unlimited positive ways. Let's start by learning everything we can about it, then we recreate or modify it to form new uses. This may be the breakthrough we need to understand that damn virus."

Donna asked, "Where did this orb come from and why doesn't it weigh anything?"

"It came from aliens and that is one of the things we'll determine as we examine it," Hope said.

"As crazy as it sounds, it makes more sense than this stupid virus," Kayla said.

"I'm game. Aliens are us," Donna replied.

Hope said, "Had I thought it'd be this easy just to invoke alien participation, I would have mentioned it a long time ago. "Ok then let's get to work. If you come to a verifiable theorem as how to duplicate it, we'll name the process after you."

"I'd rather have a boyfriend," Donna said, "I've been thinking lately that we're not getting out of this world alive, and I didn't want to end my days alone."

“Me too,” Kayla said. “I never took the time to try and figure boys out, but in the face of losing everything, I hope it’s not too late.”

“I’ll tell you what. Let’s get some serious work done here, we have agriculture, medicine, bioengineering, and a host of other applications this substance could be used in to examine. Once we know we have a shot, I can introduce you to a couple of guys.”

“You know some guys?” Donna asked.

“Oh, Yeah. They’re nice guys too, but let’s get some work done first. Ok?”

After two weeks, half of the news organizations have had to suspend their operations and reporting due to critical losses of personnel. For the remaining news agencies, their reports have turned into score cards, number of dead and infected. FEMA’s reports to the President and Joint Chiefs were very Grim. Mostly consisting of dead and infection statistics. The low-level radiation, civil order, food and fuel supplies and medical services status rounded the top issues. One issue that has not yet been identified would be the overall increase in every known sickness and disease. With the reports to headquarters indicating a sixty percent infection rate and a fifteen percent mortality rate of the infected, the numbers themselves were almost enough that the Joint Chiefs considered risking the suspension of the Succession Protocol and reestablishing the government. Advisors to the President reminded him that within the safety of the bunker the government would still operate and a few more weeks to fully understand the virus was not only prudent, but a requirement of the protocols mandate.

The President’s communique to Admiral Pritchard was clear, “Admiral, we shall remain on station until such time that

the virus is either eradicated or a cure is developed. We did not initiate The Succession Protocol to take chances on its effectiveness. World leaders are reporting much fewer cases than are actual, we cannot trust their reports. I am directing our intelligence community to work close with FEMA and take the lead in evaluating the situation and I am granting the CDC authority to quarantine at their discretion. If you have any input, I'd like to hear it before we hang up."

"Yes, sir. We shall remain on station. However, I don't believe the Harrington Suburban Projects needs to remain locked down. The casualty rate doesn't appear to be high enough to force citizens into seclusion. Perhaps we could make it a voluntary issue?"

"I'm confused, Admiral. When has the military ever put civil rights ahead of Security?"

"Mr. President, we have a couple thousand of the top engineers, scientist and scholars that could be of help above to combat this situation. If they were to choose to return what rational should we use to deny them their freedom?"

"Admiral, this is not a matter of freedom. Every single person in the program is there for a reason, a reason so remarkably important that the House, the Senate, my cabinet, and I thought worthy of drafting unchallenged legislation in its support. Let us not be hasty, give the scientific community the opportunity to fully investigate, advise and develop a plan to keep us all safe. We've had more loss of life due to this virus than all the wars we've fought in the past century."

"Yes, sir. I'll direct them to stay on station as well."

They had no way of knowing then that it wouldn't make much of a difference. They could stay relatively healthy if they were to stay underground, but would they be able to sustain a civilization and for how long?

Back at the campus, Donna and Kayla were working on developing future application of the magical mystery liquid from the orb and Justice was working with Jim and Gary building the stewards of a new race. Justice and Hope discussed the social necessities of their teams and decided to hold a party. For two weeks they have been working without any knowledge of each other. They initially kept their teams apart for the same reason they are now going to facilitate. Upon the realization of inevitable annihilation, it's only fitting they extend Gee's advice of enjoying the life you can while you can to their friends and peers.

The next morning Hope and Justice returned to their teams. "Donna, Kayla, if you would, gather around for a minute. I have good news; we're going to take a little time off work this afternoon and have a party."

"A party? Just the three of us?" Kayla asked.

"No, we're going to have company. My boyfriend's coming and he's bringing his team with him. Jim and Gary. They are about your age; they both were students here before the shut down and they are as geeky as we are."

Hope must have said that just right because Donna and Kayla got excited, giddy excited. They were useless the rest of the morning.

Justice brought Jim and Gary together in their little break room and gave them the news.

"Girls, real girls?" Gary asked. "What will we do, show them our robots?"

"You are such a nerd," Jim said. "No, we're not showing them our robots, unless of course you're bionic, then I suppose that would be ok. We'll socialize. Let me tell you a secret Gary, when it comes to women, listen don't talk unless they ask you

something. They need to know you are interested in them for their brain, not their body.”

“Really. That shouldn’t be hard, I can deal with a brain.”

“Hell, you can’t deal with your own brain.”

“Ok, guys, take it easy. We’ll head over to the Microbiology Lab around noon,” Justice said.

“You mean they’re here? How long have they been here?”

“It’s not important.”

Justice found out the same thing. His guys were now totally useless. He called Hope to check on party supplies. “What do you need me to pick up?”

“Do you have someone old enough to buy liquor? Can you believe with everything happening out there, liquor stores still card?”

“Yeah, I’ll ask Jim, he fancies himself an expert. By the way, Jim is more outspoken than Gary, he is also a bit more socially engaged, while Gary is shyer and less experienced.”

“Oh, I see, you want me to match them up?”

“Yes, it would probably be easier than taking a chance that both girls go for the same guy or vice versa.”

“That sounds logical. I guess we’re learning as we go too.”

Hope called Connie to inform her of the little get-together they’re going to have and asked her if she wanted to join them. “We’re going to have a little party in the Microbiology Lab around noon. A little something for our teams who have been working twenty hours a day for two weeks. You’re welcome to come by and bring someone if you would like.”

“No offense Hope, but I’m old enough to be your mother, are you sure you want an old lady at your party?”

Hope laughed, “You’re not old. Besides, with everything that’s happening in the world, anybody can be your friend.”

“Right you are, I’ll think about it.”

Twelve o’clock rolled around and the boys strolled over to the Microbiology Lab. Hope had the girls put up streamers and balloons, a table was set up with food and drinks, and a music video channel was turned up on the TV. Even though none of them were partiers, they all knew it was much of a party, but the point of the party wasn’t the party, it was the get together. A little comradery with peers, a chance to loosen up, but mainly the introduction of boy meets girl.

“Guys, this is my girlfriend, Hope. Hope, this is Jim, and this is Gary.”

Hope said, “Jim, I’d like to introduce you to Donna and Kayla. Gary, meet Kayla and Donna.” Without specifically pairing them together, her introduction addressing who first subconsciously established it for her. For the first hour they just sat at a table and talked about their jobs and chosen careers, with an occasional crazy story of their collegiate escapades. It wasn’t until Justice and Hope took to the floor for a very slow dance before Jim, the most extroverted of the bunch, had his move and asked Donna to dance. She accepted, now Gary and Kayla felt obliged to join them. There is something about a twenty-year old falling in love for the first time that makes you realize how fragile humans are. If Justice and Hope had imagined how vulnerable they all were, they might have chosen to stop dancing, but the comfort of each other’s embrace was addictive. Jim and Gary both just stood in the middle of the floor, holding the girls, and barely moving side to side in an amusing attempt to dance.

Connie decided to stop in after all. She came alone, mostly out of curiosity, but at the very least she wanted a little taste of feeling good. Since the campus closed down, she hadn't had anything in her life moving forward. Hope saw her enter and briskly walked over to meet her. "I know it's not much of a party, but welcome, do you want something to drink?"

"What do you have?"

She pointed at the table, "Soda, juice, tea, beer?"

"Beer sounds great. Are all of you old enough to drink?"

"Nope."

Connie thought about it for a minute, "Hell with it, cheers."

Hope asked, "Don't you have a husband or boyfriend?"

"No. I was married once, it didn't work out, we were always working, and he found other interests."

Even Hope knew what that meant. "I'm sorry, with the world all messed up you should consider trying to find someone new."

"I'll take that under advisement. So, who are your friends?"

"This is Jim and Donna, and this is Gary and Kayla. The girls are working with me, and the boys are working with Justice. This is the first time we all got together."

"I brought news with me," Connie said, "the campus will be reopening next week. I don't know what arrangement you have with the Dean or the Science department but the contractors that were restoring the lab haven't been told the lab was occupied."

"I'm not worried about that. The amount of people on campus is a little different. It's only been a couple weeks, but we haven't found anything to suggest this virus is capable of

being contained which means that things can only get worse. One thing's for sure, this lab will need to be secured."

"My staff is expected to return as well, when they do, you can count on us to keep you safe."

"I'm not worried about me; I'm worried about the students."

"I'm glad you're taking a break, it must be difficult working so much, don't you miss home and family?"

"I try hard not to think about it. There are more important things to think about and if we dwell on the hardships, we may miss the answers."

"I don't believe I've ever heard a more mature statement come from a young person's mouth. I'm inspired by your dedication. Look, I just thought I'd come by and see you; we can talk more tomorrow. I'll let you get back to your party."

"Are you leaving already?"

"You kids have a good time and be safe. I'll see you tomorrow."

Around three o'clock, Donna and Kayla conspired to sneak the boys into their rooms. Hope saw right through their ploy but played along. Justice didn't give it a second thought; he had holding Hope in his arms on his mind and was ready to close it down and go home himself.

Chapter Six

The Harrington Suburban Project has now been locked down inside the mountain for a month. People have gotten into a routine, but it hasn't stopped them from getting frustrated. All day new reports of carnage, mayhem and chaos have kept their spirits low and the thought of being trapped made their stay that much more unbearable. There were those that thrived on the situation. They would be those that truly felt their importance and reason for being there was the paramount to a new civilization, one in which they would finally have a say in how society should be. For Jack and Phil, they were the ones to stay clear of. Frank spent most of his days meeting people, looking for a partner. His last relationship was a year ago and his loneliness manifested in outbursts of simple goofiness. Jennie often referred to him as their adult child. Jack often thought of Hope and worried, sometimes he cried. He missed Lisa and he missed Hope, his days were spent writing letters that would never get mailed. Facilitators would periodically initiate some false hope of leaving the shelter, though their intent was in good faith and hope, the conviction to preserve life out trumped their desire. Whenever news of the virus slowing down came around the rumors of leaving the mountain would abound. Then of course, reality would reset the scales, and they'd be back to being sequestered.

After a month, over two hundred million people have died. The CDC issued its second status report to the Director of FEMA and the President. This is the first report indicating an increase in every known illness. If there was a history of any kind of cancer, diabetes, sickle cell, polio, or any form of medical condition in one's family, people will be all but guaranteed to perpetuate that history. This was also the first

report that they have found no one that was infected to have working, functioning reproductive organs. Their data shows a one hundred percent reproductive failure rate.

“Oh my God,” the President thought as he read the report. “This means in a hundred years we will all be gone. All the advances in civilization and technology over the past millennia gone. Nothing we have ever done will have mattered one bit.”

The first lady had to remind him, “The destination is not the reward, the journey is. When faith is all, you have left, you still win.”

Less fortunate countries, with fewer resources, took enormous casualties. Disease, famine, and chaos obliterated their civilization and life was a living hell for anyone still fighting for every bit of life they could.

The President wondered if earth would survive.

Hope came into the lab a little late the next day. She thought the party went well and was glad to see her girls happy. However, she was in for a surprise when she walked in the door. Donna came running over to Hope excited, like a five-year old at Christmas, pulling at her hand, come see, we found something. She guided Hope over to a microscope, “What do you see?”

“This looks like a molecule of the orb plasma.”

“Yes, but what is missing?”

“The protein looks dead.”

“Now look at this slide,” Donna said.

“Ok, the protein’s active. So?”

“This slide looked like that dead one just twenty minutes ago. The protein brought itself back to life all on its own.”

Hope grabbed her lip in deep thought. I'll be damned. Something came to her. It was something Gee had told her years ago, "Life runs through your veins."

"Kayla," Hope called out, "Can you bring me a syringe, a twenty-two gauge and an alcohol pad?"

Donna asked, "What's up?"

"Take a sample of my blood, extract the plasma."

"What do you expect to find?"

"I expect to find something like the orb's plasma. I can't believe the answer was in front of me the whole time."

"What is it?"

"Let's get this sample to the centrifuge, if my suspicions are correct, I'll have a story to tell you."

Meanwhile, Justice just got a call from Northrop Grumman, they want him to contact the government and gave him the phone number. All the robots they built alone with the other companies caught the eye of national security and the government was looking for answers.

Justice called the number, not worried in the least. Believing he could control any conversation or thought, maybe something good can come out of the discussion. "This is Justice Southerland; I was asked to call."

"Mr. Southerland, my name is Major Bennett, I am extremely impressed with your design and programming for the robots Northrop Grumman are making. They are working like a charm, but we have a question. How did you come up with it so fast? It looked like weeks or months of work, yet the danger was an unforeseen secret that was upon us without warning. We'd like to talk with you."

Right about then three men walked into the room. "We're with the Department of Homeland Security, please relax, we need your help."

That little speech was an attempt to gain trust. Justice knew better and as he doubted their sincerity, he thought of a plan to use them. “How can I help?” Justice asked.

“We understand you provided diagrams and software to Northrop Grumman just one day after the hazards of the comet became known. How?”

“I had knowledge of the comet. Why you didn’t have knowledge is not my concern.”

“Ok, how did you have knowledge?”

“My alien friend told me,” he said with a straight face.

“Alien?”

“That’s right.”

The three of them looked at each other a little confused on the next line of questioning. He had caught them off guard, if he were telling the truth, their participation is useless, if he’s not telling the truth he’s either crazy or has something even more sinister to hide than aliens. Either way, they were the ones at a disadvantage.

“Does your alien have a name?” he said sarcastically.

Justice knew this wasn’t the government looking for help and he didn’t want to waste any more time with these guys, “What do you want? No more games,” he said as he focused his commands to them, and like magic, the entire room’s atmosphere changed as his words controlled their thoughts. “Have your troops take to the streets, not with guns but with food and water, blankets, and medicine. Let the people know they have not been forgotten and give them Hope.”

After staring into Justice’s eyes for a few seconds they smiled and thanked Justice for his time and left without remembering what the initial reason for going there was. “He seemed like a nice young man” one of them told another.

For Justice, he knew it was a sign to move on. He called Hope, “I’m on my way over, I just had company, I’ll tell you about it when I get there.”

“I’ve got something very important to discuss also, hurry over.”

Justice told her, “Federal agents came visiting. They put two and two together when Northrop Grumman was able to react and produce robots so quickly for the retrieval of bodies. They’re suspicious about how we knew of the virus in advance. I put their mind in a fog but it’s only temporary. When their superiors don’t get a status report, they will undoubtedly send another team. I’m afraid we don’t have a lot of time. Do we try and mind control everyone that comes around, tell them the full truth, or relocate?”

“We have about one week before someone else figures anything out. If our plasma has the same properties as the orb’s plasma, it will turn out that we are the antidote and if that’s the case, we can harvest it in any lab. We should keep watch for more agents and prepare to move on. Admitting we’re part alien is not an option. We have plenty of proof they cannot handle it.”

“We have three Adams operational, we’ll put them on security duty. We could load all this equipment in that truck that delivered it within an hour. If we had to evacuate, could everything be shut down within the hour?”

“Yes, but if the test is positive, we won’t need this equipment, any lab would have the equipment we need to process the plasma.”

“Then its settled, how about we find an abandoned house away from the populous and close up shop?”

“Not yet, we still must wait for the test confirmation, we should have it any minute. Besides, before we comet to a

decision that involves Donna, Kayla, Jim, and Gary, I think they should have a say in what affects them. We should let them decide if they still want to stay and be a part of this or return to the lives they would have otherwise led.” Hope suggested.

“You right. We’ve done all we can in secret, at least with regards to them.”

They got everyone together back at their house and laid all the cards on the table.

“The government has become suspicious of our knowledge of the virus,” Hope said.

“I thought you worked for the government,” Donna said.

“Yes and no. The work we were doing was supposed to help the government, but they didn’t know we were doing the work.”

“So, what now? Kayla asked.

“We are going to relocate before another team of government agents return. We have the healing power of my plasma that we can make a serum to effectively act as an antidote. It’s a start, but if the government gets involved, we become rats in a lab and the antidote goes to the highest political bidder. I am not going to ask you to come with us because this could be dangerous. However, if you’re like us and this has become your reason for living, we still think you would be safer with us than out there on your own.”

Kayla said, “I have nothing to go home to, you’ve become my family, please don’t kick me out.”

“Of course not. We just thought you each should have a choice of your own. Before you decide, we have more to tell you,” she looked at Justice and nodded.

“Hope and I are exceptional people. By exceptional I mean like we are the exception. As far as we know, we are the

only two half human half alien beings.” He stopped and paused for a moment to let that sink in.

“Did you say alien?” Jim asked.

“Yes, I did,” Justice replied.

“Far out.”

“You’re not shocked?”

“Hell no. I’m relieved. I’ve been saying for a long time that there’s no way we could go from horse and buggy to a man on the moon in sixty years. Is it awesome? Being alien, I mean.”

“I honestly wouldn’t know the difference; I’ve always be me.”

Gary said, “Alien or not, if Kayla goes, I’m going.”

“I’m still going,” Kayla said.

The timer went off and the blood separation finally finished. Hope verified her blood plasma had identical properties as the mystery liquid in the orb. She did find one aspect that was different, and it was important. With everyone gathered around, Hope explained, “I don’t know why it took me so long to figure this out, I am sorry. Now, we have three samples.” She took the jar of gel Gee gave her out of her pocket. “One slide has the orb’s liquid, one slide has my plasma, and this jar was given to me by a friend. It contains a gel extracted from his body. All three of these are similar in that they all contain alien DNA. A protein present in the orb’s liquid and Gee’s gel works in conjunction with the plasma can perpetually regenerate itself. In my sample, the protein is used but cannot regenerate itself.”

Donna asked, “Can we synthesize it?”

“I don’t know that we can. If it can be done, my friends may be the only ones that could. But the point is, my plasma has a shelf life. I can create an antidote that will stop the progression of disease and ease the symptoms of radiation

poisoning, but it will be temporary. When the protein in my plasma is used up, my plasma will cease to be effective. I don't even know how long it will last without some live testing. However, with the pure DNA from the aliens, the protein regenerates and would effectively last indefinitely.”

With little revelation, Hope realized that's why she had to secure the egg in the orb's liquid prior to insemination. It would keep the mother healthy while carrying the child. She wondered how long it would stay with her after birth and figured she would bring it up in her next conversation with Gee and Soo. It would have to wait.

Donna asked Hope, “What were the other tubes of the orb for?”

“Will it make a difference whether you come or go?” Hope asked.

“No, not really, I am just curious. That's a lot of samples left unused. We could have used it for the serum.”

“You're right, we could have, but it served an even more important role.”

“More important than an antidote for the virus?”

“I'm sorry to say, yes. I don't believe my plasma to be a cure, just a treatment. For as long as the virus is out there, it will continue to have negative effects once the antidote cycles through a person's system. I'm hoping it lasts at least four weeks or so then it's likely one would become sick again,” Hope said. “We should take the opportunity over the next two days to process and produce as much serum as we can before we leave. Also, does anyone have reservations about being a test subject for the serum?”

No one objected.

“What are you going to call it?” Donna asked.

Hope said, “You guys are as much a part of this, get together and among yourselves, you can name it.”

“How did you get involved in all this?” Donna asked.

“We have been in contact with a species that was here long before us, they prepared us for this event. They mentored us and put an impossible responsibility upon us. This event is meant to wipe out humanity, we are tasked to save it. Those two thousand samples are the hope of earth’s future.”

“Ok, so now what. We’re all going with you, right?” as she looked around at everyone.

“That’s right,” they all said in unison.

“You didn’t put that in their head,” Justice thought toward Hope.

“No, that’s all of them.” She thought back.

“All right then,” Justice said. “Now it is settled. We’ll stay here long enough to work up as much plasma as we can. Fortunately, we have two people to draw from. Hope and her team will figure out the antidote, dosage, storage, anything having to do with the virus. My team and I will handle security, logistics, and anything having to do with our environment.”

“First things first,” Hope said. Radiation levels are low, but the buildup will cause major problems. Justice and I have a secret to combat radiation sickness and the ill effects all of you have felt once already.”

It just dawned on each of them, as if they had forgotten and remembered at the same time, “You’re right,” Jim said. “I remember being sick and feeling like hell until Justice took my arm. I should have figured he was alien then. Damn, I missed it.”

“We all did,” Donna said. “The same thing happened to us.”

“Well, at least we know we’re in good hands.” Kayla added.

Hope said, “Yeah, but you may have to remind us if you’re not feeling well. The virus isn’t going anywhere, and neither is the radiation. Right now, I think we should check your radiation levels.”

Jim said, “I haven’t seen a Geiger counter since we’ve been here.”

“We don’t need one,” Justice said as he extended his hand toward Jim. “You’re close to being overexposed,” he put his hand on Jim’s arm and said, “let me know if you can feel a difference.”

Jim closed his eyes and relaxed, “I can. I can feel the difference. It’s like catching your breath after holding it under water. You can feel the jitters before and the calm after. I didn’t notice that before either.”

Everyone took a turn getting the treatment, and of course, someone had to ask how it worked. It was their nature, that’s what scientists do, they ask questions. Justice explained how he could absorb the radiation and discharge it later to another object. He was glad he didn’t have to find a Geiger counter to prove it.

“Jim,” Justice said, “First thing in the morning I want you and I to take a ride out in the county. We’re going to find an abandoned house, a new home. Gary, we’re going to need one of the Adams programed for personal safety and security, program it to recognize each of us and employ the unit as soon as possible. Can you do that?”

“You can count on me.”

They woke in the morning to the sound of gunfire. Jim looked at the alarm clock, but the time wasn’t lit. He realized they had lost power and grabbed his phone off the nightstand.

“4:22.” He said. “What the hell is going on.” He heard more gunfire. Using the flashlight on his phone, he crossed the hall to check on Gary. Gary was staring out the window when Jim walked in.

“I can see them across the street. It looks like three or maybe four people trying to get into that building on the corner,” Gary said.

“Where’s the gun fire coming from?”

“I don’t know. It looks like the people trying to break in are running scared.”

Jim asked, “Did you get the remote for Adams working?”

“Yeah, I did. Good idea, let’s see how it works.” The remote is actually a cell phone converted to a voice command remote. Gary took the remote off the dresser, “Power on,” he commanded. “Camera on, Link to Gary,” a second later his phone beeped, and the audible confirmation came in, “Connection confirmed.” Gary told Jim, “We’re up and running.”

Jim asked, “Did you retrofit him with the defense protocol?”

“Yes, he’s programed but unarmed.”

“Damn. Ok, let’s get a look.”

His remote screen showed Gary what Adam’s camera was viewing. “Go to back door,” Gary commanded, “open door, exit, close door. Head south on sidewalk to the next intersection.” When the robot made it to the next street, Gary commanded, “Infrared on, scan surroundings.” Two blotches were shown on his screen about a block away. Gary told Jim, “Watch this, I fixed the stealth observation mode. “Adam, stealth mode on, target heat signature, observe and report.” From there on, Adam was under his own command, using radar,

sonar, satellite, GPS, infrared and sound to locate, identify and track its target. Adam could travel at up to thirty miles an hour and could easily chase down a suspect if need be. He was also extremely quiet. His program allowed him to use his surrounding environment for cover and concealment. Adam closed in on the suspects within seventy-five feet. Hidden behind a car, Adam's transmission gave Jim and Gary all the information they needed. The perpetrators were definitely armed and hostile.

