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-The Healers-

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Chapter One

The only thing Daniel could see was the man's face. The tinkling of champagne glasses, the bright, early spring sunlight through Ann's picture window, the smiling friends, and the murmur of their light-hearted conversation all faded into the background when the figure walked through the door from the kitchen. Daniel thought at first he would be sick. The man was the same man they had seen so many times on the alien ship: broad-shouldered, bearded, rugged and good-looking. A big man. Here, today, on the ground, in a dark sport jacket and tie.

Daniel felt a tug at his pant leg. He looked down and saw a little four-year-old boy forlornly looking up at him. His heart went out to the boy. Daniel quickly put his finger to his lips in the universal sign for 'be quiet'. He put his hand on the little boy's hair as he leaned towards his wife. "Sara," Daniel hissed, nudging her away from her conversation.

She looked at him and furrowed her brow: He wasn't in the habit of interrupting her.

"Excuse me, Karen," Daniel said politely but with a deliberate sense of urgency. Daniel took Sara's elbow and guided her away from the doctor, who today was the happy bride.

"For goodness sake, Daniel. What do you want?" Sara could not hide the slight irritation from her voice. Daniel knew she had been enjoying her conversation with Karen, but this was urgent.

"Look over there," Daniel said covertly. "Standing in the doorway of the kitchen. Do you see him? See?" Daniel was shaking, and it required considerable effort on his part to keep himself from running over and screaming in the man's face.

Sara whispered, "Oh my God, he's here. What is he doing here? He's the human from. . . from the ship," she stammered. Sara leaned down and quietly spoke into the boy's ear. "Eric, Honey, you cannot let anyone know that you know Saul. Do you understand? We must be very careful." She kissed him motherly and hugged him briefly. The boy didn't react to her display of affection.

Daniel caught the eye of Rachel, his daughter, standing across the room from him. "Take care of Eric for us," he signed quickly. Rachel looked puzzled. "Now, Rachel," Daniel signed emphatically. "Please."

Rachel came to Eric and smiled down at him. "Want to come with me?" Rachel signed to Eric. She took him by the hand and led him away to her husband Steve.

Satisfied, now, that Eric was out of harm's way, Daniel touched Sara's arm, wanting to comfort her but not daring to draw attention to themselves. "I don't believe it," Daniel breathed. "He looks so relaxed. He's maddeningly casual."

"Yes," Sara whispered. "He helps the Zeta as they abduct us, and now he's showing up in our space here on the ground." She gripped Daniel's wrist hard. "Let's go home, Daniel. I can't stay in the same room as he." Sara took his hand, her face white with a horror that only Daniel could know, and with purpose set out towards Rachel and the boy.

Ann, the host of the wedding, waved suddenly from a corner of the living room, and stepping near the man, motioned Daniel and Sara to her side. Sara hesitated. Daniel looked at her.

"Well, what's it going to be?" Daniel frantically telepathed to Sara.

"Daniel, she seems to know him," Sara telepathed in return, surprise in her thought.

Suddenly Ann was in front of them, holding out her hands. To have pushed past her would have been rude. Daniel stood his ground. If he could mouth off to the alien doctor, he knew he could confront this man, especially now that the man was in Daniel's space. "How in the world does Ann know this bastard?" Daniel's telepathic message escaped before he could grab it back. Sara's mind was locked up, cold and dark. And Daniel could feel her frenzy. He couldn't stop his mind from slipping into the horror of the

past

[Down the long hallway of the now familiar Zeta ship, a being appeared. Behind it was another, and yet another. They walked and floated, walked and floated, coming towards him like a cloud of purposeful bugs. When they reached him, they stood like preying mantises before him. A squadron of surrealistic soldiers-silent, menacing. They were humanoid, but they weren't human. They were insectoid, but they weren't insects. They stood, four feet at the tallest, slender trunks, limbs like sticks, oversized heads perched on pencil-thin necks. Huge black eyes that wrapped partly around the head stared from almost featureless faces. Their skin was grey, their hands were four-fingered. And on their tight-fitting uniforms was the symbol Daniel was so familiar with-the symbol of a snake. He feared for Sara; he feared for himself.

A being grabbed Daniel's arm, but Daniel quickly jerked his wrist from the being's grasp. And as Daniel jerked on the being's arm, the light weight of the being gave way to Daniel's strength and it went sprawling on the deck.

The beings quickly circled around the both of them. Daniel embraced Sara with one arm and started flailing at the beings with the other. Sara stood with her hands at her sides-defeated. "Fight. Damn it, Sara, fight," Daniel said with weariness in his wildness.

But fighting was useless. Daniel didn't even know why he expended his energy on them. Before he knew it they had jerked Sara from his grasp. He had both hands free, now, and he was swallowed by his anger. His fists caught one being, then another. They went down, one by one, but as soon as one being fell, it was replaced by another. They were overwhelming him with their numbers.

It didn't matter how many times they brought him up here—he was always frightened out of his mind. How do you come to accept beings that look like something from your wildest nightmare? How do you keep from screaming yourself hoarse because you know they are going to take you and put you on that table and do unspeakable things to you? Daniel saw a flash of metal come at him and he felt a familiar sharp sting against his skull. "Ah!" It was a stunrod that caught him and immediately paralyzed him. Before he had time to react, he collapsed on his back onto the deck. How do you keep from screaming yourself hoarse? Simple—when you're paralyzed you can't scream.

But you can scream in your mind, and these beings could hear him scream. He knew that. He tried to keep his fear in check because his wife could hear him scream in his mind, too. Her telepathic powers were fully as strong as the beings that were now standing around Daniel's paralyzed body. "No, don't touch me! Please don't touch me!" he telepathed.

With its four-fingered hand, a being gripped Sara by her wrist and began to pull her away from where Daniel was lying on the deck. "No," Sara said. "Please don't."

Daniel was physically helpless now; he could hear and see, but his motor control was gone. He could feel the drool running out the corner of his mouth, much like drool would run from a mouth shot full of novocaine. But he was in for far worse than a filling or tooth extraction; the use of the stunrod proved that. They only took such measures when they didn't want to fool with him.

"Bring him," a being telepathed into his brain. Daniel could just move his eyes. Off to the side of him he was terrified to see the taller being whom he had come to call the "doctor."

"Please don't hurt Sara," Daniel telepathed frantically. "Please don't do to her what you are going to do to me."

The tall being ignored him. Now he felt himself being lifted off the floor. He wanted to close his eyes, to blanket his senses from the terror that was running through him like hot ice. But he couldn't close them. He could only see and think. He wished they would just anesthetize him, do what they had to do, and then send them back down the beam. But they wouldn't; he knew they wouldn't.

The beings carried him down the hallway. When they came to a door, Daniel was carried through it, cradled in the arms of a nightmare.

"Dear God, please don't!" he telepathed wildly. But he could feel the beings ignore him in their minds. He wasn't even sure if the beings could focus on Daniel as an individual, as a being that was to be respected. They laid him on the table. It was hard and cold. They picked and tugged at his clothes until he was naked except for his exoskeleton. They stopped and stared at it—perplexed. They carefully touched the intricate web of steel that encased Daniel's limbs and trunk. "You don't know what it is, do you?" Daniel telepathed, enjoying their ignorance. It was obvious to Daniel, now, that it was the first time this particular group of beings had seen Daniel's exo. He had no idea how many beings were on this ship. He suspected there were hundreds, maybe thousands.

"Silence." This terse, disembodied telepathed "voice" was familiar: The doctor was back. It half walked, half floated to the side of the table. It bent down until its face almost touched Daniel's face. The huge black eyes bored into Daniel's soul, and Daniel couldn't close his eyes to shut it off. Daniel had been through this ritual so many times before. It was impossible for him to explain, but every time the being pushed its face into Daniel's, Daniel felt a strange mixture of love and hate towards it, as if he knew this being from long ago. And he knew that while the being was sending its own peculiar kind of hate to him, it was also scanning his mind. "Where is the human male child this being is allowing you to nurture?"

Daniel felt sick with anxiety. "He's not with us tonight. Please allow us to go home."

"Where is the human child?" the being persisted.

"I can't believe you don't know where he is," Daniel telepathed defiantly.

"This entity knows where the child is. This entity wants you to say where the child is."

"Figure out where he is yourself."

"The child is with your daughter, Rachel." The being stood back, away from the table.

If the being's face could have registered emotion, Daniel would have seen smugness plastered all over it. But how do you read the emotion of a cricket or a beetle? You don't.

Now other beings came forward and stood on both sides of the table as if readying themselves. One of the beings lifted Daniel's head and slid something under it. He felt cold jaws, metal, against his ears. He thought they must be immobilizing his head so it wouldn't roll. Above him he saw a device slowly descend from the ceiling. The doctor took the device from its holder and came towards Daniel's face with it. Four prongs spreading out like the petals of a steel flower bloomed from the device. "What are you going to do?" Daniel telepathed frantically. The claws slipped into his eye socket and around and behind his eye. The doctor deftly pulled and Daniel's eye was out of its socket! "God! Please! It hurts!"

The doctor ignored his telepathed pleas. In his mind Daniel began to hyperventilate. "No, no, no, no!" he telepathed in a frantic stutter.

One of the beings laid its four-fingered hand on Daniel's forehead. "It doesn't hurt. You just think it hurts. It doesn't hurt." it telepathed detachedly.

"Oh, God, it hurts! Please stop! It hurts!" He could feel them probing in his eye socket, now. "You're putting something in my eye! Put it in my nose! You always put it in my nose! Please, oh please don't put it in my eye!"

He felt a tugging around his eye socket. Suddenly Daniel could again see through the eye. Relief washed through him like a flood. He wanted to cry from relief, but he was too paralyzed to cry.

He felt the sting of the stunrod against his head again. From past experience he knew the stunrod, a short metal rod with a ball on its end, was reversing what it had done to him when they brought him up here: It was restoring his motor control. Relieved, he felt his strength coming back to him. The doctor looked down at Daniel with its huge black eyes, turned from him as if to dismiss Daniel from his thoughts, and floated out of the room. The smaller beings helped Daniel sit up. "I don't need your help, damn it. Just get away from me. I'll dress myself." He addressed them as if they were his unruly children. They stood away from him, then, and watched him fumble with his clothes.

"May I help?"

Daniel knew that the sound of this human voice was that of Saul's, the human being who for reasons beyond Daniel seemed to work willingly for these monsters. Standing quietly in his army camouflage pants and flannel shirt, he smiled through his salt and pepper beard.

"No, you can't help," Daniel said angrily. He snatched up his clothes that were lying in a heap on the floor.

"They pulled your eye out and stuck one of their little beads into your eye socket, you know," the human Saul said matter of fact.

"How do you know that" And what little bead . . . what are you talking about?" Daniel put on his pants and shirt, then stooped down to tie his shoes. He looked at the beings still staring at him, then back at the human. "This place is like one insane hallucination. This place is so strange, the only reason I know any of this is happening is because Sara experiences it too. And what are they doing to her? Did she suffer through what I've just been through?"

"Yes," the man said in a voice that was low and riddled with guilt.]

Now Daniel heard voices. They seemed to come from far away. He fought to regain his emotional equilibrium. He was still standing in the brightly decorated living room, his friends and family standing there like good socialites, holding pink cocktail napkins. They were congratulating Karen and Yankee, the happy couple, who not fifteen minutes ago in this room had made their life-long commitment to each other. It seemed that an eternity had passed, but his recalling of two nights ago, the night of their most recent abduction, had only lasted a second. Daniel felt the room spin.

Now the man was in front of him, smiling. Daniel could not control what he did next. He pulled his hand from Sara's grip, hauled back his arm, and with all of the force in his body, slammed his closed fist into the man's face. The man went down instantly, as though stunned with the Zeta stun rod. Daniel found himself smirking in spite of Ann and Sara's horrified looks.

"Daniel, for God's sake. . .what in the world. . .?" The room fell silent, then began to almost bounce with noise and confusion. Sara's delicate, dark face turned white. She stepped back in horror. Ann's eyes were as large as saucers. She knelt to assist her friend.

Daniel felt his face turning red. What had he done? He wasn't so much worried about hitting this man, whoever he was. He deserved that. But the others, all of his friends and associates, now had seen him do a physical act that took a normal, no, a strong man to do. And he had suffered from polio for his entire life. His secret of his past healing was now out of the bag. How would he explain this? And now a second thought rushed through him. How would he tell Ann who this man was? She would be mortified. She had talked so proudly of her new boyfriend. She had finally found the kindest man in the world, or so she had said. Now what?

Daniel looked up at the small boy who had rushed to his side. The boy looked distraught. "Saul," the boy said quietly.

Daniel picked up the boy and held him tightly. "Don't say anything, Eric," Daniel whispered fiercely. "Remember what Mommy told you." He put Eric back down on his feet and said, "Stay with Rachel and Steve." "God, man, what did you do that for?" The stranger was on his feet now. Blood pouring from his nose and down his shirt front, he held his nose in his hands and his voice sounded garbled and faint. But Daniel recognized his voice anyway. There was no doubt in Daniel's mind: This was the man he and Sara had confronted on the alien ship. Not once, but many times. There was no mistake in Daniel's mind, and a quick glance at Sara confirmed that Daniel had hit the right man. Karen suddenly appeared and then disappeared. A moment later, a long silent moment, she returned with a wet towel. Yankee, the groom,

strode over and in one move took the towel from Karen.

"No blood on that three-hundred-dollar dress, my dear," he said. "You may be a medical doctor, but let me take care of him." With a frown at Daniel, he put his arm around the stranger's shoulder and helped him towards the bathroom. "I think you broke his nose," he said to Daniel over his shoulder as the two left the room. Karen hurried after them. Without meaning to, Daniel quickly felt his own face. ". . . They pulled your eye out and stuck one of their little beads into your eye socket, you know. . . ." came back to him. He could almost see Saul telling him, taunting him. Daniel's face was throbbing from the recalling of it.

"Daniel. What in God's name were you thinking of?" It was Ann's voice. "I can't believe you did this, Daniel. You don't even know Saul. You have never seen him in your life. And you just come into my house and hit him? Is this the Daniel I know? I don't think so. I think you've lost your mind."

"Ann," Daniel said with great apology in his heart, "I'm sorry to have done this."

"Daniel, you aren't a violent person," Ann said in disbelief.

"Only to the Zeta," Daniel mumbled under his breath.

Sara stood silently watching the scene play itself out. Daniel could sense that she was torn between cheering and crying. At least the color was returning to her face.

Ann continued, "Hitting a man in my home is unacceptable behavior, Daniel. Saul is my fiance." Ann hissed the last part. Daniel felt his heart drop to his stomach. He and Sara were very good friends with this woman, and he didn't want to lose that friendship.

Ann said, "Let's go into my study." Ann's eyes were steely. She was becoming more angry by the second. Daniel paused, looking carefully into her eyes.

Daniel took Sara's hand. He smiled at her. "Coming with me?" he asked.

"Yes," Sara said softly.

The rest of the guests, still appearing to be shocked at the confusing moment, watched the three of them leave the room. The happiness of the day was broken. Daniel could see Rachel, Eric at her side, glare at him from across the room where she stood with her husband Steve. Would she understand? She'd been on the alien ship too.

As the little procession moved down the hallway, all he could remember was a vision of that man carrying the body of his infant grandchild down a hospital hallway several months ago. The baby was born dead, and Saul had appeared in the morgue, removed the infant, and was apparently taking it to the alien ship for God-knew-what when Daniel had caught him in the elevator, and that was the first and the last time that Daniel had seen the infant. It was a sight he'd never forget. The baby was something other than human. He looked for all the world like the vile Zeta beings who came at will and wreaked havoc on all they touched. Daniel was grateful Rachel had never seen her baby.

Ironically, Daniel and Sara had met on that same alien ship when they were only five years old. Sara lived in a different part of the galaxy then, thirty light years from Earth. The beings were so powerful, they would routinely abduct Daniel and Sara, and then put them on the ship together. Only months ago they had met for what they thought was the first time, fallen in love, and married. Later, the Zeta, with the aid

of the human Saul, had shown them how they had first met. The beings had erased all memory of their childhood abduction encounters with each other. It was only months ago that Ann had used her powers of hypnosis to uncover the past secret lives of Daniel and Sara.

Sara was the miracle in Daniel's life. During the last summer he had been lonely and buried in his work, surviving as best he could with the enduring pain of his childhood trauma-polio. Sara and her father, from the planet Teruhl, possessed and shared the power of healing with Daniel.

The pictures flitted through his mind like flickering lights. The last picture Daniel stoked from his fuming mind as he turned to follow Ann into her home office was the tears and pain in Sara's eyes two nights ago.

Did they hurt you, Sara? he had asked, as the abductors lowered them to the open road in a shaft of light.

"Yes." She had burst into tears then. It was only a few weeks ago that the beings had taken Sara's fetus from her. Daniel and Sara's baby were on the alien ship and the human hybrid boy, Eric, was now in Daniel and Sara's care. The beings had taken and given, and although Eric was welcome in their lives, their baby quite probably was going to be raised by the Zeta. How Sara shored herself up for today's festivities was beyond Daniel's imagining.

He found himself standing in Ann's office and was suddenly awakened from his thoughts by the resounding thud of the closing door. Ann was already seated. Sara, her face registering little emotion, lowered herself into the chair next to Ann's desk. She stared out the window beyond Ann's eyes, unable, apparently, to face her friend and counselor. Daniel remained standing. The adrenalin was still pumping through him.

Ann's office was all too familiar to Daniel and Sara. They had spent a lot of time here in the past. Without Ann's understanding and deep insight, Daniel was sure neither he or Sara would have emotionally survived the many alien abduction experiences they had suffered through. Ann was Daniel's dear friend, and like a common mugger of the streets he had injured the man most dear to her. "I'm sorry," Daniel began. "I can say nothing more except I'm sorry."

"Daniel, you wouldn't hit a complete stranger. I know you so well. You are not a cruel person. You must have had trouble with Saul in the past. Where did you meet him before?"

"I really . . ."

"Just tell me, Daniel." Ann sighed and looked pleadingly at Sara.

Sara said, "This is quite awkward, Ann." Sara looked at Daniel and telepathed, "We cannot tell her how we know Saul."

"I know," Daniel telepathed in return, "but I have to make this right."

"Damn it, you two, I know when you're telepathing!" Ann barked. "Talk to me!"

Daniel looked at Ann and felt real concern for his friend. He took Ann by her wrist and squeezed it gently. "Tell Saul to come in here. I'll fix him."

"You mean use your power of healing?"

"Yes," Daniel said softly. "It's the least I can do."

Ann looked at Sara. "But if you heal Saul, you will give yourselves away to the others here who don't know about your healing powers. We've got a house full of people here today. I thought you both were concerned about your keeping your secrets?"

Sara said, "Ann, you know we are, but we can't allow Saul to suffer for what Daniel has done."

"No . . . no, of course you can't. I don't want Saul to suffer with this, but . . ." Ann quickly stood up. "What am I doing in here? Saul needs me. I walked away from him when he needed me the most." She took a step towards the door.

"No," Daniel said. He stepped in her way. "Karen's taking care of him. You can't do better than hosting a bride's wedding who just happens to be a doctor. Karen and Yankee will take good care of him."

Ann sat down again. Pain was on her face. Daniel sat down next to her. "Maybe if," Daniel said, "I give him just enough of my healing energy to lessen the pain, to speed his healing rather than instantly reverse the injury, we could give Saul some relief."

"Yes," Ann said. "Yes, that's a sound idea." Ann got up from her chair again and left the room. The door clicked quietly shut behind her.

"I've done it, haven't I?" Daniel said, dejected.

"It was an instinctual reaction," Sara said. "You couldn't help it. I just wish we could tell everyone in this house about Saul."

"Well, we can't. We can't even tell Saul. He may actually think we haven't put two and two together on this." Daniel smiled at his wife sitting across from him.

"No, you're right," Sara said. "It would destroy the relationship between Ann and Saul." Sara put her head in her hands and began to softly weep. "Where is our baby? Saul knows if it's dead or alive. He is in league with the Zeta and together they are incubating our baby on their dreaded ship."

Daniel took Sara in his arms. "Don't cry, Sara. We have Eric to think about now. He needs our love. We have to be strong for him."

The door opened and Saul and Ann walked through it. Saul looked at Daniel strangely. "Do you know who Sara and I are?" Daniel telepathed. He knew it was truly a shot in the dark. Saul telepathed well when he was in the company of the Zeta. Would he acknowledge Daniel's telepathed question here on the ground and away from the Zeta's massive starship?

Saul continued to look at Daniel, but registered no sign of recognition.

"He doesn't know us, Daniel," Sara telepathed. "Let it go for now."

Daniel motioned for Saul to sit down. "I'm sorry," Daniel said. "I'm sorry for hitting you." He didn't mean it, but he felt he had to say it.

"You caught me off guard, or I would have stopped you. You deliver a hell of a punch for someone your

size." Saul looked down at the built-up shoe on Daniel's left foot. Daniel felt uncomfortable. Only curious children looked at Daniel that way.

"Well, I apologize. I . . . I thought you were someone else I knew. I was wrong; I don't know you."

Again Saul looked at Daniel strangely.

Daniel slid his chair close to Saul's. He glanced quickly at Ann and said, "I'm pretty good at ironing out sore muscles. Would you at least let me try to make you feel better?"

"Why not? I think you owe me that."

"Oh, I owe you much more than this, but right now this is all I can do for you."

"Careful, Sweetheart," Sara telepathed in warning.

Daniel put his hands gently on Saul's shoulder muscles. His mind flashed back to when Saul-unknown to them then-came at Daniel and Sara from behind. He gripped Daniel's shoulder so hard Daniel almost passed out from the pain. But that incident seemed like years ago, although it was only a few months past, and it would do no good to dwell on that experience now. Daniel cleared his thoughts and then sent his own healing power into Saul. But he was careful to give Saul just a little of himself. He couldn't have Saul walking out of Ann's office with a totally and instantly healed face. He had to give him just enough to make him more comfortable and perhaps heal faster than normal.

"Ah!" Saul groaned. He put his hand on his nose. "What did you do to me? It feels wonderful."

"I pressed a few acupressure points," Daniel lied. "You should begin to feel better soon."

The four of them walked out of Ann's office. Ann took Saul by the arm and they walked into the kitchen together. Rachel caught her father's eye and motioned for both he and Sara to come to her. Eric was standing attentively by Rachel's side. Daniel with Sara walked to where Rachel and her husband Steve stood. "Is he alright?" Rachel signed rapidly. Rachel was almost totally deaf, but her deafness had no effect on how well she delivered her ideas to others.

"He's alright," Daniel signed rapidly in return. "Don't ask me any more questions right now. We'll talk more about this at home."

Sara picked Eric up and held him close to her.

"Sara," Steve signed, "I think you should put a leash on Daniel." Steve signed this jokingly, Daniel knew, but Daniel was still too upset to appreciate his son-in-law's humor.

Chapter Two

Guests were beginning to trickle out the door. Daniel was drained. He wanted to go home soak in the hot tub, and wallow in his embarrassment. He desperately wanted time to think, but the mumblings of his friends indicated that they had something else in mind. "Daniel," Sara said, "Roger and Julia want us to go to the Eagle's Nest with them. I'll say our goodbyes to Karen and Yankee." Sara kissed Daniel quickly on the cheek.

"All right," Daniel said.

Sara looked with compassion upon her husband. "Julia and I will go on ahead, Daniel. I'll take Eric. I believe you should have a talk with Roger before you join us at the restaurant. Roger has a talent for making you feel better."

They sat out in the car, Daniel and Roger. Roger Kennedy was Daniel's dear friend, and as Roger sat behind the steering wheel, his pot belly jammed against the rim, his curly, unruly red hair reaching all the way down into the collar of his sport jacket, he listened intently as Daniel poured out his troubles.

"God, Roger, I don't know how much more of this I can take. I didn't plan to hit Saul today, but a man can stand just so much. I'll never live this down."

"Sure you will. All those who really count in your life know about this guy. They don't blame you for what you did. Besides, this man is only one glitch in your life."

Daniel began to shake. "Please, Roger, I don't want to talk about that."

"Maybe you don't, but you must. Facing it is half the battle." Roger looked off down the street. Then he turned to Daniel and said, "Sara may be wrong."

"About them taking her own fetus, you mean?"

"Yeah," Roger said with sadness in his voice.

"Roger, that's why they gave us Eric. They knew we wanted him and they exchanged him for our baby."

Roger scrunched up his forehead in thought. "There's something that doesn't make sense at all. It seems almost uncharacteristic of them. They have been treating you and Sara so cruelly. They have put you into painful emotional situations just to see how you would react. Why do you think they gave you Eric in exchange for your baby? Seems to me they could have just taken the fetus and left it at that. They do whatever they please with you. Why would they suddenly take this charitable turn with you?"

"Maybe they know in their own dark hearts that they aren't capable of raising a being as human as Eric," Daniel said.

"Why would they care how he was raised? They don't care about any of the other children."

"I don't know, Roger. I can't answer that one. I know that I saw lots of kids. Hybrids. I didn't see any kids as human as Eric up there-except Eric."

"A hell of a life for those kids," Roger mused.

"Roger, those kids act like robots. When you hold them they display as much emotion as a plastic doll. I feel so sorry for them, and yet I know that they know no other life."

"So you've said." Roger paused, then asked, "How is Sara handling all this?"

"She doesn't want to talk about them taking the fetus. She's so upset by it, she simply can't talk to me

about it."

"That's not good for her to bottle it up inside her like that."

Daniel sighed. "No, it's not. But right now it's the only way she can cope with it. Eric has helped her a lot."

"Eric's still pretty quiet, isn't he?"

"Roger, the only life he knew until a few weeks ago is life with the Zeta."

"From what you told me, though, Saul seems to have looked after him."

"Looked after him? I don't know what part he played in the boy's life before we got him. He may have helped us get the boy, but I doubt it. I just know he works for them. When we are taken aboard, he's there-always. And now I punched him and everyone thinks I'm crazy."

Roger smiled. "Let's change the subject. How's the exoskeleton doing?"

"It's doing okay. If I hadn't had it powered up today I wouldn't have done quite as much damage to Saul."

"But the healing Santoo took you through seems to be bringing you up to full strength." Santoo was Sara's father and it was he with his superior technology that transformed Daniel from a forty-four old man crippled with polio to a strong-bodied individual.

"If you can call four times the strength of an Earth human 'up to full strength', I suppose you could. But I'm becoming nervous about the rate of growth of my left leg. I appreciate the considerable degree of healing Santoo has given me, but . . ."

"I thought I was doing a pretty good job of shaving down that build-up on your shoe," Roger interrupted.

"Roger, what happens when you finally shave it down to no lift at all? How will I explain that to my friends? They've known me for years. A man doesn't just suddenly dispense with an orthopedic correction. He doesn't miraculously grow his short leg two inches practically overnight. I'm forty-four years old. They'll never buy it."

Roger sighed. "Daniel, old buddy, I gotta tell you that you've been spinning your wheels about what you are going to do and say for several months now. Tell everyone you've been receiving experimental treatments, tell them you are going to have surgery, tell them anything. People will believe anything if you are sincere enough. No one has noticed yet, but you've just got to get your story straight and stick with it. I've never seen anyone worry as much as you do."

"I worry-you're right. I keep getting distracted by my life, for God's sake. What a roller coaster ride this has turned out to be. And to think I was once bored and lonely."

"I'm sure Saul is feeling damned sore right about now. You're sure he's the man you've seen on the Zeta ship?"

"This is the man. This man has shown up during the majority of our abductions."

"But Daniel, this same man, according to what you've said before, appeared every time you and Sara were shown the hybrid children. He seemed to be very kind to the children, or so you've said."

"He was. He was very kind to them. And sometimes he was kind to us as well. But when I say 'kind' you have to realize that he was detached, almost neutral. Compared to Zeta behavior, that's 'kind'. How did he meet Ann? And when? Does he live around here? Has he always been in the area? When I saw him here today . . ."

"It made your past experiences really real."

"Yeah," Daniel breathed. "They always take us at night. It's almost like a dream sometimes. But today . . . when I saw . . ."

"When you saw him on the ground in Ann's house . . ." Roger prompted.

Daniel fiddled with his seat belt. "I never doubted the reality of our experience-but he sure nailed the lid down."

"Come on, man. Where's the old Daniel Alan spirit I know so well? They're not trying to kill you. They could have done that months ago."

"Years ago, you mean. They've been tormenting me since I was five-years-old."

"And Sara as well," Roger confirmed.

"Yes. How did they manage that, Roger?" Daniel asked wonderingly. "Teruhl is thirty light years from here. Santoo's starship can't even make two light years a day. Yet, somehow these people could abduct Sara, abduct me at almost the same time, and bring us together on their starship. Then they could put us both back from wherever they took us, and we didn't even recall these childhood experiences until Saul showed us our past."

"It's as Santoo says, Daniel, these people are thousands of years ahead of his technology, let alone our technology."