“What do you want to do Jim?”

“We need to scare them away. Shame we didn't arm Adam yet, we'll have to do that later for sure. Can you blast a siren?”

“Yeah, ready?”

“Do it.”

Gary commanded, “Stealth mode off, self-preservation mode on, activate police siren at 120 disables.”

As soon as the siren sounded the two nearly jumped out of their skin and began running in between the buildings. They headed south toward the vehicle they had parked on the street.

Gary commanded, “Activate loudspeaker and microphone sync,” and gave Jim a smile.

“Prepare to open fire,” blared from Adam's speaker, as Adam followed them through the maze of building.

They made it to their car, jumped in and sped off. They were scared silly without ever seeing anyone, the intervention must have overwhelmed their ability to reason, and fear controlled their instincts.

Gary said, “That was the most fun I've had in years. Make's me want to do it again.”

“Yeah, fun. Those guys could have hurt someone. I don’t see it as fun. How about we get Adam back here and get him loaded.”

“The 40 caliber shells and the mini missiles are locked up in the lab.”

“Ok, just don’t forget. We still need to test and calibrate the firing modules. How about the other Adam? Is he as ready as this one?” Jim asked.

“No, but he will be by lunch.”

Jim called Justice to fill him in on the event. Justice in turn called Hope. “Hope, the guys had an incident this morning. A couple of armed predators came around the campus this morning. Adam was able to chase them away. But, considering the increased danger, how about getting the girls and meeting Gary at the robotics lab, Jim and I are going get an early start and find a new place.”

“Ok, be safe. We’ll get things gathered up here in case you find something, so we can move out on a moment’s notice.”

Justice and Jim travelled up Interstate 25 and turned west on state highway 24 toward Woodland Park. Jim was driving. Justice had a map in his hands but never looked at it, he was being guided by his intuition. Along the way they noticed a few houses far off the highway, suddenly Justice got a feeling, he said he felt, “The house over there,” as he pointed, “is empty. Let’s check it out.” So, Jim turned on the long driveway road leading to the house. The closer they came, the stronger the feeling Justice got that this would be the one. As they pulled up to the front Justice noticed that the house had a shed at the back of the house. “There’s a generator in that shed, this house has a storm shelter for a basement.”

“How do you know?” Jim asked.

“I just feel it, like the house is talking to me or maybe like I’ve been here before. I really don’t know how, I just know.”

They got out of the Escalade and walked up to the front door, knocked, not expecting anyone, then tried the doorknob. The house was locked so they walked around to the back of the house, checking windows on the way. “This one’s opened,” Jim said. Jim, being bigger, helped Justice climb through the window. Justice opened the front door to let Jim in and they toured the house looking for clues as to what may have happened to the owners.

“Jim, this is the right house. The owners are not coming back.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m looking at one and there’s a fresh grave in the back yard.”

Jim came into the bedroom where Justice found the owner in his bed, partially decomposed.

“It looks like about three weeks. Let’s see what we can do about digging a big hole,” Justice said.

Jim went out back and noticed the owner had an old tractor. He got Justice to help him connect the bucket attachment and started it up.

“You know how to use this?” Justice asked.

“Oh Yeah, it’s not my first time. Where do you want this hole?”

“Start right next to that grave. It must be the old man’s wife. She undoubtedly was simply lying on the ground. She needs to be burned as well. As you get deep enough beside the other grave, we’ll just pull her over to the big hole, carry the old man out along with his mattress and burn the whole lot. I’ll see if I can find some diesel or gas,” Justice said.

Jim said, “This doesn’t seem like a life we’re meant to lead. To walk in and take over someone’s property just seems so unreal, so disrespectful. I wouldn’t have thought that I’d feel troubled by this, when we hit the road, I figured we may run into something like this, but now that we’re here, it just seems so different than I imagined.”

“This is a mild circumstance compared to experiences of the people in the cities. They have gotten so use to their family, friends and neighbors dying and having dead bodies stacked up out on the streets that they’ve become desensitized. Mr. and Mrs. buried here are, will at least be buried,” Justice said. “While you’re digging, I’m going to check out the generator. I can’t imagine public electricity lasting too much longer. As soon as something happens to the grid or substation, there won’t be anyone left to fix it, we’re going to need this generator.”

Jim finished excavating a seven-foot deep, eight-foot-wide pit beside the grave and was able to exhume the body carefully and respectfully. The mattress, the man and the woman were placed on top of a large pile of firewood doused with ten gallons of diesel and set ablaze in the well of the pit.

While the fire burned, Jim and Justice walked through the house taking notes as to what supplies and equipment they needed. The house had four bedrooms but the only bed in the house was now on fire in the back yard. Justice called Hope when he finished his assessment. “I have good and bad news. The good news is we found a house not that far away, the bad news is we need three beds.”

“Three beds?” She asked.

“Providing we share a bed; three couples need three beds.”

“So, the house has no beds, I see. Well, I still have money, how about I go to a furniture store and have three queen size beds delivered?”

“Yeah, you should probably hit the road and drive north to Colorado Springs and go to a furniture store there. The house is about half an hour west on highway 24 from there. The address is 11265 Hargrove Rd., Woodland Park.”

“We’ll load everything in the Yukon that we can, we may have to leave some stuff behind,” Hope said.

“The three Adams and Jim and Gary’s tools should be able to fit in the back. You, Donna, Kayla, Gary, and as many personal belongings that can fit should be our priority. If I must make a trip down to get anything, we left behind I can, but you guys and the robots must stay together. Tell Gary not to forget the ammo.”

“Ok, I’ll call you after I finish at the furniture store.”

She had to use a little power to get the store to deliver the furniture immediately, but for Hope it has become instinct to control thought processes, a natural progression of communication and her powers seemingly increasing over time. Hope’s mother didn’t reach her power’s maturity until she was eighteen. Hope as already surpassed her at sixteen.

Justice and Jim moved things around and cleared the way for the furniture. This would be their home for the next few years.

After weeks in seclusion, communication from the bunkers to the outside world opened. For personnel in the sanctuary of the Harrington Suburban Project, and other government secured facilities, it was a blessing to be able to communicate with the outside world again, providing they could accept the guilt of being singled out for protection. At the very least, it gave both the people inside and the people outside

hope that chaos would end soon for the country and the world to begin to heal. After reports indicating that control has been reestablished in most of the country, the only remaining broadcaster with enough resources to continue gathering and reporting of the events of the world became the official information source. If the government wanted people to believe something, it was put on the air, if they didn't, it was not, and being the only source of information, the public would not and could not know what the truth was.

Being so close to where her dad was giving Hope confidence that she would see him again, she just didn't want to wait till it was too late. She knew it was tormenting him that he was kept away safely while she had the weight of the world on her shoulders. She got in touch with him through video conference and told him, "I've isolated a temporary antidote to the virus. It's not one hundred percent, it doesn't cure, it doesn't prevent, but what it does is suppress the effects of the virus and low-level radiation on a temporary basis. We're still testing the duration, but we suspect the terms to be approximately four weeks, meaning every four weeks people will need a booster."

Jack said, "That's still a good thing, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's the best we can hope for now. Being able to synthesize it will take a considerable amount of time. We're dealing with something alien to this world; the answer will also have to be alien to this world. Can you give my contact info to anyone in authority there? Once on the phone, I can work my way up the chain of command. I'm coming to see you dad."

Chapter Seven

Six weeks underground kept everyone in the bunker anxious to find ways to justify opening the doors. The Commanding General had a discussion with Hope and arranged for a visit. Extreme precautions for decontamination and monitoring were employed while the containment was secretly breached. Hope took Justice with her. She gave Justice advice on their communication with the command. “We only answer the questions we have already decided the answers to. For questions we don’t feel comfortable talking about, we simply think of something and change the subject, their questions will disappear from their minds.”

They passed through three air locks before a man, simply referred to as ‘doctor’ remotely gave them permission to enter through the facility’s one-foot thick, stainless steel main entrance. “Welcome to the Mountain,” the man said. Stepping forward was Colonel Wilks who said, “Please follow me, the General is waiting.”

They entered a room with a huge desk and the General sitting at desk facing a portrait of George Washington on the wall. He turned around and introduced himself, “My name is General Bostich, welcome to my home. I understand you have developed something that could help us in the fight for survival. May I ask how?”

“Absolutely General,” she said. “I’ve developed a serum that can retard the effects of the virus. It won’t cure it, but it will keep it in check. There is much work left to be done, but I’m sure that if I gave you the formula, the brightest minds you have at your disposal can figure out how to perfect it.”

This got his attention immediately. “There must be something you want for this in return?” he asked suspiciously.

“Spoken like a wise man,” she said. “Not now, but within a couple years I’m going to ask for some land, land that I can build my own city and you’re going to make sure I get it.”

“How am I going to do that?”

“Actually, you’re not. It doesn’t matter who helps me secure the land, it’ll happen just the same. I just wanted you to feel like you made a difference. The bottom line is, the serum is temporary, but with it, the country can begin to heal. Now, I’d like to see my dad,” as she handed three vials, filled with the serum to the General.

She was then escorted to see her father. Jack was happier than he’d been in sixteen years seeing her walk through the door. He held her tight with tears in his eyes. “I am so happy to see you. Are you ok?”

“I’m fine dad, you’re the one that looks like they need a break.”

“Yeah, I guess I do, I’ve been so worried about you I haven’t slept in a month.”

“I can tell. Well, you don’t have to worry, I’ll take care of you now.”

Again, a tear came across his face, how many people have teenage daughters more equipped to care for them as they can for themselves? He was so very proud. “What’s the plan?”

Hope said, “We’re going to all walk out of here and build our world together. Ask Uncle Frank and Phil, Aunt Jennie, and Faith if they want to get out of here. I can keep everyone safe from the virus if they come.”

Jack talked with them, but they didn’t want to leave. The reports and videos they had been subject to all depicted a world gone mad and they were afraid to leave. Hope understood and was prepared, she decided before she went there that the decision to leave would have to be theirs of their own free will.

She mainly wanted her dad back and she felt happy that her friends were safe. Hope found herself having to maintain an extended or substantially aggressive air of thought control will be in the heart of an extremely tight military command. The sooner she could leave, the better. The decision was made to leave right away, and without haste convinced their escort to take them to the exit.

Scientist below, gloated about the serum's potential and would labor intensely to perfect its reproduction. After three weeks they believed they had succeeded in synthesizing the antidote and reported to high command that they'd done so. With an antidote in hand, the government felt they had enough of a security net to open the doors to the sequestered government shelters. However, the Harrington Suburban Project would remain intact until the threat has been completely contained. The thought process was that even if the government would fail and fall, there would still be one last chance for human survival. If society can pull itself back together and the antidote works, they could suspend the program.

One important aspect of the serum Hope failed to tell them of was the origin. Her DNA was the basis for the serum, they would not be able to synthesize it, but they would come close enough to mimic its properties that they felt the antidote viable. They would never know the difference.

Jack took the dead room, as they called it, the bedroom where the old man was found. It didn't bother Jack, he never thought about it. Just being with Hope again was enough to keep him strong. They stayed at the house preparing for the development of their own city.

"The children will be born near the end of winter," Hope said to Justice. "Gee said we'll have seven years to prepare for their arrival. I think we need a place with a large hospital. We

can program some Adams to tend to their needs while we continue to expand our cities capabilities.”

Jack felt a little left out, “What children?” he asked.

“Dad, Justice, and I seeded two thousand little Hopes and Justices’ and with the help of Gee and Soo surrogates across the county were impregnated. Starting in seven years, one at a time, they will be reunited in a new city, the first city of a new world, a city we must plan and build.”

Jack asked, “How, pray tell are you going to build a city?”

“We not actually going to build one, we’re going to take one over. Through attrition and mental manipulation, we’ll assert ourselves as the crafters and creators of the city any everyone left healthy enough to participate in a societal obligation will do the physical work for us. We on the other hand will be developing a whole new world of technology designed for our new family. In three or four generations, there won’t be a single human left able to reproduce and the end will mark yet another beginning for life on earth.”

“Knowing the future must be very hard to live with and being a part of it must be even harder. I can’t begin to imagine your pain regarding the future, but I can offer you all the love in my heart for support,” Jack said.

“Thanks, dad. I do see that there are thousands of people I could help, but I can’t help the millions behind them, and it saddens me. It makes me question what I’m doing and why, then I occasionally see a future where the struggles of the past are footnotes to a civilization that rose from the ashes and evolved to a greater purpose and it reminds me that we don’t control the universe, it controls us.”

Jack gave her a hug and kissed her on her forehead, “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said. “Oh, by the way, you’re going to be a grandpa.”

“What, you’re pregnant?”

“Yep,” she said with a smile.

“I’m at a loss for words. I am so happy for you and proud but scared at the same time. These trials and tribulations we endure are unpredictable and unprecedented. Anything could happen, and we’d be unprepared to deal with it. That’s a feeling no one can feel comfortable with,” Jack said.

“Try not to worry too much, the hardest part is over. All we must do for the next seven years or so is live, eat, love and plan for the future. Attrition will clear a path for us to lead and the guys have a plan for security that you’d probably find extremely interesting. We’ll be alright, trust me,” she said.

For the next several months all the nations of the world worked tirelessly to clean and clear the cities of death and disease. It was as if the entire world stepped back in the past to the days of the great plague. Bartering for goods as money lost its value, children taking over the roles of parenthood to their siblings and more oddly than thieves pitching in and helping their neighbors, the governments of the world stayed mainly intact. Surely some governments would tumble and fall to anarchy, said all the scholars and pundits, but the worse things got, the more people looked to leadership for help. Regardless, the type of leadership they had, when the rain began to burn and the stench of death came to their door, the stronger that government became. In hindsight, they assumed that when faced with walking through hell, more people preferred to follow than lead.

It was time for the children to enter the world. The fact that the expecting mothers remained healthy while people all around them developed illnesses drew considerable attention to

the medical staff that attended the births. The events of pregnancy and birth became extremely rare to nonexistent for most of the country and for the few cases they had, the mothers were surprisingly healthy. These were the mothers that were chosen. The liquid from the orb that provided the protection and nourishment to the fetus in the whom, also provided the mother with the same protections. Being derived from the aliens, the plasma is pure and will retain its potency throughout her life, but without future donors able to fertilize any more of her eggs, these will be the last of the children they will bear. While the serum created for the populous must be administered on a regular basis these women that bore the children of the future are free to remain healthy, in fact their blood has been purified of potential illness though they may one day believe it to be a curse. They will ultimately see all the people they know, friends and family, suffer the anguishes of the many diseases to follow.

Gee came to Hope, “It is time to acquire a city. You must find a city to take over or some land to build a city. In the middle of the city, you will need a building or center with two thousand beds. I suggest you build, and I suggest you begin now.”

Hope went to Justice to tell him of her conversation, “Gee told me its time to build a city.”

“He told me too.”

“When?”

“Just now.”

Jack asked, “What are you talking about?”

“We are supposed to build a city, so we can raise the two thousand children we spawned,” Hope said.

“Your mother told me of the dreams she shared with her father. She spoke of dreams of building an emerald city in the desert. A city that would become home to aliens and the center

of a new civilization. Could this be another case of reality and the supernatural intertwining?"

"That's an interesting concept, I should ask Gee. It could have been a look into the future or a paradox to avoid, changing history can cause terrible ramifications."

"Gee, I need advice."

"My grandfather spoke to my mother of a city in the desert. Is this the city we are to build?"

"Trust your instincts. Remember, a dream is just a window into another dimension that may or may not be real. If you are influenced by his dream, it doesn't change what has not happened yet, therefore an alteration of a divine plan has not been made. Again, I say to you, trust your instincts."

Hope went back to her father, and asked, "Did my mother discuss much of her and grandfather's dreams?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Hidden in those dreams are clues. Gee and Soo tell us we must build a city, a city to become the center of civilization, and isn't it rather odd that my grandfather had a specific dream about building a city in the desert for the very same reason? If you know anything of that dream, it could very well be a guide for us, a part of the plan laid out in front of us," she said.

Jack said, "Ok, Um, I'll sit down and write down anything I can remember that we may have talked about. I probably remember more than I suspect."

Looking over his notes it became clear to him. Hope was on to something. "Your mother was beautiful, super intelligent and talented," Jack started, "everyone loved her, but her time was cut short. In the end she knew she would not be long for this life, but all she could do was think of you. I think she told me of all her dreams so that I could prepare you for the future. They called it the Emerald City, but it had an official name that

included a number she never mentioned. Jack continued discussing in as great detail as he could. If we had the people and supplies, we could do this. I believe you are right, and I say, let's build a city."

Hope gathered everyone together. "We have less than seven years to build a city. It is time I called in that government favor to acquire the land. Buckle your seatbelts, the next ride takes us to the deserts of Arizona where we are going to build a beautiful city."

"What share we call it?" Donna enthusiastically called out.

Hope said, "The Emerald City was my first thought, but now I think Providence is a better name. The comet that started this whole thing was named Providence."

"Take a vote?" Hope asked.

Everyone agreed, and Hope picked up the phone, and called General Bostich. "General, I'm in need of that favor. There is a section of government land at the base of some mountains in Northern Arizona that we would like. Approximately forty square miles." All the while, she was mentally pistol whipping him into total submission.

"Yes, I understand. I'll call you very soon with an official approval."

"We're going to need the services of a city planner, construction firms, supplies and equipment," she said.

"I can acquire the land; I cannot fund anything though. Only the office of budget management can spend money."

"Tell them I have Gold."

"Yes, ma'am."

Justice asked, "Why did you tell him you had gold?"

"Gee told me a long time ago that if I ever need it, they have tons of it."

Jack said, “This plan is getting better all the time. I’m no stranger to building things, I can be the General Manager.”

“That’s a good idea, dad,” Hope said, “You oversee building, Justice oversees the technology and I oversee Science and health. We have a lot of planning to do, the biggest issue now is where are we going to get the people?”

“You said you can get gold, can we put out a help wanted sign?” Justice asked.

“I have something better. What’s the most important thing in everyone’s mind right now? It’s their health, are they going to get a disease and die like so many of their family and friends? I can give them health while they are working on and living around the city, add a little bit of gold and I think we can get more volunteers than we need.”

“Who’s going to design it?” Gary asked.

Hope suggested her dad be the architect. “Jack has the most building experience, so he’s, my choice.

Gary asked, “Can I be your helper? I’m particularly good with schematics and drawings.”

“Ok, but I’m not calling you little buddy, Gilligan. Nobody got the reference.

“The names Gary.”

Jack just looked at him, “Never mind, Gary, which was inside joke for old people.”

“Just remember, we need rooms for two thousand children and a few hundred staff.” Hope said.

“Not to worry,” Jack said, “I’ll create a plaza with rooms and shops, schools, and a cultural center. My mind hasn’t stopped piecing things together since we first started talking about building this city.”

Justice reminded Hope of another critical issue the government could help with. “If we are going to be teaching

and entertaining two thousand children, we are going to need an army of educators. Adam was programmed to be able to build a replica of himself, but we lack the supplies and equipment to build. We will need one Adam for every ten children, that's two hundred Adams."

Within days, truckloads of supplies and equipment started showing up on site. Jack would be the only group member to be on site for the first 30 days of construction. Volunteers flocked from all over the southwest to participate in the construction. The promise of a vaccine was enough to get people there. Hope gave Jack 200 doses, to get things started, she would arrive with the rest of the team before the beginning of the second month and bring more serum for more volunteers. The workers would build their temporary homes before the actual city construction could begin. Once they were housed, fed, and inoculated, the leveling of the city could begin. The proximity to the mountain and canyon walls would keep the entire north side of the city protected. The south, east and west would have a huge wall, twenty feet high and ten feet thick. The wall would have its own construction crew as would the roads and utilities. The wall's purpose was simple, to keep everything out except that which comes through the gate. The roads would be made of crushed gravel and a specially designed polymer that would keep the roads strong and solid, yet flexible like a hard rubber and does not reflect or retain heat. To make a surface compound like stucco for all the buildings, Jack mixed the polymer with sand and concrete. The buildings would be stronger than brick and like the road, would not reflect or retain heat. The desert may be 120 degrees, but the city will be about eighty degrees by the time all the design elements are incorporated.

Hope asked Justice to talk with Northrop Grumman, or one of the other three they had provided the design and software for Adam and have them build two hundred Adams for us. “I think putting the screws to the tech giants to produce our Adams for us would be fitting, and more than reasonable, as payment for the exchange of technology we provided.”

Justice responded, “I agree, I will have them agree to provide us with two hundred Adams, unprogrammed. I’ll get in touch with them now, when will we need them?” he asked.

“They have plenty of time, we won’t be receiving the children for a few years to come, but when we do start getting them, we must be ready. There’s more programing involved than just educators, they’ll have to be understanding, and help guide the children through logical and emotional situations, something a nannie may provide.”

“I don’t know anything about nannies,” Justice said.

“Yes, I know, but the children’s surrogate mothers do and may come with us if given the choice. We’ll offer each of them the opportunity to either stay or go. Either let us take the responsibility of raising the child or come with them and be a part of a team raising all the children in the new city. It is a simple choice, one that I’m confident will work out nicely.”

Thirty days past quickly. The team drove out to the desert where they were housed outside the walls while volunteers worked diligently to build the city. Every month, the workers would come to the city center to receive their booster. Rather than making their own, they relied on the government for the boosters. Justice and Hope could produce about five hundred doses in a month’s time, but the volunteers working in the city had risen to over eight hundred. The utility services, water, sewage, and electricity totaled five hundred workers themselves. News of the vaccine dispensary traveled far and

fast, within six months there were three hundred additional people in line outside the city waiting for a booster shot, and every month it seemed like a hundred more would arrive.

If we are to help those outside the walls, we will need the government to increase its booster supply, or we will have to develop our own again.”

The look on Jack’s face told her everything. Her and Justice would produce their own synthesized version of the antidote and open the gates to the city to new arrivals. After all this time and all the death, a lifelong plan to nurture a new society, a new race, she had become a little desensitized to the plight of humanity. The plague upon the world was indiscriminately cruel from the eyes of the inflicted, but in terms of the earth, it was just another change, a set of circumstances that precluded a new beginning. Still, Hope knew what the right thing to do was and until such a time that there were no more humans, she would be obligated to help in any way she could.

After seven months on site Hope had acquired the services of a physician who had recently retired just prior to the comet. He lost his wife to the virus and being all alone in the world was something he had never counted on nor could bear. When he heard of the city, he knew he had to become part of it, he needed to be a part of something. It was he who contacted Hope and offered his service pro bono. All he asked for in return was basic housing and sustenance needs. Naturally, Hope couldn’t refuse such a generous offer. The timing couldn’t have been better, within a month he was being called on to deliver Hope’s baby.

“Justice!” She called out, “Justice!”

“I’m here, what is it?”

“My water broke, it’s time, can you call Dr. Havard?”

“Doctor, Hope’s water just broke.”

“I’ll be right over,” he said.

He arrived at their quarters within ten minutes. “We’ll deliver here, the clinic and hospital still have no water, you’re as healthy as they come and haven’t seen anything to suggest any complications, so we should have a pretty uneventful delivery.”

Hope said, “I hope so. It didn’t work out to good for my mother, and I’m not done here yet.”

Just as the doctor suggested, the delivery went well. Hope and Justice had a little girl, they named her Angel, and as far as they knew, she was the first of the new generation, the first of a new species of humans.

“I’m putting you in charge of the science department while I recuperate,” she told Donna. “I need about a week or so, maybe two that I can clear my mind and get refocused. Can you handle it?”

“Of course, Kayla will help, we’ve got it covered. Get some rest, it’ll be fine.”

“The only thing pressing is a huge list of supplies Dr. Havard is working on. Once he completes it, I must negotiate with suppliers. We’ll be tapping into Gee gold stash again which means additional security, so Justice will need to be kept in the loop. Don’t be afraid to come by if you have questions, I just need a break from the routine.”

Motherhood would be a little difficult for Hope. She’s always been a do it yourself type and assumed that everyone was. The thought of people being needy didn’t seem natural, so introducing an infant into her life could be quite a bit of an adjustment. She soon found great relief with one of the Adams that were programed for childcare and could tend to an infant’s needs to include feeding, diaper changing, cleaning, and

providing associated contact and attendance. There were still a few issues and bugs to work out like telling when a child has gas or Gerd, but he made a wonderful sitter at the very least.

Across the country the children were born to single mothers and surrogates. Gee and Soo spread the seeds in fifty urban areas, about forty children per city. They knew it would only be a matter of time that someone might notice one child looking like another. Being all brothers and sisters, they were bound to look similar. Taking the risk of having forty per city was a calculated risk they needed to make. It was difficult enough to locate all two thousand children from fifty cities, it would be twice as hard from a hundred.

The virus was basically being controlled with a potion, but addressing the radiation proved physically impossible. Justice and Hope could absorb and redistribute small amounts of low-level radiation but that could account for about ten people. Justice and Hope had to face the fact that they could only handle about ten people and decided that was the separation line. Jack, Donna, Kayla, Jim, and Gary were family and once a week Justice or Hope would extract the build up of radiation from them and discard it. This treatment wasn't a cure, but it greatly helped. That was their trade off, the people they see every day, live their lives for Justice and Hope to see suffer from radiation poisoning and balance that to helping your friends. They also decided not to talk about it.

Kayla managed the hydroponics and botany departments. She was tasked with growing all the necessary elements of nutrition. All the proteins, amino acids, fats, and vitamins provided in specific quantities were mixed together with a base and baked into bread. The diet may have seemed bland and unappealing but with a hundred different artificial flavors, the bread symbolized life and the ability to continue. It

eliminated waste, was easy to make, was not contaminated, tasted good and provided all the nutritional values. When the volume of consumers in the city became more than she could grow for she went to Justice with dire warning. “The amount of plants I have to use at this rate would have us out in two months. We cannot sustain these provisions.”

In a fraction of a second, Justice decided to call Jim, “Can you get a crew together to excavate under the hydroponic farm. Let’s give the farm a couple of floors, we’ll need all the equipment needed for expansion as well, get with Kayla for a list.”

Back to Kayla, he said, “Will this fix it?”

“Yes, if they can get it built inside of a month.”

“I think we’ll be ok. Thanks Kayla, you’re doing great.”

Things were happening a lot faster than anyone could have imagined, and Justice saw the need for ten Adams, programmed for security and ten more programmed for education and information. Northrop Grumman came through and provided twenty units by week’s end.

At each of the corners of the great wall around the city stood towers forty feet high. At the top of each tower was a cradle where an orb would stand guard. A gift from Gee and Soo to guard and protect the city. With powers from beyond the realm of men, silent and speedy, the orb sees all and allows no unauthorized passage. Burning as bright as the sun, no one can look upon it without losing their sight. The orbs served yet another purpose, a storage vessel for Justice and Hope to make deposits. Invaders could find themselves on the receiving end of a lethal dose of radiation. Throughout day and night, the orbs stand guard and now there are two Adams for each wall, roaming the tunnels within the walls as sentinels.

Jim was Justice's main support for technical advances. Justice developed plans and specifications for the advanced engineering of the city's development, new forms of power, advanced propulsion systems, electromagnetic shields, and capacitors. Jim was constantly in awe of Justice's ingenuity and intellect. Building the hydroponic farm from top to bottom wasn't planned, but when faced with the food shortage problem, building down suddenly became a stroke of genius. Jim would admit he would have never thought of it.

Jim came to Justice with a waste disposal issue. "We've been taking our trash and garbage outside the city to burn in an open pit, but the pit can hold no more, we'll have to extend and make the pit bigger. But in doing so we'll end up having to remove some housing."

Justice said, "No, the problem is not space, the problem is we're not burning it hot enough. If we increase the heat, we decrease the particle size of the residue. We shall make four super-reflective mirrors, four-foot square, coated with the heart of an orb, and use the sun's radiation to incinerate the trash at 1600 degrees. There will be nothing left but powder."

"How do you know it's going to get that hot?" Jim asked.

"I don't, really. The thought just came to me and until we give it a try, we really won't know, will we?" Justice said.

Jim knew Justice was brilliant and felt that he was being played. Justice was never wrong, so he figured he was just being modest. Jim thought about the design the entire time he worked on it, trying to do the math and figure out how it could create that much heat but couldn't. The mirrors were finished with the finest nitrate of silver, an exact concave degree to focus the lights reflection to a central point and when a layer of the liquid from one of the orbs was brushed upon the mirrors, the trillions

of radiant photons from the sun were superheated and focused from all four sides to a single point, aimed directly to a small area of the trash pile. Like a boy with a magnified glass and the sun, Jim trained the mirror array back and forth across the pile and it burned like a laser.

The next step would be to automate the targeting parameters and duration of contact. He would never have bet it could have gotten that hot. Jim didn't say anything at the time, but he saw the potential for warfare with that array of mirrors and thought of Archimedes. Maybe this could be a bit of information he could keep to himself, until such a time that it could be useful, and if that time should come, he would look like the smart one.

Chapter Eight

By the city's fourth anniversary, the number of people living inside the city walls have dropped from and the eight hundred to six hundred. The city's construction was completed so no new residents were registered, and attrition began to thin out the herd. The booster shots have been helping with the virus and fewer cases have been reported but have done nothing to help with radiation. Complications from radioactive contamination have taken the place as the number one health risk.

Every year, the whole gang got together to celebrate Angel's birthday. By her second year she knew and sang the words to Happy Birthday, by her third year she asked why her birthday was more celebrated than others. On her fourth birthday, she officially proclaimed the practice primitive, archaic and economically dysfunctional, and petitioned her parents to discontinue the tradition. This came from a four-year-old. She was so far advanced for her age adults never knew how to talk to her. She spent hours every day listening to audio recordings and learning everything the Adam was programmed to teach. Donna, Kayla, Jim, and Gary had to stay on their toes around her. Jack thought the funniest thing in the world was seeing that cute little four-year old twist a situation involving one of them around and concede to her will. A quote from her favorite movie might be, "Outsmarted by a kindergartener."

With her fifth year coming up she got a special visitor, "Do you know who we are?"

"By your appearance, I'd have to say Gee and Soo. My mother has talked of you."

"You are correct. Do you know why we're here?"

“If you’re here for my birthday, I would have to wonder where you have been for the past four years. Other than my birthday, nothing special comes to mind.”

“We’ve come to talk with your parents about your brothers and sisters.”

That got her attention. She turned and looked at Hope with a confused look and quizzical tilt of her head.

Hope told Gee, “I haven’t discussed any of that with her yet, she’s only five.”

“You need to, five years for her is like eighteen to humans, you learned twice as fast as humans and these children will learn twice as fast as you. We have to move our schedule up and start making deliveries.”

“Why the hurry?” Hope asked.

“Anarchy has statistically reached critical levels and it has gotten too dangerous for the children to remain out there. We must bring them here and soon.”

“It’s not nice to have a conversation in front of other people, without including them in your conversation,” Angel said, “you taught me that mother.”

“I’m sorry honey, you’re right. Because of the virus, people out in the world are unable to have children. To keep our species from dying off, your father and I have donated our eggs and sperm, so a couple thousand children could be born into this changing world. No other children are being born, therefore, you’ll technically have about two thousand brothers and sisters and no other friends to speak of,” Hope confessed.

Angel looked at Hope with a cynical look in her eye, “That answers one question. I didn’t want to embarrass anyone, but I notice there were no other children my age, I just assumed people stopped having sex.”

“What do you know of such things?” Hope asked, somewhat shocked that she was engaging in a discussion about sex with her five-year old daughter but assumed just the same.

“Just what I’ve read.”

“I think we need to expand your library,” Hope said.

Gee said, “We cannot stay long, our presence here will cause ripples in the plan if we stay too long. We will be gathering the children and delivering them here starting tomorrow. We will be bringing about ten a day until they are all here and we will be bringing three- hundred-sixty mothers with them, we hope you are prepared.”

“Yes, we’re prepared, but only three hundred sixty mothers?”

“They are the committed ones; the others would be relieved to eliminate the responsibility.”

“Would you explain to Angel telepathically what is going to happen?” Hope asked Gee.

“Now that sounds like something you should be doing.”

“Yeah, but Angel has heard many stories and it would be very educational for her to experience the communication for herself, straight from the minds of the best.”

“Very well, I’ll update the child.”

He connected with Angel and told her the story, from her grandfather to her mother to her and the future. Having to slow the conversation down using words was very inconvenient and timely. Gee planted the entire story in Angel’s mind in less than a minute. Spoken would have taken an hour.”

“Ok then,” Angel said, “Do I have to share my room?”

“No sweetheart, not if you don’t want to.” Hope said.

In the heart of the plaza, buildings were stacked and arranged in varying heights and sizes. Some two stories, some three, and occasionally a four-story building. They were

basically hotel suites resembling homes, apartments, and offices. From the outside they looked like buildings lining the streets of an old-fashioned town with much character and charm. From the inside, they were a large bedroom and a separate bath each, like a fancy hotel room. Each building had a lobby on the ground floor with a dining hall and kitchen.

The mothers and the children were orientated separately. The mothers would be teamed together as house mothers, each house would have one mother for every five to six children. Their duties were simple, manage and coordinate the children's daily routines, breakfast, lunch, and dinner times, play time, study time and teaching them personal responsibility, bathing, laundry, and making their beds. Each house had access to an Adam, programmed for household duties to assist the mothers in their duties. For the most part, the children were quiet and reserved, highly intelligent and possessed the self-discipline a marine would envy. In Hope's welcome speech to the mothers, she would tell them, "Taking care of the children will be the easy part, preparing them for an uncertain future will be the challenging part. This is their world now, if we have any love for humanity left in us, we must give these children everything we can, to help them succeed."

The rooms began to fill, the houses no longer empty and quiet, the inner city near the plaza came to life. Jim and Gary established a learning and entertainment network in each home. A large screen monitor with voice activated commands brought a wireless network connected to a massive and powerful computer system. Every known publication recorded or digitized, had been downloaded and stored in its crystal core memory banks of Jim's computer servers. Jim spent months hacking into every database his software could locate. He had help from Gee and Soo, who gave them futuristic computer

programming capabilities using crystal and DNA plasma processors. He gained access to government and private commercial entities that have been doing data mining for years and downloaded over sixty petabytes of information, three times more than the library of congress, all of which would be available to the children for education and training.

The children had many questions about the people on the outside of the city. They understood the sickness, saw, and understood their struggles, but had a hard time understanding the emotional display as hardships and circumstances negatively affected them. Hope and Justice saw this trait in the children and began to wonder, "If intelligence breeds logic, and logic is void of emotion, are we destined to become insensitive and emotionless? Is that what happened to Gee and Soo? Did they once feel love and joy?" Hope wondered.

"I think they did, I also think it's something they wish they had back."

"The children don't have dogs and cats to love and pet. They spend their days in an academic world learning everything except how to share their feelings providing they have them. We need to incorporate something in their lives that can balance to such things as knowledge and faith."

"Yes, but we can't force it. Remember, it was emotion over logic that made us inferior, and evolution is not evolution if it goes backward," Justice said.

"That's true, but the respect for life comes from our ability to feel compassion, and without respect for life we are doomed as a species. Even wild animals have some respect for each other."

"What are we to do?"

"Simple," Hope said, "teach them how to love. Send them with hand outs to the streets and mingle with the

downtrodden citizens outside the gate, under supervision of course. It may also help the people outside the gate to know why this city was built in the first place. Not for us, but for them.”

“Ok, I think you’re right, let’s give it try. Who knows, if it works, maybe Gee and Soo could benefit as well.”

By the time all the children came to the city the flow of outsiders coming to the city stopped. Major urban centers have collapsed to ruin, only the sick remained to savage for survival. Food and natural resources dwindled to nothing, and the cities were in a death spiral. Rural and suburban life was on life support. Livestock was gone, meat processing plants shut down, few farms still produced crops and the only meat to be found was wild game and much of that was quickly becoming contaminated. From prospects of the disease progressions taking decades to just a few years, it was clear, all the experts were wrong.

Opening the shelters and assimilating the government back into society made no difference at all. They would have nothing to rule over inside their bunkers anyway. The Harrington Suburban Project remained in lock down and their concept of staying underground until they could come out and form a new civilization was shortsighted as well. Their ability to procreate, even if there was no virus or disease, was miss calculated and human species would be extinct within a few generations anyway. Still, they cling to hope that they will prevail. Their life underground is still safer and more comfortable than above, but to wake every day without freedom to roam is taking a little of their life away day by day.

The lack of formal clergy or ceremony hasn’t diminished the concept of togetherness. Hope and Justice, Jim and Donna, Gary and Kayla all feel a bond to each other as if

they were married. Each of them was dedicated to the other. Kayla came to Hope one day, “Gary and I have been trying to become a family, yet we’ve been unable. Is there anything you know that could help?”

“I’m sorry Kayla, I don’t know how to tell you this, but no one is able to have children. That’s why we are here. These children are the future.”

“That’s what those samples from the orb was for, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Couldn’t that liquid help me?”

“No, it’s too late. Once the eggs have died, it’s over. But think about this, there are over a thousand children here that said goodbye to their mothers, I could only imagine that if given a choice to have a mother or not most would choose to have one. Could you feel for one of them the way you would want to feel for your own?”

With the thought of never having her own children, Kayla took Hope’s suggestion to heart and contemplated adopting. She spent weeks observing and interacting with the children in her building, she was trying to establish a bond, but the emotional a connection never came. Knowing the origin of the children seemed to make them less human in her mind, a concept she couldn’t ignore. As Hope would witness, being human sometimes means bias is normal and arrogance divine. Was it her pride that prevented her from becoming attached, it was hard to say, the child was genetically superior and free from guilt and shame? What would Kayla’s pride be to subvert the child’s value? More than likely, it was humanity itself on trial, all we’ve ever known was being the smartest animals on the planet, now a challenger has come, and feeling beaten, we still can’t submit to change. As much as Kayla wanted to, she

couldn't come to loving any of the children as her own, just as many cannot come to faith, either you have it, or you don't.

The external dangers and hardships were obvious, they were tangible and could be calculated, developing plans to protect themselves had logical application. The internal dangers were much more difficult to foresee. Like Kayla's, maternal dilemma. Everyone had mental and emotional issues that weren't being adequately addressed. You cannot address a problem you don't know exists, and even if you knew it existed, are you qualified? Jack was the oldest of the group and had seen more in his life than this bunch of kids but was no expert on human affairs. Being the obvious father figure, he was often approached for advice, and he in turn would consult with his sixteen-year-old daughter. "I had a talk with Jim this morning," Jack told Hope, "he hasn't left the plaza except to go to his workshop since we moved into the plaza. I asked him why, but he did everything he could to keep from talking about it. I finally got through and he admitted that he was afraid of the people in the city. Not the threat of the virus or disease but afraid of the people in general, he sees them all as predators."

"I didn't notice he's been avoiding the public. It seems to me that if it's fear, it's only going to fester and get worse if left unattended."

"I agree and that's why I come to you. You do so much for everyone here, weekly radiation treatments and antivirus protection alone literally keeps us all alive, but I'd like to ask one more favor." He paused as he put his hand on her shoulder, "Will you scan each of the team periodically to make sure mental or emotional issues don't overwhelm them? They're young and have experienced more disturbing events and situations than any group in history that I'm aware of, that's got to have a negative affect on a person's psyche. I honestly don't

know how you are able to keep yourself and everything you must deal with together. That being said, promise me that if you ever have feelings that you're having difficulty dealing with that you will come to me and talk about it."

"I will," she said.

"What's going to make Jim's situation more difficult is the growing threat outside the walls. Violence out in the suburbs has been growing and people are starting to group together in factions. One great truth no one has had to face yet is the possibility of having to inflict harm on someone else. Everything you have told me supports the ultimate goal of protecting these children at all costs. Well, all cost means the possibility of taking life if need be and I'm sure none of us are ready for that. If we must engage in violence, I'm afraid Jim may end up flipping out."

"I see. Let me investigate what Jim's issues are and I'll get back with you. I must be careful when it comes to emotion, if I convince him not to be afraid, he may end up enjoying a physical altercation."

This conversation couldn't have been better timed. The Adams at the main entrance had their first casualty. For the five years of the city's construction, there hasn't been a lethal confrontation. Everyone assumed that in the face of disaster, we tend to come to each other's aid, sure there will be an occasional opportunist, but the idea of widespread murder and total disregard for human life was a thing for the movies. Now they will have to reevaluate. A group of about six young people approached the city gates armed, when they were denied entrance, specifically for being armed, they decided they would assert their will by opening fire on the Adams, which didn't turn out well for the boys. The Adams' firing control was rapid and accurate, shooting all six subjects in their limbs, while moving

in to confiscate the weapons. Unfortunately for one of them who took a bullet to their femoral artery and died on the scene. For the onlookers, the sight was awesome and scary. Knowing they could be protected, if need be, in such a situation was comforting but the speed and accuracy of the response removed any doubt that the robots could take anyone out if they wanted. What if the programming went wrong and it turned on innocent people?

The people of the city, especially the people who witnessed the event, now had reason to be wary of the Adams. Until now, they were always looked upon as little R2D2s and thought of as adorable droids, now the realization of deadly threat changes things. For Jack, he could imagine having to take up arms to defend the city and the children. The hundreds of humans populating and working in the city had no idea the true purpose for the city, if they were to know, the distrust and resentment would have them revolting for sure.

Jack called Dr. Havard, “Doc, we have a problem at the main gate, there’s been a shooting.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Wait, there are six with at least one believed to be dead.”

“Are you going to be there?”

“Yes, I’ll meet you there,” Jack said.

By the time they arrived on scene a couple of concerned citizens had tried to bandage and stop the bleeding with torn shirts while others gathered in a circle around them, maneuvering to get a better view. Of course, everyone there had a version of the story to tell, but one thing was clear, the threat to the city was real. The emergency room at the hospital has only seen patients with cuts, bruises, and illnesses until now. Jack wondered if this was going to end up being a normal

occurrence. There has been a lot of chatter and rumor within the city that outside entities wanted to come and take over. Even though this situation was local, Jack saw the potential for those rumors.

As soon as the remaining five were patched up for transport to the hospital, Jack left to talk with Jim.

“I heard about the shooting,” Jim said.

“We need to look at a bigger issue. This was just six lone wolf criminals, to what extent are we prepared for a real invasion?”

“I’m not sure,” Jim said, “I’ve never been military, all my experience comes from movies.”

“I know, its ok. I just need all of us to stay conscientious and not assume anything. I’m sure though, we don’t have enough Adams to handle a coordinated effort by any one with larger weapons. I’m going to get Justice to call in that government favor for more Adams and get Hope to talk with Gee and Soo. When the new recruits get here, I’ll need you and Gary to get them programed as soon as you can, also, can you look into building drones, armed drones if you know what I mean?”

“No problem.”

“By the way. There are a few civilians that have been helpful around here, see if there are a few you could use, as part of the security forces that is,” Jack said, thinking interaction with the locals will help him from withdrawing any further.

“Ok, I’ll talk to a few.”

When Hope discussed the orbs with Gee, he reminded her, “The sentry orbs have undisclosed abilities, to include offensive applications, you just need to communicate with it.”

“You mean like talking to them as if they were human?”

“Definitely not,” Gee said, “talk to them as you would talk to yourself or me. Just connect with them and their nature will be revealed, after all, we are all made of the same energy, we are just able to control it, where they are meant to be controlled.”

“But I don’t know what it can do, so I wouldn’t know what to ask it,” she said.

“Take a little time and connect with it, it’ll come to you.”

With that advice, she went out to the main gate to investigate the orbs. She stood outside the gate and looked over toward the southwest tower, closed her eyes and imagined the orb perched atop the tower, calling to it in her mind, “Come to the main gate.” Within seconds it arrived and hovered in front of her. Doing the calculations in her head she surmised the orb had to have travelled at about eighteen hundred miles an hour to get there that fast. Each wall was six point two miles long and the main gate was in the middle of the south wall. She stared at the orb and asked it what it could do. She didn’t get a direct reply but what she did get was intuitive impression of the power the orb possessed. All she had to do was imagine the orb doing something and it would happen. She sampled it by imagining the orb disabling a truck driving out of the gate. The orb made its approach from the rear and veered off to the west, as it made its turn it blasted the vehicle with an electromagnetic pulse stopping the vehicle’s engine. The poor driver didn’t know what to think. He got out of the vehicle and started to lift the hood. Hope observed as she directed the orb to restart the vehicle, the driver just back in fright, convinced the vehicle was possessed, he walked back to the main gate abandoning the vehicle, left running in the middle of the road. Hope explained

the situation and the driver went back to his vehicle half impressed and half nervous.

Watching the orb fly around in total silence glowing like a neon glow stick she wondered what caused the luminescence and what its parameters were. She found out quickly when she encouraged the orb to give her a demonstration. The orb's brightness soared to a blinding luminance nearly matching that of the sun. She had no doubt, EMP and blinding light had an obvious defensive application. Her last test was sound, once again her inquiry was answered with a deafening high-pitched blast in excess of one-hundred-forty decibels. It could easily harm a person's hearing and cause pain if unprotected, even protected would cause enough discomfort to cause a person to second guess their actions.

Hope called Justice to give him an update on these revelations of the orbs. "I just got through sampling some of the abilities our orbs have."

"What did you find?"

"Awesomeness. They're lightning fast, silent, can blast an EMP that can stop a vehicle motor, produce a blinding light and a deafening high pitch blast. I'm sure at can do much more, but to satisfy my curiosity for security, I feel much more protected now than I did twenty minutes ago. I'm afraid you and I will be the only people that could control it, it's a mental powers issue."

"Maybe later, you and I can check it out together," Justice said.

"Good idea, let's have a picnic tomorrow out at the base of the mountains and do some more testing?"

"It's a date, just you, me and an orb."

"How about you, me and two orbs. I'd like to test how they can work together."

“Absolutely, hey, while we are talking about security and technology, Jim has been working on some upgrades for the Adams, increased speed, nonlethal defense, and dual unit synchronization so they can work in pairs. Maybe having the orbs and Adams synchronized could be a possibility.”

“Yeah, this is your baby,” Hope said, “I just got curious and had to investigate, I’ll be turning it all over to you after my curiosity is satisfied.”

“There’s yet another application if you recall, we can discharge radiation into the orb and in turn, the orb would probably be able to discharge it back to others as a weapon. It’s one of the tests I’d like to do tomorrow.”