Daniel drummed his fingers on the armrest of the door. "How would a human from planet Earth get caught up with the Zeta? And for how long? Ann told me Saul was her fiance. Ann is my friend. Saul is part of my ongoing nightmare." Daniel put his head in his hands. "Roger, I don't know what to do."

Daniel felt Roger's comforting hand on his shoulder. "I know what you have to do. You just have to hang in there for Sara and Eric. Don't forget about your new son. He's only been with you for a few weeks. If you crumble in front of him there's no telling what will happen. Lord knows he got no love or affection from his alien caretakers. You've got to be there for him."

"Yeah," Daniel whispered. "Yeah, I know that." Daniel put his hand on his old friend's shoulder and gripped it hard.

"Ow, Daniel," Roger shrieked. "You're stronger than you think. Go easy on me."

"I'm sorry, Roger. I'm just worried."

"You and Sara will be good parents. You just have to concentrate on that."

"But how do we keep the State of Iowa off our backs? How do we explain where Eric came from? Sara didn't give birth to him. We didn't adopt him. We aren't foster parents to him. There is no record of his birth. We'll have to send him to school soon, probably next year."

"You mean the Zeta don't keep birth records up there?" Roger's mischievous smile disappeared suddenly. "Sorry, bad joke."

"I know you're trying to help me feel better, Roger, but somehow we're going to have to resolve this."

"I know. Maybe Yankee can figure something out," Roger said cheerfully. "He's a lawyer. Lawyers always know what to do."

"Yeah, maybe," Daniel said dejectedly.

Roger brightened. "Look, Daniel, things could be a whole lot worse. At least you and Sara aren't suffering through this alone."

Daniel felt miserable now. "Worse? Do you think it makes it easier that you and Julia know about these beings coming into our bedroom every other night and sucking us up their lousy beam of light into their ship? How do you think Rachel and Steve are taking this? And Ann? And Karen and Yankee? Don't you think the Zeta are making your lives miserable as well, even if they don't take you on board?"

"Daniel, I . . ."

"It's hell, Roger." Daniel was yelling now. "It's hell and it doesn't stop. My family, my close friends, all of you know. And I worry about all of you all the time . . . all the time."

Roger leaned across the seat and put his arm around Daniel. "Easy, Daniel. Easy. This can't last forever. It can't. Eventually the Zeta will tire of you and move on to others."

Daniel felt tears forming in his eyes. "But our baby . . . Rachel's

baby . . . where are they? Are they alive . . . or dead? If they're alive, will we ever see them again?"

Roger sat back and looked at Daniel for a moment. He slowed the car and brought it to a halt for a red light. "I know this sounds stupid and insensitive of me right now, but I want to buy Eric a chocolate shake. Do you think he'd like that?"

Suddenly Daniel felt better. "I think he would."

The light turned green. Roger put the car in gear and drove them down the street to the Nest.

"What a night."

"Let me help you, Daniel."

Daniel was sitting on the edge of the bed and Sara began to help him take the exoskeleton off.

"Thanks, Sweetheart, but I can do it myself. I have superior strength, you know," he said with as much humor as he could find in himself right now. He pulled open a velcro strap that held the links of mesh to his body. The suit was not unlike a suit of armour, except feather light and soft to the touch. The exo, technically, was three-hundred years ahead of Daniel's technology, but where possible, Sara's father had used Earth technology to build parts of it. The velcro straps were comforting to Daniel. They helped him accept the exo as a high tech device, not unlike something that might come from Earth technology.

"What a strange predicament we're in, Sara," he said wearily. He lifted his arm and released the frame from around it. "We live here on Earth at one level of technology. Now that you've come into my life we're living part of our lives in your technology: my exo that gives me the strength of four men; our shuttle with its gravity drive that can take us to any place on Earth, even away from Earth if we desire; our amulets that teleport us instantly to any place we can visualize; the power of healing and the power of telepathy that now even I possess. And then there are the Zeta flying in and out of our lives in a huge starship-much larger and technically more sophisticated than your father's starship. Your father estimates the beings' technology is thousands of years ahead of yours. You and I are living in three distinctly different levels of technology." He heard himself rambling, telling Sara things she already knew all too well. The exo was off him now. He vigorously rubbed his arms and legs. Even advanced technology couldn't make a totally comfortable medical device. He leaned across the bed and hung the intricate framework on the hooks in the wall. In the darkness he embraced Sara. "No wonder we are confused." He kissed her. "I love you."

"I've brought much fear into your life."

Daniel released her and sat back. "No-and yes. You've brought me freedom. Without you I would have had to face these beings alone, and the fear alone would have probably killed me by now. But, now I worry for two-no, three of us." He kissed her again. Then he gently mussed her hair and lay back on the bed. She lay down beside him.

"Maybe you should visit Yankee tomorrow, Daniel."

"Yeah," Daniel sighed, "maybe I should. We don't want the state's child welfare department at our door. I'll see him tomorrow. Our new kid needs a Social Security number."

Sara sat up, then put her feet onto the floor.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to check on Eric. I want to make sure he's all right." She left briefly, then came back and crawled into bed. "He's sleeping soundly. He's telepathing profound rest. That's good."

Daniel took her hand and held it comfortingly.

"Daniel, I'm living in such fear that they'll take Eric back. We are totally powerless against them if they should decide to do that."

Daniel sighed into the almost blackness of the bedroom. "You are so right. We are totally powerless against them. We have to hope that they've made a permanent decision. I wish I knew their agenda. And I so want to ask Eric what it's like on the ship, but I know I don't dare-at least not now."

"No, especially not now. He's such a vulnerable little boy, isn't he?"

"He seems so sad at times. It must have been terrible for him."

Sara rolled into him and put her arm over him. "Have you thought that perhaps he misses them?"

Daniel threw back the covers and sat up. "Sara, they're not human. They show no kindness or emotion. Their appearance is so frightening, they give me nightmares. How could a little human boy be comfortable in an environment like that?"

Now Sara sat up next to him. "Have you so quickly forgotten the little hybrid babies we held? Have you forgotten the hybrid children we rocked and held and played with? Have you forgotten all those children that are on that ship?"

"No, of course I haven't. But just because they are up there doesn't mean they're okay."

Sara laid her head on Daniel's shoulder. "We can only hope they are. We want them to be happy, but the Zeta world doesn't know that emotion. They are emotionless."

"Eric is doing really well with us, under the circumstances, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes." Sara paused, then said, "That little boy has much to tell us."

"Yeah. I just hope he doesn't start telling other people."

"Daniel, no one would believe him."

"No? The whole town is still connecting you to the lights. And as long as the beings are here, taking us, the lights from their ship will continue to appear."

"I know. But there's little I can do about that. Perhaps the longer I live here, the more trusting the people of Eagle Bluff will become. We can only hope."

"This is what I hope, Sara-I hope you never stop loving me."

"That, my dear, kind man is a promise I most willingly make. I will love you forever."

He felt her soft hands caress his face. Before he knew it he was gently exploding inside her. He would love her forever, too.

The experience was so familiar by now it made him sick. A white light shot through the ceiling and bathed their bedroom in brilliance. Then the light narrowed until Daniel, Sara, and Eric were clearly defined in its glow. "Damn!" Daniel said. "Damn, they're coming for us again." Eric was in the room and he looked at Daniel, anticipation on his face. Then all three rose in the light and passed through the ceiling and roof of the house. Daniel grabbed wildly for Sara and Eric, but before he could reach them they were all now standing inside the massive starship that hovered above Eagle Bluff. Beings with huge black eyes and huge gray heads came towards them. No matter how many times Daniel saw these beings, the starkness of their features still frightened him. They were the 'grays' of his nightmares.

As the beings half floated, half walked towards them, Daniel stood his ground. "Stop," Daniel said

calmly. "The human boy you already know is with us. Please don't frighten him."

The beings ignored Daniel, and when they confronted him they grabbed his wrists. "Damn you all, I said stop!" Daniel said as he twisted his arms from their grasp. He saw a thin-limbed arm snake out and then he felt a sharp, familiar stab of pain on his forehead. The stunrod had taken him down. Sara went to him and tried to help him to his feet, but he was almost completely paralyzed.

"Daniel," Sara said as the beings stood around them, "please cooperate. We have Eric with us now."

"Where's Eric!" Daniel yelled. He was relieved that at least they had left him his voice this time up. Usually his voice was paralyzed along with the rest of his body.

"He's alright, Daniel. He's with me," Sara said. "Can you see him standing next to me?" she asked with reassurance in her voice.

Daniel could see Eric standing next to his new mother. "I can . . .

I can see him," he choked.

Suddenly Daniel was picked up and carried down a hallway. A door opened in a wall and Daniel was taken inside a room and roughly laid down on the floor. Then the door silently closed.

The room was lit by a kind of indirect lighting that belied its source. Daniel's visits here were always fights for survival, and there was no chance to explore the scientific aspects of the lighting, the invisible doorway, or anything else on this ship.

Now the door silently opened again. "Ann!" Daniel croaked through a dry throat. He was so paralyzed he could barely form the words.

"Where am I, Daniel? Where am I?" Ann almost screamed. She furtively looked about the room.

Daniel could barely breathe. "They won't hurt you, Ann. They will do everything in their power to scare you to death, but they won't permanently hurt you." What was he saying? The beings had very nearly wrecked his life. "Try to stay calm, Ann," Daniel said miserably. He knew he couldn't hide his fear from her.

The door opened once again. This time Sara and Eric were pushed through the door. Sara fell to her knees and cradled Daniel's head in her lap. "Oh, Daniel, why do they treat you so roughly?"

"Because I won't allow these sons-of-bitches to control me. That's why," Daniel said through clenched teeth. Eric looked with alarm at Daniel. Daniel said, "I'm sorry, Eric. I'm not feeling well right now. I shouldn't talk about your friends like this. I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"Ann," Sara said softly, "they have taken you." She reached out and took Ann's hand.

Ann smiled weakly. "I guess they have." Ann began to shake then.

"Hold her, Sara," Daniel telepathed. "She's going into shock."

As Sara took Ann in her arms, a blinding flash lit up the room. "Oh, my God!" Sara screamed, "it's Saul!"

Saul, the man who had appeared to Daniel and Sara so many times before when the beings took them aboard, Saul, the man who had promised himself to Ann, Saul, the man who Daniel confronted and then struck in a state of shock and rage, now turned and looked at Ann. Then he looked at the others. Puzzlement was on his face. Daniel knew, then, why the beings had paralyzed him-they were protecting Saul from Daniel's anger.

Now Saul again turned to Ann and looked at her curiously. "Do I know you?"

Ann reached for him and took his hand. "Honey, it's me, Ann. Don't you know me?" she asked, pathetic desperation in her voice.

Saul pulled his hand away, crossed his arms across his chest, and stared at her. "No."

Ann began to cry. Saul didn't try to comfort her. He simply continued to look at her in a curious way.

"I see you're still working for them," Daniel said.

"Working for them?" Saul asked. "Working for who?"

"Your Zeta keepers," Daniel said, clipping his half paralyzed words.

"I live here," Saul said, matter of fact.

Daniel felt his heart break for Ann. She looked as if her world had just crashed down around her.

Eric pulled away from Sara. He walked to Yankee and looked up at him. "I miss you," Eric said. The child raised his arms to be picked up.

Saul looked at Sara and asked, "Would it be all right if I pick him up?"

"No," Sara whispered. "No, you may not."

Saul slowly bent down to the boy's level. "How are you, my boy?" Saul asked.

"Fine," Eric said. He moved forward, but Sara pulled him away from the man. Turning to Saul, she said, "Under the circumstances, you may not hold Eric ever again. You have my baby on board this craft. You have Rachel's baby as well. The Zeta have grudgingly given us Eric in some kind of a sick exchange for the outrageous hurt they have caused me and my family, so I am Eric's mother and Daniel is his father. This is the way it will be, and from now on every time the beings take us up here, I will fight for my new child, Eric."

Saul said, "You never fought that hard for Daniel when the beings would take you in the past."

In measured words Sara said, "That's because my husband was doing his very best to take care of us both. He fought these beings with everything he had just to keep them away from me. I couldn't possibly fight off your legions of demons, even with my four-times Earth strength. But Eric is a little boy. He can't fight for himself up here. I will fight for my little boy from now on every time they bring us aboard. And I don't have to tell you what kind of trouble the beings will be in with regard to my husband."

Saul seemed nonplused by Sara's comments. He pulled something from his pocket. "Daniel," Sara

telepathed, "Saul has a stunrod!"

Daniel expected the familiar stabbing pain the beings often dealt him, but instead, Saul went slowly down on his haunches next to Daniel.

"Do what you will with me, Saul. I can't fight you when I'm paralyzed."

"I'm not going to hurt you," Saul said. "I'm going to give you your strength back." He smiled.

"Aren't you afraid I'll plaster you all over the deck?" Daniel asked. The paralysis that had seized him was beginning to seriously constrict his throat muscles.

"No," Saul said softly, "I'm not." He took the rod and gently touched Daniel's forehead. Strength came back to Daniel in a burst. He stood up. "I'll give you this much, Saul, you are infinitely gentler than your friends with that thing."

"Thank you," Saul said. He shoved the rod back into his pocket. "I help both you and Sara when they take you, but you are always too upset to realize it." He stared at Ann a long time. Then looked at Sara. "Has this woman ever been up here before?"

"Saul," Ann said, "tell me this is a nightmare. Take me home. Take me away from this place. Take me back to our bed. Please help me understand . . ." she looked about the room, ". . . this. This isn't real. None of this is real. Take me. . ."

Saul interrupted her. "I don't know you. I thought for just a minute I knew you, but I don't. I live here."

Ann began to cry. She put her arms around Saul and clutched at him, but Saul pushed her away. "Look," Saul said, "I don't know who you are. You must be confusing me with someone else."

"I do know you, you bastard! Why are you doing this to me?" Ann beat on the man's chest in tearful frustration and then grabbed the front of his shirt and ripped it open. "Look!" she shouted at the others. "I gave him this." She yanked a gold chain the man had around his neck. "I bought this for him at the souvenir store along the river. We started to talk about marriage that day. Why is he doing this to me?" Ann collapsed to the floor and sobbed uncontrollably.

The door again slid open. A being stepped through it-taller than the others. The being was the one Daniel came to call "The Doctor." It stood quietly, huge, unblinking black eyes staring at them. Shorter beings came into the room and gathered behind the taller being. Without hesitation they took the prisoners out of the room and dragged them down a short hallway into another room. Daniel gasped at what was inside.

He had been here before. He was as frightened now as he was when he came the first time. The room was filled with tables-he didn't want to even guess how many-and almost half the tables had abductees on them. There were men, women, and children, all ages and all sizes; they looked dazed, uncomprehending, as small beings stood over each one of them, probing and poking with their four-fingered hands and threatening instruments.

The beings that had been attending Daniel slammed him on a table, their faces expressionless. They were so calm. He groaned as the hard tabletop met his spine. He saw Sara placed on a tabletop to his left and Ann was put on a table to his right. He felt terrible for Ann. She looked dazed and there was nothing he could do to help her. The first time he had been abducted he knew he must have looked the same.

He felt a sudden tightness on his wrists and ankles. With a heave he arched his back against the restraints, but the beings had moved quickly; Daniel was securely strapped to the table. They had actually done him a favor. This was far preferable to the stunrod.

Daniel waited for the doctor to come to him. He waited for yet another invasion from the being who he hated so much. But the doctor didn't come. His back began to ache from the unyielding tabletop. "Uhh."
A

low, painful moan came from his right. He turned to look at Ann on

the table next to his. A smaller being, four foot high at the tallest, was inserting a probe into Ann's stomach. She squirmed under

the pain of it. Another moan came from Daniel's left. He turned to

see a being standing over Sara. Daniel could see the being was

scraping Sara's leg with an instrument. Daniel felt his self-control snap. He couldn't stand to see them doing this to his wife and he feared for Ann. With massive resolve he heaved himself up from the table and pulled furiously at the straps holding his arms and legs. He thanked God he was considerably stronger than most humans: His nearly perfect cells gave him that strength. There was movement to his left. As he pulled on the straps he saw Sara pulling at her own straps. "Sara, pull! For God's sake, we have to get Ann out of here!"

"Yes, Daniel. Pull." The two of them, each struggling with their own restraints, pulled against the straps until they began to tear. The beings standing over Sara and Ann didn't try to stop them. The beings were determined to study them, yet seemed so passive when their human specimens did something unpredictable. But Daniel really didn't care what made them tick right now; he was determined to take matters into his own hands.

Sara had pulled herself free before Daniel. She came to him and helped him break the rest of his straps. Daniel got off the table and confronted the small being by Ann's table. Emotions were impossible to read on the beings' faces. They simply stood there, quietly, as if waiting for orders. Daniel looked quickly at the being and then he and Sara set themselves to the task of freeing Ann from her table. A being raised its hand once as if to stop them, but quickly dropped its hand to its side when Daniel glared into its black eyes. Once freed, Ann fell into Sara's arms. She was beyond frightened-beyond terrified. "What do we do now, Sara?" Daniel asked. "We can't leave without Eric." Ann began to gag. Sara patted her back and talked to her soothingly, but Daniel knew the only cure for her panic was to get her home. He wasn't sure how they were going to accomplish that because the doctor being was now standing in the doorway and Eric was standing next to the doctor. Daniel moved towards the doctor, but there were smaller beings behind it. They rushed past the doctor and Eric and then grabbed Daniel and Sara. They struggled against the beings, but they were finally overwhelmed by them. Ann looked dazed and uncomprehending. The beings dragged all three of them out of the room and down the hallway. He was quite sure the beings were taking them to the exit hatch. A light burst in the hallway. Daniel felt himself fall into the light and then he went down it at a frightening speed. Sometimes the beings would float them home, but tonight they were were not so gentle: The roof of Daniel's house was coming at him far too fast. And he and Sara hit the bed hard enough to knock the breath out of him.

"Where's Eric?" Sara choked. "Where is he?"

"I don't know, Sara." Daniel was sickened at the realization that Eric had not been sent back with them.

The light that brought them home winked out. Sara was hyperventilating. "They're not sending him back to us, Daniel." She took long breaths as Daniel tried to quiet her. "I should never have resisted them, Daniel. They are punishing me," she said, stammering as she talked.

Once again the light burst from the ceiling, and down it came Eric. The relief Daniel felt was so profound, he began to cry as he embraced his new little boy. Eric, too, began to cry. Sara reached for the little boy.

"Ann!" Daniel said. "What about Ann, Sara?"

"I'm . . . I'm sure they returned her. I'm sure they did."

"I have to go and reassure her," Daniel said. "She can't face this alone. I'll have to see her." He felt sick for her. He suspected she was at the point of insanity right now.

"Yes," Sara said as she cuddled Eric. "Yes, please go and talk with her. She will be upset."

Daniel got up from the bed and from the night table he picked up his amulet and put it around his neck. The diamond shaped frame with the black stone set in the center by its electromagnetic force field dangled from the braided chain. He looked down at himself. "I'd better put on my robe." He fumbled in the closet for his bathrobe and pulled it on over his pajamas. Then he put his hand on the pendant and visualized the inside of Ann's home. The pendant became warm and in an instant he was standing in her living room. He could hear someone crying.

Daniel called in the dark, "Is that you, Ann? It's me-Daniel. Don't be frightened. I came here with the amulet."

A light switched on. "Daniel, come in here," Ann sobbed. "I'm afraid to move. Please come."

Daniel made his way through the half light of the living room and then to Ann's bedroom. Ann was lying on the bed in a fetal position. She was the only person in the bedroom.

"This didn't happen, Daniel. Tell me I dreamed it," she said through tearful eyes.

Daniel sat down on the bed. "Has Saul been staying with you?"

"Y. . . yes."

"Where is Saul now?" Daniel asked gently.

"He said he had to work late tonight."

"What does he do that would require him to work until. . ." Daniel glanced at his watch, "four in the morning?"

"He's a landscape architect. He said he had to figure a big job tonight. He said something about having to present the bid tomorrow."

"Do you believe that's what he's doing?" Daniel knew he was giving her the third degree, but he had to get Ann to see the true nature of her fiance.

Ann sat bolt upright. "No, I don't. Not now. Not after what I've just seen."

"And what did you just see, Ann?"

"I saw things I would never have believed possible. I thought all my years of regressive hypnosis on so-called abductees would have prepared me for this, but it hasn't," she whispered.

"What did you see that's so unbelievable?" Daniel dreaded her forthcoming answer.

"At first I felt as if I was in a dream, but as time went on I knew it was real. You were there. Sara and Eric were there. And . . . and Saul was there." She choked on her words.

"Do you remember where you were?"

Ann exploded. "You know where we were! We were with those damned beings you and Sara have described to me over and over again!"

Daniel's thoughts flashed back to the time when he and Sara first got to know Ann. He remembered the lecture Ann had given Daniel about the importance of being docile in their presence. Her attitude, Daniel noted, had changed dramatically now that she had met them face to face, but he wasn't about to bring that up. That would be best left for another time. He took Ann by her arms. "Now you know what Sara and I have been going through, Ann. Now you know," he said softly, trying to comfort her.

"Yes, now I know." Her voice trailed off.

"Maybe Saul really is working tonight," Daniel said, reassuring.

Ann looked up quickly. "That . . . that's Saul coming into the driveway now."

"You're sure?" Daniel asked, uncomfortable now. "I'd better go."

"No, Daniel, don't go. Please stay."

"I don't want Saul to catch me here. I'd better leave," Daniel said.

"You stay right here. I want you here when he comes in," she said, begging.

Daniel heard the garage door close and the door into the house open. Footsteps came across the carpeting and then a man with a salt and pepper beard stood in the hallway. The front of his shirt was torn.

"What in the hell are you doing here?" Saul's face was red with rage. Daniel looked quickly at Ann. Then he looked back at Saul. "Ann called," Daniel said. "She was frightened. It seems she had a nightmare," Daniel lied.

"Your wife could have come," Saul said angrily. "It seems to me there would have been no need for you to come. Tell me, did you know that I had to work tonight?" Saul said with an accusing tone to his voice.

"Saul," Daniel said, "that's not fair of you. Ann was frightened and wanted me to come. Sara couldn't come because she didn't want to leave Eric."

"I want to know what's going on. First you hit me and now you are sitting in this bedroom with my . . . my . . ."

"Look at your shirt, Saul." Daniel pointed to the open shirt with half its buttons gone.

"What . . . ?" Saul looked down at his shirt front. "How did . . . how did that happen? It looks like I've been in a fight." Ann put her head in her hands. Saul said, "I don't understand. This shirt was perfectly fine when I went to work this morning."

Daniel looked at Ann. "I'd better go." He began to back out of the bedroom door.

"Wait a minute," Saul said. "Don't you live in Eagle Bluff? Eagle Bluff's a good half hour drive from Dubuque. I didn't see any car parked out front. How did you get here? And what in the hell are you doing in a bathrobe?"

"I . . . I'm going now, Ann," Daniel said. "Sara will call you tomorrow to see how you're doing." He tried to make his smile reassuring.

"Wait a minute," Saul said gruffly. He put his arm across the doorway to bar Daniel's exit. "First explain."

Gazing steadily at Saul, Daniel said, "Saul, I love my wife dearly. My presence here is not the way it may look to you."

"But how did you get here?" Saul asked insistently.

Daniel put his hand on Saul's arm and slowly pushed it aside so the doorway was no longer blocked. Saul looked surprised. "So you really are stronger than you look," Saul said.

"Yes. And now I'm going home. I won't explain how I came here or how I'll get back home. I have a feeling, though, that someday you'll know." Daniel walked through the bedroom doorway, through the living room, and out the front door. When he closed the front door, he stepped around the corner of the house, touched the pendant of his amulet, and in a blink was home.

Daniel awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of a quiet little voice sobbing from the shadows. "Eric, is that you?"

Little feet hurriedly pattered across the bedroom carpet. Careful not to wake Sara, Daniel picked Eric up and put him between himself and Sara. "I'm afraid," Eric said fretfully.

Daniel snuggled against Eric to give him a feeling of safety. "What are you afraid of, Eric? You can tell me."

"I don't want to live with them anymore."

Daniel wiped a tear off his own cheek. "Eric, you will always live with us. Do you believe me?"

"We always go there," the little boy said. He pointed upwards.

"Someday we won't go there anymore. I promise."

Daniel felt Sara's arm reach out and embrace them both. It was the last thing Daniel remembered before he fell into sleep.

Chapter Three

"Why didn't you tell me about Saul's involvement with the beings?" Ann leveled her gaze at Daniel. She had come to the college the next day and now had Daniel trapped in his office.

"We didn't want to hurt you," Daniel said.

"Thanks for giving me no credit at all," Ann said sarcastically. "Now I think I know why you belted him."

Daniel sat quietly. He knew that anything he might add right now would simply inflame her.

Ann leaned forward in her chair and in a whispered measured tone said, "Daniel, I have been abducted by alien beings. Yes or no?" she hissed.

"Yes," Daniel responded as gently as he could.

"And they hurt me?" Tears popped from Ann's eyes.

"Yes," Daniel said again. He felt sorry for her, but he didn't know how to comfort her.

Ann jammed both fists into her eyes and began to sob. "And somehow Saul is caught up in the whole thing. But he's on their side, isn't he? This can't be happening."

Daniel said, "I'm sorry to tell you that you are one of us now, Ann." He almost said, "Welcome to our nightmare," but knew that would have been insensitive. Ann needed his friendship, not his sarcasm.

"I don't want to be one of you," she said, raging now. "I don't want to be one of you."

"Shhh," Daniel said. "Keep your voice down." Anyone walking by Daniel's office door would hear Ann raging at him. Ann quickly lowered her voice. "I'm. . . I'm sorry, Daniel." She sat for a time, then said, "Tell me Saul was not part of this horrible experience." There was pleading in her tone.

"I can't tell you that, Ann," Daniel said kindly, "because he was part of your experience. He was on board the alien ship. Sara and I often see him when we are taken."

The color drained from Ann's face. "So this. . . so this is the man that you've seen in the hybrid nursery?"

"Yes." Daniel knew that trying to spare Ann would have been pointless. The beings would no doubt take Ann again. She might as well be prepared for it.

"And Saul, my Saul, was the man who gave you Eric?"

"The same," Daniel answered.

"I'm going to lose my mind, Daniel," Ann said, matter of fact. "I can't live with this knowledge. And I

can't live with the fear that the beings will take me again."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, the beings somehow switch off your fear. Sara and I have these terrible experiences with them, but in a day or two we seem to be able to cope. I don't know why, but I'm always able to sleep afterwards. . ."

"Daniel, I was terrified in their presence. I . . ."

Daniel put up his hands and interrupted. "Yes. In their presence you were terrified. So was I. So was Sara. But when they send you home again, the fear of the experience seems to dissipate. They remove the fear so you can live with abduction after abduction. Right now this experience is new to you and your terror is so real you can almost reach out and touch it, but it will get easier. You may not become less angry, but you will become less fearful."

"Why would they want me? And why now?"

"We ask ourselves that all the time. We don't know what their agenda is."

"But how am I going to cope with Saul? I've seen him in the worst possible place in the worst set of circumstances. How do I go on with our relationship?"

"What did Saul say after I left your house last night?"

"We had a fight-a big one. I've never seen him so jealous."

"Did you accuse him of being on board the ship?"

"No. I was too upset to discuss it. And I so wanted to believe I dreamed the whole thing. What if we are wrong, Daniel? What if Saul is completely innocent in all this? Throwing it up in his face would just wreck everything between us."

"His shirt was ripped, Ann. You ripped it, and I'm sure he didn't go to work that way."

"Yes," Ann whispered. "His shirt was ripped."

"And you didn't pursue that?"

"No. I was too angry with him to think."

"How did you resolve this last night?"

Ann sighed. "He went back to his apartment. It was nearly dawn when he left. We were both exhausted and fed up with fighting."

"Have you talked to him today?"

"No," Ann said miserably. She looked down and fidgeted in her chair, then looked up. "He'll probably leave me, Daniel, and I don't know what to think about that. I should leave him."

"If Saul truly doesn't know what's going on, he will come to you for comfort and support."

"I don't want to see him." Ann spoke softly.

Daniel smiled. "Even though he doesn't know what's going on himself, I think that deep down in his psyche he knows there's something wrong. I think he'll be back and that he'll ask for your help."

"Oh, God. I can't do this alone, Daniel. I'll need the support of you and Sara."

"I know," Daniel said. "We will do everything in our power to help Saul solve his own mystery-if he wants to solve it."

They would protect Eric from his former life-a cold life fostered by emotionless beings. Secretly, though, Daniel hoped that Eric would begin to open up to them. His speech was stilted, and Sara had mentioned on several occasions that she suspected Eric had learned what English he knew from Saul.

The key, they decided, was to treat Eric as they would any other child they might love. Above all else they wanted him to feel safe. The constant visitations the beings heaped upon them would make this task extremely difficult. Still, with determination, Daniel was sure they could raise Eric successfully.

"Eric, Honey, would you please hand me the picnic basket?" Sara asked. The Saturday afternoon was beautiful, and the clearing in Cottonwood Park smelled of new-mown spring grass.