The city hasn’t established a penal system, until now the only crimes to be dealt with were petty, and easy enough to adjudicate through civil discourse and victim restitution through a five-person panel their peers, failure to accept the recommended punishment was dealt with by exile. Part of their agreement with the government for the annexation of their new city was complete local governance to include law enforcement. However, the courts would still fall under the purview of state and federal authorities. This was one of a few concerns the group was unprepared for and at a loss to remedy. Even though society has fallen apart, the group was reluctant to ignore the legalities involved. The hallmark of any civilization is its ability to fairly apply and enforce its laws. The old west was lawless for a time as well as this new city, but eventually a system must be established and enforced. Upon holding a meeting, the group decided the local sheriff’s department should be contacted and let them decide what to do with the injured assailants. As for the one that didn’t survive, Justice was confident that the self defense program installed in the Adams would hold up as justified in any court, so he wasn’t worried

about their action, just the trial and punishment of the others was at the heart of their dilemma.

“We are going to have to sit down and come up with our own legal system,” Justice told Hope. “We won’t have the sheriff or state police to call before too long. If we’re going to have to reinvent laws, we should probably take some time to evaluate our needs, priorities, and values to keep it simple and fair.”

“Why don’t we plan to get everyone together and discuss how we want to proceed with this. There’s seven of us, but I’m not in favor of a straight majority rule on this. These rules and laws will be governing humans for only a short period of time, for the most part, we’ll be setting this up for our children and future generations. How about we get everyone’s input on issues, but leave the decisions for you and me?”

“You’re probably right, the others are not qualified to foresee the needs of a species more advanced with a totally new and different form of society. Ok, let’s get everyone together after we get this gang picked up and out of here.”

Whenever everyone was called together for a meeting, they knew it was big. Normally things were handed down from person to person, but when everyone had to get together, it was always important and affected everyone, and made everyone a little nervous.

Justice started the meeting as soon as the last person showed, “We’re going to have to come up with some rules for all of us to live by. The recent event at the gate brought to light that we don’t have laws or a court system to handle these things. We are not going to be able to count on local, state, or federal services for very much longer. Hope and I thought we should all take a little time and write down some basic laws we think are important enough to warrant warnings or disciplinary

actions. We don't have to mirror the laws out there; we can use this opportunity to simplify our code."

"If we have our own system, who will be judge?" Jim asked.

"We won't necessarily have a judge, we're looking more like having a counsel of three, five or seven judges, depending on the severity of the crime. If you have any suggestions concerning law enforcement, judiciary, or legislative issues, please include it. We want to be able to evaluate our needs and everyone's input is important." Justice said.

Jack suggested, "Please keep it simple. We don't need J walking, tax evasion or spitting on the sidewalk at this time, just the common-sense stuff that would keep us safe. Don't forget, we have robots that would probably end up responding to some of these issues and they would have to be programmed. With that in mind, I don't think anyone here wants little robot spies doing the policing, so please, give some thought to the crime and how and who it should be reported to."

Hope wanted to tell them it was basically for the children of the future but in doing so she thought that might suggest that they were no longer important, so she decided to remain silent."

"Can everyone have a list provided by this time next week, so we can start putting something together? We can always add amendments if we think of other things."

Everyone agreed, and left wondering what type of government, and rule of law they were going to develop. They felt a little more empowered to be a part of it.

Chapter Nine

Six months after the first of the children and mothers arrived, they were all accounted for. One thousand nine hundred seventy-six children and three-hundred-sixty-eight mothers. Twenty-four children ended up being victims of their parent's murder suicide pacts, a circumstance Gee and Soo failed to account for. Mental issues such as those were concepts, they were ill prepared to deal with or understand. By the time everyone was on board, the houses were running smoothly. Angel felt out of place on occasion, being the only child there with a mother and a father and her own family routine but joined in the activities of the other children of the house with excitement whenever given the chance.

Angel confided in Hope, "They are aware of their ability to communicate without words."

"They are?"

"Yes, they're also aware the mothers can't and are often conspiring to have fun with their advantage."

"Thank you, sweetheart. These things are important to their development, I should talk with them. This would be a good time for me to explain and teach you some of our differences as well. Before I do, I need to discuss this with your father, so for now, don't let the other children know we talked about this, that includes not letting them read your mind. Block out this conversation for now, can you do that?"

"Yes, I believe I can."

Hope talked with Justice about the children's rapidly advancing abilities, "They're learning things at a much younger age than we did, we're going to have to stay closer to the collective psyche of the children if we hope to be better parents."

“I agree, maybe we should increase their study time and separate them into smaller groups. Maybe mix it up every now and then so they don’t get used to communicating with the same children all the time.”

“I like that idea, if they are always together, they will form a hierarchy and be influenced by each other rather than the elders,” Hope said.

Hope went from house to house and had a training session with each of the children. In groups of girls in the house, then the boys, she explained that the ability to communicate without words was referred to as linking and linking in a group or mass communication was referred to as syncing. For her first test she corresponded with each of the kids one at a time, then her second test was syncing, where she concentrated on telling all of them something. All the children responded favorably until she applied her third test. She said, “Children, I want you all to try and tell everyone something using syncing.” As soon as they began, all the children’s eyes squinted in what appeared to be pain. “What have you learned,” she asked one of the children.

“Noise, a lot of noise. I couldn’t understand anything, it was just loud and noisy.”

“That’s right. Syncing is not meant to be a routine form of communication, it should be left for important things and used sparingly. An example would be like a mother or a leader calling out to their children or work force important commands, “All children assemble in the parlor for a family meeting” or “All workers return to work.”

Hope’s next lesson was the one which necessitated the need for the meeting in the first place. “As you practice your ability to communicate, and you do need to practice, keep in mind that you are special and being special has its own

responsibilities. The mothers don't have your abilities, and not only is it rude to link behind their back, but it is also highly disrespectful. They have given the lives to attend to your needs out of love and if you forsake their love, you will be dishonoring yourself and your house. Therefore, as a rule, whenever you are in the presence of people that do not share your ability to link, use your voice to communicate. Does everyone understand?"

A couple of the children nodded; others just looked on.

"Do you understand," she asked insistently.

"Yes," each of them said individually.

Having had this training with each of the houses, Hope began to wonder what else she might expect out of the children and thought back to her growing years and when she started experiencing abilities. She was going to have to use Angel more and more to be the link between them and her. She didn't want to put Angel in that position, but it was the easiest and most logical solution, besides, she felt Angel should be a step ahead and a notch above the other children, even though they shared the same DNA and were roughly the same age, Angel was her only birth child and preferential treatment was authorized in her book.

Time would seem to fly for the next few years. The population of the city would begin to thin out as terminal diseases became more prevalent. The amount of people in the country, businesses in operation, agencies, services, and supplies dwindled to record lows. The country and the world were dying, and everyone knew it. The government ceased supplying goods and services to the city, occasionally sent representatives there to see what the city might have to offer the government. When they appeared, either Justice or Hope gave them enough false information to satisfy their curiosity without

drawing further attention to themselves and sent them back with knowledge that the city had nothing of value.

Word, from family members within the city, managed to make it out to relatives and friends in distant locations. Life in the city felt like a sanctuary to them, a haven for the desperate few lucky enough to find safety in the city. By the time the word got back home, travel became too dangerous. The largest quantity of criminals was on the road and guarding their territories like vultures in the desert. If you travelled any distance at all, you would have encountered a horde of vandals. It was inevitable that the city's security would be tested, they just didn't know what to expect.

Once in the second year, the city had 26 Adams stationed around the city per mile of perimeter. Five miles south of the city riding north in a large caravan of SUVs, inside the vehicles were heavily armed groups of pirates. They called themselves sharks as if they were cleaning the ocean. Six SUVs, travelling north up the long straight desert road to the city, were detected by the orbs around the five-mile marker and flew out to investigate. At 1800 hundred miles an hour, it didn't take long for the orbs to arrive on station, speeding past the vehicles so fast the occupants didn't have a chance to see them. The orbs returned to the gate and disclosed all it observed. Justice made the call, "Southwest and Southeast orbs, go forth and stall the convoy. Seconds later the orbs deployed an EMP that shut down all six SUVs.

Occupants then exited their vehicles and continued on foot. The orbs returned to the infiltrators with an excruciatingly loud siren, twice as loud as a shotgun blast. It was a devastating blow to the bandits, but a simple test they had passed with flying colors. The orbs, Justice and Hope had a bond, a connection, which brought them together. In the heat of the orbs mission,

Justice and Hope both felt what it was like to sit in the front seat of one of these orbs while they're doing their thing. When a few of them managed to reach the wall, two Adams came flying out of the gate at thirty miles an hour and cornered the three against the wall. With two mini-Gatling guns each the Adams blasted all four guns, spitting out forty-five caliber rounds at a rate of three thousand rounds per minute. The blasts only lasted a couple seconds and it scared the living hell out the city's visitors. They turned behind them and saw their own outline in the wall behind them. An Adam appeared immediately in front of them and told them, "Drop your guns and walk away. You have three seconds to respond and zipped backward twenty feet and cycled its guns, the invaders immediately dropped their guns and walked away with hands in the air praying to a god he didn't even believe in.

"So, we understood a caravan of armed gringos, what would we do about tanks and helicopters, or missiles and bombs?" Jack asked Justice.

"Let's hope it never comes to pass, but I imagine if we needed Gee and Soo, they would assist and demolish any threat."

"You trust them that much?" Jack asked.

Justice said, "Oh Yeah, I do. I can see it, I can feel it, it's an energy in the air and Gee and Soo control it. It's awesome to witness."

"Yes, I can say the same, but for me, it's more like I have no choice. I must believe in them, I've already witnessed a handful of miracles, taking care of a battle situation with tanks and helicopters shouldn't be more difficult, they're both filled with electronics that cannot withstand the EMP capabilities of the orbs. Same thing can be said about an approaching missile,

the EMP would fry all the electronics and the missile would drop out of the sky.”

Angel entered the room and politely waited for Jack and Justice to finish their conversation before interrupting between comments. “I told mom I’d let her know if I witnessed anything of importance, I have, but mother’s busy with Ms. Donna.”

“What is it sweetheart?” Justice asked.

“I was having lunch with Eric, Sasha, and Vanna and instead of Eric reaching across the table for a napkin he simply put his hand out and the napkin came to him. After seeing that, we all tried it. Watch this dad,” as Angel motioned with her hand to retrieve a pen from Justice’s shirt pocket.

Justice looked at Jack and said, “I don’t know what concerns me more, the fact that they can do it, or the fact that they know how to do it and can teach their brothers and sisters. Now I’m going to have to give it a try, they had to have gotten it from somewhere.”

Sometimes the simplest things are so simple we overlook them. He was astonished to find out he too had telekinetic powers as it appeared to Angel that he was upset about it. His frustration was he’d obviously had this power for quite a while without realizing it and the fact that he had it didn’t upset him, the fact that he failed to understand his own self did. “Sweetheart, I’m not upset with you. You did a good thing, I’m upset because it was my job to know these things and I missed it, which makes me wonder what else I’ve missed.”

“You know what amazes me?” Jack asked. “The fact we’re having this discussion with a five-year old. I remember my wife didn’t realize her powers until she was eighteen and Hope didn’t begin until she was sixteen, now the children of the children seem more mature than grandpa.”

Justices concentrated hard to link with Hope, “Angel has a surprise for you when you’re ready to be amazed.”

Hope tried to connect with Angel and rushed back to the house when she felt that she was being blocked. “I tried to link with you, were you blocking me?” She asked Angel.

“Yes, ma’am. Dad told me it was a surprise, so it’s a surprise. Surprise!” Just as she said that a soccer ball floated up from behind her and hovered over her head.

Hope sharply inquired, “Are you doing that?”

“I learned it today.” She said.

“They grow up quick, don’t they?” Justice said. “Telepathy, telekinesis, a high IQ, and probably a photographic memory, make me wonder what they’ll be able to do by the time they’re fully grown.”

“It just makes me glad, that back in my day, our government didn’t go after Gee and Soo and their race. We would have been royally screwed. Thank you Gee for being patient with us.” He said not expecting a reply, seeing where they had only spoken to Jack once before. But, out of nowhere the words “you’re welcome” appeared on the wall behind Hope which made Jack feel good. Gee and Soo recognized him as if he were one of the family. He knew he was just the human aspect of Hope, her mother, Lisa, was the one with superior genes and the one Gee and Soo guardian to.

Kayla’s hydroponics farm was producing a surplus of vegetables with all three floors at full production. The vegetables and herbs would then be processed for their nutritional values and included into the ingredients of their staple food sources, breads, biscuits, crackers, and cookies. These food supplements were rationed to the city’s citizens and on occasion found their way outside the city walls in a local black market. To combat the exploitation, Hope periodically

took supplies outside the city to hand out, devaluing the scalpers ill gotten gains. She might have handled it with a little more supernatural force but feared becoming a demigod or recognized as such. She didn't care too much for praise, she was only interested in respect.

The end of the month rolled around again, and it was time to absorb the group accumulated radiation. Justice and Hope realized the amount had dropped for the fourth straight month. "It's definitely a good thing that the radiation is decreasing," Jack told Justice as he wondered when it would be safe enough for his friends to leave the bunker. They had room in the city for them, maybe they would consider coming out now. "Can you get back in touch with that General in the bunker, so we can offer my friends another chance to stay with us?"

"Sure, when do you want to make that call?"

"How about first thing in the morning.?" Jack said.

"How long have you known them?" Justice asked.

"I've known them since I was a little kid, went to school with them, I married Hope's mother in a double wedding with two of them."

"It must be hard." Justice said, trying to show some empathy and concern.

"They kept me going through the toughest time of my life, I owe them everything, Yeah, it's hard."

"If I can get them on the phone, I can convince them to come."

"No, it has to be their call. I promised them I'd always respect their wishes so as much as I wish they were here, it's not my choice to make."

"I respect that. You're a good man Mr. Baker."

“You sounded just like my wife, don’t do that again.” Jack said, scolding him humorously.

Back at the Baker house, a two story with five extra-large suites, a plot was brewing. Angel has outsmarted her mom, but not in a combative way, she calculated, with theorems and insight prior to advancing an action. Angel linked with one of her sisters at the house and suggested, she send out an image of an animal to just a small group of kids with instruction to spread the news, and redispach the image to others in their vicinity and so on. At a speed faster than electricity, the image encompassed the entire group of kids within a second. Information was successfully transmitted to the entire group instantaneously, making the group one giant living organism, figuratively speaking.

With results in hand, Angel approached her mother and began by saying, “Mother, we need a conversation.”

“Mother? Not mom? What are you up to?”

“I have proven a science fact that you need to be aware of. You told the children that syncing was something that should not be taken lightly. We have successfully transmitted information to the entire group of children simultaneously.

“And why would you have done that?”

“I was curious.”

“Curiosity killed the cat.”

“What’s a cat?”

“Touché.”

“All I did was send a small sync request to a few with directions to pass it to another small group. Chain reaction, now we have a widespread safety net. Imagine trouble rearing its ugly head far to the east of the city, within a second the west side of the city see everything. What are your thoughts?”

“Child, you amaze me, you didn’t exactly disobey or disrespect my authority, and you managed to impress me one more time with simple brilliance. You know, when I talk to your father about this, he is going to want to practice and train using the orbs and the Adams in an exercise, and if he doesn’t recommend, we give it a whirl, I will.”

Justice received his brief on the development and immediately was the defense application and potential. He pulled Hope aside after giving Angel proper acknowledgement of achievement and a smile to melt every young girl’s heart.

“Children are five and they’re smarter than we are,” he said. “We’re going to have to pay close attention, we don’t want them building nuclear weapons or something.”

“You worry too much. Yes, they have abilities, as we all do, but they don’t over think things yet. It’s not that they’re smarter than us, they are starting pure, and we haven’t seen anything pure in a long time,” she said. “What do you suppose might happen if they used their telekinetic ability with their telepathy, could they lift a city? We’re into an all-new era physics application, it really makes you wonder.”

“If we test that theory, can we start small?” Justice asked.

True to Hope’s request to do a little training, Justice took four children each to the towers surrounding the city. Six miles from tower to tower, they practice sending signals back and forth. They then incorporated the Adams to receive the impulses from the children’s communique. Finally, incorporation the orbs. Justice’s expectations were far exceeded. He knew then, some of these children would need to become servants of the city, and the city has the ability to defend itself. The beauty of these recent developments is that all of it could be automated, except for the children. With

twenty-four children, we'll call them sentries, on duty around the city at a time, a security force of a hundred twenty would be enough. A hundred twenty, sentries, first responders, local enforcement, and militia, the city was evolving.

All the photos of a green and blue planet became nostalgic. The radiation and the virus uncalculatedly influenced the earth at the onset of the impact. The decay of organic organisms coupled with the radiation created an atmosphere less capable of retaining oxygen. With billions of animals and people no longer providing carbon dioxide, plants and trees died off more rapidly, additionally dropping the oxygen even more. Looking back, far from earth, one would see a red haze around the earth, not green and blue. The red would glow from the reflection of the sun but in the southwest desert of the United States sat a city between intersecting lay lines. Each of the towers were strategically built right over intersecting lines and now the city had the pulse of the earth, magnetically speaking. The magnetic protection surrounding the city gave the city its own aura. From the far reaches of our solar system the city in the desert glowed green, among the red backdrop of the planet's red glow.

Hope recalled the stories of her mother and grandfather's dreams and mentioned to Justice, "Maybe this is why they called it the Emerald City. I chose to call it something else. In my grandfather's dream, it was a beacon in the night, a shining city on a hill. We don't want this to be that city, we must be able to say goodbye. We can't save them; we can only prolong their agony and suffrage and extend one more day of existence. I want this city to provide for the safety of a future brand new. The people outside the walls are not our concern, the people within the city are. Providence is the future; the past had its chance and should remain in the past."

“You know what I think?” Justice asked. “I think all these revelations are occurring for a reason. The fact that we know we can communicate instantaneously and use telekinetic, are signs that they must be used. I feel we’re constantly being tested and trained ourselves.”

Hope said, “Without a doubt. Gee and Soo probably know every aspect of this big picture and it makes me wonder, whether we are their test.”

“If we are, I suggest we do whatever we can to help them. Failure in this game doesn’t end well for the losers,” Justice said.

“I decided, I’m going to do what must be done to get dad’s friends out of the ground and into the city. My dad would suffer the loneliness if it meant respecting his friend’s wishes, but I don’t share the narrow version, I prefer to believe the journey more important than the destination. If you can’t enjoy going there, why go? Dad’s happiness is more important to me than the misguided fears of people who probably don’t deserve his love. This is the future, and we can help them, far more than the government can. Their choice can be influenced if you merely give them a visual of this life or that. The final years filled with love and friendship or alone in a strange environment, there’s no doubt they will chose wisely.” And she did, she called out to the secured line to the bunker and arranged for the release of Phil, Jennie, and Faith. Frank chose to stay, he had found a companion and his life was finally complete, he wasn’t leaving her.

After almost six years, the call to offer residents of the Harrington Suburban Project one last chance to leave and rejoin the outside world came and this time Jack’s friends took the option. This would be the last time the doors open until they finally run out of food.

Hope had to admit to Jack that she had contacted them and secured their release. They were due to be picked up in an hour and it would take forty-five minutes to get there. “Dad, I have good news, Uncle Phil, Aunt Jennie, and Faith are getting out today. We have to leave now to pick them up.”

“What?” He said. “How do you know?”

“I talked with them a couple hours ago and they made their own decision to leaving during the last chance the bunker will have for a while.”

“Are you sure you let them make their own decision?”

“I was careful dad, I did show them the difference between living here in the city and living there in the bunker, the decision was theirs.”

“Good, because I know you knew how important it was for me that we didn’t unfairly influence them.”

“Yes, I know,” she said. What she didn’t tell him is that she only showed them the good things about the city and the bad things about the bunker. But for Hope, knowing there would be no other chances for a long and happy life, getting her dad’s friends back together with her dad meant everything to her.

They loaded two of the Adams in the back of the Yukon and took both vehicles to go pick them up. All the way there, Jack couldn’t help but to feel nervous. He hadn’t seen them in so long that he was afraid he might not recognize them. They arrive just as the outer doors began to open. Phil, Jennie, and Faith were all that emerged. As it turned out, there was one left in the bunker with a desire to leave the protection of the program. Phil recognized his Yukon immediately upon exiting and laughed when he saw Jack sporting a salt and pepper beard. Faith was Hope’s age and missed her teen years locked away from anyone her age. When she entered the shelter there were

young children, young adults, and older people but teenagers seemed hard to come by. She couldn't have felt happier to see Hope and began to cry when they got close enough to hug. Jennie walked behind Phil, smiling at Jack all the while thinking that they should have stayed with Jack from the beginning. Lisa wouldn't have left Jack, and in hindsight Jennie wished she hadn't either.

"We are so happy to see you," Jennie said as she gave Jack a big hug, and then Hope. "We missed you so much."

Jack said, "We missed you too. We've got rooms for you in the city and a lot of catching up to do. We are actually doing much better than expected."

"I can't wait for a home cooked meal," Phil said, "It's been like a school cafeteria in there."

"I'm sorry buddy, you're just going to have to stay unsatisfied, we had to execute the cook." Jack said, as he tried to entice Phil for a rebuttal in character. Phil was off his game and missed the cue for the game they used to play. Jennie didn't miss it though.

"You've been waiting six years to play with Phil, haven't you?" She asked.

He replied, "Yeah, I guess I wasted it, he's not the same Phil."

"Come on grandpa, we have some vitamin biscuits and healthy loaf for you," he told Phil.

"What?" Phil asked, with a confused look on his face.

"You'll see when we get there."

The ride back to the city was hot and dusty. The sun was brighter than any of them remembered. They've been living with artificial light for six years and between the three of them neither had a pair of sunglasses. All their belongings fit in the back of the Escalade with the Adams riding in the back of the

Yukon. Phil and Jennie rode with Jack in the Yukon. Jack was glad to give Phil his Yukon back, but after not driving for so long, Phil asked Jack to be the driver one last time. Hope and Faith rode back together in Frank's Escalade, and now that Frank had decided to stay in the bunker, Hope could now officially claim it.

"I am so glad to get out of there," Jennie said. "Do you know that if you run out of clothes the only choice you have is coveralls or military utility uniforms. Is there anywhere to shop for clothes left?" She asked. "The best thing about being down there is we didn't spend any money."

"We have shops inside the city that have clothes," Jack said, "but it's not Macy's. Most of the stores closed years ago and we bartered with gold, services, serum for the virus and anything that became of value to stockpile various supplies, clothes being one of them. Don't be shocked though, we really don't buy and sell things anymore. Food, clothes, medicine, anything that is a need, we do a rather good job providing. Luxury items on the other hand, like watches, sunglasses, alcohol and tobacco, or anything hard to come by, will take some negotiation and trade."

Hope and Faith had over five years to catch up on. When they separated, they were just sixteen and responsibility resembled routine tasks like doing the dishes or homework. With humanity on the block, responsibility took on a completely different meaning. Hope was a mother now. Not only to Angel, but to nearly two thousand others. Hope talked about Angel and how smart and mature she was. Faith was unable to understand and grasp the concept of a five-year-old having maturity or being intelligent for that matter, but she would see for herself soon enough. She did have a question of importance for Hope.

“You say you used your eggs and Justice’s sperm and inseminated two thousand women to birth these children, right?”

“Yes,” Hope said.

“Then they will all have similar DNA?”

“Yes, again.”