Eric struggled with the size and weight of the basket, but finally managed to hand it to Sara. Daniel suppressed a smile. It was obvious to Daniel that Eric was trying to fit into his new family.

"Eric," Daniel said, "after we eat, let's get the kite out of the car. Shall we do that?"

"Yes," Eric said without displaying emotion.

Daniel made light banter about how he and Sara had flown a kite while they were dating, and about how much fun it was. Eric paid little attention. Daniel felt quiet desperation for his new charge. And he felt a sadness from Eric that he wasn't sure either he or Sara could cut through. They ate quietly, Daniel trying not to watch his new son, but watching him anyway. Eric ate and stared at the trees beyond, as if he was in another world.

"See, Eric? See the kites in the sky way over there?" Sara pointed above the tree line. A small, red diamond shaped kite was floating high in the sky.

Eric turned his eyes to the kites and kept eating, but a small smile flashed across his face.

Daniel stood up and took Eric's hand. "Put down that ham and cheese, Eric; you can finish later. Let's all go kite flying."

Daniel got out the kite and began assembling it. He gently tried to enlist Eric's help, but Eric contributed nothing to the effort. He did watch intently, however. He held the kite's tail in his hand and waited with endless patience.

In the middle of Daniel's kite rigging, Eric abruptly turned around and walked to Sara. Then he crawled up on to the top of the picnic table and sat, crosslegged, staring off into the surrounding trees.

"What's wrong, Honey," Sara asked.

With pain across his face, Eric said in a low voice, "I don't know what to do."

Daniel went to him and sat on the picnic table next to Sara. "What do you mean, Eric? You mean you don't know how to help me put the kite together? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. I don't know how," Eric said, tears in his whisper.

"Honey," Sara said, "you can talk to us. You can tell us anything you want. Daniel and I will understand." She glanced at Daniel and telepathed, "How can we make him feel comfortable with us?"

Daniel said brightly, "Eric, we have a kite that's waiting to be flown. Let's fly it. And when we're finished having fun with it we can all explore the park. It's a big place. And there's a nice visitors' center that has lots of neat stuff in it."

Daniel lifted Eric from the table and set him on the grass.

"Come on," Sara said cheerily. She took Eric's hand and Daniel took the other. Eric looked up at them both, then walked with them out of the clearing.

Once Eric got the hang of keeping the kite string tight and letting more string out, he managed to keep the little kite up in the air for some time. But he didn't seem to get the thrill from it that Daniel and Sara did. Kite flying had been a spiritual experience for Daniel, but for Eric, at least today, it was another set of actions that led to a predictable result. After a half an hour, Daniel helped Eric reel the kite in.

They spent a good hour walking down the shady paths and browsing through the visitors' center. At times Eric's eyes went wide with disbelief. Daniel felt relief that Eric was expressing some sort of response. Eric was especially fascinated by the aquarium. He pointed at the glass and said, "Like me! Like me!" Neither Daniel or Sara knew what he meant, but they were thrilled at his show of enthusiasm. Daniel hoped that some good family time would help bring Eric out of his shell.

"Why are you blinking, Sweetheart?" Sara set a fresh cup of morning coffee down in front of Daniel. Daniel had been rubbing his eye since he'd awakened that morning. He had first thought that he'd picked up some pollen while in the park the day before, but now he wasn't so sure.

"My eye really hurts." Daniel looked at Sara. His mind's eye saw a fleeting image of the metal petaled contraption move swiftly down and pull his eye from its socket. The image disappeared from Daniel's mind as quickly as it had appeared.

Sara shuddered, "I don't even like to think about it."

Daniel could see the shudder of dread pass through Sara's delicate frame. "Come here. Sit down in front of me," he said gently.

Daniel noticed Eric watching them closely as Daniel came around the kitchen table and seated himself in front of Sara.

"Let me heal you first," Sara said.

"All right." He held his wrists out to her. She grasped them lightly and sat back. He knew she was relaxing herself into that state where she could sense his energy field. Suddenly he felt her healing power surge through him. Daniel gently pulled his wrists from her grasp. "Enough, Sara. You need your strength."

"Do you feel all right, now?"

"Yes. The burning around my eye is gone." He rubbed his eye and was relieved that the pain was no longer there. "Now it's your turn. Give me your wrists."

She offered them to him. He took them in his fingers and allowed his eyes to slip out of focus. He felt his healing power go out to her, and he felt her body right itself as his own energy swept through her pain. Dear God, he thought, what a wonderful gift her father had given them both-the gift of healing.

Eric looked at them with what Daniel perceived to be genuine concern. Daniel picked Eric up off his chair and put him on his lap, then kissed the top of Eric's head. Already he loved this boy as much as he loved his daughter Rachel. Now Daniel ventured a carefully posed question. "Eric, who taught you to speak English?"

"Saul," Eric said. "Saul talked to me when I was with the others." Daniel winced inwardly. Sara looked at him quickly, a look of warning on her face.

But Daniel wanted to know about this boy who had come to them. He plunged ahead. "Eric, what are your friends-the others-like?"

The boy looked perplexed. Daniel tried again. "Were you happy when you lived with your friends?"

"I . . . I was with them always."

"Yes, I know, Eric, but . . ."

"Daniel, don't," Sara said. "We can talk of these things another time."

Daniel ignored Sara and looked squarely into Eric's face. "Tell me about Saul, Eric. Was he nice to you?"

Eric's eyes brightened. "Saul said he was my friend. A friend is something different, Saul told me. A friend is better. I want Saul."

Daniel was devastated. He felt like he had just been kicked in the teeth by a little boy he barely knew. Sara said, "Eric, Honey, how is a friend different? Different from what?"

"Saul said friends stick together. Like glue. They help each other and show each other . . ." He trailed off, not knowing words for what he wanted to say. Tears began to brim in his eyes. "Saul is my friend. Saul is my friend. I want to see Saul. What is glue?"

Daniel picked up Eric and held him. "I know you miss him, Eric." He looked at Sara, not knowing what to do or say. Somehow the little boy had formed an attachment to a human. Yes, he'd chosen Daniel's least favorite person on or off the planet, but that was a hopeful sign. If Eric could love a human, then he could come to love them.

"Umm. . . Eric, Would you like to visit Yankee this morning?" Daniel asked. "Don't you remember that he wanted to be your friend, too?"

"Yes," Eric said, disinterest in his small voice.

"All right. But first we have to help your mom on her way." Daniel stood up, set Eric down, and pulled Sara to her feet. He looked at her lovingly. "I guess I'll have to let you go to work."

"Yes," she said despondently. "I hate to leave Eric." She leaned down, picked Eric up, and carried him to the doorway.

"Be good for Daniel while I'm gone this morning." Sara cuddled and kissed Eric, then set him back down on the floor. Eric looked up at her and put his four-year-old arms around her legs and hugged them.

"Are you my friend?" He whispered to her.

"I-I'm your best friend. Daddy and I are your best friends. I promise." Then she stooped down and whispered, "I'll be home at lunch time. All right? Then you and I can spend the whole afternoon together while Daddy goes to work-just like we do every day."

The boy looked into her blue eyes. "Take your eyes out."

"Honey, I have to go to work now," she said patiently.

"Please," he said plaintively.

Sara got down on her haunches. She tipped her head forward and covered her eyes with her hand to spare her little boy the pain of seeing her remove huge contact lenses from her eyes. The lenses dropped into her hand. She put her head up and looked directly into Eric's eyes. Her eyes were black. Not just the pupil, but the iris and white as well. Sara had no white to her eyes. Her blue eyes were contact lenses she constantly wore to cleverly camouflage the existence of her mutant DNA from the good people of Eagle Bluff-from the people of Earth.

To Sara's great shame, the people from her planet didn't have black eyes like hers: their eyes were exactly like the eyes of humans on Earth. She didn't know why her eyes were black. No one did. Now she was showing her eyes to a little boy who came to them from aliens who also had black eyes.

She cupped her hands over her eyes and put the contacts back in. Then she looked up at Eric and blinked several times, settling the lens surfaces against her eyeball. "Remember, Eric, we can't tell anyone about my black eyes."

"I won't tell," he said.

"I know you won't." She kissed him on the cheek. Then she looked at Daniel and said, "I'd better go now. Save some lunch for me." With that, she was out the door.

Daniel turned to Eric. "Eric, would you please help me clean up the breakfast table?" He handed a plate to Eric. Eric took it and walked to the dishwasher with it. He dropped the plate into the washer rack and looked back at Daniel.

Daniel handed another plate to Eric. Eric took it. As Daniel watched this little blonde-headed boy carefully put the plate into the rack, he thought about how full his life had become. After Rachel had grown up, he missed taking care of his little girl. Without hope of ever finding another mate to share his life with him, he became lonely. Rachel's absence from the house took its toll on him. He wanted to remarry, but he didn't think he had the physical energy to contribute to another relationship, let alone raise another child. Polio sucked the strength from its victims, and as each year passed, he felt himself becoming physically weaker.

And then Sara arrived with her black black eyes and her spaceship. Her disability ran even deeper than his own. She was truly convinced that her black eyes and mutant DNA set her apart from the rest of the human race that was sprinkled throughout the galaxy. But Daniel made her see herself in a more positive light. And she had given him hope as well-and a new body.

When he was given the choice of acquiring a perfect body from her father and his technology, he couldn't accept Santoo's offer. He knew that a new body would cause him far more trouble than it was worth. Daniel was short-five foot four inches-and he walked with a distinct limp. That's the way people knew him. His left shoe was built up to compensate for his shorter leg, and when he met Sara he had a brace on that leg as well as a shorter brace on the other.

Now the exoskeleton Sara's father had helped him build replaced both braces. The exo gave him terrific power and stamina. Soon, even the exo wouldn't be necessary because the perfect cellular structure Santoo's technology blessed him with was already giving him strength he'd never known. He would eventually develop to four times the strength of an Earth human, and his life span was already expanded to two-hundred and fifty years. He and his beautiful black-eyed Sara would live to a very old age.

Only a few intimates knew of his healing. To everyone else his familiar limp was proof of his crippled body, although with time the limp would disappear altogether. But it was crucial his healing remain a secret. If his true nature would be revealed, his family and friends would never have another moment of peace. And he didn't want to even think about how he would explain away his eventual total healing. He had still not found a perfect way to explain that.

"Here's a dish, Daddy." Eric's voice brought him out of his musings. The counter was piled with dishes Eric had brought from the table.

As Daniel, with Eric's hand in his, walked towards Yankee's newly established law office, he thought back on how he first met Yankee. Yankee O'Hara first came to Daniel's attention through Yankee's doctor, Karen Wilson. Yankee had suffered a catastrophic car accident in which he had lost limbs, the inability to move, talk, or breathe on his own; and when Daniel and Sara first saw him no one was even sure if he was aware of his surroundings. Put in cruder terms, they assumed he was a vegetable. Karen asked Daniel and Sara to try to heal Yankee in their own special way. She was one of the intimates who knew their secret. When Sara received clear telepathic pleas from Yankee, they knew he was mentally alive. Sara's father, through his technology, made it possible for Yankee's original body, the body he was born into, make a clone of his original body. But the cloned body was physically perfect. In a matter of seconds Yankee regained his limbs, his muscle control, and his life. Yankee was now living in his clone. And again, only a few intimates knew of Yankee's healing, or even knew he had had an accident at all.

Daniel pulled the door open. A bell on the door tinkled pleasantly. A tall man with a very red beard looked out of his office and grinned mirthfully. "Hi, Daniel. It's good to see you." Yankee motioned for Eric to come to him. Then he bent down and picked Eric up. "Hi, my new little friend. I'm glad to see

you, too."

The word 'friend' made Eric look up at Yankee.

"Hello, Yankee," Eric said softly.

"It's sure good to see you both. Eric, do you know what I keep in this desk drawer? Come and see."

Eric moved over to the other side of the broad walnut desk. Yankee opened the drawer and pulled out a large red sucker. He handed it to the little boy, who stared at it.

Yankee bent down and took the sucker from Eric. "Oh, here, Eric. You have to take the wrapper off. . . then, you pop it in your mouth, and suck." Yankee demonstrated this process with glee.

Eric imitated Yankee's actions, and his eyes lit up when the sugary tart taste of the sucker registered on his tongue.

"I think he likes it." Daniel watched with satisfaction. "And how is married life agreeing with you?" Daniel took a seat in the leather wing chair nearby.

"It's wonderful. I love Karen as fiercely as you love Sara, Daniel." Yankee smiled at his comparison and then asked, "What brings you here this morning?"

"I, uh, want to talk about the adoption, but . . ." Daniel felt uncomfortable. He didn't want to discuss this in front of Eric.

"Eric," Yankee said, "how would you like to watch some TV while Daniel and I visit? I have some toys for you, too." He led Eric into another room and turned on a portable TV.

Eric picked up a toy rocket ship that was made of plastic. It was hot pink with wheels under it. Daniel said, "Eric, do you know what that is?"

Eric looked up from the floor at Daniel. "No."

Daniel wasn't surprised. Alien spacecraft weren't hot pink and they certainly didn't have wheels.

"Come on out here, Daniel. Let's discuss this." They stepped into Yankee's office. "I'm not expecting anyone until ten, so we have time to talk this over." Yankee handed Daniel a can of soda, then took one for himself and settled back into his chair.

Daniel could hear Eric making motor noises as he pushed a toy along the carpeting. "Let's get this over with, Yankee. Sara's so nervous about the State coming around and asking questions. I'll have to admit that I'm pretty uncomfortable about this myself."

"Well, faking an adoption is illegal. The law would insist that he be treated as an abandoned child, put in foster care, which may or may not be your home. Then they'd go all out trying to find the parents, whom we know aren't anywhere, and only after that exhaustive search would they let you apply for adoption. It could take a year."

"I thought you would have had this all figured out by now," Daniel said, frustrated.

"I do . . . I do." He hesitated. "You remember when Sara came to town and told everyone she was from France?"

"Of course I do."

"I think that would be the best course of action with Eric. I think you simply need to tell people that Eric is Sara's son from a previous relationship. Tell them, if they ask, that the little boy has been staying with relatives and has come to live with you now that Sara has a 'proper' home and a less transient job."

"So everyone would consider me the step-dad?"

"For awhile, yes, but over time, people don't care and won't worry about it. They will see you as a family."

Daniel marveled at the simple approach to the problem.

"But what about a birth certificate? He'll need one to get a Social Security number-he'll need it for everything on this Earth."

"You're right about that. And there's the hitch. We have to figure out a way to plant a birth certificate. Maybe not in any county in this state, or in any state. Maybe somewhere overseas, where Sara supposedly came from, where we can 'pay off' some official."

"I think you are onto something, Yankee." Daniel looked down to see Eric holding up the now empty sucker stick. He was holding it up with a pleading look on his face.

"Got another one of those suckers, Yankee?" Daniel said, laughing. "Looks like we're going for a sugar high, here."

The conversation stopped while Yankee rifled through the drawer. Daniel hoped that Eric's attention had been focused on toys and food, rather than conversation.

"Isn't it expensive to pay off some official? Wouldn't that get out eventually? What's to stop this 'official' from talking?"

"I don't think it's that big of a deal to them. But if that bothers you, we could try something else, something that only you and Sara could pull off."

Daniel sat forward. "You mean putting the information in some file somewhere, or on some database. How do they do that-say-in France?"

"I can look into that. I imagine it's not much different from the American system. It used to be that baptism was the registry for birth. It was recorded at the local church. But nowadays I believe there will be some sort of registry office for each district. Much of the birth information has been computerized. I'm thinking that if a file was inserted on the proper server, the record would show that young Eric was truly born to Sara."

"What about the father's name?"

"I think she'd have to say that the father was unknown."

"Great. That makes her promiscuous and Eric illegitimate. Can't we make up a name?"

"You can do anything you want. Just make sure your story is consistent and doesn't raise some district employee's red flag."

"The four of us will have to go. I'm not leaving Eric with Steve and Rachel."

"My God, Daniel, Rachel is your daughter. If you can't trust her . . ."

"That's not it," Daniel quickly interrupted. "Sara and I are afraid to leave Eric with them because-

"Because what?"

Daniel sighed loudly. "They got us again."

Yankee's eyes widened. "When?"

"A few nights ago. And they took Ann this time."

"My God," Yankee breathed. "My God," he said again. "Where was Eric during all this?"

"They took Eric up too. And Saul."

Yankee quickly leaned forward in his chair. "Did Saul recognize you?"

"I don't think so. Maybe he was faking it, but he's a cruel man if he was. He didn't seem to recognize Ann, and I don't have to tell you that it just about broke Ann's heart."

"Yeah," Yankee breathed. "No doubt . . . It seems you can't keep Eric from the visitors."

"No," Daniel said, "we can't keep him away from them."

"Then stop and think this through, man. They could take the three of you while you are enroute to France. They've taken you before while you were flying in the shuttle. They can do it again."

Daniel took a breath. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying," Yankee said slowly and patiently, "that you need to leave Eric with Rachel. If they want him, they will take him regardless of where he's at. This operation is too dangerous to take a small child with you."

Daniel sat back in his chair. "You're right. Of course, you're right. I don't know what I was thinking of." He sighed deeply, frustration setting in. Then he said, "You're coming with us, aren't you?"

"No."

"But you have to. We can't do this alone."

"And what good am I going to do? Besides, I'm not afraid to tell you that I could be disbarred if it's found out I've even helped you plan this."

"Damn, you're right. Well, that simplifies it considerably. Sara and I will take the shuttle and do it ourselves. Sara and Santoo did this kind of stuff all the time before I met them. You know that. They'd sneak into medical labs and leave critical information behind. And they were never caught. Never. We have no choice but to do it this way." He got up from his chair. "It looks like Sara and I have some heavy research ahead of us."

Yankee smiled. "You'll figure it out."

"Yeah," Daniel said. "We'll figure it out."

"What?"

Sara almost barked at the mention of it. Daniel knew he should have eased her into this. "It will work, Honey. We're not ordinary people. We have ways . . ."

"To bypass the law," Sara interrupted.

"Then what would you suggest?" Daniel asked. The arguments between them were few and rarely heated. This one was different. Daniel felt like walking away from her.

"Something legal, Daniel. I don't want false records to break down under scrutiny and then the State of Iowa taking Eric away from us. That would be more than I could . . ." She began to sob. Daniel took her in his arms. A little boy stood in the doorway.

"Why are you sad?" Eric asked.

"Oh, Honey." Sara picked Eric up and cuddled him to her. "Daniel and I are just having a disagreement."

Eric reached out to Daniel and grasped his shirt. "Don't be sad," he said.

Daniel was shocked at Eric's sudden display of maturity. Sara put her hand on Eric's shoulder and said, "Eric, we know this is difficult for you. You came to us, probably without you having a choice in the matter, and Daniel and I realize that this life with us is very different from the life you lived before."

Eric crawled up on Sara's lap and looked into her eyes. "Will you be my friend always?" he asked quietly.

Sara was suddenly overcome by the directness of this boy. She hugged him fiercely. Eric's hand reached towards Daniel and Daniel took it.

The way was now perfectly clear to Daniel, and he hoped to Sara as well. They had to save this boy. He was not an orphan: He was Daniel and Sara's son, and anything illegal that might transpire in regard to Eric's status was now justified in Daniel's mind. He would not lose one second of sleep over what they were about to do.

Chapter Four

Daniel was grateful for the warmer spring weather. He well remembered standing out here in the woods

while the winter wind would almost take his head off. Now they were standing out here on an almost warm Saturday afternoon. As much as Daniel wanted to fly the shuttle, he had to admit he was a bit uneasy anytime he flew it in full daylight. Usually they flew the shuttle at night when they had the protection of darkness.

Now Sara pushed a button on a small transmitter she had pulled from her pocket. The ground began to move back as the door under the turf slowly opened a rectangular hole in the ground revealing the shuttle below. The shuttle was circular, about forty feet in diameter and sixteen feet thick at the center. The vehicle they were about to fly in looked very much like a flying saucer. This was the ship that Santoo and Sara had had hidden here for the last twelve years. Sara and her father, Santoo, had been coming to Earth for many years. They brought with them medical knowledge that they freely, albeit surreptitiously gave to the people of Earth. They would come from their distant planet in Santoo's starship but would use the shuttle for short hops around the Earth. They found themselves visiting BioMed so many times, they decided to construct a permanent shelter for the shuttle. The shuttle was less than four miles from Daniel's house, but it was very cleverly hidden; there was little worry of anyone ever stumbling upon it. Santoo had bought the timber area the shuttle was hidden on, and 'No Trespassing' signs kept curious people out. As an added precaution, after Daniel and Sara had committed their lives to each other, Santoo and Daniel had installed a cloaking device for the shuttle. Although the shuttle was hidden below the ground, the hole it was hidden in was always in danger of being seen when the motors lifted it above the ground. Cloaking the shuttle was an added safety precaution-a necessary one since Daniel and Sara flew it far more often than when Santoo and Sara flew it in the past.

The cloaking device required a substantial amount of power. The shuttle was nuclear powered, but even with Santoo's advanced technology, using the cloaking device too much could dangerously squander the nuclear fuel.

Santoo, and Sara's mother Chumaya, would come back from time to time. It was their work, their life, to go unseen with the aid of their amulets into labs and research facilities. There they would leave behind useful, highly advanced medical information on file servers and hard drives. But they at any time might be light years from Earth on another planet in the galaxy doing the same kind of work there. Daniel fully appreciated the enormous scientific power of Sara's people. But even with all this power at their disposal, Daniel's now as well as Sara's, they were still no match for the alien entities that abducted them anytime they pleased.

The door was fully open now. Sara fished her amulet from inside her shirt and let it hang on its chain outside of her coat. She pulled Daniel to him, against the amulet. Sara visualized where she wanted the amulet to take them, the amulet warmed, and they were instantly standing inside the shuttle. Sara could have easily taken them right through the closed overhead doors and into the shuttle. But she didn't. Daniel loved to see the big doors of the underground storage bay roll silently back and reveal the craft beneath. Nothing could replace that thrill, and Daniel enjoyed it thoroughly every time they came here to fly.

Now the cabin lights came up. Daniel never ceased to thrill to the sight of what was inside. Two seats, side by side, were in the middle of the cramped space. A large viewscreen was erected in front of the seats. A control stick between the seats came up from the floor, and a flat touchplate-a control panel-was in front of the seats. On the touchplate were various areas with contact switches below each area so that when a particular place was pressed, the contact switch was activated. Written on the touchplate were explanations of the operating functions in Sara's language. Daniel could actually read some of those explanations now.

They sat down in the seats-Daniel on the left so he could operate the flight stick with his right hand, and Sara on the right. Daniel pressed the touchplate and he could feel the shuttle gently rising to ground level.

He pressed the touchplate again: the shuttle was now cloaked: the ship was invisible.

"We're up," he mumbled to himself. He pressed the touchplate yet again. The familiar hum of the gravity drive sounded like music to Daniel. He twisted the top of the stick and the shuttle began slowly rising from the rack that had lifted it out of the ground. There was no sense of movement. The gravity drive isolated them from the Earth's gravity. While on the shuttle they were under the influence of its gravity. It was like being on their own little planet.

Below him he saw the rack slowly descend into the ground. When it reached the bottom, the door slid neatly across the hole, leaving no trace of the shuttle's hiding place. The gravity drive hummed and the trees fell away from them within the border of the viewscreen.

"Where to, my dear?" Daniel asked cheerfully.

"Let's follow the Mississippi for a few miles before we head to France."

Daniel twisted the top of the stick until they had climbed to five-thousand feet. The diffused image of Eagle Bluff shimmered peacefully in the air of early spring. Buds had begun to pop several days ago and now Daniel could see the faint green tinge of life that had permeated through the trees in the timber below them.

Barely an hour later they were over the coast of France. With the aid of the navigation computer aboard the craft, they were now over Le Blanc, a small town in south central France, and the little hamlet was barely visible in the night. This was perfect. Very few people would be on the streets. The only visible activity appeared to surround a small tavern on a corner as lights shown from the tavern windows. Daniel chuckled as he put the shuttle down in a small field; he was making a bona fide crop circle. The streets and houses had disappeared behind the trees between them and the town. Finding a place to land was easy. Before anyone would even be aware of their presence, they would be heading back to Eagle Bluff.

He cloaked the shuttle as quickly as he dared, hoping no stray pedestrian walking home from a night of partying would see his landing.

They had planned carefully for this. They knew the sun would be down when they arrived, and to better hide their movements, they had worn dark clothing. The spring air was cool, and streets dimly lit.

They had their 'ducks in a row,' as Daniel delighted in saying. Sara and her father had done work in France many times in the past. Sara had friends who lived there, and before she and Daniel had embarked on this mission, Sara and Daniel had talked with one friend in particular extensively. They knew exactly where they were going and exactly what to do, once they got there-theoretically, anyway.

Now Daniel and Sara walked in silence into the town. Finding the public records building was going to be a bit of a challenge. They assumed it would be near the center of town, and hoped it would stand out among other buildings due to its important nature. They already knew the address.

"Here," Sara whispered. She pointed to a street sign. "And there, I think," Sara whispered excitedly.

"Yes," Daniel whispered.

They walked quickly along the sidewalk until they came to the front of the building. It was ancient, and even in the dim light the very old street lights provided, Daniel could clearly make out the ornate gargoyles spilling across the building face.

"This won't do," Sara whispered. She led Daniel down a narrow alley that ran adjacent to the building. "Here," she whispered as they ducked into the shadows. Sara pulled Daniel to him. The amulet felt like fire between them. A second later they were in an interior hallway and Daniel was extremely relieved that it was dimly lit.

"Now where?" Daniel whispered.

"Now we telepath. We don't dare risk being heard. There may be a night watchman."

"All right," Daniel telepathed in return.

They slowly made their way through the hallway until they came to a door. "Here," Sara telepathed. She carefully pulled the old door open. They were in the office of birth records.

Now Sara set to work. With the speed of a desperate mother, she located the heavy book where she would write the record of Eric's 'birth'. She flew through the pages until she came to the correct date and year. Almost by instinct, she turned from the book and searched a desk drawer and pulled out a blank registration form.

"Find some sort of official stamp, Daniel," she whispered. She pointed to a place in the book. "It has to look like this one. Look in one of those drawers over there." She indicated directions with her head.

Daniel riffled through drawer after drawer. "I can't find it, Sara." He was becoming alarmed. Sara was quickly writing a birth registration in long-hand. She was looking at the writing in the book and imitating that as best she could. From Daniel's point of view she was doing a very good job. Now, to find the official Mayor's stamp.

"Look on the rack. There, against the side of the file." Sara did not even turn around this time.

"We'll never pull this off! There are too many variables. There are too many variables, Sara. We're halfway across the planet in a country and town we don't know. We don't know what we're doing!" Daniel felt sick. How would they ever do this?

Sara took him by the wrist and looked directly into Daniel's eyes. "Take a breath," she said. "Take a breath and have faith. We can do this, you and I. We can do this."

Daniel touched Sara's face. "Yes," he said. "We can." He smiled confidently, then began looking at the stamps in an ancient rack on top of a small table. Among them was a worn metal stamp impressed with the circular seal of the Mayor. It looked to Daniel like the stamp of a Notary Public.

"I found it. Are you finished?" He took the stamp to her.

"Almost. I have to make sure this shows up on a carbon copy. No copy machine in here."

"Oh, great. Is that our official copy, a carbon?"

"No, we leave it behind. I want this to look like someone knew what she or he was doing. I don't want any questions."

"So we leave the carbon behind?" Daniel didn't like this.

"Yes. We put one in the book, here." She inserted it in the proper page as she spoke. "Then I think we put the copy in-" she looked around the darkened room. The street light cast shadows on the floor. If someone walked by this window and looked in . . .

"-There's a tray over there. What's in it?"

"Uh-carbon copies. Let me see . . . here's a registration of a birth. Sara! The carbon must go in here. The name on the registration is 'Yves Laronne'. Look and see if he's in the book. He was born on March 29 of this year." Daniel squinted in the poor light.

"Yes. He's here. Right before Eric's certificate. We're set. Let's get out of here."

Suddenly Daniel's heart almost burst from his throat. "There's someone coming!"

Daniel pulled Sara to him so hard he nearly knocked the breath out of himself. With one last look around to make sure nothing was out of place, they disappeared from the room and were once again on board the shuttle.

"My God, we pulled it off!" Daniel screamed in the small cabin. "How in the world were you able to move so quickly and imitate the writing so well? How did you know where the stamp was?" Daniel's heart was pounding.

"I honestly don't know. I just knew that we had to work fast or we'd surely be seen. The tavern was not that far away. There was no place to hide if someone had looked in . . . I don't even want to think about it."

"Okay," Daniel said. "Let's get home. We're making excellent time." He swung the ship around and headed towards the Atlantic Ocean. An hour later they were nearing the landing site in the woods near Eagle Bluff. When he was directly overhead, Sara pressed a zooming switch at the base of the screen's border. It was important Daniel have a clear look at the shuttle's landing area. Although the landing spot was invisible to others, the shuttle's electronics made visible a marker that gave Daniel a reference point. Suddenly something other than the reference marker caught his eye on the viewscreen. "Sara, look! There's someone down there!"