“What’s going to happen when they are the only ones left on the planet that can have babies? Isn’t that going to be inbreeding and cause deformities and retardation or something?”

“For humans it would, but our DNA has properties that prevent chromosomal damage. Justice’s and my genome can repair itself and replicate without alteration. I thought about that very issue when we began repopulation and was assured by Gee that it was how it was supposed to be. I can say all the children and their children will have a similar look about them. Say goodbye to diversity, say goodbye to ethnicity.”

Faith said, “Seems kind of Orwellian to me. If everyone were a clone, there wouldn’t be individuals, and that’s more like a society of bees and ants, not people.”

“Technically, they’re not clones because the cells weren’t split. It’s more like a thousand pairs of fraternal twins. Each produced from separate eggs and sperm.”

“Still, it doesn’t seem like a future to look forward to,” Faith said.

“We still have to think about your personal and social life,” Hope said.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No.”

“The number of boys available in the city are pretty slim. There are a few but I’m a little concerned you may get lonely or depressed.”

“Hell, it can’t be worse than being in the bunker.”

“Jim and Gary are a few years older and if it doesn’t work out with Donna and Kayla, they may become available. If need be, I’ll share Justice.”

Faith laughed, “You probably would. Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine.”

By the time they reached the city it became clear to Faith that Hope continued to live and had stories to tell of her achievements while she wasted away underground in a bunker to hide from the world and its dangers. She felt she had wasted the best part of her life so far and desperately wanted to make up for it. And now, without her parents and the government dictating what she could and couldn’t do, she had only the voice of reason to deal with and in this new world the voice of reason could be even more demanding.

Chapter Ten

Donna had been working every day for the past couple years trying to perfect the synthetization of the orb's liquid. Early on, she was able to reproduce it to a 99.5 degree, enough to produce an adequate substitution for the antidote serum, but that last .5 percent was thought to bear the signature of the alien DNA, the missing ingredient to many of the applications the orb possessed. To achieve her goal, she would have to periodically get a blood sample from Hope for continued DNA sequencing, but Hope's DNA was foreign. Hope's hybrid DNA was something uncommon and misunderstood. Somehow, a tertiary segment entwined within her DNA helix and produced a protein not found on earth and thought to be the secret to the healing powers of her blood and the orb's gel. The harder Donna studied the more confused and frustrated she became.

She discussed her work with Hope, who in turn consulted Gee.

He told her, "We're not from your dimension, our DNA doesn't belong here, yet here we are. Physics in our dimension is different than in yours, at the subatomic level, not by much but enough to make a difference. She will never be able to exactly duplicate our DNA in your dimension. This is also why we can't stay in your dimension too long."

"And this is why she cannot recreate the protein?"

"Correct. The quarks that make up the atoms that make up the protein, have similar but different properties in your dimension, which is why it seems to have supernatural qualities."

"Donna, the reason you can't duplicate the orb's liquid to hundred percent is the protein found in the DNA is foreign to this world, and literally cannot be duplicated here without

changing the laws of physics. We need to focus on what we can do and abandon the dream of reengineering the alien aspect of the orb. I'm sorry Donna, if I'd had the foresight to ask Gee specifically, I could have saved you a lot of time."

"That's ok, we still managed to create an antidote for the virus, be it only temporary, it wasn't all for not. I was dreaming of answering the riddle though. So, what do we do about the virus and antidote now?"

"Same thing we've been doing, it's all we can."

"I still have research on treatments of known diseases going on so it's not a complete waste of time. Getting samples of those diseases will probably not happen unless we go to Atlanta and break into the CDC. A generic vaccine, with your synthesized plasma has worked on the flu, lupus, shingles, and a scorpion sting, which is very strange. It's not an antibiotic, but on some things, it works like one and other things it repairs damage. Unscientifically, I don't know why it wouldn't work on other things, but scientifically, I don't know why it works at all. It's a little backwards and makes me feel pretty dumb."

Hope said, "Don't be too hard on yourself, nobody on this planet other than Gee and Soo know more about it than you do."

A week prior to Jack's friends' arrival, Donna nicked herself shaving her legs, and showed signs of minor infection early on. She didn't think too much of it at the time, but since has noticed the infection spreading. She recalled missing her monthly antiradiation treatment and wondered if that may have accelerated the infection.

"Now that I can take a break from the microscope, I need to go see Dr. Havard."

"What's the matter?"

“I cut myself shaving and it looks infected. Do you think radiation might make it worse? I forgot to ask for an antiradiation treatment last month.”

“In this environment, it probably would make it worse. Give me your hand,” Hope said, then absorbed the radiation that she had accumulated.”

“The good news is there is less and less residual radiation here. The bad news is I can tell your infection is more severe than you think.”

“How can you tell?” Donna asked.

“Not sure, I just can. When I took what little radiation you had I sensed the infection, but it wasn’t localized. You better get over to Doc’s right away.”

The doctor examined her and took a sample at the scratch and a blood sample, gave her a generic antibiotic, and told her he’d call her when he was through reviewing the test results.

It took him a little while cause he needed to be certain. “Donna, I need you to come back to the hospital right away, it’s a staph infection and it looks like it may spread throughout your body. If we don’t get a handle on it now it could get critical.”

She returned to the hospital where Dr. Havard gave her a shot of penicillin and had her sit with a hot compress on her leg where the scratch was. “I’m considering admitting you, we have to keep close tabs of this. Within hours it could become life threatening.”

She was a professional, these things are not supposed to happen. “I’m only five minutes away, I’d rather rest up at home.”

“Ok, but if you get a fever, if your leg looks worse or develop any other pains or symptoms, I want you back here right away,” he said.

“Alright, if it gets worse, I’ll call you.”

The doctor called Hope as soon as Donna left. “Donna just left to go home and rest. She has a staph infection that may have started to spread, I gave her a shot of Penicillin but with everyone’s immune systems constantly being attacked by the virus there’s no telling if antibiotics will work. She should have someone around her in case things turn south quick.”

“Kayla,” this is Hope, “Donna was sent home by the doctor. She shouldn’t be left alone. Can you go stay with her until about five? I’ll come and relieve you then.”

“Sure.”

Hope went back to the Baker House to meet up with Faith. She told her she’d show her around the city and had been looking forward to spending a little time with her old friend. She arrived driving Justice’s prototype roller car. He called it roller car because instead of wheels the vehicle sat on large hollow rubber balls infused with a ferrous metal. Super conductive magnets propelled the vehicle with a 360 degree turn ratio. Super quiet, battery operated, and comfortable, the car could have made him rich if a viable economy existed, but for now it was Hope’s get around play toy. He was also working on a play toy of his own, an air car. To complete his design, he needed help from Gee for the propulsion system.

She picked Faith up and drove out to the main gate. It was fitting that their first stop was the entrance to the city, where the suburbs outside of the city greeted visitors driving in from the desert. Upon entering the huge main gate of the city seemed to take on a new life, a vibrant oasis where people might travel from all over to partake in the trade and commerce in a post-apocalyptic world. From there, they travelled west to the southwest tower, then the northwest tower. Overlooking the walls of the city in the background to the north were the

mountains, majestic and calm, giving the city an ambiance worthy of a vacation resort. She showed Faith the orbs that protect the city and gave her a brief demonstration. After the outskirts of the city were visited, she showed her all the shops within the city where people gathered to trade goods. “If you need clothes, this shop here usually has the newest fashions. There is no cost, but the shop handler keeps track of all the transactions to ensure people don’t abuse the system and he gets credit for how many different transactions he does. Food dispensaries are on each of the main intersections around the plaza. No charge for the food either, same set up of credit. The shops closer to the outside perimeters are the ones that customarily do bartering to trade for luxury items. You’ll find your high-end clothes, jewelry, and such out there.”

“Where does it all come from?”

“Stores out in the world shut down long ago but before the doors were busted in, thieves managed to acquire most of the goods before vandals showed up to finish them off. Anyway, networks of stolen goods surfaced and before you knew it, all those goods have been bought, sold, and traded so often it became impossible to trace their history. Even since then it’s been a barter and trade commerce. Shop keepers would challenge the road and highways to other locations to buy, sell and trade in bulk.”

“If things are free or traded, what do you mean by ‘buy or sell’?”

“Gold made a comeback for people that didn’t need as much as others. For some people food and clothes are more precious, that’s why the shop keepers keep track.”

“Wow, it must have been hard to live out here during all this chaos?” Faith commented.

“Tell you the truth, we didn’t think about it too much. Things either were, or they weren’t. Acceptance of how things were, was easier than I would have thought it would be. It’s not to say that things were easy, but we didn’t dwell on things.”

“I’m going to go sit with Donna this evening, she is battling an infection and I’m afraid to leave her alone. Do you want to get a bottle of wine and sit with us?”

“Oh, yes. I haven’t had wine since we where sixteen and snuck into my mom’s stash.”

“Her room is on the first floor of our building with her name on the door. I’ll be there about five. I am so glad you’re here. It’s been all business since we parted, I’m looking forward to a little social time.”

“Me too. I think my life stopped the day I went into the bunker.”

Hope arrived at Donna’s at a quarter till five, Kayla decided she would hang around, as she put it, “I’ve got nothing else to do anyway.”

“Hey girl, how are you feeling?” Hope asked Donna.

“Not too good, I’m cold, really cold.”

She was wrapped in a blanket, but Hope asked if she wanted another.

“Yes please, I can’t get rid of these chills. Do I have a fever? I’m sweating my ass off.”

Hope put her hand on her forehead, her face was cold and clammy, “It doesn’t feel like you have a fever, but you look miserable.”

“I feel miserable. Do you think a little of that wine might help?” Donna asked.

“No, but if you want a little, I’ll pour you glass,” Hope said.

“Yeah, if I can’t keep it down it’s not going to matter anyway.”

Faith knocked on the door just in time for Hope to grab two glasses. Kayla answered the door and introduced herself, “Hi, you must be Faith, I’m Kayla, I live next door.”

“Nice to meet you. It’s nice to meet anyone, I’ve been incarcerated for the past five years.”

Kayla looked at Hope with a confused look on her face.

“She’s been in a government control shelter deep in the mountains.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I guess you need this more than I do,” and handed her the glass of wine she poured for herself. Kayla seemed interested in Faith’s stories of the underground and Faith was more than happy to talk about it. She hadn’t had a peer-to-peer conversation in a long time and felt free for the first time since the comet.

After thirty minutes, or so, Hope felt Donna’s forehead again but this time she felt like she was burning up. She ran the thermometer across her forehead, “A hundred four degrees, that’s too hot. Kayla, can you get me a dish towel with some ice in it?”

She asked Donna, “Do you feel worse?”

“I feel like I’m dying, and my back started hurting really bad.”

Hope took the towel with ice in it and banged it hard off the corner of the coffee table to bust up the ice and put it on Donna forehead then called Dr. Havard. “Doc, Donna’s fever’s up to a hundred four and she’s complaining of lower back pain.”

He said, “Sounds like the infection may have spread to her kidneys. We need to get her back in here right away. If this turns into sepsis it could kill her.”

With that ominous warning a thought clicked in Hope's head. Gee had told her years ago that she would know what the little jar of gel he gave to her was for when the time came and out of the blue, it came to her. She had put it in her purse years ago but couldn't remember the last time she saw it. Hope rarely if ever carried her purse around with her. Oddly enough, she subconsciously brought it with her this evening. She searched her purse and found the jar, pulled it out and opened the lid. She dipped a little out with her finger and put it in Donna's mouth.

"What is that?" Faith asked.

Hope replied, "This is a gel that Gee gave me years ago. It's part of Gee, where we have a layer of fat under our skin, he has a layer of this gel which is an organ under his. I didn't know why he gave it to me, but he said one day I would. I think this is the day. There's no doubt it has healing powers, it's the heart of the antivirus, but I never thought to use it this way. I guess we'll just have to wait and see. Meanwhile, we must get her to the hospital.

The hospital was at the end of the center square across from the plaza. It took five minutes to get her situated in the vehicle and another three minutes to get her to the hospital. By the time they got there Her fever had dropped to a hundred and her back quit hurting. She said she felt much better and insisted she didn't need a wheelchair. After fully examining Donna, he couldn't tell that she ever had the infection. No rash, no scar, no redness or fever, her lab results came back clean and healthy. He told Hope, "This is the strangest thing, there is no sign of infection, and certainly nothing that would support her symptoms."

"Doc, you haven't seen anything yet. There's a lot around here than defies normal."

"What do you mean?"

“Do you believe in aliens?”

“Not so much,” he said.

“You should.”

It was almost midnight by the time they got home. Faith asked Hope to remind her to talk to her in the morning about gainful employment. Having nothing to do would be as bad as being in the bunker.

The next morning, Donna started her day with the revelation that she didn't have a job assignment. Now Hope had two people looking for something to do.

Hope told Donna, “I have an idea. You and Faith are both at an impasse for an assignment worthy of your talents, I have no crusades to offer but maybe I could offer you an adventure.”

“What do you have in mind?” Donna asked.

“How about taking the hovercar around the city to evaluate the people. Take something to monitor for radiation. I have a feeling that the people are sicker than we thought. It could be that some diseases are more prevalent than others, and we can be proactive in the prevention of a breakout. The radiation factor is another issue. I'm still debating on what we can do about it.”

Driving around the city seemed interesting and exciting for Faith in the beginning, but the longer she was out meeting people in the city the more aware of the devastation caused by the comet to the people that had to live through it. The people she met looked much older than they were, there were very few smiles on their faces even when greeted pleasantly with a smile. She felt that the people, in general, were just tired of the struggle and resigned to a helpless existence.

Talking with Donna in between stops, Faith had many observations. Some of which could only be noticed by an outsider. “Everyone seems so sad,” she said.

“They’ve been through a lot. Every one of them came from somewhere that is no longer their home.”

“Even the children appear to be withdrawn, I’ve seen a handful but none of them playing.”

“I suppose when your needs are met, you can afford to put a little entertainment or selfish comfort on your priority list, but when you struggle daily, to meet your necessities, happiness has a different meaning,” Donna said.

“Has anyone thought to hold a public concert, party, or dance. Something, anything that people do in a group?”

“No, it never came up. That’s odd, we’ve been here for over five years, and no one ever thought of having a party. When we get back to the plaza you should bring that up to Hope. We should have a Founder’s Day party or something. Pipe in some music throughout the city offer snacks and food, singing, dancing or whatever.”

Donna checked area readings for radiation as well as reading directly from the people they stopped and talked with. After meeting with more than twenty random people in different areas of the city, every one of them had an estimated exposure level great enough to consider them highly susceptible to cancers. Donna told Faith, “The area exposures were not high enough to cause sickness, but not being able to get away from it, is what’s doing the damage. The long-term and total exposure will be what kills them.”

“Where’s the radiation coming from?”

“The comet emitted a lot of radiation in small doses all over the world. It never really goes away; it just weakens some over a long period of time. Right now, it has absorbed into the

ground, plants, buildings, and anything that's exposed to the atmosphere. I liken it to what earth might be like without a magnetosphere."

"There's nothing that can be done?"

"Hope and Justice have the ability to remove radiation exposure, but they say even they have limits and can only handle protecting the few of us they consider family."

Faith then asked, "If your research in the DNA stuff is stymied why don't you concentrate on the radiation issue?"

"Because I'm a microbiologist," she said. As soon as she said that she realized in simple terms, that Faith had a point. Though Faith didn't understand all the workings of microbiology, she looked at Donna as an educated problem solver and didn't see why she couldn't apply her knowledge to find an answer. "I don't know, maybe there's something that can be done. We know the people of the city are suffering and will not come out of life alive, but maybe we could make it better."

Faith's next question struck a more personal cord. "I haven't seen any babies. The youngest I think was about ten."

Donna's mind wandered away from the conversation as she thought about the fact that Kayla recently learned of her maternity woes. Even though Donna wasn't in a hurry for a family, it had crossed her mind, and her DNA research could have solved that issue as well.

"One of the most depressing effects of the virus is its proclivity to cause sterilization. Do you mind if we change the subject? Maybe you can talk with Hope about that, the thought is too disturbing for me, and whatever you do, don't talk to Kayla about it."

When they returned to the plaza Donna gave Hope a report of her findings and confirmed that the health of the

citizens was in decline. “While we were out, I had some interesting conversations with Faith. It seems that we may have been looking at things through a microscope and failed to look at the big picture, or a different big picture.”

“Ok, what big picture are we missing?” Hope asked.

Donnas said, “Let Faith explain, she has given my fair observations from a perspective we’ve overlooked.”

“Well, we’ve been looking at so many things separately,” Faith began with excitement in her voice, “that we’ve failed to notice one thing they all had in common, they sucked. All we have to do is make them not suck.”

Hope thought for just a moment, and in her inside ghostly whisper voice she uses to talk to herself, too quiet for a mouse to hear, she said, “I’m officially dumber now for having heard that, Wow,” Then, the genius of her statement began to formulate a plan. Faith wanted to be a part of something, she needed something to do. “Wait a minute, you couldn’t be more right, are you up for a challenge?” Hope asked Faith.

“You bet ya,” What’s up.

Hope asked, “Would you accept being appointed City Commissioner of Welfare, in charge of projects throughout the city that will help the citizens feel happier.”

“It would be my honor.” Faith left the room with a new lease on life. For the first time in six years, she had a purpose, until now, she had nothing in her life that resembled being a part of anything.

Donna continued the conversation about the radiation exposure. “Many are weak and show severe weight loss. Some had breathing issues, others with heart issues and have seen no one in a good mood. Emotionally draining, I don’t remember a time when I felt a fire in my soul like Faith has.”

“This has always been the saddest thing I must endure, being so close to saving someone but you just can’t reach them. Even Justice and I handle some, but we have our limits, those limits restricted us, and who gets to choose who lives and who does not. I have been advised by one far greater than myself to do my best to let it go, let them go. The mission is, and always was, to raise these children to be the next stewards of Earth. We’ve had our time in the sun and now we must move on.”

“So, you say we should do nothing?”

“No, I’m saying what I can do to help is limited, I’d like you to consider either helping Faith with projects around the city or overseeing the science department of this fine establishment. I must, without question, start spending more time with the children, all one-thousand-nine-hundred-seventy-eight of them if you count Justice.

“I couldn’t do what Faith is going to try, but I do appreciate the opportunity to work on the things of my choosing.”

“Talk with Jim and have him help you program an Adam for any and all of your science needs as well as an intelligent source of commination and humor. Yeah, Justice told me the guys made an algorithm for humor and installed the program into one of the Adams in his shop, and now they have a two hundred IQ, smart aleck robot joking about building his own peg legged, blind robot slave.”

“What? That sounds weird.” Donna said.

“It’s the guys we’re talking about, of course it’s weird.”

“I want to get advice from Gee with your support.”

“Advice? How about a conference call? What are we looking for?” Hope asked.

“I don’t know why I can’t believe there’s nothing that could be done to eliminate the radioactive threat to the city.”

No sooner than she finished that statement Angel walked in from around the corner. “You don’t have to talk with Gee?”

“What, honey, what did you say?” Hope asked, wondering what this child could possibly have to say about such a topic.

“Correct me if I am wrong, but hasn’t Gee already told us we should communicate with the orb? Well, communicate with the orb. It’s not that difficult.”

“That’s a marvelous idea, next time, leave off the sarcasm, little smarty pants.” Hope said. She then turned to Donna and asked, “Do you want to take a mental journey?”

Donna said, “Sure, where are we going?”

“Take my hand, close your eyes, and listen to the darkness.” In the blink of an eye, Hope had an emotional hold on the orb, to the extent she could feel its presence within her soul. “Can radiation be removed from the city, and how?” Angel had eavesdropped on their session, Hope knew it but let it go anyway, and said, “I can see all four orbs going around in a circle very fast, and as they widened the circle, the space between them stretched, creating a magnetic vortex. It can suck up the radiation and discharge it outside our magnetosphere,” she said.

Donna’s mind was officially blown. She immersed herself in that exchange of communication and felt as if she were part of their conversation. “Is that it?” she thought, then came Hope’s response.”

“Rain, we need rain to assist with the radiation having a conduit to transfer to while its being collected and discharged.”

Donna thought to herself, but of course everyone’s reading each other’s minds, so private they were not. This is the

most awesome I've experienced in recent memory, if ever. Do you feel this stoked about it as I do?"

"I'm glad you enjoyed the journey," Hope said. "I want to recognize a new advisor to the counsel of all good things, Angel. Hope looked down at Angel, with Angel looking up, and gave her a wink, a simple gesture that spoke a thousand words of approval. It was an emotional treasure for Angel to see the pride and joy in her mother's eyes.

Hope broke off the call and declared, "We have a mission. Donna, please take charge of this adventure in discovery, and allow Angel to further communicate with the orb in your behalf."

"Angel, do you want to be Aunt Donna's helper?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

"Faith is working on a block party, Donna has a new mission, I think it's time for me to do my part," Hope said to herself.

Meanwhile, Jim and Gary have retrieved all the Adams that were negotiated plus a few dozen more advanced frame models created in Jim's shop. For education they had produced dozens of droids and dozens of drones. Each with an LCD display and mobility so they could follow the children around as they go through their day learning about everything. The security force was a construct of Jim's imagination. Gatling gun, check. Laser, check.

Gary, on the other hand, was feeling a little bit lost. Everyone else had a job, a mission, a part to play in the show, but him. He is always the helper but would like to be special at something. That's when it hit him, his strengths were in the diagrams. With his fascination with aviation and being a plans and blueprints maestro, he decided he wanted to engineer some aircraft for local shuttle and for massive transportation and

defense needs. All he felt he needed was approval, from Justice or Jim. He would get the assignment and Justice made comment, “All good things were once just an idea, make your idea reality.”

For the next five years Donna worked on radiation issues, Jim concentrated on defense, Gary concentrated on aviation, Kayla had a crew of eight Adams programed to help her with the hydroponics farm and nutrition center, Justice spent most of his time learning and applying crystals in conjunction with the transmission and reception of energy, Faith was our soul saver, Angel proved herself a star in every circumstance. It was Hope’s turn; her assignment was the children.

Chapter Eleven

It was just a few days before Angel's tenth birthday. Hope was conducting her daily lessons with the children for which she would spend an hour visiting with the children of each of the houses on alternating days. If she had no special topic, she would spend her time telling, and listening to, stories. Among the many impulses she received from the children, she felt one of them wondering why they had a name and where it came from. Hope approached the boy, "Do you not like your name?"

"No," he said without hesitation, "You would think a free society would be free for people to name themselves."

Hope had never looked at it so simply. It's always been the responsibility and privilege for parents to name their children. Was the inalienable right to oneself being taken away? This child made Hope think.

"You can look back at this day as the day you changed a tradition. I will declare that everyone has the right to name themselves. I shall ask that everyone use good judgement, pick a name that is respectfully worthy of their character. Bob, John, and Mary have no meaning unless they are specifically honoring another, therefore, honor that which you respect and admire."

Two days later, the word had spread that there would be a big ceremony of the children's right of passage, the opportunity to name themselves. Everyone in the city was invited and encouraged to attend. The children had a special bond, they communicated with themselves all the time, even from a distance. It took no time at all for the word to spread and offer the children the opportunity to become the person they wanted to be. Hope stepped up to the top step of Plaza Square

One, the building directly across from the Baker house, “Today marks ten years on earth for you, and you are no longer the dependents you once were. Today, you have completed your assignment and are now honored as citizens. With this honor, you may now choose a name for yourself that describes or honors your commitment to a prosperous future.

“Angel,” Hope beckoned, “You were first born, would you begin the ceremony?”

“Start it how?”

“Step up and tell everyone what you want your name to be.”

She took a closer step toward Hope and said, out to the crowd, “Henceforth, I shall be named Angel.”

“Honey, you were supposed to give yourself a name.”

“I did. I like that name and it fits me; don’t you think?”

Hope felt blessed, a proud mother, her little girl never ceased to amaze her. The others caught on and, one by one they climbed the steps and announced their new name, one boy proclaimed, “My name is “John Wayne,” another said, “I am Thor,” and another said “Freedom.” The house mothers of each of these children were leaning a little bit more about their wards as the names kept coming.

Faith thought to herself that her parents and Hope’s parents had already this figured out. “Faith and Hope, I can’t think of two better names for us.”

“By all accounts this was a fine day,” Hope thought.

It’s been close to eleven years since Providence changed the earth. Ninety eight percent of the world’s population is gone. There are not enough people, in any one area, large enough to form any type of militia but like all predators, there will be times when occasional problems arise.

Between the rain and the orbs doing their thing, the radiation levels have dropped. Hope had all but given up on it, but Donna's dream kept it together. Now the city has green parks and a water fountain in the middle of the Plaza Square.

Hope invited Gee and Soo to come converse with the children many times. As much time as they could abide. In one of their gatherings, a child asked Gee, "What do you dream of?"

All Gee could perceive a dream to be, was an analysis of perception, "What do you refer?" Gee said.

"I've seen historical documents depicting images of people performing physical activities. I dream of doing great physical things. What do you dream of?"

"I do not dream," he had to admit. "What do you choose to be called?" Gee asked.

Without words the child told him, "Credence," she said, "Haste not and follow us," and brought Gee into a sync with the rest of the children. The kids joined into a group dream where they each shared a little information and imagination back and forth. Before Gee knew it, he was feeling like he was acting in an old movie, he was suddenly portrayed to be a human. His position has been altered and not by his own accord. Gee was in a dream and for the first time in existence, of over four hundred years, he experienced a self-made dimension that had a life of its own.

"There's more," Credence said as all the children at once share a single pure thought of love, love that they had for each other and that of the people around them. Gee and Soo traditionally felt they had no mechanism for emotion, and it shocked him to suddenly have a thought that made his heart beat a little faster, his mind deaden to where concentration became difficult, and a confusing sense of pleasure weakened his legs.

Gee backed out of the sync and realized that he'd been playing without a full deck. "How could this have been possible without my knowledge. Gee suddenly had doubts about the universe's claim to destiny. He asked the children, "You have a lot of power together, can you concentrate like that and focus on a task?"

Credence said, "Of course, but before we go any further, it's math," answering a question Gee was thinking, "You had the ability all alone. Love is nothing more than a frequency, as is hate. A pulse of energy traveling from point A to point B, not too different than a thought. It may take some practice, but emotion can be tangibly measured. Be mindful of the two, the balance between the two is powerful, but finding the right frequency is worth it."

Gee has never been stumped, but here he was, stumped. His position on the population of the planet had always been a cold and calculated the certainty that the population would become extinct, so a personal attachment was not conceivable and certainly not convenient. But now, there was an urgency to do what could be done to preserve all they could. "I believe we can save what's left of the world's population from continued radioactive poisoning. It won't solve all their problems, but at least you can say, you were on the right side of history and fought the good fight."

"That's a very human thing to say," Credence said.

Then Hope asked, "How are we going to do it? Wait a minute," she interrupted herself, "I put Donna in charge of the radiation, she should be here."

So, Gee linked with Donna and Hope to explain the nature of the orbs. "Under your skin, you have a layer of fat, under ours, we have a layer of Prolificence, an organ that transfers energy within us. As you may have noticed, it has

many uses. The orbs are essentially made of the Prolicience from those of us who have expired. Though we cannot live without the organ, for as long as the Prolicience has energy to process, it has a purpose, and will continue to serve its purpose. We extract it from the body after dead otherwise it would eventually consume our remains until there were nothing left, and eventually dissipate. We understand humans have an emotional attachment to their dead, but you need not be concerned, the Prolicience may share the DNA of its previous host but does not share our consciousness. Once we have expired, the Prolicience becomes a donor organ. Just as we used four orbs to encircle an area and create a vortex, we'll use a hundred in a bigger circle, and in time, most of the radiation will be dispatched off the planet."

It seemed like a huge problem was about to be solved with little to no effort from the team. Gee was to coordinate the orb's maneuvers and assignments, while Donna could only sit back and watch. Now Donna was right back to not having an assignment and asked Hope if she could continue her research for cloning animals.

"List all the animals you currently have samples from," Hope told Donna. "When the world is ready, we may reintroduce some species, but we'll have to evaluate their ecological value as well as the balance of nature before we proceed. It's basically on the shelf for now, but you can still prepare. It's not a popular decision, but some of these species should remain extinct."

"How will we decide what species to keep?" Donna asked.

"It's hard to say right now, we have a lot to think about before making those decisions. There are consequences to altering a grand design as Gee and Soo have warned us many

times, and we cannot afford to add to the battles we are currently fighting. I wish I had a better answer for you, but we'll just have to wait on it for now."

"I just don't have an assignment right now and feel a little less than helpful if you know what I mean."

"You can help me."

"With the children?"

"Yes."

"What can I do? They're smarter than I am, so I don't think there's much I could teach them."

"They're academically smart for sure, but they lack a mother's love. Even though they are technically more advanced, they still have emotional needs that must be met."

"What kind of emotional needs?"

"All you would have to do is spend a little time with them, talk to them, encourage them to recognize and identify with their feelings. With their intellect, it would be easy for them to become apathetic, but the only redeemable quality humans are able to contribute is emotion. It would serve us and them well if we were able to guide them through the ups and downs."

"Sure, I'll give it a try. Where do you want me to start?"

"Can you start at the Lincoln House," named after Hope's grandfather.

"Any ideas on how to start?"

"Teach them a song. That was the first thing I did, they seemed to like it." Hope said.

"Thanks, I'll give it a shot."

Donna was a little out of her element. She really wanted something important to do, something more related to her academic background, but everything she could have contributed to has either already been completed or cannot be

done. She could help Kayla, but plants were not her interest, animals were. While Donna struggled to find something viable to work on, the guys were busting knuckles left and right on projects. Jim's robot security and Gary's air taxis didn't leave them with a lot of time to lounge around, and even Faith had something to keep her busy.

Suddenly, Hope got a call from Justice. He sounded excited and nervous. "We have visitors."

"What visitors," she asked.

"I'm sure they're the kind we don't want. An alien aircraft breached the city, we know it's alien because it was totally silent and evaded the orbs."

"Where is it now?"

"It was headed straight to the Plaza," he said.

Hope stepped outside and saw the craft sitting in the middle of the street, all four orbs were hovering near it in a defensive stance. Donna and Angel followed Hope outside but cautiously stayed behind her. Hope could see Justice behind the craft racing toward them in his hovercar as the front of the craft dropped and an alien emerged. The first thing she noticed, other than the fact that it was alien, was it was taller and lankier than Gee and Soo. As soon as he appeared, he attempted to subjugate control of the bystander's minds. Donna, being human, was easily subdued and stood in a trance with blood dripping from her nose. Hope felt a sharp pain in her temples, still able to think but unable to release the grasp the alien had on her. Justice arrived in time to be included in the exchange. Oddly though, Angel remained unaffected. It was unclear if she was immune to the attack or if the alien didn't consider her a threat and did not target her. Without hesitation, Angel recognized the threat and stepped forward, looking up at the intruder and let out a blood curling scream. An extremely loud, high pitch scream

that stopped the alien in his tracks, breaking his concentration and releasing everyone from their mental chains. No sooner than Angel screamed, Gee and Soo both appeared from thin air, Soo had an orb in her hand and slammed it into the face of the invader. The orb's shell opened to the side that struck the alien's face then closed sealing his head inside the orb. As soon as the orb was in place over the alien's head Gee put his hand out beckoning another orb.

Gee said, "He's not alone, they're never alone."

Suddenly the door to the craft closed.

Hope said, "Where did you come from? I've never seen you move so fast."

"We observed this craft breach the dimensional barrier after being chased by their own security forces. They are called Velkees, this one is called Qwi, a well-known anarchist among them and is very dangerous."

Justice asked, "How do you know of them?"

"We were once at war with them over the same issue. We wanted to settle a colony on a satellite planet in our world, they wanted to annihilate the existing inhabitants and take over. We fought for years and ultimately prevailed. We've lived in peace since, but as you can tell, not all of them believe in peace."

Justice asked, "What does the orb do to him?"

"Right now, Qwi's central nervous system is being bombarded with static, rendering him completely incapacitated. We can only leave it in place for about an hour before it starts to damage his central nervous system."

"What are you going to do with him?" Hope asked.

"When we take the orb off, there will be time as he recuperates to interrogate him and find out what his plans are. First, I must extract his partner from the craft."

Hope noticed Donna was still bent over holding her nose and put her hand on her shoulder. When she did, she could tell that she was subject to damaging pressure within her head, she had an embolism that needed immediate attention. Hope thought how strange it was that the only time she needed to use Gee's gel was on Donna and now it would be for the second time. She started to make a move to retrieve her purse, but Gee was ahead of her, knowing what Hope was experiencing, opened his forearm and dipped out a little Prolicience and put it in Donna's mouth. Seeing this Hope said, "Thank you Gee."

"I believe, you're welcome is the correct response," he said. "Now let's retrieve the other one." Soo held the orb in attack position while Gee put his hands on the craft and gave the other an ultimatum, surrender or die by fire, the one thing all aliens fear. Gee could feel the craft power back up, so he instructed the orb to disable it with an EMP, then proceeded to cut into the craft with a laser. It wasn't long after that the door opened, and the intruder surfaced.

Gee had Justice provide four Adams for security and took the intruders into the lobby of the Baker house where they intended to interrogate them. "Keep everyone out and evacuate the building."

With Qwi and his sidekick in the middle of the room, surrounded by the Adams, locked, and loaded, Gee and Soo began their interrogation. Thirty minutes later Gee summoned one of the leaders of Qwi's species to retrieve the two rebels and return them to their own dimension. Once gone, Gee and Soo emerged from the house,

"Where are they now?" Justice asked.

"They have been returned, in custody, to their people."

Jack, Jim, and Gary had arrived by then. Everyone was deeply concerned about the events. It was accepted that Gee and

Soo were aliens, and they were friendly, but to find out a nonfriendly species exists was of concern to all.

“What did they say?” Jack asked.

“These are the things we’ve learned,” Gee started, “It was they who managed to direct the comet into earth’s path to wipe out the existing life. Once you have been killed off, they would settle the planet as an outpost for mining. They did not anticipate that we would reseed the planet with a hybrid species and assumed humans have been eliminated.”

“If they’re guilty of Omnicide, why did you let them go?” Jack asked.

Gee said, “They may be guilty, but their leaders were not. They have a rogue faction in their presence attempting a coup, their supreme guard has been catching and executing them. These two will face their fate without mercy. There are a couple factors we must now account for, starting with the dimensional integrity being breached. Alteration in the balance will have consequences, secondly, the rogue faction still exists, and we must prepare ourselves for further contact. We have been absolved from any future action against their militants and encouraged to dispatch any such intruders with extreme prejudice.”

Is that all they said?” Justice asked. Thinking, for amount of time he interrogated them, there should be more information.

“They were taken off guard, unaware of our involvement, they assumed there were just humans here. These two were just scouts, their plan was to fly in, assess the cities defenses and get an estimate of the population. They were not prepared for our intervention, but rest assured, they have made their report and future scouts will be prepared.”

“Did you find out how many of them there are?”

“They have a secret network, only their leaders know, these scouts didn’t even know who their leaders are.” Gee replied.

“How do they know for who or what they fight?”

“They don’t, but for them it doesn’t matter. The nature of the command dictates its authentication, meaning that, if the command seems reasonable to the overall concept, the command is genuine, if the command is against their mandate, they ignore it.”

Justice said, “Pardon me, but that seems undisciplined and chaotic.”

“It makes sense to them because there are two beliefs in play. One is a passive society of education and exploration, the other is an aggressive approach to overpower other societies, if one is inclined to believe one way or the other, who’s in charge doesn’t matter.”

Gary asked, “They took them back to their dimension and left their craft here?”

“It appears so,” Justice said.

“Can I, have it?”

“I guess, are you going to try and reverse engineer it?”

“That and learn to operate it. Maybe you could help me link their onboard operating system to one of the Adams so we can understand it better and possibly duplicate parts of it?”

“Sure,” Justice said, “That’s sounds like a good idea.”

Angel said to Hope, “We didn’t notice them coming, they appeared before the orbs were alerted, how are we going to prepare for their return if we can’t tell when they are coming?”

“We’ll just have to stay vigilant and come up with a better first response system.” Hope said. “Maybe we can all think about it and discuss options this evening.”

“We should have kept one of them so we could think like they do. I don’t trust them, nor do I trust their leaders.”

“Sweetheart, why would you doubt their leaders? Gee said their leaders didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Gee and Soo are good beings; they don’t think like bad beings. Just because someone professes honor doesn’t make them honorable, the old saying about actions speaking louder than words comes to mind. The invaders have chosen a different path, how are we to know the true path of their leaders? If they can deceive themselves, they can clearly try to deceive us.”

Hope talked to Justice about Angel’s comments. “You have to hand it to her, there’s wisdom in that young mind. For now, at a minimum, we should deploy some orbs to roam the outskirts of the city and maybe find out more from Gee about how they open a dimensional portal. Gee just showed up, Johnny on the spot, something had to allow him to pinpoint his entry.”

“Where did the craft come from when it first appeared?” Hope asked.

“The southwest and southeast orbs deployed simultaneously when the craft arrived, but the craft arrived first. It seemed like out of thin air, as Gee and Soo’s arrival, one second its nothing the next second, it’s there.”

“It seems to me that if space and time were being affected there had to be some form of precursor. I’d like to get Gee’s opinion on Angel’s perspective and space, time distortion issues when they pass through dimensions. Surely Gee would have considered the possibility of the alien’s possible deceit, but he seemed so confident. He knew who the invader was, he probably knows the leader as well, maybe there’s some history.”

Justice suggested, “I think we prepare for the worst-case scenario and hope for the best. If they do come back, we must be ready. I cannot imagine Gee or Soo being so easily deceived. I’m inclined to believe them but airing on the side of caution doesn’t mean I don’t.”

The next morning Donna went to the Lincoln House and met with the children. The Lincoln House was another smaller house but had more children than the Baker House. 16 Boys and 16 Girls. The first thing Donna noticed was a uniform appearance. She had never noticed the differences between the children before, probably because she’d never had a direct association with them in a group. They all had the same similar skin color and hair. Variations were identifiable but very subtle. Their skin was a clear pale white to beige in color, clear with no blemishes and had the appearance of a strong and durable texture. All the children’s hair was in between light brown and blonde and they all had brownish amber eyes. Not one pair of blue eyes in the bunch.

“My name is Donna, Hope asked me to come by and spend a little time with you.”

In unison, the children welcomed her, “Good morning, Donna.”

One stepped forward, “We’ve seen you many times, we’re delighted to finally meet you. You appear to be more aged than Hope, are you related?”

“No, we are friends, and yes I am a little older.”

“There is another older female in the city, is she related?”

“No, her name is Kayla, and she is another friend.”

“Why does she stay away?”

Donna realized the children were extremely interested in the people surrounding the group and felt guilty of keeping

her distance. “I apologize for not being more accessible, I suppose I dedicated too much time to my duties. I am sure Kayla feels the same.”

“That’s understandable and we appreciate all you do.”

“Thank you. What is your name?” Donna asked the in quizzical one.

“I am, Felicity.”

“I’d like to start by going around the room and everyone introduce yourselves,” Donna said, “But, forgive me if I forget anyone’s name, I am not as gifted as you.” They went around the room and each child said their name. Donna was surprised that all the names referred to positive things or people of notable respect. “So,” Donna asked, “What would you all like to do today?”

From middle of the pack a boy said, “Watch a movie.” Another said, “Build something.” A girl called out, “Travel outside the city.”

“Well, we have many choices, don’t we? Let’s start small and go from there. How about we just talk about what you want to do with your lives when you become independent? We can do the other things another time.”

Donna learned a lot about the children which helped her considerably regarding her new adopted family. Her mother and father didn’t last out the virus, she had no brothers or sisters, and accepted being alone a long time ago. She didn’t have a close relationship with her parents. She loved them but it was more of a cordial love than a deeply personal love. Being able to distance herself from the children came easier than acquiring a personal connection. Her interactions with the children were proving to help her with her emotional growth as much as she was helping the children with theirs.

Hope could see a change in Donna, even after only a couple visits. She thought that if she could just get Kayla involved, she may grow to love them as well.

Hope and Angel were usually linked while Hope was around the house. Angel had many questions and was growing faster than any of the children. Hope believed it to be because of the constant contact she had and assumed that similar contact with the other children would have the same results. In a vague comparison, it did help, but Hope's contribution to Angel was far greater than that of Donna to the other children. Hope wanted to spend more time with them on one hand and on the other she was happy and satisfied to have someone else take on that task. She wondered what her life might be like if the comet hadn't come.

She occasionally became overwhelmed with sadness for the loss of life throughout the city. Though they were not family or friends, they were no less citizens within her charge. By virtue of her leadership status, she took on the responsibility of caring for nearly a thousand people. Many of whom by now have either moved on or passed on. Less than two hundred remain in the city and rumors of the alien invaders have sent shock waves throughout the city. Living in fear of sickness is one thing, but fear of an alien invasion is something that has a mystical way of sinking into the human psyche.

Every now and then, Hope would take a break from her situation by meditating. She would lock herself in her room, turn down the lights and light three candles. She would drift off while imagining herself ascending through a colorful cluster of stars. Upon reaching the heart of the cluster, she found peace and comfort. The presence of the universe quelled her curiosity, and the anguish of her worries waned. Suddenly, her troubles became insignificant as she could see that the world would still

turn without her, and the universe would right itself regardless of the situation. She never talked to anyone about her need to get away, thinking that it was a character flaw, but her occasional insecurity would show up as frustration when circumstances beyond her control surfaced.

Chapter Twelve

Twelve years after the city opened, it became one hundred percent self-sufficient. For all practical purposes, the outside world no longer existed. No one in the group had relatives left, the government had no representatives to communicate or coordinate with, suppliers and contractors were shut down and out of business. The world was a virtual wasteland. Small groups of scavenging bandits were all that was left of a once beautiful and thriving planet.

When the nuclear power plants started to shut down, the power to the nation's western grid dropped to essential services provided from steam and gas turbine back up systems. Very shortly thereafter, the lack of fuel and personnel to operate and maintain the equipment caused them to close as well, and everything west of the Mississippi was without power. No more refrigeration, electronics, lighting, or anything requiring electricity was functioning. Slowly, one service shut down after another, and in each case, the public was reminded of all the things in their lives they've taken for granted. They cursed themselves for their complacency as they struggled to understand the principles of survival.

The Harrington Suburban Project was among the last recipients of a limited electrical supply until all production ceased, then they converted to their backup generators for the remaining two months of operation. Food supplies were nearly exhausted by the time they went dark and strict rationing was barely enough to keep the people alive. When their fuel supply for the backup generators dropped to emergency reserve the main doors to the bunker were opened for good. The designers of the program estimated ten years' worth of supplies would be enough to sustain a cadre to reorganize and build a civilization.

Having lasted two years longer didn't give anyone solace, they were not ready for life outside the bunker. With all the preparations they made while in the bunker, nearly none of it would prove to be useful without electricity.

Neither scholars, novelists, nor Hollywood could have imagined the true desolate nature of what the world has become. The stench of rotting animal and human carcasses that filled the air for years has subsided, but their skeletal remains lay in place as the very few left alive roamed from house to house, city to city, scavenging what they could use. Without a civilization to grow and harvest crops, or livestock to raise, food was by far the most precious commodity, canned food to be specific and it didn't take a scholar to realize that resources would soon become too scarce for survival.

People slowly abandoned their cities and towns in search of communities with resources. Hamm radio was the only form of communication and transmission had its limits depending on battery power. Outposts, where fresh water was available, were the last sanctuaries. Solar power sustained the communities with the ingenuity to apply it, but fuel sources were too rare to make transportation convenient. For the people in these makeshift communities, they understood each day was a blessing and the end days were near. Bandits were often dealt with by deadly force and strangers were required to work in the fields as payment for their acceptance into the community.

Providence, being in the middle of a hot desert, reduced the number of visitors, and being able to incapacitate vehicles from miles away would further protect the city from intruders, that is, until their visit from the aliens made it clear they needed a new strategy.

Justice, Jim, and Gary worked endlessly trying to figure out the craft confiscated from their visitor. When they

exhausted their knowledge and understanding of aviation and physics, Justice conceded to involve Gee with the engineering complexities they were unable to comprehend. All their confusion involved the accessibility of controls. Gee explained the hand cradles for the commands had DNA signature sensors and without an authorized user's hand on the controls the aircraft would not operate. "Must first reengineer the control cradle and replace the old one, then populate a sequence authentication request and override the default algorithm and switch to manual synchronization. While the synchronization is in process remove your hand and replace it over and over and the system will reset itself to accept a new DNA signature. At that point, the first hand that enters the cradle becomes the default operator of the craft and you should be able to access all systems after that."

Justice asked, "How do you know this?"

Gee said, "This was an older design that we had given them during our armistice. My advice would be to destroy this craft. The orbs can stop them once they have appeared, but if the Velkees were able to recapture it, the self-destruction capabilities could destroy the city and everything in it."

"We were hoping to reengineer the technology for our own transportation and aviation needs."

"The power supply of this craft has stabilities issues. It was not designed for the heavy gravity of earth. We will help you develop your aviation needs but for now, take my advice and destroy this craft and rely on the orbs for protection. Learn what you can as you dismantle it, but do not open the power supply encasement, we will take it off the planet for disposal."

"Off the planet?" Justice asked.

"As I said, it's unstable."

“If you wanted us to destroy it, why did you tell us how to reprogram it?”

“You need to shut down all the systems and power before you can take it apart, and you can’t do that without control of the craft. I cannot stay physically in this dimension much longer, call me when you have the power supply out and I’ll come and retrieve it.”

Justice told Gary, “Well, it doesn’t look like your going to fly this thing, but I’m sure you’ll have fun learning from it.”

“I wanted to fly this thing badly. I guess its all for the best, I’d probably crash and hurt someone anyway.”

Justice suddenly felt and heard something deep inside himself, a song, ‘Somewhere over the rainbow.’ He linked to Hope, “I hear children singing.”

“I’m not surprised,” Hope said, “I’m with a dozen or so children watching a movie, they’re singing along in their mind.”

“I’d hate to sound like an old scrooge, but can you ask them not to sync their singing, it makes it hard to concentrate.”

“Sure, I’m sorry, I have instructed them about syncing but got caught up in the situation and didn’t think about it.”

“Ok, children,” she instructed, “use your voice to sing, syncing is for emergencies.”

Justice had a thought and linked with Hope again, “I was wondering, do you think the children can sync together and see things going on elsewhere?”

“I’ll find out. What’s on your mind?”

“If they can see things happening elsewhere, they can update us as to the status of the world, population and civilization.”

“Ok. By the way, the children apologized for disturbing you, they said they just wanted you to hear their beautiful voices.”

“Now I feel bad. Tell them I loved it.”