Chapter Five

Daniel held the shuttle a few hundred feet above the ground, waiting and wondering what he'd seen. The view screen now registered that the area was clear. Still, he waited. He didn't want anyone to even remotely suspect that the timber hid a shuttle craft storage bay. Who would be down in the woods at this time of night?

Finally Sara cleared her throat. "Let's see if we can land, Daniel. We've been up quite awhile. Whatever the viewscreen caught must be gone by now."

"You're right. I'm going to have to land this thing sometime. Pray that no one is there." He moved the stick slowly, and the craft descended, gently touching ground a moment later.

Daniel looked at Sara. "What was that below us?"

"I don't know, Daniel, but whatever was there is gone now. Let's get Eric from Rachel's and then put him to bed."

As always, Daniel worried. It would be catastrophic if someone had wandered into the timber and heard them bring the shuttle in. He didn't even want to think about what the consequences might be.

When they arrived home, Eric was sound asleep in the back seat. "I'll carry him in," Sara said. She quietly slid open the minivan's side door, unbuckled Eric's seatbelt and took him in her arms.

"He's out like a light," Daniel mumbled. He held the door open as Sara carried Eric through it and into the kitchen.

"Yes, he's out like a light," Sara said.

Eric came to half awake several times as they undressed him and put him in his Mickey Mouse pajamas, but when they tucked him in his bed, he was again sound asleep.

They made their way to their own bedroom. Daniel couldn't speak for Sara, but as for himself, he was tired to the bone. He unzipped his jacket, "My dear Daniel." She gently sat him down on the edge of the bed, then helped him take his clothes off. As she began pulling open the velcro straps that held his exoskeleton in place, he chuckled softly. "I'll bet your father never envisioned this much action for this thing."

Sara kissed him on the cheek. "I suspect you're right."

"Ahhh . . . what a mysterious life we lead." He began to unbutton her blouse.

"Come on, sport." Daniel had to hurry. He couldn't wait until Sara came home from work at noon to tell her; he had to tell her now. Daniel held tightly to Eric with one hand and touched the pendant of his amulet with the other. In only an instant they moved from Daniel's house to a dumpster in the back of the building where Sara worked at BioMed. Once inside the building, he had to fight to keep himself from running down the hallway with Eric. He could have telepathed all this information to Sara, but this was a momentous event. He had to speak to her in the way ordinary Earth humans do. Now he was facing the doors of Dept. 52, Sara's department. He pulled them open. Sara was sitting at her computer in a small office off the hallway. She looked up and smiled at them in a way that only she could.

"I already know what you came to tell me, Daniel. You telepathed it to me, probably without even realizing it."

Daniel hugged her quickly and said, "Shhh. Don't say the word 'telepath' too loudly. Close the door."

When Sara pulled the office door behind her she picked up Eric and hugged him like mothers do. "At last you are ours, Eric. I love you. I will be your mommie forever."

Eric buried his face in her bosom and lay contentedly against her as if he had been waiting all his short life to receive her comfort.

"I called Le Blanc this morning, early," Daniel said. "I asked some sweet old lady in the same office we sat in on Saturday, probably sitting in the same chair you sat in to write the document, if she could send a certified copy of Eric's birth certificate. It took her a while to find it but she finally came back to the telephone and told me she'd found the document and would make a copy for the mayor to sign. We'll have the document by certified mail in a week."

"I must have really done a good job forging the sweet little lady's handwriting, or someone else's writing." Sara was smiling.

"Who did you put down as the father, Sara?"

"Why no one, of course." She looked at him. "You know I had to list the father as 'unknown'."

"I really hate that. Now it's going to be that way forever. Maybe I can legally adopt Eric at some point." Daniel loved this boy.

"I think that's what we'll need to do, but I don't want to call attention to it right now. We'll need to get him a dated passport at some point, in case someone asks how he got over here."

"What about citizenship? We'll have to contact the Department of Immigration."

"We don't have to rush that. We can make an application for that anytime. But I have to get the certificate first. Once we have that, the rest is pretty routine."

Daniel sighed audibly.

"You worry too much, dear. Who is going to ask? And who would ever enter the wrong date on a passport for us?"

"You're right. I'm just paranoid. I can hardly wait until his certificate comes. Then we can get his social security number. . ."

"Soon you'll have him working and paying taxes."

During the next days Daniel and Sara doted on their little boy. They were immensely relieved that Eric's identity was finally and firmly established. They no longer needed to worry about people asking probing, curious questions. They could give an 'honest' answer: the certificate was in the mail.

They had lectured Eric again and again on how important it was to keep the strange goings-on in their lives secret. In fear of Eric letting down his guard in a careless moment, they had not yet allowed him to play with other children. Now it was time to introduce him to new friends. If anyone asked him where he was from, he was to say, "From France."

On the third Sunday after they knew Eric was finally theirs, Eric had a party.

"He's playing well with Roger and Julia's three kids, Daniel." Ann had been watching Eric closely from a corner of Daniel's living room. It was not lost on Daniel that Ann Neilson-hypnotist, child psychologist, and hopefully still good friend-probably was making a professional assessment of his little boy. "As a matter of fact, I'm quite astounded with his progress. One would never know he came from such bizarre,

horrible circumstances." She visibly shivered at the telling of it.

"Sometimes it's hard for Sara and I to believe he came from that stinking environment. He's improved greatly over the last two weeks or so."

"That's probably because you and Sara are more relaxed with him, now that you've got him registered. And I'm sure Eric feels more secure now that he knows you're not going to abandon him."

"Of course you're right." Daniel took a sip of soda. "How have you been? We've been so busy with Eric the past few weeks, we were beginning to neglect everyone. Sara and I thought this get-together would be good for us all."

"It certainly has been good for me," Ann said, a trace of sadness in her voice.

"Something's on your mind, isn't it?" Daniel said.

"Yes, and you already know what it is."

Daniel flinched outwardly.

"Don't give me a hard time about this, Daniel. You know damned well I want you and Saul to have this out."

Daniel didn't know how to respond. He just wished Sara was here with him instead of at the super market scouting up a box of ice cream.

Suddenly he heard the door slam. "Sara must be back," he said quickly. "I think I should help her with the ice cream."

Ann clutched his shirt sleeve. "Whoa, we're not finished. I said I wanted you to have it out with Saul. Did you hear me?"

"I heard what you said. I heard you."

Ann gritted her teeth and looked up at the ceiling, but it did little to disguise the tear that trickled down her left cheek. "Ann, I appreciate how you helped us explore our abductions. I really do. And Sara appreciates it too. But don't you see how awkward and maddening this is? Now you are being abducted along with us! And Saul is in league with these monsters. Surely you can see that."

"I can see that. That's why all this is so difficult for me. I'm living with a stranger."

"I don't know how you can live with a man like that," Daniel said incredulously.

Ann whispered, "I love him, you idiot. I love him and I want to marry him."

"Then you must be willing to be abducted for the rest of your life. It seems like the beings have already erased your fears." Daniel turned to Sara as she approached. "Sara, did you get the ice cream?" he asked, relieved she was now here to rescue him. "Save me," he telepathed.

Sara grinned at Daniel, then addressed Ann, "Yes. Would you like some?"

"Not right now. Sara, I just asked Daniel if he might consider talking to Saul-confronting him. Or am I going to get the same excuses from you too?"

"Well, uh . . ." Sara stammered.

"What is this with you two?" Ann asked exasperated. "You'd think Saul was a first class felon."

Sara and Daniel looked at each other .

"As far as we're concerned, he is," Daniel spoke between clenched teeth.

"Maybe he isn't the one on the ship. Maybe we've all been mistaken. Maybe it just looked like him. Couldn't that be it?" It was uncharacteristic of Ann to waffle on anything. Her eyes were pleading. Sara looked at Daniel, then said abruptly, "Maybe we could be there when you talk to him."

"Nice save," Daniel telepathed grumpily.

"Soon?" Ann asked, astonishment on her face.

"Soon." Sara looked squarely at Daniel now. "Won't we, Daniel?"

"Yeah," Daniel said. "Soon." He had no idea how he would be able to confront Saul yet again, but he had a feeling he was going to find out.

"Um, I have a favor to ask of both of you." Ann looked at one, then the other. "All right," Ann sighed, "so agreeing to work things out with Saul is already a huge favor, I know, but Sara, I would like you to do some regressive hypnosis on me."

"Might this be in regard to your suspected abduction when you were a little girl?"

"Yes. Remember the day I drove us to the woods and looked for that door in the ground? I haven't been able to stop thinking about it. Was I truly abducted then? If so, by whom? And why? And was my sister abducted along with me? I want to know, Sara. I helped you two find your experiences. Now will you help me find mine?"

"I don't know," Sara said. I have no particular skills in hypnosis. I meditate, but . . ."

"You meditate, yes. And you heal. And you are a terrific channeler. You were terrific when I helped you channel the Zeta entity, Sara. I know you would be a wonderful hypnotist if I would show you the basics. Would you help me?"

"I suppose . . . if . . ."

"Wonderful." Ann sighed with relief. "I'd like to start as soon as possible. When would you like to set up our first session?"

"Give Daniel and I time to work something out. May we bring Eric with us?"

"Of course. I wouldn't expect you to leave the little guy home."

"I don't want to even be in the same room with Saul."

"We have to," Sara whispered. She plumped the pillows up and yawned. She quietly set the alarm for work the next day. "And please keep your voice down; we don't want to wake Eric."

"First of all," Daniel whispered, perturbed, "if you're concerned about us waking Eric, we can telepath. And second, he's sleeping hard. He's dead to the world."

Sara snuggled into Daniel. "Today was fun. I'm sure it's the best party Eric ever had."

"Sara, I'm sure it's the only party he's ever had."

"Well, he'll have many more. Summer's coming. We can go to the park . . ."

"Yes," Daniel interrupted. "You know, I wouldn't have thought this even a couple of months ago, but it's fun raising another child."

"It's fun raising a child," Sara mused. Sara had no children. At forty-four years old, Sara was experiencing her first marriage. "I couldn't love this child more if he were from my own body." She began to cry quietly.

Daniel kissed her comfortingly on her forehead. "Sara, we can't think about our baby. We have no way of knowing if it's alive or . . ."

Sara clutched Daniel. "I feel guilty," she whispered. "I love Eric so much. He's filling up my hole of sorrow. But I don't want to lose hope for our baby. I don't want to use Eric to replace our baby."

"You're not, Honey. We love Eric. That's all that counts. We love him."

"Mommy," a little boy called from the doorway.

"Eric, Honey, Mommy and I thought you were sound asleep," Daniel said.

"May I sleep with you tonight?"

Daniel sat up on the edge of the bed. He picked up Eric and put him on his lap. "Eric, we've already discussed this. Once in a while you may sleep with us, but sometimes Mommy and Daddy like to sleep alone. Wouldn't you like to go back to your own bed and sleep?"

"No."

"I'll tuck you in."

Eric clung tightly to Daniel's neck. "No," he said frantically. "Not tonight. Please, Daddy, not alone tonight."

"Eric, are you all right?" Sara asked with motherly concern in her voice.

"I . . . I want to tell you something."

"What, Eric? What do you want to tell us?"

"I will never tell anyone," Eric blurted. "I will never never say anything," he said desperately.

"Eric, what are you talking about?"

Eric began to sob. "I'm afraid they will take me back."

"Do you mean that the people in the sky will take you back?"

"Yes."

"Well . . ." Daniel didn't know what to say.

"Daddy," Eric said pleadingly, "They are smart. If they decide they want me back, you can't stop them. Mommy can't either," Eric said pathetically.

Sara telepathed her shock to Daniel at Eric's sudden mature grasp of the dilemma that was facing them all. Sara said, "Eric, you seem to have just grown up before our eyes."

"Grown up?"

"Honey, do you know how old you are?"

"I don't know what that means."

Sara looked at Daniel sadly. "Well, Honey, how old you are has to do with how many years you've lived."

"Years?"

"You don't know what a year is, do you, Eric? How could you, living on that ship where you had no sense of the sun or moon? How could you know?"

"I want to live with both of you forever." He clung to them and began to cry again. "They're coming. They're coming now," he cried pitifully.

Suddenly, a beam of light like a long malignant finger plunged through the ceiling and enveloped the three of them in its white-hot glow! Daniel felt Sara wildly grab him by the collar of his pajamas! She had them both in her grip, now, and the three of them hurtled up the beam and through the roof of the house.

Never had Daniel been taken up this fast. He dared not look down. He caught only a flash of the open hatch as they plunged upward through the bottom of the alien ship. He was without his exoskeleton, but it didn't matter. His not yet fully developed "natural" strength was only twice that of Earth strength, but with that strength he was going to make them pay dearly for this insane violation of his family's private space.

Daniel's feet hit the deck with a whump. Before he could fully regain his balance they were met with swarms of small alien beings. But this time Daniel was more than angry—he was enraged beyond all reason. Eric was a little boy, and he needed Daniel's protection. Daniel would die before he'd let them

take his boy away from him.

He heard Sara scream. She was lashing out at the beings as they tried to wrest Eric from her grasp. She had never fought them before. In the past she would simply give in to their numbers and let them do to her what they pleased. But this time it was different; this time she was fighting like a tigress whose baby was in danger. Maybe, just maybe between the two of them they could do some real damage this time.

Daniel swung and punched and kicked at the thin limbed bug-eyed beings until his own limbs were raw. He grabbed the beings and picked them up like dolls and hurled them against the wall. Daniel sensed they were telepathing fear.

And now Saul appeared and came running into the middle of them all. He grabbed Daniel with one hand and Sara with the other. "This won't work, you two. I know you're upset, but . . ."

Unfortunately for Saul, Daniel still had one hand free. He jabbed Saul full in the face. In reeling back from Daniel's well placed blow, he let go of Daniel's wrist. "No, Daniel, this isn't the way. This isn't the way."

Daniel had no time to feel sorry for what he'd just done. The beings had Eric and they were running away with him. Daniel clasped his hands together to make a powerful fist. He swung at Saul again. This time he caught him in his left eye. Saul fell back onto the deck. "My God, what have I done?" Daniel wasn't a violent man. These beings from a nightmare were making him lose all sense of reason and compassion. What was he doing? Saul was a human being that somehow was ensnared by these walking nightmares. Even in the heat of the fray Daniel knew that he had to stop treating Saul like a criminal.

He bent down to help Saul. If he had had the time, he would have gripped Saul's wrists and healed him right there. But he had no time, and bending down to help this mysterious human was Daniel's undoing. The beings piled on top of Daniel, and the little beings overwhelmed him.

The fact that they were rough with him when they carried him down the hallway was comforting to Daniel in a way. They seemed to be angry with him. He was seeing their emotional side now. So they weren't cold and indifferent-at least when their physical well being was at stake they weren't. "Ah, you little bastards, maybe you do have a heart," he yelled almost triumphantly as they carried him into a room and roughly dropped him on a table.

Several beings at his head and several at his feet quickly strapped his feet and arms to the table. They hadn't paralyzed him. Why? One blow with the stunrod would have quieted him. Yet they chose to fight and brawl with him. That was it! he realized. They were trying to arouse his emotions again. They wanted to study him; to analyze him. Well, this time would be different. This time he would simply lie quietly and endure whatever they would do to him. He would foil their insane study of human behavior.

The tall doctor being came in. It walked like a spider on its long, thin legs. It came to Daniel and bent its huge head over him until it almost touched his face. Daniel tried to turn his head so the being couldn't look directly into his eyes, but the gaze was too penetrating, too arresting. "Why do you fight this entity? Why?"

Daniel lay quietly, trying hard not to think about anything at all.

"You are quiet. Why?"

Daniel didn't respond.

A being from Daniel's left held a four pronged helmet in its four-fingered hand. The prongs, front, back, left and right, slid against and pinched the sides of his skull as the being shoved the apparatus on him. Daniel had been through this before. They were going to record his emotions-to see what made him tick. But this time he wouldn't give them the satisfaction. He would simply lie quietly and shut down the emotional side of his brain.

There was a flutter of activity on his left side, but the tall being's stare was so mesmerizing, Daniel couldn't turn his head to see what was there.

"Turn your head to the left," the doctor being telepathed.

Daniel obeyed; the being, by the will of its mental power, simply made him obey. His heart lurched! Sara was lying on a table only three feet from him. She, too, was strapped down, and like Daniel, she wasn't paralyzed. "Sara?" he said. "Sara, Honey, are you all right?"

She turned her head and saw him there. "What have we ever done to these people to deserve this kind of treatment, Daniel? What have we done?"

Beings came to the head of both of them and they released the straps that were holding their arms to the table. "Sit up," the doctor commanded. "Sit up and watch in front of you." It pointed with its thin, frail looking arm.

They both sat up and looked at the doorway. Saul stepped through it-with Eric in his arms.

Sara screamed as if her heart had been broken. Daniel could see what Sara was screaming at-Eric's eyes. They were completely black. Eric gazed at Sara with alien eyes.

Eric looked up at Saul, this mysterious human that obviously loved Eric very much. He put his arms around Saul's neck and he clung to him.

"His eyes are like my eyes! Alien eyes!" Sara screamed. "He's an alien like me! Oh, God, he's an alien like me!"

Daniel began to hyperventilate. In a burst of desperate strength he broke the straps at his feet that were holding him down. "You'd better paralyze me because I'm not going to lie here and let you do this to my family!" He yanked the helmet off his head and threw it across the room. Then he lunged off the table and grabbed the first hapless being that was within his reach. The doctor had wisely stepped back. Even through Daniel's anger he could see the doctor coldly analyzing his behavior.

He felt a sharp pain on his temple and his knees buckled. He tried to catch himself, but he was paralyzed before he hit the floor. He fell in a heap, his legs and arms twisted under him. Hands grasped him and put him back on the table. But they didn't lay him down; they held him up in a sitting position.

"Look," the tall being telepathed. "Look in front of you."

By pulling on his hair with their four-fingered hands, they lifted his head up so he could see. Saul was still standing in front of Daniel, Eric still in his arms. With black black eyes the little boy stared down at Daniel. Tears were streaming down Eric's face "Stop them," Daniel telepathed to Saul miserably. "Please stop them."

"I can't stop them, Daniel." Saul's left eye was already reddening where Daniel had hit him.

"Would you like this entity to keep the male child?" the being telepathed.

Eric began to sob openly. He reached down to Daniel, but Saul kept him from Daniel's reach.

"No. Please don't take Eric from us," Daniel telepathed in his paralysis.

"What would you feel like if this entity were to send you back home without the male child? What would you feel like?" the being pressed.

"Please don't hurt my family," Daniel telepathed desperately. He was emotionally exhausted. If he didn't pull himself together, he would die. He was sure of it.

Saul turned from them and carried Eric out of the room.

"Bring him back!" Daniel telepathed. "Bring Eric back you traitorous bastard!"

Suddenly he felt himself floating. The smaller beings pulled him off the table and out of the room and down the hallway towards the carrier beam. It was euphoric in a way to be in this condition-floating. Such contrast to what he felt like only seconds ago. When he arrived at the exit point, they stood him on his feet, then cut off whatever force was allowing him to float. He stumbled against the sudden return to gravity. They quickly stepped away from him. Saul was at his side. "Here's Eric, Daniel."

Numbly, Daniel reached out and took Eric in his arms. Eric buried his face in Daniel's shoulder. He could feel the little boy tremble against him. "It's all right now, Eric. We're going home now." He looked up at Saul. "Where's Sara?"

"She's coming," he said comfortingly. "We'll wait for just a minute until she comes."

"How can you treat us this way? You are in league with these beings. Why?"

"I . . ." Saul stammered.

"How would you feel if Ann were in Sara's place?" He had said it without thinking.

"Who are you talking about?"

Daniel looked at him intently. "You don't know, do you?" Daniel asked incredulously. "You are living with her. You don't know that?"

"Living with who?" Saul asked. "I live here."

"So you aren't aware of life on the ground?"

"Yes," Saul said, "but I don't live there. I don't know anyone there. I wasn't born there."

Daniel looked with awe at this man. "We'll talk later," he said quietly.

Now Sara came. She was led by several spindly legged beings who were clearly telepathing fear of the wrath Sara had shown them earlier. She looked stunned and frightened. Daniel reached out to her, and

with Eric still in his arms, hung on to them both. This was his family and they were all going home now. The beam burst around the three of them and they slowly began to descend to the ground. He noticed, now, that the night air was too chilly for the thin protection only a pair of pajamas could provide.

Chapter Six

"They make me afraid!" Eric cried pathetically. "They make Mommy afraid! They make me afraid!" Eric buried his head in Daniel's shoulder.

Daniel gently held Eric and stroked him comfortingly. "It's all right, Eric," Daniel whispered. "We we all afraid sometimes."

Eric sat back from Daniel's shoulder and looked at Sara. "Why is Mommy crying?"

Daniel gently slid Eric off his lap and gripped Sara's shoulder. Sara turned away from him. "She's crying because she's upset," Daniel said. "But I'll talk to her. She'll be all right if I talk to her," not feeling the assurance he hoped he was projecting.

"May I talk to her, too?"

"Of course you may."

Eric sat on the edge of the bed and quietly waited.

"Sara," Daniel said softly. "Sara . . . you can't turn away from me. We have to resolve this."

"I'll get over it in my own time," she said, voice muffled against the sheets. "Give me some space."

"No, I'm not going to give you space. Eric and I are concerned for you and we want you to just turn around and talk to us."

"Mommy, please," Eric said quietly.

"I'm sorry, Eric," Sara said. "I don't mean to upset you." The night light revealed Sara fumbling for her contact lens case at the side of her bed.

"Leave your eyes out, Mommy. I like your black eyes."

Sara turned around on the bed and grabbed Eric in a tight embrace. "Oh, God, Honey, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for reacting to your black eyes. I'm so sorry."

"What are you talking about, Mommy?"

Daniel reached for the bed lamp. "Things always seem so much worse in the dark. Cover your eyes while I turn on the light." They all squinted when Daniel clicked the lamp on.

Sara let go of Eric, then. Daniel's jaw dropped at what he saw. "Eric, your eyes are blue! They're not black."

"My eyes are not black," Eric said, with a very puzzled look in his blue eyes. "I wish they were black like

Mommy's."

Sara hugged Eric as if the Zeta were about to take him away again.

They had allowed Eric to sleep with them, but in the middle of the night, after Eric had fallen soundly asleep, Daniel picked him up and carried him back to his own bed. Daniel and Sara had some talking to do.

Daniel crawled half way into bed, then stopped. "Would you like me to get us something to drink"

"No, Daniel. Thank you for being so considerate of your cranky old wife, though."

"You're not cranky. We were terrorized and traumatized a few hours ago. You're not cranky. Sometimes I don't know how we stand it."

"We really have no choice, do we?"

"We have no choice," he agreed. He leaned up against the headboard and pulled the quilt up.

"I want to have Eric's eyes checked by Karen," Sara said abruptly.

"Why? His eyes aren't black. We just saw his blue eyes. It was just more emotional illusion-torture by the Zeta. More specifically, the Doctor."

"Maybe his blue eyes are a covering like mine and maybe he doesn't know that."

"You're making too much of this, Sara."

"I want to know if he has alien DNA."

"Sara, listen to me. You know the Zeta have mislead us before. Tonight was just another one of their experiments to see how we would react emotionally. They put the illusion of Eric's eyes as black into our minds. They can put any image there."

"I don't want Eric to have black eyes like mine. I hate my eyes; I don't want to hate his."

Sara," Daniel took her hand in his, "we don't know the origin of this little boy. He may not even be . . ."

"Human?" Sara interrupted.

"Maybe he isn't. Maybe he's . . ."

"Not an illusion," Sara interrupted. "Daniel, you had better not say he's an illusion."

"I didn't say he was and I don't think he is."

"Then what is he?"

"I don't know. Why does it matter?"

"It matters because that boy has a right to know where he's from-how he came to be."

"Maybe you're right," Daniel conceded.

"You know I'm right. Tomorrow I'm going to make an appointment for Eric with Karen. If you want to come with us, you're welcome. But if you're going to cause me grief while she's examining him, don't come with us."

"This isn't like you, Sara. Why have you become so hateful towards me?"

"I'm not hateful. I'm just so . . . so tired of these people ruining our lives. I can't take it anymore. It's got to stop, Daniel. They won't even allow us to raise our little boy." She laid her head on Daniel's shoulder.

"Maybe he's not so little, Sara."

Sara looked at him in the strange orange glow of the night light. "Are you trying to make my life even more complicated than it already is?"

"Surely you noticed how mature he appears at times."

"I've noticed."

"Do you suppose Karen could figure out how old he may really be?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Perhaps Father can tell us when he comes. You know I love you, Daniel. We'll somehow get through this-somehow." She reached over and clicked out the light and was sound asleep before Daniel could kiss her good night.

"Look directly into the light, Cutie."

Eric sat quietly as Karen shone a light on his eyeball. "Now turn your head for me." With her fingers she gently turned his head to the right. "All right, Cutie, you can hop off the table now. I want to examine your mommy's eyes now."

Sara said, "You're going to examine my eyes? Why? We brought Eric. I didn't bring myself to be examined."

"Do you want me to give you an intelligent assessment of Eric's eyes, or not?"

"You don't have to examine my eyes. There is no genetic relationship between Eric and me."

"Then, Sara, I can't give you an answer," Karen said firmly. "You have black eyes. You think Eric has black eyes. At least let me make a physical comparison."

"I won't . . ."

"Sara," Daniel interrupted, "let's step outside for a moment." He stepped to the door. Sara followed him out the door and into the hallway.

"You're embarrassing me, Daniel."

"No I'm not. You're just frightened. You don't want Karen to examine your eyes. But choke down your fear and . . ."

"Daniel . . ."

"And stop hating your eyes. Stop hating this part of you. I don't care why you have black eyes, and I can tell you Eric certainly doesn't care. Don't make our little boy responsible for your happiness. You are responsible for it. Now, will you please let Karen examine you?" he pleaded.

Sara opened the door and walked back into Karen's office. "What do you want me to do?"

Karen smiled. "I want you to sit, open your eyes, and look at the light."

"All right." She sat.

Karen looked at Sara's left eye, made some notes, looked at her right eye, and made more notes. She stepped back from Sara and said quietly, "Now take out your lenses."

"Is that necessary?"

"Yes," Karen said kindly, "I have to compare the reflective and refractive properties of the surface of your eye with the lenses in and with the lenses out. If Eric has a covering over his eyes, I may know it after I examine your eyes."

Sara hesitated.

"Sara, are we good friends or not? Do you truly think I'll think less of you when I see your eyes? You've already shown them to me. You weren't ashamed of them then. Why are you ashamed now?"

Sara tipped her head down and dropped the lenses into her hand. Then she put her head up as Karen shone her light into them. She took more notes. "Hmm . . ."

"Well?" Daniel asked.

"Eric has no covering over his eyes. Now, I don't know how these beings fooled you. I've never been up there-to my knowledge, at least-so I don't know what the lighting is like in their ship. If the lighting is dim, it would be hard to make out the details of an eyeball in a white field-even at a distance of only a few feet. Maybe it's as simple as bad lighting. Maybe you just panicked when you saw Eric."

"Panicked?" Sara said incredulously. "Panicked? Every time we go up there we think we're going to die. And now they take Eric up there, too. Karen, can you even begin to imagine what Daniel and I go through when the beings take us? Can you?"

"No," Karen said, "I can't. But here's the bottom line, Sara; little Cutie here," she stopped and smiled at Eric who was listening intently, "does not have black eyes."

"Good." Sara breathed.

"Why is that so important, Sara? What real difference would it make if he did?" Karen studied her intently.

"The black eyes mean . . . they mean he's some sort of mutation. Like me. He won't belong. He won't be accepted. He'll have to hide them . . ."

"Like you hide your eyes."

"Yes. Like I have always hidden my eyes. The black eyes are Zeta eyes. The Zeta are monsters."

"And Eric could be 'half-monster'?"

"Yes. I can't bear that."

"Because you . . . fear . . . that you could be half monster, too?"

"I know I am, Karen. It can't be any other way. I must be part Zeta. I don't want Eric to be part Zeta, too. And my baby-I think when they do horrible things to it-it will be half-Zeta, too." Sara sat huddled in the chair. Tears streamed down her face.

"There. I've said the unspeakable," she sobbed. "Daniel, I know you've been thinking the same thing."

Daniel could only nod his head in silence.

Usually when Daniel's phone would jangle at work it was either a student or it was Sara, so he was more than a little surprised when he heard Ann speaking to him. He could tell by the sound of her voice that she was upset.

"Daniel, I probably should have called Sara since I know her half day with Eric is when you're working and it would be less intrusive of me to call Sara at home instead of bothering you, but I need to ask you this because I didn't want Sara to have to go through the grief of getting you to cooperate."

"You're really painting me as the bad guy, Ann."