“You can tell them, give it a try.”

Hope gathered a few of the children, “We are going to practice concentrating as a group and attempt to visualize different places. Are you ready?”

As a group, they synced together, with Hope directing the group they were able to visualize their travel as if they were literally flying to their destination. After ten minutes she closed the session and reported her findings to Justice with excitement. “Your suspicions were right on. I synced with the children and together we flew around the world. The Midwest is a desolate wasteland, the eastern seaboard has scattered bands of nomads, Europe resembles Dante’s seventh level of Hell and southeast Asia is an infestation of insects and snakes. We didn’t see anything that resembled a civilization, except up around the western Pacific where some outposts along the rivers were attempting to grow crops. What made you think of remote viewing?”

“The children singing. If they can project information, why can’t they reach out to receive information? It just made me think they might.”

“There is one thing about it I noticed that is of importance. There has to be guidance, someone within the group has to be clearly in charge or it doesn’t work.”

“I wonder, who among the children would take charge?” Justice asked.

“I know Angel has often taken charge of other conversations with the rest of the children which now makes me wonder what would happen if another strong-willed child was inserted into a conversation. Would they argue, would one personality overtake the other or would they collaborate as equals?”

“That’s a good question, we should investigate.”

While Hope contemplated the children’s inner social network, she closed her eyes and practiced viewing things around the city herself. She witnessed citizens going about their business around the plaza, Kayla taking soil samples, Jim was working on some software for the Adams then she came across her dad. He was bent over a sink in his room coughing up what looked like blood. She felt ashamed, like she was spying on him at first, viewing him in a private moment, then became nervously concerned for his health. Jack was the oldest person of the group at 51, which was once considered middle aged, but since the comet, fifty-one was nearly unheard of. She needed to go to him and see for herself.

“Hi dad,” she began, “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. How are you?”

“I’m good. I was just wondering; you look a little pale.”

“Nope, I’m good.”

“If you were sick, would you tell me?”

Knowing Hope had the ability to tell if he was lying helped to keep Jack an honest man for years. He really didn’t want to talk to Hope about it and tried to get out of it. “I’d prefer not to talk about how I feel. Can you give me a little time to think about it?”

“I’m no longer a child, dad. I’ve seen a thousand people die. If you were sick, I can deal with it.”

“Ok, first I want you to know that I appreciate you giving me my privacy and not invading my head. I’m sure you wanted to. I don’t have the abilities you have, I’m just a man, a lonely man. When I lost your mother, I lost everything, except you. You are what kept me going all these years since. But you don’t need me anymore and I haven’t wanted to continue this way for an awfully long time.”

“What are you saying?”

“I think I’m sick and didn’t want to tell you because you’d just try and make me better.”

“Of course, because I love you and don’t want to lose you.”

“Yes, I know, you don’t want to lose me. What you want is why I’ve hung around for as long as I have. What I want is to go back about thirty years, back when I was happy and in love. Quite frankly sweetheart, I’m ready to go. If I get sick, would you please let me go?”

“Do you really want to go back thirty years?”

“I wish it was me that died and not your mother.”

“Take my hands,” Hope said.

Jack put his hands in hers,

“Close your eyes,” she said.

He did and within a moment he was transformed into a younger self standing in the clouds, staring out into the sky. Walking toward him was his beloved Lisa, smiling like it was his birthday, and she had the perfect gift for him. Her stride was long and sensual, carefully timed, and graceful. He couldn’t stop staring at her, she looked more beautiful than he imagined, which confused him, because he knew subconsciously, she wasn’t real. Still, he couldn’t help but to feel her presence, her touch, her smell. All the love he had for her returned as he watched her get closer and closer. Anticipation tortured him as she made her final approach. With her arms wide, she gave him a hug and his thoughts that she wasn’t real, vanished. His return embrace solidified his heart’s commitment as he prayed for the moment to never end.

“I’ve missed you terribly,” he said.

“I know. I felt every tear. I wish I could have helped you, but I don’t have powers here like I had there.”

“Where are we,” he asked.

“I am in your heart, and you are in your head. I have never left; you just couldn’t find me.”

“I don’t want you to go away again.”

“When you wake, I will still be here, in your heart. You have not forgotten me, you have never stopped loving me, and I will be here for you always.”

He pulled his head back just a little to better focus on her face. Putting his hand to her face a tear rolled down his cheek, I have been so alone, it has been hard.”

“When our worlds come together and you are welcomed here, I will be here waiting, but that journey is divine, a circumstance of destiny that you cannot force. Trust in Hope, her instincts are pure. It is time, wake; my love is with you as yours is safe in my heart.”

As she started floating backwards, getting smaller and smaller, he cried out, “Don’t leave me, don’t leave me here.” A moment later his eyes opened to see Hope with tears in hers. All he could do was hug Hope. The experience crippled him emotionally.

“Did you witness her?” He asked.

“Yes. She was beautiful. I wish I could have met her in life.”

“That’s what I’ve been haunted by for years. Losing her was the worst thing that ever happened to me, and I’ve been suffering since.”

“The love is still there; you did not lose it.”

“Yes, thank you for giving it back to me. I was lost.”

“While you were visiting mom, I reviewed your health. You have tuberculosis. I have something Gee gave me that can help you. Will you take it?”

“Your mom told me to trust you, so whatever you think is ok with me.”

“Good,” she took the jar from her purse and put a little of the gel on her finger, “open up.” She wiped it off her finger inside his cheek and told him, “Its ok, all we have is each other for a little while longer. Before we know it, these children will be all that’s left of this world, and we will all be in another. This gel will start working right away, you should feel better real soon.”

As much sadness and loneliness Jack had endured, he found solace in confiding with Hope about her mother. The pain of her loss was often more than he thought he could bear, and not talking about it didn’t help. Being able to finally talk with someone about it enabled him to revisit the memories of their love and the joy they shared together. Those memories made his heart feel heavy and reminded him of the days when life and living were precious. Though he knew it was only temporary, he was grateful for the feelings of happiness that once made his life worth living. Perhaps now, he could stop feeling sorry for a future without his love and appreciate the love in his past.

After that deeply emotional exchange, Hope realized that time had its own schedule and was coming fast. She knew she only had a few years left before her family and friends would be gone. She decided to call a meeting of the group and lay out the immediate and long-term plans to restart a civilization.

“It’s been over twelve years since the children were born and in just a little more than two years, the children will need to pair off and procreate, a civilization must have its population. By then, we will have to be prepared for these fifteen-year-olds to run a civilization. First, they must teach themselves to plan, build, engineer and operate projects. Four

basic tasks, builders, agriculture, technology, and services. Jim, can you help Donna with a group of kids to determine which of the four groups they best fit. The children should have a say as well. Gary and Kayla, can you take a group of kids as well?"

Hope realized that setting up these groups would give them a chance to feel like parents, their only opportunity for that chance, they would take the assignment without hesitation. Kayla could put her fears aside and without expectation she could see and feel the bond a parent has with their children. Hope knew this was a good thing.

Hope continued, "So, we have two years before our children will be having children. The physical building of a new city needs to start shortly after the new generation is born."

"Why would we move? Jim asked.

Justice was receiving the same image in his head, as Hope was, as she continued to explain, "the desert location was for security in rough times, its time for us to reclaim our lives. The desert's no place to raise a farm, we need to go to the best place for growing crops. Hope turned and looked at Jack, we're going home. One of the best places to grow is off the banks of the Mississippi Delta. What do you think?" she asked the group as they stood with chin in hand.

Kayla was first to respond, "Hope's right. I enjoy what I do, but I'm at my limit underground in the hydroponic farm, with two thousand more children we'd have to produce twice as much to be able to feed everyone. That's too much. We need to get back to the earth."

Donna asked, "How are we going to get there?"

"Gary, you're in charge of transportation, can you, do it?"

"Yes, I can," Gary said.

"Fine," Donna said, "But you haven't told me how."

Gary said, “You’ll be surprised in a couple months of the airbus I’m building.”

“I can vouch for that,” said Jim, “I can build better farm equipment too.”

It started to look like everyone was positive and looking to the future. Hope was pleased about that, but it didn’t help too much with everyone’s time coming closer to the end. There is so much to be done that Hope worried the few people left in the world may not complete their task before departing, and they would risk losing it all.

“Justice will command the technology and I will oversee services. We are all hands-on deck when it comes to security so let’s prepare to kick Velkees ass if need be. If everyone agrees, we should start identifying the children for study and work assignments tomorrow and begin training right away.”

From behind the group as they formed their little circle, Angel cleared her throat. “Ahem,” she uttered and cleared her throat again. “Ahem, are you forgetting something?”

“What is it sweetheart? Hope asked”

“You officially made me a member of the group? As member of the group, shouldn’t my inputs be of value?”

“Oh, I am so sorry sweetheart, of course your input matters, what are your thoughts?”

“You gave us talents and abilities that you yourselves were unaware of. You must use us as you would any other available tool. We can contribute to our overall safety. We’ve proven that we could work closely together as one, you should let us help.”

Jack, being the official ‘old school’ advisor, would refer to that as a ‘burn.’ He smiled and chuckled loud enough for Hope to hear and put two and two together. All she could do

was laugh and put her arms out to her. “Come here sweetheart.” Justice smiled too, because he realized his little girl thought differently than he did, and often managed to out trick or outthink him. For someone with a huge IQ, it amused him to be outplayed and it kept him modestly grounded.

“Lastly,” she said, “I want to share a conversation I had with Gee recently. He informed me that our two dimensions are temporarily linked, and the space time gateway would soon close for another three thousand years. When that time comes, whoever is on one side or the other will remain there. Gee and Soo have committed to staying with us in case there were Velkees left on this side of the gate when it closes.”

“I don’t see them giving up and if they know the gate will soon close, I have to believe they have already found a place to hide out,” Jack said.

“Then I suppose we should plan for that,” Hope said.

“We need eyes everywhere, it’s a shame we don’t have any satellites left.”

“Maybe Angel has already given us the answer, we effectively viewed distant areas, I believe if there are any Velkees left behind, we’d be able to locate them remotely,” Hope said.

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” Justice said as he looked at the stairway leading to the Angels room upstairs.

“Ok everyone, we have some planning to do. Let’s meet here tomorrow evening, bring your list of the children’s assignment requests, and set up some teams.”

Throughout the following day, teams were assembled, and professions chosen. Society officially began for the children that day. They allowed the children to choose their field and the ones that weren’t decisive, one was offered. The biggest issue of the day was their security.

“It’s an immediate threat and must be dealt with immediately,” Jack said.

“Jack’s right,” Justice repeated, “We have two children unaccounted for,” I don’t have a good feeling going on. We need to get a handful of kids together and find them remotely.”

Hope linked to all the children in the house at the time and directed them to assemble in the lobby. “Ok, guys, we have our group, let’s find these kids.”

As the children closed in their circle the other members joined the circle.

“I’m so jealous,” Donna said, “You all have something that allows you to do this, I will never be able to experience this again, this is my one chance.”

In just a few moments, visions began to form within the group, soon more visions joined, then they all began to migrate to the same vision. That’s when they knew they were in the right place. They saw the children sitting on a sofa surrounded by a dozen Velkees. The room was dark, and the children were afraid. Hope whispered into vision, “We’re coming to get you.”

“Gee, we need you,” Hope said aloud, “We need you to pass the gateways and rescue the kids. If we distract them, can you, do it?”

“Yes, but before we proceed, I will coordinate with Bahra, the Velkees Head Counsel to apprehend their traitors at the same time so we don’t have to do this again. Besides, when the gate closes for good, we don’t want them here.”

Gee vanished for a moment and returned hardly without notice, “the Velkees are ready,” Gee said.

Hope said, “On the count of three, everyone think of a loud and annoying sound, and project that sound to them in three, two, one, go.”

An incredibly loud screech blared in the Velkees heads, Gee and Soo stepped into their space, took the children one each in hand and walked right back out of the space. The kidnappers didn't see a thing, then immediately thereafter, the Velkees army nabbed the rebels and put binding halo on the criminal's heads, designed to incapacitate the wearer if need be.

"Holy cow," Jim shouted out, "that was the most awesome thing I have ever seen. This is a dream; I'm living in a dream."

"Calm down," Justice said.

"We traveled through space and time or invented our own dimension and went into an alien's mind, slapped him around a bit, and came out a winner. Damn it, it makes me feel good, I'm a little excited, please forgive me." As much as Justice tried not to get as excited, it was safe to say that everyone was that excited but showed it a little differently.

"I think we should stay vigilant. Let's not assume there is no more threat. We cannot afford to get complacent now," Justice said, and Jack agreed.

A few hours later, Jim and Gary delivered some Adams to each of the houses, school was back in session and the children had about two years to learn everything they needed to run a civilization. The Adams held more information than could be read in a thousand lifetimes.

When things got quieter later in the day, Hope took the opportunity to talk with Gee. "Will the gates close before the children are born?"

"The events are simultaneous, the birth of the children will mark the gates closing for three thousand more years," Gee said.

“So, you’ve spent most of your life working for this event and now it’s coming to a close, what will you do?” Hope asked.

“We shall stay right here. Even though we’ve spent most of our time in our own dimension, earth is still our home. We will stay here, with you, until it is our time to go.”

“Soo, Gee, I would like to offer you something,” Hope said softly, as she asked three of the children nearby to come together. “There’s really not much a primitive society like ours can offer you, but if we could give you a true heartfelt emotion to remember us by, I’d like it to be one of my mom and dad. She took the children’s hands, formed a circle, and began to daydream of a moment she shared with Jack when she was five.

Hope walked into the room and asked Jack, “Did my mother have wavy hair like me?”

Jack sat her up on his knee, and with a smile on his face, looked into her beautiful amber eyes and said, “Yes, she had wavy hair, she looked like an Angel. That’s why we named you Angel, because you look like her and she looked like an Angel.”

“I thought it was because when I was born, she left and became an angel.”

“Well, to me your mother was a saint. I worshipped her, everything about her was perfect. She was smart, she was beautiful, she was strong, and she loved me. I was the happiest man alive. Then she was gone. Now I have the most wonderful daughter to remind me of my wonderful love.”

“She must have really been special. I feel better knowing she was special; I wish I could have met her.”

Jack couldn’t believe a five-year-old talked like this. “Whenever you feel your heart skip a beat, or a warm feeling on your face, or when a cool breeze blows you a kiss, that’s

your mother's love, returning to tell you everything is going to be alright. She will always be here with us."

Suddenly Gee and Soo were aware of the emotions involved in that conversation, as they felt their chests get heavy. They didn't have tears ducts but had they, they would have been working. Their claim of not feeling emotions was null and void. They felt every beat of Jack's broken heart and the warmth of Angel's heart as it opened up to a mother she never knew. It took a child to make them see, and they knew it was a gift to cherish.

"Thank you Hope, thank you children. Your sacrifices are virtuous, and the reward of love is that which lights your world. It is my honor to be a part of your ascension in evolution."

Hope said, "it's still funny to look at it that way."

"Your DNA has changed, you have abilities your ancestors did not have, what other definition for evolution do you need. It's not a bad thing, it's a good thing. Your children will be better, and their children will be better, and before you know it, the entire species is better. You should take time every now and then and celebrate."

"How ironic is this?" she said, "you, advising me, to be more human, I knew you had a sense of humor."

"No, I'm serious, 'carpe diem,' seize the day. You've overcome so much and have accomplished even more. Your journey is nearing its end and you have every reason to believe in success. You should find enjoyment and celebrate life when and while you can. You don't need me to remind you how short it is."

"Thank you, Gee. Who would have thought you'd be the voice of human psychology? You are truly an inspiration."

By the end of the week, Gary was ready to reveal his design for the airbus. “I now understand why we associate spaceships as saucers,” he said.

Jim asked, “Why?”

“Because the craft flies the same no matter what direction or orientation the craft is in. It doesn’t necessarily have to make a turn in order to change directions, very convenient.”

Gary’s airbus was forty-four feet in diameter and twenty feet tall, shaped like your traditional flying saucer, which was not his first design choice, it just turned out to be the best design. The lower deck was a large open area for cargo and the upper deck had seating for a hundred passengers. Three hydraulic stanchions maintained its height six feet from the ground and when the hatch opened it had a ten-foot clearance to drive a vehicle in.

Justice was particularly excited about the armored shell; a carbon fiber and polymer composite they had all worked on for months. Extremely lightweight, stronger than steel and non-ferrous. The craft’s only moving part was its cargo hatch and door assembly. The craft’s internal power supply was a technological gist form Gee, located under the bridge, consisting of an array of crystal batteries, supercharged by an enclosed Prolicience capacitor. The craft didn’t have or need an engine. It used the orbs to fly it. Four slots around the perimeter cradled the orbs and sensors in the slots translated commands from the bridge to the orbs to direct its movement.

No sooner than the airbus was revealed, everyone wanted a ride. Gary was excited to punch in the code and open the craft for people to board. He gave them the quick tour then sat in the Captain’s chair. He inputted more codes into his control display and the craft powered up. He closed the hatch,

asked if everyone was buckled in and moved his finger on a glass grid on his control panel. The craft rose twenty to thirty feet in the air without notice. Gary then moved his finger forward on the grid as the craft was in flight. Everyone knew the craft was flying because they could witness the landscape from the multitude of cameras installed but they felt little motion. With no engines to make noise the ride was peacefully silent.

“How fast can we go?” Hope asked.

“We think the orbs can carry us and travel up to their maximum 1800 miles an hour,” Gary said.

Justice added, “We got the idea to use the orbs as the propulsion system when we randomly asked the orbs to move a truck off the highway and it flew under it and lifted it up in the air and moved it off the road. From there, we tested its weight restrictions and realized it didn’t have any. It just took more power.”

“This is remarkable, we should be able to move everyone to Natchez in less than a week, to include any equipment or robots built here. You guys outdid yourselves this time. Good job Gary.”

The next two years were all about preparation. The airbus transported farming equipment to the field outside the new city and with the help of the agriculture department prepared the land for crops. Builders made periodic trips to build houses, stores, and factories. It was all but certain by the time the children are born the only humans left will be Hope’s group. Physical security at the new location didn’t seem to be an issue, but they still had the Adams if need be. Putting Justice’s technological touches to the solar power grid increased its production, decreased space requirements, and

provided the most efficient supply of power they could have hoped for.

Chapter Thirteen

Justice and Hope sat at their dining table sipping on a cup of coffee discussing the latest advances in the plan to move to the delta. “The children will be fifteen next week,” Justice said, “how are you going to address their procreation duty?”

“It’s all taken care of. We’ve been talking and training for a couple months now. For many of them it was hard enough to make them wait, most of them had already paired off. Do you remember when we paired up? Everyone was so different; it was hard for our contemporaries to find the right partners. These kids are so close there’s not a big difference between them so I don’t think choosing a partner should be that difficult.”

“It’s just weird,” Justice said, “I can’t imagine being one of them and being told, “Ok, we need you all to pair off and have sex.”

“That’s why you weren’t asked to present the situation to them. That would have been weird. We first explained the mathematical equation that allows a civilization to maintain a society and that the new world required their active participation if they were going to survive.”

“Now you have me wondering about Angel. Has she found someone?” he asked.

“She said she had but will reveal who it is at the joining ceremony,” Hope said.

“Excuse me, joining ceremony?”

“We girls got together and decided that the children needed to be committed to each other, and in lieu of legal reference of marriage, we decided that in front of everyone, they be required to pledge their commitment to each other in a ribbon ceremony.”

“That’s sound nice, we should do it too. But let’s get back to Angel for a minute. I don’t like the idea that’s she going to ‘join’ with someone, and we don’t know who it is.” Justice declared.”

“Tell me honestly, can you tell any of the boys apart?”

“Yeah, I know Freedom and Washington and the one that helps Jim clean the Adams.”

“Exactly. You’re a little out of touch and it doesn’t matter. None of these kids are hoodlums, I trust her judgement and you should too.” Hope said.

“I guess you’re right.”

“By the way, you’re not the only one that didn’t know about this. None of the guys know yet. Jim, Gary, and my dad.”

“Oh boy, you are sneaky. Tell me you’ll wait, to tell Jack until I’m around, I want to see the look on his face.”

Hope continued, “Anyway, on the fifteenth birthday of the oldest child, which would be Angel, we will all gather in the plaza square and take a strand of ribbon, wrap it around our clasped hands and repeat vows of loyalty. We’ll party some, but then the children will be set free to begin their lives with their new partners.”

“Where are they all going to live. Traditionally the boy will move in with a girl, but it doesn’t matter. The girl could move in with the boy.”

“How many of the mothers are still here?”

“There are thirty-eight mothers left, all between the ages of thirty-four to forty-two. The ones that left the city have presumably passed by now and of course there are the ones we lost here and laid to rest. They will no doubt be with us to the end, and that makes me feel bad that I didn’t get to know them better.”

Faith pulled rank and took charge of the ceremony. Social events were her responsibility and one as important as a group wedding for the entire community was not slipping through her hands. This was also a huge contentious inner battle for her, being single and without companionship. To fight her own demons, she knew she had to tackle this wedding head on or succumb to a life-threatening bout of depression. Her thirty first birthday was around the corner, and she was facing the prospect of never finding a man much less Mr. Right. As the tally of the children and list of children to join in the union neared completion, an odd fact came to light. Faith realized that there were nine-hundred-eighty-five females and nine-hundred-ninety-one males. Of the twenty-four children lost before the coming to Providence, fifteen were girls and nine were boys. She had a thought and realized she didn't have to be alone. At first, she tried not to think about it much out of shame, then began justifying it in her own head. She was afraid to mention it to anyone until she had processed the concept in her mind from A to Z and went to talk to Hope.

"We have one thousand nine hundred seventy-six children," she started.

"Yes, I know," Hope said.

"How many girls?"

Hope thought for a minute and with a curious look on her face said, "You know, I don't know."

"Nine hundred eighty-five. We have six more boys than, girls which means not everyone is joining a union tomorrow."

"That could be problematic, we'll have to keep an eye on them, provide additional counseling. Maybe have an avenue for the unions to disband if the two decide. Then they would be free to meet others. I don't see the parochial need to bind a relationship indefinitely, do you?"

Faith was glad Hope didn't take a hard line on morality or sanctity of these unions. 'Till death do us part' hasn't been honored for hundreds of years for a reason. "I also have an issue; I need your opinion and hopefully your blessing."

"What is it?"

We are going to be thirty-one soon. You have a man, I don't. I may never have a man. Would it be too far out of socially acceptable to take one of the remaining boys in union?"

"Well, I know, at times, our ancestors didn't have age limits, they relied on emotional development as the determining factor. These kids are far more advanced than children of our day, so, I don't believe it would be wrong. Do you think one would want a woman twice his age?"

"That's mean. You make it sound like I'm a predator. I'm still young."

Hope replied, "I'm sorry, you're right. I know how sensitive this is and if I could go back to the day you went into the shelter, I'd have fought to keep you with me. We just didn't know what to expect and everyone was afraid for your safety."

"Can you do me a favor?" Faith asked.

"Anything."

"Can you connect with the unpaired children and chaperone a meeting with me, as I explore this issue with them? I suppose I should also refer to them as young men rather than children."

"Sure, I'll get them to come over and we can talk to them one at a time."

"Thanks," she said as she gave Hope a hug.

Hope could only imagine how lonely she must be. The thought of her closest friend being lonely was unacceptable. Something had to be done. She hoped things would work out

for Faith on her own without extra-curricular help, but whatever it took, she needed to help.