"I don't mean to, Daniel, but damn it all, I need the help of both of you so much."

He could hear tears welling up in her. "Ann, let me make this easier for you. Whatever you plan to ask me, I promise I'll say yes. Now, does that help make you feel better?"

"Oh, Daniel, you know how much I want Sara to help him. Please don't put me off anymore."

Daniel paused, realizing he couldn't put Ann off any longer.

"All right . . . okay . . . Should we come tonight?"

"Yes, if you can. Come to my house. This is a social call, not a medical call."

"Seven o'clock okay?"

"Make it six. I'll make us a nice dinner."

Daniel sighed, but held his hand over the telephone mouthpiece so Ann wouldn't hear it. "We'll come with our amulets, so don't make any references to us coming in a car. Don't offer to walk us out to the car when we leave. Don't . . ."

"I've got it, Daniel. I've got it. I won't give you away. Just come; that's all I ask."

The three of them stood in an alley-an alley that was only a block from Ann's. They knew this particular alley would be empty; they had been here before. Daniel tucked his amulet back into his shirt. They walked briskly toward the apartment.

Daniel was nervous. He looked at Eric and said, "You have to be sure you don't show that you recognize Saul. Can you do that?"

"I can do that, Father," Eric said with maturity that almost made Daniel shiver. Eric was changing rapidly. His sudden grasp of the world was even making Sara nervous.

"I know you understand, Eric. I know you understand," Daniel said.

Eric took Daniel's and Sara's hands in his and looked up at them with soulful eyes. "I love you. I will be quiet."

Sara said, "Honey, Daddy and I don't want you to be quiet. We just don't want you to make Saul uncomfortable."

"I won't make Saul uncomfortable," Eric said with resolve.

"All right," Daniel said. They began walking down the sidewalk. It was a wonderful spring evening. The trees along the walk were leafed out in a not-yet deep green, and the evening was almost warm enough to enjoy without jackets. When they got to Ann's house, Daniel took a deep breath. They walked up the front step and he knocked. The door cracked open, then widened as Ann realized that Daniel's family waited on the other side of the door. "I'm so glad you came, Eric." She looked at Daniel and Sara, questions on her face. Then she bent down to Eric, "how are you, Sweetie?"

"I'm fine," Eric said with what Daniel noted to be a certain amount of indulgence.

"That's good. Well, don't just stand there on the step. Come on in."

They walked through the entryway and into the living room. "Eric, I bought a new video game for myself today. Would you like to try it out for me?" she asked enthusiastically. "The TV is in the next room."

"No thank you," Eric said quietly. He politely sat down on the couch.

"Okay . . . Would you like some cookies before we have dinner?"

Sara began to open her mouth to speak.

"Oops, I don't think your mom wants you to have cookies now."

Eric looked at Sara. "I don't care for cookies now."

"All right, then," Ann said.

Daniel said, "Is Saul here?"

"He should be here any minute. I don't know what's keeping him."

They sat down and looked at each other. The ticking clock above the fireplace seemed loud to Daniel. Uncomfortably he said, "Well, we haven't been this quiet with each other in quite a long time, have we? It's kind of nice to just sit and relax. Isn't it nice to relax?" Daniel visibly jumped when he heard a car door slam in the driveway.

A few moments later, the door opened, and Saul, bald, dark complexioned with intense eyes, sporting the all too familiar salt and pepper beard and a very black left eye, walked into the living room.

Chapter Seven

Daniel quickly glanced at Eric. Eric's eyes flickered in recognition of this Zeta-loving human who had somehow found his way to the ground and into Ann's life.

The man looked at them, stopped in mid-stride, and put his hand out to Daniel, then Sara. Then he dropped to his knees on the carpet and shook Eric's hand. "Hello Eric," he said warmly. "I'm glad you came too."

"Hello," Eric looked at Saul intently.

Saul stood up and tenderly touched his bruised eye. "I'm sure I look awful to you. I had an accident a couple of days ago and my eye is pretty frightful looking." He turned around and smiled at Eric. "Especially to the little guy here," he added.

Eric said, "I'm not afraid of black eyes."

Saul suddenly glanced over at Sara. He knit his brow in concentration, then seemed to let his thought slip away. "Well," he rubbed his hands together enthusiastically, "Let's eat."

"You say you had an accident?" Daniel couldn't resist pursuit.

"Yeah."

But then Daniel thought better of it. He didn't press Saul for details.

They ate almost in silence. Daniel remembered a blind date he'd had once with a woman so shy he'd run out of topics of conversation before ten minutes had passed. Eric sat quietly, picking at his food.

When they had finished their meal, Ann said, "Why don't we all go to the living room?"

Sara said, "I have a better idea. Why don't I help you clear the table and stack the dishwasher? We can let Daniel and Saul visit." Sara looked quickly at Daniel. They had agreed before they came that they

wouldn't telepath. Saul telepathed well—at least when he was in the presence of the Zeta; and if this was truly Saul, they simply couldn't risk having him understand them. Whether he had similar powers on the ground, they had no way of knowing, but they didn't want to complicate matters this evening. A look, an expression would have to be enough to communicate. Daniel would have signed to Sara if he could have gotten away with it, but it didn't look as if they would ever be out of sight of either Ann or Saul.

Daniel and Saul went to the living room and sat down. "Eric, why don't you check out that new video game of Ann's," Daniel suggested helpfully.

"Sure," Saul said. "I'll show you how it works, Eric." He started to get up.

"Eric can figure it out for himself." Daniel's smile to Eric was an unmistakable order. "Go on, Eric. Try out the game."

"All right," Eric said obediently. Without another word he went into the family room and switched on the TV.

Saul looked at Daniel uncomfortably, then said, "Daniel, I don't know how to tell you this, but when I first saw you at Karen and Yankee's wedding I knew I'd met you and Sara and Eric before."

"Oh? I don't think so," Daniel lied.

"You must have, Daniel-somewhere. We've met. I know we have." He touched his eye again and this time Daniel saw him wince. Waves of guilt washed through Daniel as he remembered hitting Saul on two separate occasions. "Hurt?"

"Quite a bit, yeah."

Daniel was relieved yet puzzled that Saul's belligerent attitude towards him when he found Daniel in Ann's bedroom had seemed to vanish. Daniel, however, knew he couldn't afford to let his guard down to Saul.

Ann and Sara had finished in the kitchen. They came in and sat down.

Saul closed his eyes, then opened them and sat back against the couch. "Would you all like something to drink? Ann what do we have in the fridge for these good people? I'll go get it." He started to get up.

"Saul, stop stalling," Ann said. "Just tell them why you wanted them to come."

Daniel glanced at Sara and read the puzzlement on her face. They had been under the impression that Ann was the one who wanted them to see Saul.

"Oh, God," Saul sighed. "I know this will sound odd, but when I first saw you two and Eric at the wedding I knew I had to see you again."

What was this about? Daniel wondered. Saul didn't seem to hold any animosity at all towards him.

"Why did you want to see us again?" Sara asked.

"I can't explain exactly. The three of you just seemed terribly familiar to me. Ever since our first meeting you have been on my mind almost continuously. And then," Saul looked at Ann, "I've been having

experiences for the last few months . . . experiences that have been making me crazy. For reasons I can't even begin to explain I want to tell you two about them." He looked at Sara, confusion on his face.

"Tell us about your experiences," Sara gently urged.

Daniel was on the edge of his seat.

"They're like terrifying dreams, only I don't think they are dreams. Well," Saul threw up his hands, "of course they're dreams, but they seem more real than that. I don't even remember much of what the dreams are about, but I wake up from them in a cold sweat, gasping for breath. Many nights I'm afraid to go to sleep. I've frightened Ann so badly so many times, I'm surprised she even sleeps with me."

"If you weren't so darned nice, I'd have kicked you down the street a long time ago."

"She's funny, isn't she," he chuckled tiredly.

"Funny and kind," Sara said.

"Can you remember anything at all about the dreams?" Daniel asked.

"Vaguely. Shapes-terrifying shapes. Movements-quick, unnatural. I come awake screaming, but when I remember what I've just experienced in the dream, I start to wonder that if what I've just dreamed really happened, I wouldn't be so frightened. Does that make sense?"

"Maybe," Daniel answered curtly.

"You think I'm making this up."

"No," Sara said, "we don't. Saul, you must have some ideas about your experiences. How do you interpret them?"

Saul's face twisted in a sarcastic half smile. "I don't know-I know that I feel that I've been taken somewhere, by someone I don't know. I think I'm being abducted."

"By-?" Sara queried carefully.

"Alien beings . . .?" He winced as he said it.

The silence that followed was uncomfortable and long. Daniel was struggling for words, but none formed on his lips.

"Tell them the whole story, Dear," Ann encouraged.

"About our . . . ?"

"Our camping trip, yes. Please tell them about it."

"Well, Ann and I went camping a couple of days ago. In the middle of the night, Ann woke up. I wasn't in the tent. I was gone. She stayed up the rest of the night waiting for me to return. I didn't show up again until the next morning."

"How did you show up? Did you just walk back into camp?"

"Something like that."

"You don't remember where you were?" Sara offered.

"No. I don't remember anything that happened. I sort of woke up at first light in the woods, not far from camp. Did I sleep there? I-don't know how I got there, or when. At first I thought I might have been sleepwalking. I could have tripped over a log and given myself this black eye, I suppose. But my face wasn't scratched or bruised-only my eye. Wait, I take that back. My nose also hurt for awhile, but that's better now. It's my eye that's giving me terrible problems. The doctor said I was fortunate I didn't lose sight in it."

"Oh, God," Daniel moaned.

"What did I say?"

"You didn't say anything, Saul. I'm just reacting to your injured eye." It was true-he was reacting to Saul's injured eye. He was reacting to his own fists that almost took Saul's sight. Daniel knew he couldn't continue to abuse Saul for what the Zeta were responsible for. From now on, he would have to somehow overcome his knee-jerk responses when he was taken by the Zeta. "Saul, I believe I can make your eye feel considerably better."

"Like you did the day of Karen's wedding. That would be wonderful". Sara gave Daniel a quick are-you-sure-you-want-to-do-this look. He nodded slightly.

"What do you want me to do, Daniel?" Saul asked.

"I want you to just stay where you are." Daniel got up and picked up his armchair, carried it across the room and set it in front of Saul."

"Jeez, Daniel, you're a lot stronger than you look," Saul said, astonishment on his face.

Daniel was wearing his exoskeleton, but it was powered down. Even so, his twice-Earth strength had to be startling when Daniel did something like this. Daniel grinned. "I work out. Now, lie down on the couch." Saul did so. Then Daniel lightly took Saul's wrists in his fingers.

"Would you like me to help you, Daniel?" Sara asked quietly.

Daniel looked sadly at his wife. "No, Honey. I have to do this myself." He turned back to Saul. "Saul, this is for you and for all the little guys I've unintentionally hurt during the last few months."

Saul's eyes flickered with unspoken questions, but they slipped away from him.

Daniel could hear the sounds of the video game seep through the door that Eric had considerably shut behind him. He closed his eyes and focused on those sounds for a few seconds. It helped him push distractions aside. Then he returned his attention to Saul. He opened his eyes, and through the confidence of his ability to heal another he slipped into a state of consciousness that allowed him to see the many layered human energy field around Saul's body. Suddenly healing power went from him into Saul. Saul lurched and slumped forward in his chair.

"Is he all right?" Ann asked, alarm in her voice.

Daniel turned to her. "We'll just let him rest for a few seconds." Daniel had healed him-he knew it without even seeing the results.

"Saul, can you sit up?" Daniel asked.

"I don't know. I feel . . . much better. Much better."

"Then let's sit you up." Daniel took him by the shoulders and gently pulled him up so everyone could see his face. Saul's eye was completely healed.

Chapter Eight

"Go into the bathroom and look in the mirror, Saul," Daniel said.

Saul got up and did as Daniel requested. They heard a sharp gasp. Saul came from the bathroom, a stunned look on his face. "It's . . . a stinking miracle, isn't it? How did you do that?"

"Don't think of it as a miracle," Sara said. "Just think of it as one human being giving to another."

"I need some air." Saul bolted through the living room and went out the front door. Daniel could hear his footsteps clicking down the hall.

"I'd better try to calm him down." Ann started to get up.

"No," Daniel put his hand up. "Let me talk to him."

When Daniel stepped out the door, Saul was standing on the sidewalk, blankly looking out into space. Daniel went to him and stood beside him. Saul fumbled in his pocket and took out a stick of gum. He offered it to Daniel.

"No, thanks," Daniel said politely.

Saul unwrapped the gum and shoved it into his mouth. "Ann got me to quit smoking. I need something right now to take the edge off. The gum will have to do."

They said nothing for a time. Then Daniel said, "Talk to me."

"How do I talk to a man who just healed me-instantly. I was in a world of hurt. How do I talk to a man who is involved in my life, but I don't know under what circumstances this involvement might be?" He paused. "Wait a minute. Turn around."

"What?"

"Turn around so I'm looking at you from behind. Do it. Do it," Saul said, stress in his voice.

Daniel turned around.

"Now . . . I see you in a park," Saul said slowly. "No, I see you and Sara in a park. There are trees, tall

trees, around us. You two are sitting on a blanket."

"Uh . . ."

"Just be patient with me, Daniel. I'm seeing something in my mind, something very important, I think. Sara is sitting behind you.

She's . . . about to put her hands in your hair or . . . rubbing your

hair . . . something like that. Then I grab you by the shoulder."

The memory of it made Daniel physically flinch and jerk his shoulder from Saul's grasp.

"Is that what happened, Daniel? You remember, don't you?"

Daniel calmed himself and then stood quietly, daring not to contribute to Saul's memory.

Saul clutched Daniel's shoulder and said, "Look, I don't want to hurt you . . ." He quickly yanked his hand away. "Turn around and look at me, Daniel."

Daniel turned around and faced Saul.

"When this event actually happened I pinched your shoulder so hard you almost passed out. Sara struggled because she was between me and you. I told you at the time that I didn't want to hurt you. I remember feeling really bad about what I was doing. But I did it anyway. What did I say then?" Saul's eyes were snapping fire now.

Daniel said nothing.

"Damn it, Daniel, what did I say then?"

"I don't remember," Daniel said quietly.

"But you do remember, don't you? You remember everything; and I'm struggling to make even a little sense of it." Saul put his hands to his face. "Oh, God, Daniel, what's happening to me?"

Daniel knew he dared not help Saul with his memories. "Saul, you're right; you and I are very much involved with each other. I can't tell you how and I don't know why, but we are involved. There's a reason you're not remembering . . . everything all at once. If . . . these memories . . . would suddenly come flooding back, it would probably drive you mad."

"Do you know how I got the black eye?"

"I'm afraid I do."

"Tell me. At least tell me that much."

"From me," Daniel said quietly.

"Oh, right," Saul said sarcastically.

Daniel sighed. "Let's go back inside. Ann will be worried about you."

"Hypnotizing Saul isn't a good idea, Sara." Daniel took off his amulet and laid it next to Sara's on the kitchen table. "Especially since you're going to do it."

"You don't have confidence in my ability to hypnotize?"

"I have confidence that you can do just about whatever you set out to do. But we're getting involved in something that's best left alone."

"Daniel, it's best I hypnotize him. Ann is too close to him. It would be disastrous for both and maybe even disastrous for their relationship."

"Maybe that's what is meant to be. If Saul is cooperating with the Zeta, maybe we all should know that before Ann makes a commitment she can't easily break. If he doesn't belong here, he needs to go back where he came from."

"Those are pretty strong words, my love. But I have to concede you are right. Who knows the real Saul?"

Daniel went to the refrigerator and opened the door. He looked inside. "Who wants what?" He turned and grinned at Eric. "Want a soda, son?"

"Yes, Father."

Daniel handed him a cola. "Sara?" He held out a can of fruit juice to her.

"No, thank you."

"I like Saul," Eric said suddenly.

"I know you do, Eric. But-he's living a secret life."

"Why is it secret?" Eric asked.

"Because, Honey," Sara said, "he doesn't know he is being taken by the beings. He doesn't know he has another life on their ship."

"Are secrets bad?"

"Yes-when they hurt you and other people."

"Maybe my other friends don't want him to know," Eric said matter-of-fact.

Daniel knew he winced outwardly every time Eric referred to the beings as his "friends." Eric insisted they were his friends; even so, he appeared to fear going back to them, and that made no sense to Daniel. Ignoring Eric's immediate reference, Daniel said, "Sara, maybe Eric's right. If the beings don't want Saul to know about his other life, maybe hypnotizing Saul will be a waste of time."

"Perhaps. But we don't know that. I know he wants help. And we all need to know the truth."

"It will be interesting to see if you hang onto your resolve to help him after the next time we see him on the ship, because there will be a next time and a next time and a next time-for all of us." Daniel wished that were not so, but Sara's look told him that he was right.

Daniel was sitting in the seat next to Yankee, riding in Yankee's new four-wheel-drive vehicle. They were driving down a narrow lane through a patch of timber just outside of Eagle Bluff. "Take a left at this fork, Yank," Daniel directed.

"What happens if I go right?"

"That path will eventually take you to a fence that's on the west side of Roger's property. It looks like a dead end."

Yankee turned left. "What's on the other side of the fence?"

"A new housing development-gorgeous homes. Very upper class." Daniel glanced sideways at his friend. "You and Karen might consider moving there. You're a lawyer and she's a doctor. You two could afford it, easy." Daniel grinned.

"You're hilarious, Daniel."

"That's what everyone tells me."

Daniel turned around in his seat as he heard a sharp bump in the back seat.

"I think it's just our toolboxes, Daniel."

"Yeah, you're right." Daniel reached behind him and pushed the toolboxes apart. "They were banging against each other."

"This is a great day for a Saturday," Yankee mused. "It's fun being off by ourselves today."

"I think the women needed some time to themselves, too," Daniel said pensively.

"Oh, come on, Daniel, surely you don't miss Sara already."

"I miss her. I miss Eric."

"You can't be under each other's feet every minute of every day. You need some time to yourself."

"I'll get used to it. We'll get busy with Roger's . . ." Daniel pointed ahead of him. "It's just through those trees. The hotel's on the other side of them. Where was I?"

"You said you'd get used to it."

"Oh, yeah. I'll get used to not having Sara and Eric around today once I get involved with Roger's restoration project."

They had driven through the trees and now were driving across open ground. The grass spread out before them like a carpet. "Nice place," Yankee said.

"It's beautiful up here. Check out the river view. If you drive the truck closer to the hotel, we won't have to carry our toolboxes so far."

"Daniel, you and I have perfect-celled strength. We could carry our toolboxes to Alaska and back without even breaking into a sweat." But Yankee did as Daniel requested. He parked the vehicle within twenty feet of the front door.

Daniel turned in his seat and said, "I know that our new strength has removed many limitations for you us, but it's probably not a good idea to show off our strength to Roger and Steve today."

"You know I wouldn't do that, Daniel."

Daniel put his hand on Yankee's arm. "I know you wouldn't. I'm not even implying you would. But when other people see our strength, they feel resentful."

"How could they be resentful, Daniel? You've been rescued from a body riddled with polio and I've been rescued from a breathing machine and amputated limbs and a bashed in, burned up face that would have frightened even my mother. How could they possibly resent that?"

"Because our new strength is a painful reminder that you and I will live to the very ripe old age of approximately two-hundred and fifty years-that's why."

Yankee sat back in his seat. "Yeah. It would look like we were showing off. Sometimes I can't believe that I'll live that long."

"You can trust Santoo, Yankee. If he says that's how long we'll live, then that's how long we'll live."

"Karen wants a body like mine. Without it she'll die long before me."

"Sara has told her that Santoo will give her a perfect-celled body. She can have what you have. All she has to do is ask."

"She's considering it. It's just difficult for her. Where does this gift that Santoo has given us end? She has her body made perfect. Then her family will want it. Then it will spread out to in-laws and their relatives. My family and in-laws and friends will want a long life too. Jeez, man, where does it end?"

"This is how I look at it-the people who are closest to me are my wife, who was born with this long life, my daughter, my son, and my son-in-law. I have no sisters or brothers, and my mother probably wouldn't want to live another one hundred and seventy years. Maybe we won't either when we get to be her age. But my life is my family. Those are the people who should share my long life."

"Have you thought that Eric may already have perfect cells?"

"Yeah."

"If he's a true product of the beings on the ship, then I would say that he most definitely has a superior cellular structure-wouldn't you?" Yankee pressed.

"I guess."

"I can tell, you don't want to talk about this," Yankee said, concern in his voice.

"See that bench over there?" Daniel pointed to a single park bench sitting under the trees.

"Yeah."

"Let's go over there and sit down." Daniel glanced at his watch. "It'll be a while before Steve and Roger get here."

They got out of the truck. Yankee put on a pair of sunglasses and they walked across the grass to the bench. The bench sat on the edge of the bluff and the Mississippi River slowly crawled across the landscape barely eighty feet below them. Daniel sat down and leaned back against the slats of the bench. "Ahh . . . this bench has a very special meaning for me."

"How so? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"You can ask. This is the place where Sara and I finally got to know each other." He turned around and pointed to the disheveled looking brick structure perched on the edge of the bluff. The four-wheeler parked next to it looked out of place, out of time. "And in there was where Sara first showed me her . . ."

"Whoa, Daniel, you don't have to give me details," Yankee laughed.

"Well, that's the first place we made love-true-but it also was the first time I experienced the teleporting power of her amulet."

"And the beings," Yankee finished.

"Yeah," Daniel said quietly. "This was the first time they came down to the ground; the first time they came on our turf."

"You're sure of this, aren't you?"

"I heard them moving in the darkness around us. I sensed them close to me-to Sara. They were there in that room in the hotel with us."

"It's to your credit, Daniel, that you are going in there with us today to help us remodel."

"I don't really have any choice. I'm doing this for Roger. He's also fanatical about getting this place in shape as soon as possible-for what, we don't know."

"The eagle?"

"The eagle."

During the previous fall when Daniel and Roger were briefly visiting in a parking lot in front of the building where Daniel worked, an eagle had simply dropped from the sky and landed on the top of Roger's hardware van. Although the eagle had made no specific impression at the time on Daniel, Roger insisted the eagle had somehow told him to finish renovating the hotel. Roger owned the hotel and the

land it was sitting on. He was so frantic to complete the work on it, one afternoon in the middle of the winter he had almost electrocuted himself while trying to wire the building. It was Daniel and Sara that-with the speed the amulet gave them-came to Roger's rescue and saved his life. Daniel had mentioned this encounter with the eagle to Yankee, but he hadn't gone into detail, nor had he mentioned it since.

"That wasn't the first time the eagle had entered our lives. The first time was here, as I sat on this bench. The eagle was flying above us. Sara asked if I would like to become as free as the eagle. Of course I said yes. She touched my temples and my consciousness became one with the eagle. That was one of those experiences you couldn't forget, even if you tried. The second encounter with the eagle was . . ."

"Wait a minute," Yankee interrupted, "you're giving this eagle disturbingly anthropomorphic properties."

"That's because this bird behaved like a purposeful human being." Daniel smiled slightly and then continued. "The second encounter was at Roger's picnic table right back there." Daniel pointed to a picnic table nestled under the trees. "The eagle dropped out of the sky and landed on the table. It walked across the table and stopped in front of Sara and me. It quite deliberately reached out and touched my hand with its talon, and then it touched Sara's hand with its talon. It was an unsettling experience."

Yankee sat with his mouth hanging open. "Then what happened?"

"Then it flapped its wings and flew away."

"Damn," Yankee gasped.

"Oh, but it gets better, Yank. Not too long after that when Sara and I were taken aboard the beings' ship, we saw this same eagle again. It was probably fifteen feet tall and it stood right in front of us."

"I think you're losing your mind."

"Of course I am. Just like you're losing yours. You've been up there with them. It was their big ship that frightened you so badly you flipped your four-wheeler right into a hospital bed."

"It wasn't their big ship that scared me."

"Oh?" Daniel said, curious.

"No. It was one of those damned little scout craft they love to fly around in."

"Scout craft?"

"That's what I call them. The craft are about the same size as your shuttle. They look different, though."

"How so?"

"They really look like they are from another world. They look kind of organic. Your shuttle looks like something our air force would have designed."

"You're saying the shuttle appears to be of human origin but their craft looks alien?"

"Yes."

"Hmm . . . maybe I should have been asking you more questions all along."

"Ask me now. It seems like Steve and Roger are already late. We might as well make constructive use of our time."

"Yeah, well, okay. Since the last time we've talked of this have you been able to recall any details of the times you were taken on board?"

"None other than what I've already told you. I clearly remember what the big ship looks like. But after it picks me up, I seem to remember nothing. Snippets of memory plague me in my dreams-that's all. I distinctly remember the little craft following me as I drove. I recall the feelings of dread when I realized it was them again."

"But you've had no other encounter experiences since Santoo transferred you to your clone?"

Yankee stared at Daniel.

"Well, have you?"

"I've been waking up with nosebleeds now and again." Yankee's attempt at sounding casual fell flat in the air between them.

"Oh, really? What does Karen think these nosebleeds may be caused by?"

"Stress."

"Is this what you believe?"

"No. I've never been happier in my life."

"Doesn't Karen realize that people with nearly perfect cells don't get spontaneous nosebleeds?"

"She knows that. We . . . just don't talk about it much."

"There's more, isn't there?"

"There's more. She's . . . also waking with nosebleeds."

"At the same times you are?" Daniel tried to hide his concern.

"Usually."

They turned to the sound of a car engine behind them. "It's them. Time to get to work."

Chapter Nine

"You're ruining this place, Roger. You're just ruining it," Daniel said, irritated at what he saw before him.

"I knew you'd say that." Roger looked at Steve. "Didn't I tell you he'd say that?"

Steve grinned. "Word for word."

"I think Roger's doing a good job in here," Yankee said. "Why do you think he's ruining it?"

"Because he was going to restore this hotel to its original state. This was a grand old place at the turn of the century. People dripping with diamonds came off the riverboats and stayed up here. This place has a history. Roger, if walls . . ."

"Yeah, I know," Roger interrupted. "If walls could talk. But they can't. And I'm not supposed to remodel this place in the way you and I had first talked about. This place is going to be bright and sunny and new inside. We can keep the charm on the outside, but on the inside it gets a whole new makeover. Sorry to disappoint you, Daniel, but that's the way it's going to be."

"Why did you decide to abandon your original plan?"

"Because the eagle told me to."

"You didn't tell me you've seen it since."

"I haven't seen it since you and I saw it. But this feeling I got from it was one of-of-urgency. This building is to be used for something, and we've got to get it finished. I've already discussed this with you countless times . . ."

Steve interjected, "Cut Roger some slack, Daniel. Let's not waste our time bickering. I have to go in for duty at five o'clock today, and I want to get to work. This is Roger's property, not ours. He can remodel it any way he pleases. Now, are we going to help him or not."

Daniel shook his head as he picked up a hammer. "Tell me what to do."

They worked the rest of the afternoon. They dropped their hammers briefly when they heard the moaning horn of a grain barge cutting slowly down river. They stood on the bluff and watched for a bit, then went back to work. Roger had made significant progress on the hotel during the winter months. He and his wife, Julia, made a good team. Daniel knew the two of them could work twice as fast as any four average carpenters, mainly because Julia knew what Roger wanted before he ever told her. Daniel thought sometimes they could telepath, too. But their unspoken communication came from long years together. Steve and Rachel had been helping as well; they enjoyed coming out on weekends to work in the fresh air.

The hotel had three stories made of worn red brick. It was as long as a grain barge and almost as wide. Roger had considered finishing it in its original elegance, and then opening it up again to tourists as a bed and breakfast, but he didn't expect to have it finished before he retired. His retirement was more than twenty-five years away.

But the eagle had changed everything. The mysterious messenger had appeared one morning when Roger was on a service call, and according to Roger had 'told' him to finish the hotel. Roger wasn't one to fantasize. If he said the eagle had told him to hurry with the renovation, then that's what the eagle had somehow communicated to him. The fact that others might find this story strange didn't seem to bother him in the least. But Roger had enough to do running his hardware store and raising his children without

adding the chore of finishing this massive project so quickly.

"Blind faith, Daniel. We're finishing this on blind faith. I'm doin' this fast, but I'm doin' it right." Roger happily slammed in the final nail on yet another sheet of plaster board.

Monday came too soon. Daniel enjoyed the morning with Eric, but in the afternoon he went to work as usual.

Sara's parents had given them three-hundred million dollars in cut diamonds for their wedding present. Diamonds weren't valuable on Teruhl: they were like sand on the beaches of Earth. They thought that at some point in the future they would spend their wedding present wisely. Daniel had no intention of spending any of it-it lay safe in his safety deposit box at the bank-but it was a great comfort to know that they didn't have to work if they chose not to.

Ann had proved helpful to them as well. Her child psychology background proved invaluable in unlocking Eric's mind. Before they had known her as a child psychologist, they had known her as a hypnotist. They originally engaged her services to help them unlock some of the memories of their abductions.

Daniel thought of these things as he pulled his battery-powered scooter out of the back of his van in the parking lot at work. The scooter was a God-send to him once, but now he didn't need it. He could out-walk and out-run anyone on this campus. But he dared not show that side of him, so he used the scooter to keep up pretenses. Someday, when Daniel and Sara would have to move on to a different location and a different life lest their ageless bodies would give them away, Daniel could dispense with the scooter. He slammed the hatch and drove the scooter into his building. Its wheels moved far too slowly for him now.

He drove the scooter by a classroom door. A group of people came out. It was apparent they had had a meeting in that room. The last person to leave was Michael Torgelson.

"Well, hello, Daniel," Michael said. "I haven't seen you for a while."

Daniel panicked. Torgelson noticed everything. He'd been eyeing Daniel suspiciously for weeks.

"You're out of your territory today," Daniel said in his most friendly voice.

"We just had a union meeting. How are you?"

Daniel felt uncomfortable as Michael looked at him. "I've been quite well. And yourself?"

"Oh, I'm fine. You certainly look healthy, Daniel. Not your usual exhausted self."

"Thanks, I think."

"Marriage must agree with you."

"Yes, I get lots of loving from my wife." He laughed, trying to be casual but knowing he wasn't succeeding.

Michael said. "Say, Daniel, has there been some sort of a breakthrough with polio?"

"What do you mean?"

Michael scratched his head. "Well, It's my understanding that once paralysis sets in, your muscles are damaged forever." He looked puzzled by his own questions. "Last I read, aging polio survivors are having re-occurrences of the symptoms of the disease. You, on the other hand, seem to be getting stronger."

"Yeah. For an aging polio survivor I'm pretty lucky."

Torgelson blushed. "I just meant you were looking pretty hearty and strong lately. My cousin had polio. She isn't doing well at all. She's about your age. Is there some miraculous doctor you might recommend?"

Daniel's heart plummeted. "Uh . . . actually, I have been trying some experimental treatment. Acupuncture . . . Reiki massage . . . magnets . . . an osteopath could help her . . ."

"Any new drugs out there? It always bothered me that we could put a man on the moon but we couldn't find relief for the damage some of these crippling viruses have caused. My cousin-" Michael rushed on, excited now, "she's tried about everything. She's getting really depressed. Dangerously depressed. Isn't there anything she can try now?" He stepped back and looked at Daniel with a penetrating gaze. "I mean, you're doing so well."

"I don't know what to tell you, Mike," Daniel said, sweat popping through the armpits of his shirt.

"Could you give me the name of your doctor?" Michael pressed.

Yes, Daniel thought. His name is Santoo. He's my father-in-law and he lives on the planet, Teruhl, thirty light years from Earth. He just wanted Michael to leave. "I'm really sorry about your cousin. Some polio survivors do better than others. That's what makes the disease so baffling. It's really a case by case sort of thing. Tell you what, let me see how my treatments go. I may not continue to improve. My strength could be temporary. If anything appears to be lasting, I'll share what I know."

Disappointment in his voice, now, Michael pleaded, "I just want the name of a doctor. Why can't you give me that much?" Michael looked hurt. With great relief Daniel watched him turn and walk away, but Daniel felt horribly guilty and selfish.

Still shaking, Daniel went into his office and picked up the chemistry tests he was about to give his class. Then he went down the hallway and into his classroom. The students were waiting for him. "How are we all today?" Daniel asked cheerfully.

"We'd be great if you'd cancel the test, Daniel," one of the students said in fun.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Daniel teased, "but how will I know how smart you are unless you tell me on your test?"

"Aww . . ."

"Now, now, the test isn't that bad." He handed the tests out and then sat down at the table in the front of the room.

The hands on the clock ticked by slowly, but Daniel was thankful for this brief respite in his busy life. Suddenly, before Sara had even stuck her head in the doorway, he knew something was very wrong. He turned to the door and Sara stood there, face as white as a sheet.

Daniel got up, knees shaking, and walked to her. Lisa, his good friend in his work life, stood next to her.

"Daniel, it's an emergency. Lisa said she'd sit with your students and pick up the tests when they're finished."

"What . . . ?"

"Go, Daniel," Lisa said. "I'll take care of things here."

Daniel lurched out the doorway. His throat was dry. Eric wasn't with Sara. "It's Eric, isn't it?" Daniel asked, afraid of the answer Sara would give him.

"Yes," she said. She led him down the hallway and into the empty janitor's closet. Then she held him in a tight embrace. "They took him, Daniel. In the middle of the day they came down and took him." He felt her tears on his cheeks, and the pendant turned to a malignant fire. Then his body melted and they were gone.

They stood in the kitchen, facing each other. "They're getting bolder, Sara. They're getting bolder by the minute."

"What can we do, Daniel?" Sara said frantically.

"We wait."

Before Daniel could formulate another thought, the light beam slammed through the ceiling and sucked them both up in its energy.

Chapter Ten

Daniel expected to be confronted with the usual small army of beings, but the hallway was empty. This wasn't the first time they had been left waiting. Occasionally he and Sara, after reaching this entry point, would simply stand and wait until the beings appeared and took them to places they didn't want to go. But Daniel didn't want to wait. He just wanted the beings to give Eric back to them and let them go home.

"Daniel, Sara." Daniel was startled to hear his name called while in this place of very high strangeness, and turned to see Saul coming down the hallway. He stopped in front of them and put up his hand. "Don't hit me. They're not here. Please, no violence today."

"Where's Eric?" Sara demanded. "What have they done with him?"

"Please. Keep your voice down. They have him, but he's all right."

"Where is he?" Daniel asked through clenched teeth. He took Saul by the wrist and squeezed it tightly.

"They want to examine him," Saul hissed.

"No! That will terrify him. Why did they take him? What do they want him for?"

Saul stood quietly, making no effort to free himself from Daniel's grasp. "I don't know. But they won't hurt him. It's not like they do with you. He's like one of them." He swallowed and whispered, "I swear when I'm on the ground I can't remember what happens up here. I swear to God I can't remember a thing. I just get little pieces of memories. They have almost totally separated my life up here from my life down there. I . . . I have a life down there, don't I?" Saul stammered. "I'm beginning to remember bits and pieces of a life down there."

"Yes," Daniel said. "You have a very good life down there."

Saul closed his eyes tightly. "Then what in the hell am I doing up here?"

Daniel relaxed his grip on Saul's wrist. "Saul, you're our only hope up here. Do you know that?"

Saul rubbed his eyes in what Daniel interpreted to be weariness. "I don't even know what I'm doing here. What am I doing up here?"

"You seem to be a go-between for Sara and I. It wouldn't surprise me if you're a go-between for others as well."

Daniel suddenly felt his skin crawl. He glanced over Saul's shoulder. The doctor being stood against a far wall. It's eyes, huge, threatening, terrifying, pierced through his soul. "He's behind you," Daniel choked. "He's glaring at us."

Sara's hands began to shake. She clung to Daniel and Daniel clung to Saul. Saul turned around and smiled at the doctor. The being turned and walked away.

"Who's running the show up here, Saul?"

"I don't know. I just do what they tell me."

Daniel stepped back and looked closely at Saul. "We want to see Eric," he said. "Please give him back to us and let us go home."

"Come with me," he said.

Saul led them through the hallway until he came to another hallway intersecting the first. This second hallway appeared to stretch for hundreds of feet, but Daniel had no way of knowing if it truly was that long or if it was an illusion. They walked silently behind Saul-hanging onto each other, fearful that at any moment the beings might scuttle in and separate them.

Saul stopped at a doorway and led them through it and into an empty room. "Stand here. I'm going to get Eric. I'll be right back." He left.

"Daniel?" Sara began to sob.

Daniel embraced her. "Sweetheart, we'll see Eric soon." What he just said, he didn't believe, but there

was nothing else for him to say.

They stood against the wall for what seemed like hours, the passing seconds drilling into them like white-hot nails. "He's not coming, Daniel," Sara said. "He's not."

A being entered the room, its long, thin body scuttling across the floor like an intelligent spider. Daniel sensed this being was a female and that it was the same female being that had only a few months ago shown them a room filled with hybrid babies.

The being moved to the other side of the room and stood quietly-watching them.

"Eric!" Sara cried. "Oh, Eric!"

Eric held onto Saul's hand, and Daniel couldn't possibly mistake the look of profound relief on Eric's face.

"I told you I'd bring him," Saul said with a look of relief fully equal to Eric's own. He released Eric's hand and Eric threw himself at his new parents.

"Daddy! Mommy!"

When Daniel took Eric in his arms he thought he was going to faint from sheer relief. "It's all right now, Eric. We're here. It's okay. We're going home now." He looked up at the being across the room. It stood, long thin arms at its sides, huge liquid black enigmatic eyes staring.

Saul turned and looked at Daniel. "I'll be right back." He turned to leave.

Daniel reached out to him and grabbed him by his elbow. "Saul, we want to go home now," he whispered.

"Not yet, Daniel. I'll be right back-I promise." He left without another word.

This time the wait wasn't as long. At least it didn't feel that long to Daniel. They had their little boy back, and right now that seemed to be all that mattered.

"I don't want to be here, Daddy." Eric was a little boy again, talking and reacting as any four year old would after a very bad scare.

"We'll have to wait for Saul, Eric. Saul will help us get home."

"I didn't get to see my friends," Eric mourned. "Do you think they are here somewhere? Let's go find them."

"No, Eric. We're going to stay right here until Saul gets back. I'm sure your friends are safe." Sara held the little boy to keep him from wandering down the long hallway.

When Saul returned, he had eleven hybrid children with him. They filed in quietly and stood in a line. The children were of varying degrees of humanness. One child, a little girl, looked as human as Eric. Daniel noted that if the child would be mingling with human children on the ground, it would be impossible to know the child came from this place.

Several children were almost pure Zeta. Only their eyes set them apart from the rest of the beings on the ship. Instead of the deep black eyes characteristic of the Zeta, these children had human colored eyes—a colored iris and black pupil within a white field. But the eye was so huge, the white of the eye was only a faint reminder of whatever humanness they possessed. Eric ran to the children and touched them all, as if he knew them well.

Saul walked to one side of the room and stopped at the wall. The room was lit from a source impossible to determine. Saul waved his hand across a nearly invisible panel which opened, revealing a set of shelves. The shelves were loaded with toys. Saul looked at the tall being that was still silently standing in place. The being came to him and together they put the toys on the floor. Saul looked at Daniel and Sara and said, "Play with the children." He stepped back away from them and stood at the side of the room, arms folded.

First Sara got down on the floor, then Daniel. "Eric," Sara said, "let's play with the children. All right?" She kissed him.

"Oh, yes, Mommy."

Daniel had already noticed that Eric was slipping back to the speech and manners of an insecure four-year-old. Daniel picked up a peculiar looking toy and said, "Eric, can you explain what this toy is?"

"It flies," he said matter-of-fact. "See, you press this." The toy looked like a fat Frisbee. Eric pressed the center of it and set it on the floor. The toy rose into the air. "Now-if you think, you can guide it . . ."

"Really?" Daniel said. He noticed the other children watching closely.

"Yes. I'll give control of it to you, Daddy."

"Just how can you give me control?"

"I just told it that it was to follow your thoughts. Think, Daddy. Make it fly."

Daniel pictured the toy flying towards Saul. It quietly slid through the air towards him. "Oh, oh," Daniel said in mock panic, "it's going to hit Saul! It's going to hit Saul!"

Eric giggled merrily as the toy drifted close to Saul's face and then drifted away, but the other children simply sat and stared.

Sara said, "I have an idea. We can play a game with this toy." She lined the children up in two rows of six children each. "Spread out," she ordered, gesturing to show the children how to behave. "Spread out so there's space between you."

Daniel was sure that with the exception of Eric, the children spoke no English. But they seemed to be getting the point of Sara's instructions through telepathy. He also had no doubt that since Sara, herself, was an extremely strong telepath, the children were getting a very clear picture of what she visualized for them.

Eventually Sara had the children batting the toy back and forth from one team to another. If the toy managed to slip through a line, the other side got a point. It was nothing more than a very simple game of tennis with a very sophisticated toy as the ball. Daniel knew that the Zeta were watching. Surely every wall in this room was transparent to them. What they wanted to know he had no clue. But he knew they

were not far away.

Eric was squealing with delight as he competitively batted the toy every time it came his way, but the rest of the children were puzzled by this strange game. Daniel wondered if they even knew what a game was. But Eric's enthusiasm finally began to generate a small amount of play among the children. He noticed that the more human-like children were more willing to play. They batted at the toy, imitating Eric. They displayed at least some pleasure in competing. But he noticed that the Zeta children stared at the others, and made no move to participate. Daniel wondered if taking these poor children off the ship, taking them down to the ground where there was constant variety, would have a positive effect on them. He suspected it would.

After time had passed, enough time for any child who wanted to enter the game to have made a move, Saul walked across the room. There was a look of sadness on his face. He took the toy from Eric. "Come on. I'm going to take you back to the exit point."

Relieved beyond description, Daniel said, "Come, Eric, we're going home, now."

"No," Saul said. "Eric can't come with you. I'm sorry."

"What are you talking about?" Sara said. Her telepathed anguish along with her speech overwhelmed Daniel. "What are you talking about, Saul?"

"They want to keep him-for now." He looked at the floor.

Daniel hoped he remembered how they came in. He took Eric's arm in one hand and Sara's in the other and he walked them quickly out of the room. He bent down and took Eric in his arms. "Come on, Sara. We're getting out of here."

Before Daniel could take another step, beings appeared on both sides of them and they had stunrods in their hands. "No, Daddy! No!" Eric sobbed. "Don't hurt my daddy! Don't hurt my mommy!" he sobbed.

A being stepped forward and roughly pulled Eric from Daniel's arms. Daniel lashed out with his fists, but before he connected, he felt the familiar sharp sting of the stunrod strike him on his temple. He saw Sara go down first. He was proud of his wife. She was fighting them; she was fighting for Eric.

His arms, already paralyzed as he went down, didn't allow him to reach out to break his fall, and he struck the floor with such force, he thought he'd broken his nose. He tried to moan, but the stunrod had paralyzed him so quickly and so thoroughly, he couldn't even do that much. The stunrod was little more than an electric cattle prod that kept the humans-animals to these black-eyed alien beings-in line.

The beings floated Daniel off the floor. Sara was floating next to him. Daniel felt himself slobbering down his face. He felt the beings' dry hands pushing their bodies along towards the exit point. "I want my son!" Daniel telepathed.

The light burst from the floor, and in less than a frantic heartbeat Daniel and Sara, still profoundly paralyzed by the stunrods that struck them, were heading down the column of alien light towards the roof of their house. And Eric was still with Saul aboard the ship. Daniel's only desperate hope was that Saul would begin to remember who he was and get their son home to them.

Chapter Eleven

Daniel was in a somewhat similar situation once when he had given the beings a serious amount of trouble after taking him on board. That time, too, they had paralyzed him with a stunrod. They were so angry with him, they had forcefully thrown him on a table. To his horror, he started to roll off the other side, and he couldn't have caught himself if he would have actually fallen off. But the doctor being grabbed him just in time, before he bashed his brains out on the deck. Would he be so fortunate this time?

He landed on his back on the living room carpet. The landing was soft, but to his horror he was still paralyzed! The beings had never returned them in a paralyzed state before. They had had a few rough landings now and again, but never had they been returned incapacitated. "Sara!" he telepathed. "Sara, are you all right!"

Sara was silent, but Daniel knew she was terrified. "Sara," he telepathed again. "Sara, are you all right? Please tell me you're all right!"

"I'm paralyzed, Daniel! Oh, dear One-In-All, I can't move!"

Daniel tried to swallow but was so paralyzed he couldn't. "What are we going to do, Sara?" he telepathed frantically.

"We're . . . we're not going to panic. Eric? Eric, Honey, where are you? Can you help us?" "He's not with us, Sara. They kept him-remember?"

"Oh, no! Oh, please, no!"

Daniel had to do something, and quickly. He was afraid Sara would strangle if she had enough muscle left to hyperventilate. "Sara . . . Sara, listen to me. We can get out of this, but you have to listen to me. Can you do that? Can you listen to me?" he telepathed.

"Eric!"

"No, Sara, not Eric. Eric's not here now. But he will be. They'll return him. He'll come back. But right now you have to help us. You can do it; you can help us." Daniel knew the key was to remain calm in his thoughts. He knew that. The logical side of him began to over-ride his panic and he began to calm. "Sara, this is what we're going to do. Rachel has a key to the house. You know this, don't you?" he telepathed gently.

"Yes, I know that. Rachel has a key to the house."

"And if you can talk to her, she will come into our house and help us. Can you telepath to her? Can you tell her to come and help us?"

"Yes. Yes, I can do that. Let me try doing this now. Give me just a minute to connect . . ."

Already Daniel was relieved. Sara's rational side was beginning to kick in. They'd get out of this yet.

"She and Steve are eating supper together at the Eagle's Nest, Daniel. She is upset. She knows we're in trouble. She's telling Steve. She says they are coming right now. She's afraid for us. I'm trying to tell her we're all right, but she's afraid. They're running out of the restaurant. Oh, Daniel, I didn't mean to scare them so badly."

"Sara, we had to have help. You did well. Let's just try to calm our thoughts until they come."

"Yes. I'll try. I'll try to stay calm."

Why had the beings done this to them? Why had they kept Eric and then literally dumped Daniel and Sara onto the floor of their own home, paralyzed and panicked. Was this still another of their abominable tests to see how they would emotionally react, Daniel wondered? Were they really learning something from these mad, inhumane experiments, or were they just cruel people? In Daniel's wildest imaginings, he couldn't believe these people were ignorant of their pain.

Daniel heard a key hurriedly clicking in the lock. Then the door flew open and Rachel and Steve's faces hovered above them.

"What can we do for you?" Rachel frantically signed.

"Getting us off the floor would help," Daniel telepathed wearily. "Help Sara up, first."

Between the two of them, they lifted Sara from the floor and laid her on the couch. Then they picked up Daniel and laid him in the recliner.

"Let me call Karen," Rachel signed.

"No. She can't do anything for us. You'll just worry her."

Steve signed and spoke, "We've got to do something. You can't stay paralyzed like this. You don't even know how a stunrod paralyzes you. Maybe there's some kind of drug that is injected into you when they hit you with it. Maybe she can find an antidote."

"No, Steve. These people are far more sophisticated than that."

"Where's Eric?" A look of sheer panic suddenly crossed Rachel's face.

"They have him. Oh, God, Rachel, they have him!" Sara telepathed.

"Steve, call Karen," Rachel signed.

"No!" Daniel telepathed. "She can't do anything. It's not necessary to get her involved in this."

Rachel signed sharply, "Call her, Steve." Daniel was too exhausted to argue.

Time passed slowly as they waited for Karen to arrive. Finally, she came; Yankee was at her side. She reacted quickly to the dilemma before her by opening her doctor's bag and rummaging through it.

"What are you going to do?" Sara telepathed.

"I'm going to try injecting you both with a stimulant. I'm fearful that your paralyzed state will get out of hand if I don't."

"Just wait a while, Karen," Daniel telepathed wearily. "You don't know how we might react to a stimulant. Just wait-please."

Karen sat down. "I don't know what to do for you, then." She lightly caressed Yankee's face in a gesture of 'help me'.

"I don't know what you should do, either," Yankee said. "Maybe if we're patient, the beings will release you from this paralysis. It doesn't make sense that they would leave you like this-does it?"

"Nothing these people do makes any sense, Yankee. You should know that from your own experience with them."

No one went home. Frantic with worry for Eric, frantic for the paralysis that wouldn't leave Daniel and Sara, they all stayed awake, keeping vigil for a little boy that they in all likelihood might never see again. Grief had eaten its way into all of them. It was the longest night of Daniel's life.

At daybreak strength quite dramatically returned to them. The all too familiar light burst from the ceiling and a being fell from the ceiling and into their midst. The being floated to Daniel and struck him sharply on his head with the stunrod. Daniel's strength immediately returned to him. He struggled off the recliner: his muscles were weak and stiff from the ordeal. The being floated to Sara and struck her similarly with the stunrod. She, too, sat up on the couch. The light burst brightly, and the being was gone.

"Are you all right," he whispered to Sara.

"I'm all right," she whispered in return. "We should telepath so we don't waken everyone."

Daniel didn't know if the others had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion, or if the beings had switched them off. Regardless of the cause, they had apparently seen nothing.

"I don't want to telepath. I want to use my mouth, my tongue to speak. For a while there I didn't think I'd ever speak again." He went to her and sat down on the couch beside her. "Sara, I can't sit here and do nothing. I have to find Saul. Maybe if we go to where he works, we could talk to him."

"We could talk to him if he's there, Daniel. But we saw him on the ship only a few hours ago. He could still be on the ship."

"In a way I hope he is: I want him to protect Eric." He embraced her and held her tightly. "Dear God," he sighed, "what in the hell are we going to do?"

"Daniel, even if we can find him today, he doesn't know what goes on in the ship. He doesn't even know he is being abducted. We should have carried our social visit with him the other night to hypnosis. Why didn't we do that? Why are we putting this off?" Sara whispered. "We left him without learning anything." Sara looked at the wall, her contact lenses almost transparent to her black eyes beneath. "He can tell us nothing," she said, her voice hollow and distant.

"Maybe he can, Sara. He loves Eric. Maybe his concern for Eric will break through the wall the beings have put up in him. Maybe if we confront him, he will . . ."

"Daniel, this can't work," Sara whispered.

"It will work. I'll make it work."

"I'll go with you." Steve got up off the floor. "Sorry," he whispered. "I didn't mean to eves drop, but I couldn't help but hear." Steve sat down on the couch next to Sara and put his arm around her. "I was terribly worried," he whispered.

Daniel said, "I think the beings switched all of you off. You were terribly worried about us, yet you all fell asleep."

"The beings came?" Steve whispered.

"Just one came. I'm assuming that they switched you all off to make it less complicated for them when they restored our strength. It seems reasonable, anyway."

"Yeah, it seems reasonable. So, can I go with you?"

"No. It's best Sara and I talk to Saul alone."

"Do you even know where he lives?" Steve asked.

"He lives with Ann." Daniel rubbed his forehead in frustration. "Look, you and Rachel just go on with your day. There's nothing you can do. There's nothing Karen or Yankee can do. We know where Eric is. I would take the shuttle up and have them take me aboard, if I thought I could get away with it."

"Sweetheart," Sara said, "you got away with that before because the beings wanted to give Eric to us. I think they wanted us to show them how much we loved and wanted Eric then. But they know how much we want him now. We've proven our love. If they want us to have him now, then they would bring him to us."

"Then that settles it; we have to find Saul." Daniel stood up and looked at his son-in-law. "Please don't worry about us, Steve. Tell the others where we've gone. I'd appreciate it if you'd call BioMed and the college to tell them we're not coming in to work today. That will be helpful if you would do this for us."

"Sure, Daniel." Steve gripped Daniel's shoulder and tried to smile. "Rachel and I are going to stay here while you're gone. Someone should be here if they return Eric."

"I think the beings will know where we're at, but we appreciate you staying here just in case they do what you say. Just don't let them scare you to death." Daniel pulled Sara to him and visualized his favorite target point in Dubuque.

"Daniel, I don't know where Saul is today," Ann said. "His landscaping business takes him all over town. I don't know how Saul could possibly help you get Eric back. What makes you think he could be of help to you?" she asked.

"Think," Sara said. "Please think where he might be today. Surely he tells you the different locations he works at."

"He does. But he doesn't tell me where he is on a daily basis."

"Well, does he work longer than a day at different sites?"

"Sure. Sometimes he'll work at a site for as long as three or four weeks. Oh, dear God, Daniel, how will you ever get Eric back?"

"Just hope Saul can help, Ann. It's easy to panic, but we need to think clearly, now. Can you remember where he worked last? Maybe he's still at that same place."

"The last place he worked was . . . uh . . . at the new middle school construction site on Beaver Avenue. We could try there."

"Lead the way."

"Is Saul out here today?" Ann asked a man in an orange hard hat.

"He should be here somewhere," the man said. "He's finishing up some tree planting, but I don't know if he came in this morning." The man turned to a workman standing thirty feet from them. "Al, have you seen Saul this morning?" he yelled over the sound of a concrete mixing truck that had pulled into the front driveway.

"Yeah. He's around behind the building. They're planting trees," the man yelled back.

The man in the hard hat turned back to them and Daniel saw him covertly glance at him. "Would you like me to go get him?" Daniel supposed his limp elicited in the man sympathy and a need to assist. Daniel didn't mind. His disability had elicited many kind responses from strangers. The man had no way of knowing Daniel had the physical strength of several men.

"No need," Daniel said. "We can walk it." The three of them set off towards the back of the building.

As they rounded the corner of the building, Daniel caught a glimpse of Saul's upper body behind a tree that was about to be dropped into the ground. "There he is." They hurried to him.

"Saul," Daniel said. Upon seeing Saul, the reality that Eric wasn't with them, that he was still being held by the beings, hit Daniel like an ax. His throat was strained and dry from fear.

"Hey," Saul said. "What are you doing out here?" He turned to the man in the truck that was about to plant the tree. "Go ahead," Saul said. "Finish it. I'll be right back." Saul took his rawhide gloves off and stuck them into his back pocket. "You'd think I wouldn't have to be out here getting my hands dirty since I'm the boss." He grinned and ushered them away from the truck and the noise.

"Eric's gone," Ann said quickly. "He's gone, Saul. Daniel and Sara think you can help them."

"Gone?" Saul began to shake. "Gone?" he said again.

Sara looked with alarm at Ann. "Let's take Saul to your car, Ann. Let's get him out of sight of his men."

Chapter Twelve

"What's this about?" Saul said frantically. "Tell me. Did something happen to your little boy?"

The wildness in Saul's eyes told Daniel that Saul had no recollection of last night's events. The four of them were standing next to Ann's car, well away from the construction workers and the roaring machinery. "Yes," Sara answered. "They've taken Eric."

"Then you should call the police. What are you doing standing here talking to me. You should call the police!"

"Saul," Sara said, "we were hoping you could help us." Her voice trailed off in the clatter of cement mixers and air hammers.

"Me? How can I help you. You should call the police," Saul said again. He looked at Ann, confused.

"Saul," Daniel said, "it won't do any good to call the police."

"Why are you talking to me?" Saul looked wild. "Do you think I kidnapped him?"

Ann, with a sudden look of helplessness in her eyes, put her arm around Sara. "I'm sorry, Sara," she whispered. "I'm really sorry."

"Please, for God's sake, explain what's happening," Saul said.

"Saul, do you remember anything about last night? Do you remember seeing Sara and Eric and I?"

"No. I didn't see anyone last night except Ann. Isn't that right, Ann." Saul looked at her questioningly.

"Saul, would you submit to hypnosis?" Ann suddenly asked.

"I'm not ready for that. I explained this to you the other night."

"Saul?" Daniel took a step towards this enigma of a man.

Saul's face was filled with pain. There were tears in his voice that Daniel could sense over the racket of machinery. He didn't know if he was sensing Saul's pain telepathically or if it was simply that obvious.

Saul opened Ann's car door and motioned everyone in. "All right," Saul said, "I know . . . I know I have a problem. I don't know what the problem is, but since I remember you-parts of your lives, that is-I

have . . . I acknowledge I need help. But since you want to hypnotize me," he turned to Daniel and Sara sitting in the back seat, "it must mean you think I'm somehow involved in Eric's disappearance."

Daniel and Sara said nothing.

"You think I took him. Isn't this why you came here? To accuse me of kidnapping?"

Ann put her hand on Saul's shoulder. "Honey, I don't think they are accusing you of anything."

"Then why did they come?" Saul said angrily. "Why did they choose to come to me for help out of all the people they know? I'll tell you why?" Saul was shouting now. "It's because I hurt them in the past. I've hurt you, too. And I can't stop myself because those bastards won't let me stop hurting you." Saul paused, puzzlement on his face. "What did I just say? I don't know what I'm saying. I don't know what I'm talking about." Saul buried his face in his hands.

Sara reached over and put her hand on Saul's shoulder. "Saul, it's time we find out about you. It's time you find out about yourself. I can hypnotize you. I've practiced with Ann. I know what I'm doing. What we learn from you could help us get Eric back."

"I'm . . . I'm just not ready. Hypnotizing me won't help you find Eric because I didn't have anything to do with it," Saul said adamantly.

Daniel suddenly felt woozy. He wanted to leave this man who didn't care about his little boy. He heard someone say, "Daniel, are you all right?" He remembered grabbing Sara's arm and he remembered the pendant of his own amulet warming under his hand. When he opened his eyes, he and Sara were again standing in their living room.

"Daniel, what have you done?" Sara screamed. "We disappeared in front of Saul! He's not yet seen the power of the amulet! . . . Oh, my God, we have to return! Ann's extremely upset!" Sara grabbed Daniel, and her amulet took them from the room, back to Saul and Ann.