Faith solicited the help from everyone willing who had time to spare to help with decorations. The guys built some lattice work to hang artificial ivy and flowers on. The lattices were eight feet high and eight feet long each. She connected three and four sections together in a zig zag pattern and lined a backdrop to a stage at the base of the plaza's main hall across from the Baker House, the same location as the naming ceremony they had when the children turned ten.

Kayla had live flowers she'd been growing as a hobby and brought them out in their planters and strategically arranged them throughout the square. Streamers made from linen sheets hung throughout the square with inspirational saying on them written in multiple colors; 'Forever We Love, Forever We Give,' 'Together We Can,' 'Bless Our Loving Families,' where but a few examples. Phil had a collection of old CDs and one thing he was certain of was a good song was timeless. Phil and Jennie's participation in the community since their arrival had been minimal at best. They both felt out of place and a burden. Jack had so many security issues on his mind for so long he had all but abandoned a social life. With the Velkees under control and pirates no longer an issue Jack finally got around to spending more time with Phil and Jennie. He didn't realize they had been so uncomfortable there.

"I wish I had known you felt this way. It's my fault for not spending more time with you," Jack said.

"Get real. It had nothing to do with you, we just don't belong, this isn't our world." Phil said.

"This is nobody's world that we know, but the only world these kids know. Things change, we change, just give it a chance. The kids are smart, really smart, and they will take

better care of us than we ever could for them. As sad as the loss of life is, out in the world, we are left with the cream of the crop to start over with.”

Jennie reminded them, “We’re the oldest here. You, me, and Phil are fiftyish, the next closest are the mothers you rescued, then our kids after that. I barely had time as a mother and now I’m a grandmother figure to two thousand kids. It hard to feel a part of it.”

“Have you talked with Faith lately?” Jack asked.

“No, should I?” Jennie asked”

“Absolutely. Talk to Faith, then give me a call.”

That conversation got them wondering and worrying. Later, they did talk with her.

“You’ve been pretty busy with this ceremony,” Jennie said.

“Yeah, but it’s coming along good.”

Phil asked Faith, “Why would Jack suggest we talk to you, like there was a secret that only you could tell us?”

The question caught her off guard because she hadn’t talked with Jack in a while, but she could figure that Hope might have said something about the meetings she had with the boys. “He didn’t say why you should talk to me?”

“No, please honey,” Jennie said, “no more guessing. Is there something you’d like to tell us?”

“I’m going to form a union with one of the boys tomorrow.” She stopped there and waited for their response. Jennie looked at Phil and Phil at Jennie, then as calmly as Jennie could said, “What’s his name?” Phil just took Jennie’s hand and stood as a proud father wanting only the best for his child.

“His name is, Worthy.”

“I do get a kick out of most of these kids names, don’t you Phil?”

“It’s interesting for sure. I realize there’s an age difference and I think I understand what you had to accept in order to make this decision, I would just like to believe that you will be happy,” Phil said.

“I hope so. Of course, I won’t know for a while, but I have to try. It’s all I got, there’s no option B. He is a wonderful young man, they all are, maybe my age will be an advantage I might not have gotten otherwise. I’m glad you’re not disappointed. I felt so bad when I talked with Hope about this, I was about to die of loneliness until this.”

“We love and support you; you know we do,” Jennie said.

Phil would later tell Jennie he thought it was good that she had someone, even with the age difference, at least she had a chance to experience a love like the one they shared.

Phil and Jennie had all night to think about their little girl, even though she’s thirty, getting married. They call it a union, there are no priests or pastor by any other name a religious leader performing the service but non the less, it was a formal event in the eyes of the citizens of Providence. The city’s square was lit with colored lights, flowers, banners, streamers, and ivy. Music started playing an hour in advance of the ceremony, Phil had chosen some of the most beautiful love songs ever written, like: ‘Unchained Melody,’ ‘I Will Always Love You,’ ‘All Out of Love,’ ‘You are the Reason,’ ‘How Can You Mend a Broken Heart’ and played them over a loudspeaker system in the middle of the square.

Hope and Angel joined the mothers of the children and had a bake fest and used up two weeks’ worth of flour and eggs to make cookies, cakes, and pastries for the celebration. Eggs, being the only animal protein, they’ve had since the city’s founding, and still so rare that they had to be strictly rationed,

were only available in abundance for rare celebrations like this. When the children saw a cake, they knew something special was happening.

People began assembling early when they heard the music playing. The children spent a lot of time linking with all their friends to talk of the ceremony, humans had to rely on verbal communication of the many flyers that were posted throughout the city. Even though the remaining humans were few and unrelated, they were still members of their close society and considered as an extended family. They were happy for the children and understood better than anyone would give them credit for, that the world had changed, and their last few years left on earth were a gift and a blessing made possible by the commitment to the children. The last feelings of self-pity vanished years ago when it became abundantly clear that everyone would succumb to the virus and the fact that they are the last of the population made their remaining days precious.

For the citizens that knew any of the children through their service throughout the city, they constructed hand made greeting cards and plaques with inspirational sayings on them as gifts. More and more people began to gather in the square. Some of the citizens remembered some of the songs being played and tried to sing along the best they could. Holding hands was a simple gesture of friendship almost forgotten and left unpracticed over the years of struggling for survival. Throughout the city, everyone seemed to be holding hands and in a festive mood. The mothers had a hand full of tables set up at all four corners of the square filled with cakes, cookies, pastries, brownies, iced tea, and lemonade.

Fifteen minutes prior to the ceremony Hope and Justice arrived with Angel dressed in her fanciest outfit, a hand me down Hope had stored away for years back when the trade

wars were in full swing. A silk pant suit that somewhat resembled pajamas but was a much better tailored fit making them look more like regal Asian ceremonial attire. Brilliant reds and blues in a floral pattern appeared to welcome you to an Asian garden.

Donna and Jim arrived with Kayla and Gary in tow. “Oh, my,” Donna said to Angel, “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you, I’ve never worn makeup before, mom helped me put it on.”

Kayla repeated, “Honey, you look amazing.”

Jim could see the pride in Justice’s face, and the happiness in Hope’s face could light a room.

“So, where’s the lucky guy?” Jim asked.

“He’s coming up behind you,” she said.

Everyone turned to see. “Mom, dad, everyone, this is Valiant.” Angel introduced him with a smile on her face and pride in her voice.

He didn’t stand out anymore than any of the others but the way she looked at him gave Justice some relief.

“That’s an interesting name you’ve chosen,” Jim said.

“It means brave, a trait I hope to always aspire to be.”

“I hope you take good care of my little girl,” Justice said.

“That is my solemn duty and desire, Angel deserves the best, so I have my work cut out for me,” he said as he turned back and smiled at her.

Valiant managed to impress Justice enough to warrant a hug, something Justice rarely gave.

Hope stepped up to a microphone set up on a podium in the middle of the makeshift stage. “Can I have everyone’s attention? Mothers are walking around with a box full of

ribbons, each pair of participants need to get a ribbon for the ceremony.”

After time for everyone to get a ribbon, they officially began the ceremony with a statement from Hope and her example to follow.

This ceremony is designed to acknowledge in front of all of us our commitments to another person so that their relationship is honored and trusted by all. Witness your brothers and sisters, friends, and family pledge their loyalty and commitment to each other respect their vows to each other as you would respect your own vows. Please turn down the music for a moment.” She waited a moment for the music to soften and continued with Justice by her side. “I take your hand and accept your love, I vow to try my best to earn that love every day, with this ribbon,” wrapped around their clasped hands, “I consecrate our bond and pray it lasts to our end.” She then whispered to Justice to say something similar, and he did.

“We are now joined,” she said to the crowd. “Que the music, softly please,” she said to Phil, then continued with instructions to the group. “We have so many ceremonies we will do them in groups. Will you all please group together in about ten pairs per group. Each group can witness for themselves the union of each in your group as vows are exchanged one pair at a time. One pair at a time within each of the groups took turns saying their vows, wrapping the ribbons and professing their commitments to their relationships. As Hope looked on, she felt a togetherness with all the children she hadn’t felt before. Until now, they had always been the mothers’ children, but today the realization that they were the product of her, and Justice sank in, and she felt an attachment and the heavy burden on her heart that it bore.”

Jack came over to Hope and said, “You did good. I am very proud of you, if your mother were here, she would say the same.”

“Thanks dad, I wish she were here too.”

“I do have a question. I know the world is different and this is the only way to proceed, but these kids making babies with their brothers and sisters seems dangerous and weirdly wrong, how is it going to affect them?”

Hope’s reply didn’t shock Jack, but it did make him wonder what kind of morality the future would govern itself with. “I talked with Gee about the very issue,” she said, “and was assured their DNA would essentially prevent abnormalities, so the stigma of incest causing deformities or chromosomal damage has been alleviated. The only issue left would be the potential for emotional damage from a breakdown in parental trust that doesn’t apply because parents are not participants. The children grew up more as friends than they did siblings. On another note, I don’t feel that they have the same concept of love as me or you. In all honesty, I believe you and mom had a real emotional bond, Justice and I have an emotional bond, but I don’t think our love could compare to yours, and it may sound a little sad, but I think the children’s capacity is even less, maybe because of the advance intelligence.”

“I can see that, but I wouldn’t count on it. They’re still just children, we should keep an eye on things,” Jack said.

“I agree.”

Jim and Donna, Gary and Kayla, Phil and Jennie all joined in the celebration making commitments to each other. Hope realized Jack was all alone and asked, “Why don’t you get to know some of the mothers? They’re still young and available.”

“Thanks for thinking of me, but they could not compare to your mother, and she left me with enough love to last a lifetime. Besides, the only time it bothers me to be alone is when I’m feeling sorry for myself.”

“I wish you’d reconsider; I hate to think of you being lonely and you shouldn’t compare them to mom anyway, it wouldn’t be fair to them.” Hope said. “Will you think about it, anyway?”

“I won’t discount it, is that ok?”

“Yes, thanks.”

It took about forty-five minutes for all the groups to report that their participants had completed their ceremonial unions and the music was again turned back up to inspire the mood of love that was meant to be shared among the masses. When talk of the children joining in a union and procreating the next generation first began to circulate, there wasn’t much talk of things such as love and the children’s interactions didn’t show much in the way of emotional ties, but the closer the ceremony got and the more the children talked about it, the more emotion and felling were generated. From the onset, it was a societal obligation, now having experienced a celebration in its honor, love has once again become relevant. Hope could see a transformation toward emotional stability in the faces of many of the kids and even within her close circle of friends. All day long, that’s all there was to talk about. Even the few boys that were left without a partner had a wonderful time at the ceremony without any outward signs of depression or self-pity. This was truly a day they would all remember.

For the following months Everyone was busy with preparations for the move. Teams of people traveled daily to the new location for the construction of houses, basic single-family dwellings to get things started. For many of the children

assigned to the building department, this was their education, training, and final exam. The agriculture department fought for space on the airbus to begin farming. Occasionally, Gary found himself making two trips in a day.

The population of the remaining humans began to reduce at a more frequent rate within the last year at Providence. Within the last year, they laid to rest ten more mothers and forty-three citizens. Of all the people they lost, Gary saddened them the most. Kayla found him lying in the shower with the water still running, blood washing down the drain from the gash in his head. Apparently, he slipped and hit his head on the faucet while showering. Kayla stayed in bed that morning, dozing in and out of sleep, and got concerned when she woke and heard the water still running. Finding his lifeless body was devastating, she turned off the water, tried to revive him and when she realized he was dead and not coming back sat with his head in her lap and cried for half an hour. She finally regained enough composure to get up off the floor and call Hope for help. She went back to Gary and managed to wrap his robe around him and waited for Hope.

At a service, the core group held in private, everyone took turns saying good things about him out of respect, but Gary's passing was a little more than a personal tragedy, it was a reminder that we are only here for a short period of time.

Jack took a moment when his turn came around, "I am the oldest here, I should have been first to go, but life is not fair and when our young die before us, it makes it even more tragic. Before you know it, we will all be gone, so until such time, we much cherish each moment with each of us and celebrate life. The world is different now, but that hasn't taken our ability to love away from us," he looked around the group, "love one another while you can."

“Thank you, Mr. Baker,” Kayla said.

“Jack,” he corrected her. “Mr. Baker lived in a different time. I’m just Jack now.” He gave her a hug and whispered to her, “I know the pain, but the love never dies, think about the love, not the pain.”

The rest of the day was quiet as everyone took the time to reflect on their friend’s life and their life with and without him.

Hope and the twenty-eight remaining mothers held classes once a week in each of the houses for the expecting mothers. Now in their fifth month, the girls were walking talking hormones. Hope could remember or imagine the emotional roller coaster these kids were on and grateful she only had one child. She shuttered at the thought of being like these kids, laughing and crying at the same time over the color of the blanket they’re making for their baby.

Gee returned to Justice and Hope in person that evening. “This will be our last visit to your world, the gate has begun to close. We can still communicate for the next few days, but by this time next week our dimensions will have completely separated and what is here stays here. Our plan was always to stay in your world and help you with the transformation, even though it would considerably shorten our lifespan, but alas we cannot stay, our people need us. We’ve ensured that no Velkees have or can pass through a portal and believe you no longer need us. Our people on the other hand do need us, therefore we have come to say goodbye.”

Hope linked to Angel and asked her to come out to the living room. Justice and Hope looked at each other as if they were lost. Hope said, “You have been a part of my life my entire life, you were apart of my mother’s life. You have always been here and losing you will leave a huge whole in our hearts.”

“You have a little of us within you, we will never be truly gone. Talk to us, even if we don’t reply, and trust that we are thinking of you.” Gee said.

Justice said, “You are family, and yes, it is going to hurt, but we understand.”

“There are a couple things you need to know; we will be leaving the four orbs with you. Their energy is a product of the Prolificence from our ancestors, when our world separates, the universal energy they harness will ultimately fade as our dimensions distance themselves. In about six months their energy will have completely faded away. We ask you, when that time comes, to bury the orbs deep in an area you deem sacred, for they will be the only remaining evidence of our presence in your world. Even your DNA will have no reference to our lineage without the physical evidence of the orb.”

“We will. We will treat it as sacred, as we do your memory,” Hope said.

“That means, within one month of the children being born, you must relocate before the orbs lose the power to take you there.”

Angel walked into the room and saw Gee and Soo and smiled. She had never lived in a world where aliens were a myth and looked at them as benevolent guardians. She was now taller than they were and expressed that thought to them in the form of looking for prideful acknowledgement, ‘Look at how much I’ve grown.’ “Hello Gee, hello Soo,” she said, “it is always nice to see you.”

Angel was always polite and far more mature than anyone could predict.

Gee said, “Hello little one who’s not so little anymore.”

“I always knew you had a sense of humor,” Angel said.

“Unfortunately, I’ve come to say things that are not humorous. We must leave soon.”

Angel looked at them curiously and felt what they really meant. “You are here to say goodbye? As in goodbye, forever?”

“Yes.”

“It must be very important and very heart breaking for you, I’m sure. Are you ok?”

Talking to them all. Gee said, “Yes, we are. We are pleased with your progress; you have surpassed our expectations and have given us more than we could have imagined. It wasn’t long ago we had no concept of emotions, now we understand and can experience some of them within limits. That is a precious gift. Thank you.”

Angel could feel their sincerity and stepped forward and gave them each a big hug. In the embrace, Gee and Soo received a true feeling of love and for them it was debilitatingly uncomfortable, making them feel vulnerable. The irony in their assessment of evolution was duplicitous, leaving them to wonder which species was truly more advanced. Angel said, “I love you; I won’t forget you; I wish you happiness.”

“Goodbye,” Soo said, “You may have only heard me say two words before but know that I am ‘proud’ of you, I shall remember you ‘fondly’ and yes Angel, we ‘love’ you too.”

With that having been said, Gee and Soo took each other’s hand, turned, and stepped through a gateway. They were gone and the surety of their presence went with them. Suddenly, Justice and Hope felt alone. A tear formed in their eyes as they contemplated the entire exchange and Angel said, “I will miss them terribly, and probably cry when I get back to my room but thinking about how bad they must have felt to say goodbye to us will hurt more.”

“Group hug,” Hope called out. They held each other, silently hurting, then told each other they loved them.

“Good night,” Angel said and walked back to her room.

Justice told Hope, “We are really going to have to get things going. What do you think about trying to get moved before the children are born?”

“Sure, I think we can do it, I’ll check with Kayla about the farming, and you check with Jim about the housing. I think between the two, they’re the only thing keeping us here.”

“I know Gary held a class on flying the airbus, I’ll check and make sure his students are ready. If some of the houses are ready, we can start moving the people farming and processing the produce.”

“We need to include Donna. It’s time for her to begin the cloning process for other farm animals. The chickens where necessary, now we do some pigs, goats, and cattle. Oh, and a dog.”

It took a crew about one week to complete a house, with ten crews on station they were completed ten per week. To meet the new deadline, they needed to double the rate. Justice decided the first people to go will be the builders, just like they did when Providence was being built. Then as many of the agriculture team as they could. The service crew would join them in a percentage ratio to population and the technical team would be last.

Jack and Justice would close up operations in Providence while Hope spent half her time in each location. Jim and Donna maintained the top leadership rolls in the new location till the entire city was moved.

Jim had a small crew working on air conditioning prototypes, much smaller, lighter, and more efficient than previous models. Power output and airflow were far more

advanced and could be easily adapted to be used in refrigeration as well. The hot Mississippi summers would be more uncomfortable than Providence, seeing where they would have the electromagnetic canopy to help keep the heat down, and the humidity in the Delta could at times be off the charts. The air conditioning will be a God send and make Jim wonder how anyone could have endured the climate there before air conditioning.

Crops for the first season were harvested and fall crops planted for soil nutritional balance. Donna's lab was set up and ready to recreate livestock. It had been so long since she had real meat she wondered if her body would still be able to digest it. She recalled the children had never had meat and wondered if they would be opposed to even trying it. This was one of those things that would just have to play out.

The last of the crew was in Providence wrapping things up. They thought about leveling the city in case visitors from, who knows where, might stumble upon it but ultimately decided to leave it as a shrine, evidence of a culture long passed.

"Has it gone unnoticed to everyone that our new home has no name?" Hope asked Justice and Jack.

"I did think about it by then forgot about it" Justice said.

"Sorry," Jack said, "I didn't think about it once."

"We had the opportunity to name Providence the Emerald City, but I chose to name it Providence after the comet. Wouldn't you like to have the honor this time?" looking at Justice.

After a moment, he looked back at Hope and said, "It was Providence that gave us the opportunity to survive, I think we should name our new home New Providence."

Through the group, synchronizing a remote viewing of the world found no evidence of communities still in existence.

No wandering bands of people, no individuals held up in the forests or mountains, and none on the shores of any nation. Humans, by all accounts, have become extinct. The only humans left accounted for were sixty-seven citizens of Providence, twelve of the mothers, Donna, Kayla, Jim, Phil, Jennie, Faith, and Jack. Within ten years all the citizens and the mothers, along with Jack, Phil, and Jennie, will all be gone. With Donna and Kayla not being able to reproduce, humans will officially be extinct by the end of the second decade removed from Providence. Justice and Hope would also be the last of a pair originating from totally separate human DNA. All the children will have basically come from the same genes, making their lineage exclusive. They will be the new human race, Homo Melius.

“We have done all we can, I hope it’s enough. The fate of the world is in their hands now,” Justice said referring to the children.

“All in all, I believe a better world will be created,” Hope said, “In a few thousand years, I think the earth will be healthier, and the people happier. I don’t think we, as humans, were very humane and poor representatives of a civilized world. We squandered so much opportunity through our insecurities and selfishness. It’s a wonder we lasted for as long as we did. These kids have a real chance to become the masters of the planet that we were supposed to be.”

“You’re right,” Jack interjected, “When you look back at a history that includes all the mass killings and wars, famine, and pestilence, caused by other than natural events, you have to categorize us as a dangerous species. But, you know, I’ve seen more love within this small group than I’ve seen in all my years out there, so I know we had it in us.”

“It’s certainly something to ponder.” Justice said.

“I agree, do you want a glass of tea?” Hope said.

“Thank you, that sounds good.”

The last of the children arrived a month ago and all that was left in Providence was Jack, Justice, a dozen citizens and the airbus driver. They were loading the last of the supplies that they had in storage and were preparing to make the final flight out of Providence. Eager to leave the desert, Jack couldn't wait to get home to Mississippi. The first thing he was going to do when he got home was build him a boat. He hoped he still remembered how. The thought of his days before the comet and talked to Justice all the way home about his business building boats and his wife's paintings. He said, “Those were the days. Everyone says, ‘those were the days’ but I'm here to tell you, those were the best of days. I was young, had a good profession, lots of money, a beautiful wife, and a wonderful life. Now I wonder where it all went. Don't make that mistake, as Gee advised Hope, ‘carpe diem,’ seize the day. Don't let a day go by without telling someone you love them, don't go to bed angry, and laugh every chance you get.”

Justice thought a lot of what Jack was talking about was epic, he would have never thought to navigate open waters, in fact he had a hard time visualizing the ocean. All he's ever seen of the ocean was from movies and he hadn't seen many of those. He was a book worm more than a movie buff and books may give someone insight, but a picture truly does tell a thousand words.

“If you build a boat, can I ride with you some time?” Justice asked.

“Yeah, if I build a boat, you can ‘sail’ with me.” Jack said.

That made Jack think about his father and how they sailed together. Maybe he had time left on this planet to go sailing with his son, or stepson.

They came flying into New Providence just before noon on the 18th of December 2051. Having a little fun Justice ask his pilot, a young man named Apollo, to do a flyby. With only references from old movies, he flew straight down the main street of New Providence, tilting the left and right side of his craft up and down, then pulled up into a spiral. He then flew back down the street from the other direction as low as he could. The craft was so silent the maneuvers were wasted on all but a few that were outside at the time, but they still enjoyed it.

Upon landing, Justice turned to his passengers and proclaimed reverently, “We are home.”

Epilogue

New Providence was near Natchez, Mississippi. After the virus wiped out most of the residents of Natchez, the survivors abandoned the city and surrounding areas to relocate north near Tupelo, leaving behind a lot of useful equipment. Hope and Justice preferred to have their own city, with their own houses, rather than overtaking an existing city, so Natchez and surrounding areas were bulldozed and turned back into farmland for future settlements and expansion. The equipment left behind would be of great value for farming. This was a new world, and everything left in it was fair game. In true pioneering fashion, their basic philosophy and standard practice would be to level everything and start from scratch whenever possible.

Their city was built, their needs were being met, and slowly but surely, advances were being made to increase their standards of living. Life seemed to be getting better by the day, as new innovations made their lives easier. The promise of a good life was in their sights.

At six twenty in the morning, January 20th, 2052, the first child was born in New Providence. Hope carefully considered her decision to help Angel induce labor. She would not have been the first to deliver otherwise, but Hope was a first, and Angel was a first, and it only seemed fitting that Angel's baby should be a first. It was a girl, she named her Lisa, in honor of her grandmother. Within hours, a second child was born, whose parents named Jackson, after their grandfather. Of course, they would have the opportunity to rename themselves in ten years as did their parents, but after all the stories that would be told of their namesakes, it was unlikely. A portrait of Jack, Hope and Justice, Valiant and Angel, and Lisa, all four generations of the founders, would later adorn the wall of the

city's courthouse. By January 31st, a new sign hung over the archway entrance to the city that read: 'Welcome to New Providence, Population 2047, Initium Novum'. Translation, 'New Beginning.'