Saul was still sitting in the car and Ann was trying to calm him. "I'm sorry, Saul," Daniel said, shaken. "It was my fault. I didn't mean to frighten you. I'm sorry."

Saul looked at Daniel. "I know you, you bastard. I know you."

"How do you know me?"

Ann said, "Daniel, for God's sake, leave him alone."

"How do you know me?" Daniel asked with hope mounting in him.

"I . . . I don't know. Oh, God, I don't know! I'm losing my mind!"

"No." Ann put her arm around Saul and held him quietly. "You're not losing your mind, Saul. You're trying to remember where you've seen Daniel before. If you can remember, then fine. If you can't remember right now, it's all right." She glanced sharply at Daniel. "I don't think this is the way to go about it, Daniel. You're going to have to come up with something better than this."

"Saul," Daniel pleaded, please let Sara try this.

"No," he said wearily.

"Why not? In God's name, why not?"

"I'm afraid of what you might find! I'm afraid that my life will change. I'm afraid I'll lose Ann. Don't you understand?" Saul said miserably. "I'm afraid I'll lose Ann."

They left him. They went home and paced and brooded for the rest of that day. Reserved for those times when they experienced great intimacy between them, they sat in their big rocking chair and held each other. The chair was a shelter, a respite from the horrible circumstances they had been visited by.

"I don't know why we tried that today. What good could he have done anyway? Gone up to the ship, knocked on the door and demanded to be let in?" Sara asked cynically.

"I was hoping he would know what they did with him-where Eric is up there. Then you and I could fly up to their door and demand they let us in."

Her shoulders slumped. "Foolish idea."

"Sara, if I could just talk to your father . . ."

They stood up and Sara embraced Daniel in an act of desperate love. The warmth of the pendant felt like the scalpel that could lance a boil.

When they reached the shuttle, Daniel dropped wearily into his seat. The amazing technology that surrounded him did little to comfort his aching heart and his tired body.

But Sara was about to use a most amazing device. It was a transmitting and receiving apparatus that could reach across light years by focusing thought waves-neutrinos-enabling communication from one end of the galaxy to the other at a speed of one-hundred-thousand light years a second.

"Mother, Father, are you there?"

The screen flickered and Chumaya, Sara's mother, appeared on it. "Hello, ta'Sara. What is happening there?" Chumaya's face registered concern.

"Mother, it's . . . it's . . ." The tears in Sara's voice choked her until she couldn't speak.

"We knew something was very wrong, Sara. Your father even now makes the ship ready. We will come quickly."

Daniel wished they could just transport to Earth immediately but they were seven light years from Earth. Their starship could travel seven tenths of a light year in a twenty-four hour Earth day. That meant they would be in Eagle Bluff in ten days. It was a very long time for Daniel to wait, but he felt some measure of relief they were coming.

That evening before they went to sleep, they sat on the edge of the bed and prayed together. It mattered little that Sara had come from a planet thirty light years from Earth and three-hundred years ahead of Earth in technology. She prayed as fervently and as often as any spiritually minded Earth human. Somehow Daniel managed to fall asleep. Emotional exhaustion and physical pain had overtaken him.

In the middle of the night Daniel awoke. He felt a soft hand on his cheek. "Daddy," the voice whispered. He was dreaming; he had to be. "Daddy," the voice whispered again.

"Oh, dear God in heaven, you're back."

"Daddy, can I sleep with you and Mommy?"

Daniel clearly saw Eric in the night light of the bed room. He picked Eric up and put him between him and Sara. Daniel was crying. He hugged Eric and he kissed him. He was frantic with relief.

"I'm glad to be home, Daddy."

"I'm glad you're home, too, Eric. Oh, God, I'm glad you're home. Let's wake up Mommy. Do you want to wake her up?"

"I want to wake her." Eric turned over on his other side and he playfully poked Sara in her ribs. "Mommy, wake up. I'm home."

During the next few days Eric gradually moved from his place of emotional insecurity to one of self assurance. He once again began to shed the characteristics of a four-year-old child, and Daniel again wondered just who this 'little' boy was. Even more unsettling was the nagging thought that possibly the Zeta were changing Eric's brain, causing the little boy to mature intellectually.

"Sara," Daniel said one evening, "why don't you and Eric do something special tonight?" Eric looked at Daniel. "Without you, Father?"

Daniel smiled at Eric. "Yes, without me. You two need to do something on your own. And then, if you like, you and I can go out and do something while your mother does something she likes."

"Whatever brought this on, Daniel?" Sara said with a look of puzzlement in her black eyes.

"Oh, I don't know."

Sara grinned. "Do you need some space? Are you growing weary of your space woman?"

Daniel came to Sara's side. He took her hands in his and he looked into her black eyes. "I could never grow tired of you." He looked at Eric. "And I'm not tired of you, either, son. I just need some time to think-to try and put things in order in my head."

Sara stood up. "Eric, where would you like to go tonight?"

"To Roger."

"That would be fun. You haven't played with Roger's children for a while."

Eric looked directly into Sara's eyes. "I want to talk to Roger about the eagle."

Daniel sighed in frustration. "Now you know why I need time to myself."

The sun had already set. Daniel was walking along the fence line of Santoo's property. He felt a sense of dread, and he knew this feeling was coming from the circuitry he and Santoo had installed in the fence. Satisfied that the fence was still repelling unwanted visitors, he walked away from it, towards the shuttle's hiding place.

When he reached the door that would open the ground to the shuttle nestled below, he stopped. Two choices presented themselves. He could use his amulet to enter the shuttle and from the shuttle he could by remote, open the door and then fly the shuttle out of its hole, or he could remotely open the door first, bring the shuttle above ground, and from there climb into the shuttle. Daniel chose the latter option. Although he was quite skilled with the amulet now, out here by himself he chose the safer approach.

Visualizing the target point was simple in daylight. The clear images of the day gave Daniel confidence in any image he tried to visualize. But visualizing when the sun had set was a psychological task for Daniel. He didn't want to panic out here in the woods.

Daniel pressed the transmitter button on the side of his hooded flashlight. The ground began moving back. Thoughts came to him about that first time he experienced this huge door moving across the ground, and about how the memories of his abductions had flooded into him. The shuttle rising from the ground reminded him of the small scout craft of the aliens that Yankee had recently described to him. Paralyzed with fear, he didn't think he'd ever become comfortable with the shuttle. But he had. Daniel was practically a Teruhlian now. He knew almost as much about Sara's planet as he did his own.

The shuttle silently rose from the ground. There was only a crescent moon tonight, but the flashlight beam lit the craft clearly. Daniel knew the special frequency of the flashlight's beam made the ship visible only a short distance. Even someone standing closely on the other side of the fence wouldn't see anything. The craft was cloaked.

Daniel mounted the ladder on the side of the hull, opened the hatch and climbed inside. The cabin was dark, but when he touched the wall, the cabin was flooded with light.

There it was. The side-by-side seats, the control panel under the viewscreen, the aircraft-style joy stick projecting from the floor.

Daniel had never flown the shuttle by himself before. Sara was concerned that he wanted to try this alone tonight, but he was ready. There had to be a first time-this was it. He touched the joy stick and moved it gently from side to side. Santoo had rigged the ship to fly like a standard Earth aircraft. Santoo and Sara controlled the shuttle by thought, but when Santoo realized that Daniel would be an important part of Sara's life, he rigged-for Daniel-the shuttle with standard aircraft controls. Daniel had considered trying to control the shuttle with his thoughts, but he knew he couldn't yet visualize clearly enough. Maybe someday. For now, he was content to use the joy stick.

Daniel started the gravity drive. The quiet, reassuring hum quickened his blood. Another press on the control panel turned on the viewscreen. He twisted the projection on the top of the joy stick. The shuttle quietly climbed into the sky.

When Daniel was above the air traffic lanes, he switched off the cloaking device.

When Daniel first began to fly the shuttle, navigation was a mystery to him. Left to his own devices, he couldn't find his way home. He and Sara had many a laugh about it. She teasingly called him 'directionally challenged'. But Sara was a fine instructor, and eventually Daniel could navigate the shuttle himself.

Daniel looked at the altimeter; he was at eighty-thousand feet, safe from the eyes of commercial aircraft and probably safe from most military aircraft as well. Fifteen plus miles above the Earth's surface was a safe place for Daniel to hide and collect his thoughts.

He clicked the viewscreen to show the ground. An occasional twinkle of a city's lights told him there was life below. He would be back home in only a few minutes. Daniel clutched the stick to descend, but before he could act upon his thought a soft tingle traveled up his neck and into his scalp. "What?" His eyes locked on the screen-nothing. Nothing below him. He activated the image enhancement scanner which reached out several miles around him. Daniel didn't use the scanner unless absolutely necessary. He didn't want to make himself visible to high altitude radar. Still nothing.

Daniel changed the screen view to frontal. Again nothing. He switched it to show what was above him and slowly sat back against his seat in shock. "My God!" he breathed. "My God, what do I do now?"

The image on the screen was, in its own way, breathtaking. The alien ship had somehow silently announced its arrival.

To outrun it was as useless as trying to escape them in his minivan. His own technology, even Sara's technology, meant nothing to these beings—they were omnipotent. He could try to teleport himself with his amulet out of the shuttle. But he had only tried this once. A few months ago in an insane effort to rescue Eric from the aliens, he had used Sara's amulet to teleport himself into their ship. Later, Saul had told him that the beings actually did the teleporting. Without their aid, Daniel wouldn't have made it in, let alone out. If Daniel was to escape them now, he would have to clearly visualize his target point, and his home would be the target. He couldn't take such a risk: he couldn't visualize that well. The mental image of him almost making it and then panicking at the last minute—a mistake that would in all probability bounce him off his rooftop—made him wince at the thought of it.

The monstrous chevron shaped craft loomed ever larger on the viewscreen until its bulk seemed to be within arm's reach. He switched the screen to long view. Now the image was centered in the screen with the black of space around it. But within seconds the ship's image again flooded the screen.

Suddenly there was a deafening grinding and clanking of machinery. The shuttle shuddered in the grasp of the alien ship's docking jaws. Panic seized him.

"Daniel! Dear God, they have you! They have you!"

It was Sara. She telepathed into his brain like a guardian angel. "I'm all right, Sara. Stay calm. I'm all right."

"Let me teleport to you, Daniel! Let me help you!"

"No! There's nothing you can do for me. I shouldn't have come up here alone. I'll be all right."

He didn't hear her anymore. The door of the shuttle opened, and beings climbed in and surrounded him.

Chapter Thirteen

As quickly as the beings appeared, they were gone. He was alone in the shuttle, floating silently in space. Hadn't they just clutched his shuttle and locked on? Hadn't they just been crawling all over him? Had he dreamed it? No—Sara would have known if he was just imagining it. She wouldn't have been so frightened unless she'd been dreaming, too. And if she were dreaming, what was Eric doing? How much time had passed? Where was he and where had he been?

Daniel put his head into his hands and breathed heavily into his palms. He didn't know if he had never left the shuttle or if he was put back into the shuttle. He remembered the shuttle door opening and then he was surrounded by the Zeta. Now he was sitting quietly in his seat. Had something just happened? Had they taken his memory from him?

He turned at the sound of a click from the hatch. A man crawled through it. It was Saul.

Saul got down on his haunches in the restricted space of the cabin and looked up at Daniel. "Daniel, I

know what you've just seen was traumatic for you. It was traumatic for me when I saw it the first time. But you get used to it. I'm sorry they choose to be so brutal with you. At least this time they're allowing me to help send you on your way."

"So I'm still inside the Zeta ship?" Daniel said dazed.

"Daniel! Are you all right?" Sara was again telepathing into Daniel's mind.

"I'm all right, Sweetheart. Please let me speak with Saul. I think he's going to let me go soon."

Saul smiled. "Daniel, I don't have the power to keep you or send you on your way. I'm not in control of you-they are."

"I know that now. I figured that out when I gave you a black eye."

Saul grinned and touched his face. "It's better now."

"Yeah," Daniel said. He paused and looked down at the control stick. "I want to know what happened just now. And why are you always the stinking gatekeeper up here."

"Calm down, Daniel. I'm not here to give you trouble." You don't remember what just happened to you, do you?"

"No."

"Maybe that's best."

"Maybe, but I'm so deep in all this now, I think I should know what I just experienced. And I think it's time for you to allow Sara to hypnotize you. Surely in some part of you that's on the ground you want to know what is happening up here. You can't avoid your complicity in this forever."

Saul laughed. "Maybe we could have a hypnotism party. You and I

and . . . and . . . Ann."

Hope leaped in Daniel. "You remember Ann, then? Do you?"

Saul shook his head slowly. "No. I don't remember an Ann."

"Saul, you and Ann are to be married. Please try to remember. Please."

"I . . . can't . . . seem to remember. I know you and Sara when you come up here. I know Eric."

"Tell me about Eric," Daniel said. "Tell me how he got up here, if he was born up here, who his parents are. Tell me, Saul. Now's your chance to make everything right."

"They don't want me to tell you about Eric." Saul began to back away from Daniel.

Daniel clutched Saul's arm. "Come with me. Let me take you back down to the ground. You're not a prisoner here-are you?"

"I'm not a prisoner. But they keep telling me I'm special and that they need me. And I believe them. Does that make any sense to you?"

"No damned sense at all. They're wrecking your life. Can't you see that?"

"The only way I know I have a normal life is because you keep telling me so. I don't know what normal is. I only know this ship and the people on it. Still, I seem to be much more like you than like them."

"Well then . . ."

"Daniel," Saul interrupted, "it seems I'm two people. I do the job they tell me. Then I change jobs and I do that one without remembering what the first job was. I'm like a robot up here. But when I see you or Sara, it's different. I can think in straight lines again. It's those times, like right now talking with you, that I realize the dilemma I'm in. I realize I'm a human and I once lived on the ground. "

"You still live on the ground, Saul.

"No."

"But if you could just . . ."

"It's amazing they are allowing me to talk to you this long," Saul interrupted. "You were very upset in there. I guess they hope I can calm you down."

"I'm always upset when I'm in there. What's so special about tonight? Did I cause them a lot of grief?"

"Daniel, it would go easier for you if you wouldn't fight so hard."

"The only way you can get me to stop fighting them is to kill me. You don't see these beings for what they are."

"What are they?"

"They are forms of life that have no respect for humans. They are opportunistic invaders that would rather dissect us than communicate with us."

"You're wrong, Daniel. You're dead wrong."

"Am I?" Daniel said angrily. "They manipulate you and you still defend them. You'll lose Ann, you know, over this. But that's okay, isn't it? You'll still have your Zeta buddies. They'll probably let you stay up here forever. You can be their butler . . ."

Saul lightly gripped Daniel's shoulder. "I'm getting nowhere with you. I'm going back into the ship. They'll cut you loose. Can you find your way back home?"

"I hope so."

"Well, good luck then." Saul stood up and walked to the hatch. He turned and smiled. Then he stepped out of the hatch and slammed it shut behind him.

Again there was a sound of machinery as the aliens slowly pushed Daniel's shuttle out of their ship. Then

there was no sound except the gentle hum of the gravity drive. The hollow darkness on the viewscreen suddenly became the dark nothing of outer space.

"Daniel, please speak to me."

"Sara, I'm coming home now," Daniel telepathed.

"Are you all right? Do you know where you are?"

Daniel glanced at the navigation screen to his left. Horror shot through him. "No! They put me out at a different place and I can't read the navigation screen." He felt sweat break out on his neck. "I can't get home!"

"Yes, you can, Daniel. You have to stay calm. Listen to me, Daniel."

"I think I saw some terrible things, Sara."

"We'll discuss what you saw, later. Right now you have to listen to my instructions."

"Okay . . . okay." He had to stay focused. What had he seen? A feeling of great horror was flashing through his brain, distracting him from the thoughts of his guardian angel who was going to fly him home.

Daniel was so relieved when the shuttle touched down, he didn't even get out. He felt the slight shifting of the grapples that gently lined up the shuttle on its carrier bed. He rode the shuttle down into the ground and with a gentle press on the touchplate he closed the doors above him. "Sara, I'm spent. Would you please come and get me?"

Sara's image appeared in the seat next to his. She put her arms around him and embraced him tightly. "Oh, my dear Daniel."

"Is Eric okay?"

"I left Eric at Roger and Julia's. He's safe-as you are." She squeezed him again. "What happened, Sweetheart?"

"I don't know. The beings intercepted me. They came into the shuttle and they surrounded me. The next thing I knew, the hatch door closed as if they'd all just left. I knew that was impossible. Why would they pick me up, walk into the shuttle, then leave?"

"I was monitoring your conversation with Saul. He thought you might remember what happened, didn't he?"

"Yes. But I didn't." Daniel shuddered inwardly. "But something happened. Were you monitoring my thoughts when I was in the Zeta's ship?"

"No. I couldn't bear to. There was nothing I could do for you. I knew they wouldn't hurt you seriously, so I just tried to remain calm while I continued visiting with Julia and Roger. It wasn't easy."

Daniel looked into Sara's eyes.

"Daniel, I love you so much, I would give my life for you."

He brushed the back of his fingers across her face. "We have a little boy at home, and he's waiting for us."

"Yes. Let's go home."

"Eric, your mother and I have some things to talk about tonight. May we close the door to our bedroom for a while?"

"What are you going to talk about?" Eric snuggled down under his quilt with his teddy bear in the crook of his elbow.

"Just . . . things grownups talk about. We're not shutting you out. We need to have time to talk together-that's all."

"All right. I'll leave you alone."

Daniel leaned over the bed and kissed Eric. "I love you, son."

"I love you too, Father." Eric rolled over on his side. Daniel got up and stopped at the doorway.

"Father?"

"Yes?"

"They're not mean like you think."

Daniel paused, shocked yet again at his new son's profound ability to see into his soul.

"Maybe someday I'll understand them like you do. Go to sleep, now." He walked into his bedroom and closed the door.

"He sees something in them we don't."

"Daniel, Eric was raised by these beings," Sara whispered. "He may be part of their race. Somehow he connects with them. You wouldn't expect him to hate them, would you?"

Daniel sat down on the edge of the bed and began to take off his clothes. When the beings paralyzed him, he noticed that this time when he got his strength back, the paralysis seemed to have taken a piece of his strength from him. He worried about it, but didn't tell Sara. This had never happened before and it frightened him. He was thinking of this now.

"Are you still with me?" Sara asked.

"Uh, yeah, I'm still with you." He smiled absently, then said, "No, I wouldn't expect Eric to hate them. I want so badly to ask Eric about his life on the ship, but at the same time I want him to forget it. He can't live in two worlds."

Sara sat down next to Daniel and began to slowly rub his back. "I believe Eric has already chosen. Why else would they have returned him to us?"

"Why did they give him to us in the first place?"

"Daniel, you rescued . . ."

"No, I didn't," he interrupted. "They pulled me into their craft that time. If not for them, I would have brained myself on the ground."

"I know," Sara agreed quietly.

"The Zeta had a wonderful time studying my pain as I tried to take Eric from them. Look what happened a couple of weeks ago. They simply kept him. They kept him!" Daniel's whisper was breaking into voice. "And we could do absolutely nothing. You didn't see me climbing aboard the shuttle and saving him that time, did you?"

"Shhh. You'll upset Eric. He's not yet asleep."

Daniel smiled in the darkness. "Your telepathic sense has given you a true mother's intuition, even if he isn't really ours."

"Yes. Now I know how an adoptive parent feels. The love I have for Eric is as intense as if he had come from my womb."

"ta'Sara Alan, I love you so much, I can't even express it. All I can do is experience it." He slowly laid her back on the bed.

"Then let's experience it with the amulet-this time with your amulet."

Daniel took his amulet from the bedside table and put it around his neck. He breathed against her. He thought beautiful things about her. When he was inside her, he slipped his hand between them and covered the pendant. The pendant warmed, and his ecstasy took them to a place he wasn't even sure existed.

There was warmth to the air, now. Late spring was Daniel's favorite time of the year. The cycle of life was well into rebirth, and the warm spring sunshine gave Daniel hope of the hot summer days to come.

The bell on the door of Roger's hardware store tinkled merrily as Daniel pulled open the door. The store was bustling with an unusual amount of activity. One clerk was trying to sell a woman a lawn mower. Another clerk was giving a man instructions on how to install a doorknob. A third customer brushed by Daniel as she headed towards the door with a garden hose and a grass seed broadcaster. Roger said goodbye to the woman, then leaned on the counter and looked at his friend. "Well, Daniel, I've had a pretty good day. At this rate I'll be able to pay the rent on this place yet another month. I must live right," he chuckled, amused at himself.

"Roger, could I . . . ?"

"To my office," Roger interrupted. "I can see you've got heavy things on your mind."

Daniel followed Roger to the back of the store and went into his office. "As usual, I can't find a blinking place to sit down," Daniel mumbled good naturedly. There were manuals and catalogs piled on Roger's desk as well as on every available chair.

Roger took two sodas from his camper refrigerator and handed one to Daniel. "Stop complaining. That's the price you have to pay for free counseling." He took a pile of books off a chair and said, "Sit there."

Daniel sat.

Roger sat down in his desk chair. It creaked when he sat back and put his feet up on the desk. "Eric had a good time last night with the kids."

"That's what Sara said."

"Yeah, that kid is so mature, sometimes I don't believe he's only four."

"We don't know how old he is, do we? He came off the Zeta's ship. Do you think they sat down with us and gave us pertinent information about his particulars?"

"Daniel, you don't need to get crusty with me. I'm only making pleasant conversation until you decide to tell me what's on your mind."

Daniel sat back against the chair and sighed. "Remember the old days, Roger? No Zeta. No spaceships. No memories of horrifying abductions. No little beads up the nose. No . . ."

"Sara. No Eric. No space shuttle to fly around in. No Santoo and Chumaya."

Daniel rubbed his face with his thumbs. "Roger, I'm close to break down."

"No! You? How can you be? You have one of the nicest wives a man could possibly want. You have Rachel and Eric, two wonderful children. Your family loves you and is extremely supportive of you. What's with this break down business?"

Daniel knew Roger was teasing him.

"Just because you are tortured day and night by a bunch of bug-eyed little Chihuahua-skinned rug shufflers. . . ."

Daniel started to laugh at the image. "Last night while Sara and Eric were visiting you, I got it into my head to go up in the shuttle."

Roger set his soda can down on his desk with a thump. The soda bubbled out and dribbled down the side. "Alone? You've never gone out alone with that thing."

"I thought I was ready for it. I was ready for it. It was the Zeta that wrecked my evening. They took me and the shuttle right out of the sky."

Roger gasped. "I could have told you that would have happened. If you buzz around their light bulbs, they're going to fry you."

Daniel sighed. "I knew I should have just stayed home. But it doesn't matter where I am; if they want me, they come and get me. I can't remember what happened but I know they came in the shuttle and got me."

"Right into the shuttle?"

"Yeah," Daniel said quietly. "I remember them coming in and kind of surrounding me. Then I remember Saul coming in and talking to me before the Zeta released the shuttle. But I don't remember anything that happened in between."

"And so now you are going to break down?"

"I want to know what happened when they took me inside their ship."

"It was probably more of the same, Daniel."

"No . . . no, I don't think so. Not this time. I get flashes of things I saw, but the flashes are only that. I can't grasp any images. But a feeling of horror has been nagging at me ever since it happened."

"Maybe Ann could hypnotize you again. You had good luck with that the first time."

"That's what I came to tell you. Tomorrow night Ann is going to probe into my mind again. I'm torn as to whether we should take Eric with us."

"We'll take care of him if you want? The kids love Eric."

Daniel waved his hand in a sign of dismissal. "I know that. Rachel would watch him, too. But I have a feeling that Eric already knows what I saw, or at least suspects what it might have been that upset me so much. I think Eric is one of them, Roger. I think he's been planted. I don't know if he's a little boy or not. That's driving me crazy, too. But maybe, just maybe, he could be helpful to us." Daniel looked at the wall, his eyes slipping out of focus. "Oh, dear God, if he's one of them . . ."

Roger leaned forward, elbows planted solidly on his desk. "Eric is a little boy, Daniel. Your insane and unsubstantiated suspicions will wreck the wonderful relationship you have with him if you're not careful."

Daniel sighed. "I know. I'm just desperate for answers."

"Has Eric offered any information at all about his life with the Zeta? I've been tempted several times to ask him, but it's not my business and I don't want to upset him."

"It's strange-Eric has told us very little about his life up there. Does this mean his previous life with them was unsettling to him, or does it mean that he's afraid that whatever he tells Sara and I would be upsetting to us?"

"Maybe both. Maybe he can't remember much about his time with them. They wiped out your memory; so maybe they do the same with him. Maybe he just wants to live a human life down here. No one likes being different, Daniel. You of all people should know this."

"I love that boy so much. I don't want him to feel different from his friends."

"Does he truly understand the importance of keeping his origin secret?"

"Oh, yes. Eric's maturity is astounding. He may look like he's four, but he acts like a mature adult. You've already seen this in him. Yet he seems to love us. I don't know what to think about him. Are they just using him to watch us?"

"That's a question I can't answer," Roger said wistfully. "But I can see how strange and unsettling it would be to distrust your own child."

"Maybe we can learn more tomorrow night. Maybe we need to hypnotize Eric as well."

"Let me know how it comes out."

Chapter Fourteen

"Eric, I don't know if it's a good idea to have you here while I'm hypnotizing your father," Ann said. "Wouldn't you rather go play?" Ann had considerably come to Daniel's home. She explained she didn't want Saul to hear any of what Daniel might tell them. Now Ann looked pleadingly at Eric.

"No. I want to be with my father. He will need me."

Daniel fought to keep his tears in check. Eric was a rock. Why couldn't he be like that?

"You are a rock, Sweetheart. You just express yourself differently than Eric."

Daniel grinned and shook his finger at Sara. "You're reading my thoughts again."

Ann said, "Eric, you're a wonderful young man. Are you always this perfect?"

"I want to be good," he said quietly.

"Well, uh, then let's get going with this." Ann, clearly uncomfortable with the statement Eric had just made with such profound resolve, began to set up the microphone and tape recorder.

"Let me help," Sara said. They busied themselves until the microphone was hanging directly over the couch that Daniel was going to lie on. Ann popped a cassette into the tape deck.

Daniel lay down on the couch and propped his head on the pillow. He slipped easily into a trance. The gentle lilting cadence of Ann's voice quickly put him in that space where he could access his hidden thoughts. "Daniel," she began, "we want to investigate a particular incident that happened two nights ago. You've said it was a traumatic experience, but you don't recall any of it. Is this correct?"

"Yes," Daniel said lethargically. He was talking into his head, but he could clearly hear Ann outside of himself.

"You've told me that you went out in the shuttle alone that night."

"Yes."

"Then you say you were picked up. Tell me about this as far as you can remember."

"I heard a sound like metal on metal. Like gears, or something."

"And what did this mean to you?"

"I'd heard this sound before. It was like the time they took Sara and me aboard several months ago."

"So you think it was . . . ?" She paused to let Daniel fill in an answer.

"They wanted me to think it was docking machinery hauling me aboard their ship. But now I'm thinking that there probably wasn't any sound when they picked me up. They maybe put that sound in my head because they thought I expected to hear that."

"Then what happened?"

"I was in my seat. I knew that any minute they would come barreling in for me. I just sat quietly. Then the beings came in. They overwhelmed me before I had a chance to fight back."

"It's cramped in your shuttle. There couldn't have been more than five or six of them in there with you."

"There wasn't. It's just that when they are close to you, up against your face in an enclosed space like the shuttle, it feels like you're in an ant farm. They make my skin crawl."

"Did they do something to you while you were in the shuttle?"

"They . . . they carried me out. They carried me through the hatch

and . . . and . . ."

"Yes, go on, Daniel."

"And Saul was there."

"Saul . . . ?"

Even in Daniel's hypnotized state, he was acutely aware of the stress that came into Ann's voice.

"Yeah, he was there."

"Well, then," Ann cleared her throat, "let's go on. Did Saul speak to you?"

"He said, 'Sorry you're up here again, Daniel. I'd stop them if I could.' He often tells me something like that when we go up."

Daniel sensed Ann's sadness, but, ever the professional, she rallied quickly. In control once again, Ann said, "What happened after Saul said this to you?"

"The beings put me on my feet. Then they touched me with that stunrod."

"Did it paralyze you?"

"Not this time. This time it made me float."

"Like in the air?"

"Just above the floor. I was in a standing position; my feet were an inch or so off the floor. They told me to move my legs as if I was walking. I did. I kind of walked and floated. My heel would touch the ground at each step. That would propel me through the air for two or three feet. I walked and floated alternately."

"Did they take you to a specific place on the ship?"

"Yes. We traveled like that until we came to a door. We went in.

We . . . went in. Oh, God!"

"What, Daniel? Don't lose me. Stay calm. What do you see? Tell me exactly what appears before you."

"I see . . ." Daniel could feel himself hyperventilating, slipping into panic.

"It's not happening now, Daniel. It's over. You can face it because it's not happening now." He felt Ann's hand on his arm, trying to comfort him. "Tell me what you see."

"There are tanks. They're clear, like fish tanks. Little tanks with blue water in them. No, not water-thicker than water. Almost like oil. And in the tanks are . . . fetuses. Each tank has a fetus. There are fetuses in the tanks. Oh, dear God."

"Now, Daniel, look carefully into the tanks. Describe the fetuses to me. Shape, color, size, characteristics. Give me a picture so clear, I will be able to see it in my own mind."

"I'll try. The fetuses are . . . are two inches, maybe three inches long." He struggled to speak. They look white or light gray. They could be human fetuses but I'm not sure. They're not moving. They have little black eyes."

"Completely black?"

"I'm not sure."

"Get up very close to one of the tanks. Look carefully. What do you see?"

"The eyes are all black."

"All right. How are the fetuses suspended in the tanks?"

"They are . . . I can't tell you."

"Try."

"They have . . . they have . . ."

"Daniel, at the count of three you will be able to see how the fetus is suspended in the tank. One, two, three . . ."

"They have rods stuck through their heads! From one side to the other! The rods are stuck crossways right through their brains! My God, the Zeta are crazy!"

"Do the beings know you are upset at seeing this?"

"Yes. They say it's all right. They say it doesn't hurt them. They say it but I don't believe them. They're nuts. I don't believe them."

"Why are there rods through the fetuses' heads, do you suppose?"

"There are tubes attached to both ends of the rods. The tubes come out of the top of the tank and are attached to some kind of device that runs all the time. It's like a life support system, I think."

"Can you hear this device running?"

"Yes. Just one device running gives off a slight humming sound. But the whole room is humming with the sound of these devices. It's humming like a huge bee hive!"

"How many tanks are in this room? Can you make a guess?"

"They take me down rows and rows of these tanks."

"The beings?"

"Yes. The beings and Saul. He never left my side."

"So, how many fetuses are in this room, Daniel?" Ann pressed.

"More than a thousand."

"Daniel, that seems incredible. Could you be mistaken?"

"No. There are well over a thousand tanks. I can only assume that every tank holds a fetus. Every tank I see has a fetus in it."

"Try to remember what you thought when you were walked . . . floated or walked?"

"Both."

"What were you thinking when you saw all this?"

"I thought I was floating through a nightmare. This ship hovers above us, above Eagle Bluff, and in it this is going on. I'm not even sure this is the only room that has fetuses. There may be more."

"Was this the end of your experience?"

"No. No! There's more to it. More happened."

"Tell us."

Daniel felt a small hand clutch his wrist. "I'm all right, son. We'll be finished in a minute. I just need to get my memories out so I can face them." Daniel felt the hand let him go.

"I'm so upset by what I see. Our baby could be in one of those tanks. I become angry with the beings. I tell them they are cruel, unthinking animals. They say they are caring beings who have only our welfare at heart."

"Did you threaten the beings in any way? Did they threaten you, maybe?"

"I lost control of myself. I began to run-no, float and run-among the tanks. I was screaming. I wanted to find my baby. Goddamn it, you've got my baby up here! You've got my daughter's baby up here! I'm going to find my babies!" Daniel, in his rage, heard Eric say tearfully, "Daddy?"

"Then what happened?" Ann asked.

"They dragged me to the back of the room to a different tank. It was larger than the fetus tanks."

"How large is it?"

"It's . . . about twenty feet long by fifteen feet wide. It's depth is maybe twelve feet, or so. It's hard to know, exactly, because its depth is below the deck."

"So the edge of the tank was pretty much flush with the deck?"

"Yeah."

"What was in the tank?"

"The same kind of thick, blue fluid that was in the smaller ones. There are lights in the water. I can't see where the lights originate, but the whole volume of fluid is evenly lit . . ."

"And then?"

"I'm not sure I can go on with this."

"Maybe we're near the end of your experience. What happened next?"

"They tell me to take my clothes off."

"Do you?"

"I have no choice. I refuse, but several beings start pulling at my clothes, so I tell them I'll take them off myself. I do that, but I leave my exoskeleton on. I'm surprised that they don't insist I take that off, too."

"Did they give you a physical examination?"

"No. They tell me to go into the tank. I tell them I'm not going in. We argue. They insist I go in."

"What was Saul doing at this time?"

"He tells me to go in and get it over with. He says it isn't as frightening as I might think, to just go ahead

and go in. But I won't go in. Three beings come towards me. Before I can brace myself, they push me into the tank."

"Since you are floating, do you lose your ability to float when they push you over the edge of the tank?"

"Not at first. I kind of skid through the air and end up over the center of the tank. Then I lose my ability to float. I go straight down into the . . . into the . . ."

"Take it easy, Daniel."

"I can't take it easy! It's so horrifying, I can't bear to remember it!"

"You will remember at the count of three. One . . . two . . . three. Tell me now," Ann commanded.

"I fall into the fluid and hold my breath. I know I'm going to drown. I sink to the bottom, but the depth is so great that when I stand up I'm still below the surface."

"You can't swim upwards?"

"No. The density of the fluid must be less than the density of water. I can't swim up in it. I hold my breath for as long as I can. When I can't hold it anymore, I let out my air, and then I inhale deeply. It's just a natural reflex. I have to inhale because I'm strangling."

"Since you're still alive, tell me how you survived in the fluid."

"That's the strange part. I start breathing the fluid. It's like I am breathing air. It's . . . just like breathing air."

"How long do they leave you down there?"

"I have no way of knowing, I guess. It seems like hours, though. Looking up through the fluid, I can see the beings and Saul standing at the side of the tank. Then one of the beings jumps into the fluid and comes down to me. He has a rod in his hands."

"A rod?"

"Yes. It looks like metal, but I could be wrong. The blue tint of the fluid could have given me a wrong idea of what it is. The rod is about a foot long, I think. It has . . . it has a sharp point on one end. Somehow I know what the being is going to do with the rod."

"The being telepathed his intention, perhaps?"

"Maybe. Yeah, probably. I'm so upset when I realize he is going to stick it through my head that . . ."

"Wait a minute, Daniel. Are you telling me the being stuck a metal rod through your head?"

This time Daniel felt both Eric's hand and Sara's hand on his arm. "The being tries to hold me down, but I'm too strong for him. Then three more beings jump in the tank. Those three hold me down on the bottom while the one holding the rod starts to push it . . . oh, God!"

"Don't stop, Daniel. Get it out. Tell us what happened next."

Daniel was breathing so rapidly, he almost blacked out.

"Would you like to stop, Daniel? We don't have to finish this. We can stop if you're this uncomfortable."

"No. I want to see it-to say it. The being started the rod above my left ear and then he pushed it through my head! Through my head until it came out the other side! Oh, God!" He could feel all three of them holding him now. All three had their arms around him.

"Maybe you want to wait to talk about this again when you have lived with this idea a while."

"No. I'll tell you the rest. I'm all right, now." He felt his breath come back to him. He could continue. "I see blood from the wound sink around me to the bottom of the tank. I put my hand up to the rod and I feel it sticking out of my head. I think I will die soon."

"Do you still have normal motor control?"

"Yes . . . yes, I do. What does this mean? If the rod went through my brain, it would have destroyed much of my motor control, wouldn't it?"

"You would think so. What happened next?"

"I hear the being clearly telepath, 'You think we are hurting the fetuses. We are not hurting them. We have not hurt you. You do not understand. We have not hurt you, have we?' Then I understood what they were trying to show me. The fetuses have rods through their heads and they are suspended in that blue fluid like the stuff I was in. I survived; so did they. That's the lesson I got from it."

"A pretty harsh lesson, wouldn't you say?"

"Everything they do is harsh-everything."

"How do you get out of the tank?"

"They reach down from the edge of the tank and pull me out."

"You said the fluid was twelve feet deep. Are their arms that long to reach down into the fluid that far to pull you out?"

"It couldn't have been that deep. Maybe I'm wrong about that. Maybe it was just above my head. Anyway, they pull me out."

"Did it hurt when they pulled the rod out of your head?"

"Ah . . . I don't remember them pulling it out."

"So you simply forgot about this rod that's sticking through your head?"

"I don't remember them pulling it out."

"At the count of three you will remember how the rod was removed from your head. One . . . two . . . three . . ."

"I don't remember. Funny, I don't remember the rod at all."

"All right. Go on."

"One being handed me a some kind of cloth and told me to dry off."

"Did you?"

"Saul helped me dry off."

"Doesn't it seem strange that people this advanced technologically, didn't have a high tech method of drying you off?"

"Oh, I don't know. After they pulled me out, they all acted kind of disinterested after that. It was almost like, 'Okay, the show's over. Leave us alone so we can go about our work.' They're often like that. It's almost like they are putting the lab rats away and then forgetting about them."

"You put your clothes back on, I assume?"

"Yes. I put them on and then the beings took me back to the shuttle. After I went inside, I sat down, dazed from my experience. I heard the hatch open. I turned around and saw Saul climbing through it. We talked for a little while. I told him I wanted you to hypnotize me so I could recall this experience. I pleaded with him to let Sara hypnotize him so he would know that he would learn what the beings are doing to him."

"What did he say?"

"He said that maybe we could have a hypnotism party."

"What did he mean by that, Daniel?" Daniel heard hope in Ann's voice.

"He was being sarcastic, Ann. He doesn't remember you. I'm sorry."

"Yes," Ann said. Daniel heard the flatness to her response. He knew she was heartsick.

"He said he had to go back into the ship," Daniel continued. "He left. Then the Zeta released the shuttle. I panicked when I realized the beings had left me off at a different place than where they took me." Daniel opened his eyes and took Sara's hand and squeezed it. "I panicked, but Sara talked me home."

Ann cleared her throat and said, "Well, then, let's bring you back up to this level of reality. At the count of three you will again be here with us in your ordinary waking state. One . . . two . . . three . . ."

Daniel sat up and stretched. He clearly remembered everything he had just told Ann. Ann looked at Daniel with a sorrow that made Daniel uncomfortable. "Why don't we head for your kitchen and sit down to a big bowl of ice cream I brought for us. Would you like that, Eric?" Ann tousled Eric's hair and hugged him. "Your daddy has sure been through a lot, hasn't he?" Tears were running down her face, now.

"Ann," Sara said gently, "eventually Saul will allow me to hypnotize him. I really believe that he is getting closer to wanting to know the truth. He has to be."

"Saul wanted to come tonight. I should have let him."

"Ann," Sara took her hand, "I wouldn't have felt comfortable hypnotizing Saul tonight. Now that I know what happened to Daniel, I can concentrate on that step."

"Yeah." She sniffed, then wiped her tears with a tissue. "I suppose."

Daniel said, "So would you like me to get out the ice cream?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Daniel went to the refrigerator and took the box of ice cream that Ann had brought for them from the freezer.

"Sara, when did you and Daniel first meet Saul?"

"Oddly enough, we met him for the first time on the ground. We know now, though, that even though he was out of the physical presence of the beings, he was very much under their influence." Sara explained how Saul, while she and Daniel were picnicking, had come up behind them and frightened them badly. The second time they saw him was right after Daniel's healing. This time Saul was on board the alien ship when Daniel and Sara were abducted. Since that time they had seen Saul almost every time they were taken by the aliens.

"And do you recall," Daniel said, "when we gave you your first shuttle ride?"

"I do. That's when you thought the gravity drive was going out. You went down into the service level to see what was . . . wrong . . . that was Saul you met down there, wasn't it?" Ann's hands were shaking as she picked up her spoon.

"Yes," Sara said.

"I remember when Eric first came to live with you and I came to see him." Ann paused and smiled at Eric who was happily engaged in downing his bowl of ice cream. "I had just begun my relationship with Saul. As I was telling you about him, you both looked at me very strangely. You suspected my Saul was the man on the alien ship, didn't you?"

Sara said, "We were almost certain they were one and the same. It was so difficult keeping this from you; we're really sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry. I would have done the same."

"Ann? Do you ever wake up when Saul disappears at night?"

"No, not often anyway. Saul is a member of a group who play, umm, war games-I guess you'd call them that-at night. It's just a group of people who like to prowl around in the woods at night. They play paintball. They dress in army fatigues and paint their faces and use those infrared goggles. It's all in good fun. Sometimes I'm out with him."

Daniel pointed his finger at Ann. "I knew I saw someone that night. When Sara zoomed in on a figure with the viewscreen I told her there was someone below us in the woods when we were trying to land

the shuttle."

"There are lots of wooded areas around Dubuque that are pretty isolated. I suppose they could have accidentally trespassed. They usually don't do that."

Sara said, "I wish you had told us this before now. I thought those woods were safe from any intruder."

"I know I should have. Don't you have some sort of protection like an electrified fence?"

Daniel said, "We do have protection, but like anything else it's prone to failure. If there really were people there the night I brought the shuttle in, the fence must have failed." He looked with alarm at Sara. "I'm concerned, now, that people in the group may have heard the gravity drive."

"I don't think so," Sara said, but Daniel could see that she, too, was alarmed.

"Sara, I think we have to find another place for the shuttle." Daniel mused aloud.

Sara seemed not to hear him. "Ann, have you told Saul about your childhood experience? The experience where you found the door on the forest floor leading underground?"

"Yes. He said he will always protect me. He loves me."

"I hope you can hang onto him."

"I hope so too," Ann whispered. "I'm sick to my stomach about him cooperating with the beings and I'm sick to my stomach that he didn't know me up there."

"Ann," Daniel said, "You can't imagine the power the Zeta have over him."

"But he could fight back like you do."

"He seems to think the Zeta have good intentions. I think they've brainwashed him. He's probably had a rod stuck through his head, too, and probably justified the horror he undoubtedly felt." Daniel stopped at the expression on Ann's face. "I'm sorry, Ann. I'm upsetting you." "My mother is up there," a little voice said. The comment came from Eric. Daniel stopped his spoon midway between the ice cream bowl and his mouth. He looked at Eric. They all looked at Eric.

"Your mother?" Sara asked. "Have we seen her?"

"Yes. You saw her when you were in the room full of babies. She came to you and scanned you with her eyes."

Then Daniel remembered. Once when Daniel and Sara were taken aboard, they had wandered into a room that had hundreds of babies lying in small box-like cribs. While they walked down the rows and picked up and held as many babies as they could, a being came into the room and stared into their faces. Soon after, they came upon Eric in that same room.

"Eric," Daniel said, "How do you know that she is your mother? How could she be? She's a full-blooded Zeta. You are a human."

"No, Father, I'm not."

"How do you know you're not?" Sara glanced frantically at Daniel.

"They said I'm not," Eric said simply, but offered nothing further.

At first Daniel thought he was dreaming. But as the doctor being stepped closer to his bed, and as the doctor's huge eyes bent close to his face, he knew the doctor was in his bedroom. He tried to sit up, but the four-fingered hand of the alien firmly pushed Daniel back down on the bed. Daniel looked over at Sara.

"Let him do what he wants, Daniel. He has control. For once just let him do what he wants," she said defeatedly.

"What do you want?" Daniel whispered.

"The human male child," the being telepathed.

"You can't have him."

"This entity will take him. He is needed."

"You can't have him," Sara whispered fiercely. "I won't give him up."

"Mommy," a small voice said from the doorway.

"It's all right, Eric. The doctor just came to visit." The being stood motionless as a statue by their bed.

Another image appeared. It began as an indistinct shadow on the wall. Then it grew and became clearer until Daniel could clearly make out another being. It stepped next to the bed.

"This is the male child's mother. She will take the male child with us," the doctor telepathed.

"No." Sara began to sob convulsively. "Please don't take our boy from us. Please. You have my baby and you have Rachel's baby. Isn't that enough?" she whispered. She took Eric's hand in hers and held it tightly. "We love him so much; can't you see that?"

"Come," the doctor telepathed firmly.

"No," Eric said so quietly Daniel could barely hear him.

"Come to me," the doctor telepathed again. If the Zeta were capable of the emotion of firmness, Daniel felt it.

"I won't go with you." Eric looked into the huge eyes of the female being. "You are my mother, but I won't go with you. You said I could be here. You said I would be with Sara and Daniel. They are my parents now. I want to stay with them," he said, his voice oddly calm and controlled. The doctor walked around to the other side of the bed and took Eric by the wrist.

"No! I said, no! Don't you understand? I don't want to go back with you. I don't belong with you. I

belong here." He pulled his arm from the doctor's grasp.

The female being stood by impassively. Daniel couldn't understand how these beings could possibly be capable of love. Why would his 'mother' want him? She had no feeling for him. He was feeling this now from the female being. And here they were, in his bedroom, like walking nightmares, like caricatures from hell trying to take their child from them.

Eric climbed onto the bed and snuggled between his new parents. "Tell them to go away, Daddy." He put his thumb into his mouth and sank down under the covers. The last thing Daniel remembered before he went to sleep was the muffled voice of his little boy saying, "Tell them to go away."

Chapter Fifteen

"Well, this is great!" Daniel said, enthusiastic with Sara and Eric who were standing by his bed with a tray of breakfast and coffee. The sunshine poured through the open windows and the Zeta were nowhere to be seen. "Whose idea was this?" Daniel looked at Eric, then at Sara..

"We want to make you feel better, Daddy," Eric said. Eric was almost losing his grip on the breakfast tray. Daniel reached out and helped him balance it as he laid it on his own lap.

"I'll tell you what would make me feel even better-if the both of you would climb in bed with me and help me eat all this." Although Sara abstained from eating most meat, she had heaped a good amount of bacon on the plate along with fried eggs and hash brown potatoes. With perfect cells Daniel needn't worry about cholesterol or free radicals raising havoc with his health. He could eat anything he pleased.

Eric and Sara climbed onto the bed and slipped under the covers with Daniel between them. Daniel felt like a very rich man. He didn't need the three-hundred million dollars in diamonds, safely tucked away in his deposit box. He only needed his family-his life. And for this moment he had it. Who knew how long this freedom would last? He put out of his mind the constant threat of the Zeta, and stabbed the yoke of the perfectly fried egg.

The three of them ate happily, chattering as they forked in food. Daniel didn't want to get out of bed. He wanted to stay like this, between his best friend and his little boy forever.

When they finished, they climbed out of bed to get ready for the day that lay before them. Sara escorted Eric to the bathroom as she did every morning, to help him take a shower and brush his teeth. Daniel sat on the edge of the bed and listened to the two of them chattering in the bathroom. He knew he couldn't put off getting up any longer.

Daniel was almost free of his exoskeleton. At first it served him well: It gave him great strength. But he didn't need that strength any longer. Because of his reconstituted cells he now had the strength roughly four times of a normal earth human. This was the normal strength of people on Sara's planet, and it was now Daniel's normal strength. Once again he recalled briefly the short period a couple of weeks ago when he had returned to his former polio-like state-when the Zeta had paralyzed him and left him that way. It certainly had given him new appreciation for his strength. He hoped he'd never take it for granted.

As he reached up for the exo, he stopped. Today he would try to go without the it. He looked at it hanging on the wall. He was fond of it. If he had almost no strength, that exoskeleton would still allow him to live a normal life. But he did have strength, and he reveled in it. He stood up and started to walk across the carpet towards the bathroom. He wondered if Sara would notice. His dream of a lifetime was

being realized.

"Would you help me with the food, Eric?" Daniel opened the trunk of Sara's little hatchback and pulled out a picnic basket. He helped Eric carry it to a nearby picnic table. Sara took Eric by the hand. "Would you like to go down to the water, Honey?"

"Yes," Eric said excitedly.

"Then take your father's hand and we'll all go together."

Eric took Daniel's hand, and with Eric walking between them, they slowly made their way down to the shoreline.

The morning sun was glinting off the water's surface. Daniel couldn't remember when the Mississippi River looked this beautiful or when he felt quite this happy.

He stopped and let go of Eric's hand, but Sara and Eric kept walking. "Wait, its muddy," Daniel called.

"Well, then we'll take off our shoes," Sara called back.

"It's still a little chilly, Sara." The early summer day was already warm and comfortable, but Daniel didn't want to take off his shoes. He didn't want to experiment with barefootedness today. She looked at him, pleading with him to take his shoes off.

"I don't want to get muddy, Sara," he said.

"Then do you mind if Eric and I take ours off?" She came to him and kissed him.

"You'll be in mud up to your knees," he admonished.

"No, we won't," Sara laughed. "Eric, your father is such a worrier!"

"I know. We won't get dirty, Father."

Sara kicked her sandals off and then helped Eric pull off his sneakers and socks. They walked across the grass and up to the water's edge until the two of them were standing barefooted in the mud. Sara leaned down and hugged Eric.

"Sara, I'm going back up to the car and set up the cooker," Daniel called. "Okay?"

Sara turned around to him and stuck her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. She arched her back and stretched. He loved her so much when she did that. "All right. We'll be up in a minute."

Daniel walked back to the car, opened the trunk, pulled out the little Hibachi and set it on the ground. Then he poured briquettes in, lit them, and set the grate over them. He sat down at the picnic table to enjoy the sun. Without the exo, he felt light and free.

Soon Sara and Eric came back to him. "Look at yourselves," Daniel teased. "You two look like a couple of little pigs."

"Would you like us to clean ourselves before breakfast?" Sara asked impishly.

"It would be nice if you'd do that."

Sara pulled Eric to her and they disappeared before Daniel's eyes. Daniel knew where they went. With the amulet's help, Sara had taken Eric home. They were gone for as long as it took to wipe off their feet with a bath towel. Then the two of them reappeared. Daniel was surprised Sara would risk being seen. When he first met her she was paranoid about others possibly seeing their disappearing act. Now she didn't seem to care. The troubles with the Zeta must be making her careless, he decided.

"You can be glad there's no one out here this morning, Sara. I wish you'd be more careful with that thing. Besides, we're trying to bring Eric up in a normal Earth kind of way. The more we spoil him with your hi tech devices, the harder it will be for him to feel comfortable here."

Eric stepped to his father and leaned against his knees. "I'm comfortable here, Father. You can spoil me if you like."

"Oh, you're a charmer, Eric." Daniel picked him up and put him on his lap. "Whatever am I going to do with you?"

"May I play down by the water?"

"I'll tell you what-if you promise to stay within sight of us, you can play there, but . . ."

Like the lightning speed only a little four-year-old could possess, Eric slipped off Daniel's lap and began to run to the river bank.

"But," Daniel yelled, "you stay within sight of us. Okay?"

"Okay, Father," Eric yelled back.

"We need to sign him up for swimming lessons."

They set about fixing breakfast. The sun was higher in the sky, now, and if the day continued in this way, it would be the most pleasant day so far this season.

Sara suddenly looked up and smiled. "Daniel, Father and Mother have arrived." She smiled and gripped Daniel's arm in relief. "I just caught Mother's thought."

"What do we do? Should we meet them at their ship? Should we get them in the van?"

"Father is picking up your thoughts and he says you are worrying too much and you haven't changed at all!" she teased.

Daniel chuckled and flipped the sausages. "Tell him that even though he's given me perfect cells, I'm still emotionally challenged."

Two figures suddenly fizzed in the air before them. "Santoo! Chumaya! I'm so glad you're finally here!" Between the embracing arms of both Sara and Daniel, they nearly smothered her parents.

"We're glad to see you, too," Sara's mother said. "We're very glad we're finally here. Where's our new little grandson?"

Daniel quickly looked down to the river bank where Eric had gone. "Oh my God!" he yelled, "where is he? Where is he?" Daniel started running. The real possibility of Eric not realizing the danger of water jammed through his mind as vividly as the image that quickly followed-Daniel in the tank of the aliens, breathing the blue water like breathing air.

He had taken eight steps when he saw Eric clearly in his mind's eye. In mid stride he slapped the pendant of his amulet and was instantly at Eric's side. "Why didn't you stay in sight of us?" he yelled. "I told you to stay in sight of us! Don't you listen to me? You could have gotten hurt down here by yourself! Why didn't you listen to me?" He scooped Eric up in his arms. He was shaking. "Why didn't you listen to me?"

"I . . . I was playing. I didn't mean to scare you. I'm sorry."

"Sorry's not enough, Eric. You could have drowned in the water. You don't know the dangers of it. There's current that can suck you out . . . or they could have come and taken . . ." He stopped. He'd said too much.

They packed up their picnic gear and Daniel drove Santoo and Chumaya to Eagle Bluff with them where they planned to stay with Daniel and Sara. Eric took to his new grandparents almost instantly, and Santoo and Chumaya were thrilled with Eric.

Now Eric was out of earshot, playing happily with his new grandmother. Santoo said. "We've come to help you. Can you fill me in on what is going on, Daniel?" Santoo asked kindly.

Daniel opened the door of the refrigerator and pulled out a pitcher of lemonade. He took two glasses from the cupboard and set them on the table. Then he sat down and Santoo sat across from him. As Santoo poured lemonade into the glasses, Daniel said, "They are constantly with us. They treat us like lab rats. Now they've taken Ann up at least once. Saul is still up there, but he's also down here mixing in our lives."

Santoo visibly reacted. "He is here, on the ground?" He took a swallow of lemonade.

Daniel heard Eric laughing in the yard, and the laughter of Chumaya and Sara along with him told Daniel Eric's new grandmother was indulging herself in him. He rubbed his brow in frustration. "Yes, he's here on the ground. He's Ann's fiance."

Santoo sat back against the chair. "My God," he whispered. "You have been going through hell, haven't you?"

"We have been going through hell," Daniel agreed. "Ann wants Sara to hypnotize him because he has no memory of serving the Zeta. He's beginning to see glimmers of our previous experience with him, but other than that he is ignorant of his double life."

"But ta'Sara has not yet hypnotized Saul?" Santoo asked.

"No, not yet. I don't think Sara feels she can do it and stay detached. I know Ann is definitely not up to

it. But this needs to be done. Maybe he can offer some clues as to why we are being treated by the Zeta in this way. Maybe he can tell us what they want." Daniel closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. "Damn," he whispered, "my family can't take much more of this."

He felt Santoo's strong hand on his arm. "We'll go to the ship this evening and talk-just you and me. We need to get you away from here for a little while. I am very glad we came," Santoo said.

That same evening Daniel and Santoo were sitting in Santoo's starship on the captain's bridge. A small table and two chairs were sitting on one side of the room while the large viewscreen and touchplate that allowed Daniel's father-in-law to fly the starship across the galaxy were in the center of the room.

Santoo was a dark complexioned, good looking man, but he didn't look anything like his daughter. Sara was the image of her mother. Daniel's own father had passed away twenty years ago. Santoo reminded Daniel so much of his own father, and the deep friendship they now shared was precious to him. "I worry every time you park your ship out here, Santoo. I don't care how sophisticated your cloaking system is-it's only a matter of time before someone catches up with you."

"I know. I worry too. You aren't the only one who worries. I have a solution to this very sticky problem, however."

"Tell me-so I can sleep tonight."

"I'll tell you when we go back to your home. I believe you'll be quite surprised at my solution." He smiled enigmatically.

"All right; I guess I can wait." Daniel got up and opened a small cabinet. He looked inside. "I'm quite impressed, Santoo. Did you stop at the Jiffy Shoppe before you landed?" he teased. "The food cabinet is stocked with soda."

Santoo laughed. "No. You just didn't drink it all before we left last time."

"Oh." He took out a can and grabbed a can of cranberry juice for Santoo. "You could have fooled me."

Santoo settled against his chair and took a sip of juice. "I was quite impressed with how you teleported with the amulet in mid step down at the river when you were trying to find Eric. You have become skilled far beyond my expectations."

"Thank you. I was so fearful of Eric's safety, I guess I didn't stop to think."

"You were thinking, Daniel," Santoo chuckled. "You were thinking quite clearly." Now Santoo folded his hands and looked steadily at Daniel. "Tell me everything that has happened since Chumaya and I left you these few months ago."

Daniel told Santoo everything he could remember. At times Santoo sat with his head in his hands, so moved was he by the plight of his daughter and son-in-law.

Now Santoo reached across the table and grasped Daniel's hand. "I don't know what to say, Daniel. I feel as though we should have remained here with you. But I don't think we could have stopped the Zeta, and as you know, I have my work . . ."

"I don't know what to say, either. We love Eric as much as if he were our blood son. He is our son. It doesn't matter to me that his mother is this Zeta being-if that is even true. They could have just told him that, you know. I think they use him. They come and get him whenever they please. We are never sure how long they will leave him here."

"What if he were partly Zeta? What if he has Zeta genes?"

"I refuse to believe he is one of them, although not too long ago I worried that he might be."

"Do you remember how difficult it was for you to accept ta'Sara's black eyes?"

"Yes," Daniel answered in a barely audible whisper.

"At first you weren't even sure she was human, were you?"

"No. Do we have to talk about this?"

"Not if it makes you uncomfortable. Let's talk about Eric. Eric is a fine young man."

"He was a sad little boy when we first got him."

"I suspect that living with the Zeta wasn't particularly conducive to developing a gregarious personality."

"It wasn't. Eric had no idea how to behave. For a while we thought he was autistic. And now . . ."

"What?" Santoo asked. "What?"

"Now he says that one of the Zeta beings is his mother."

Santoo looked flabbergasted."

"I know," Santoo. I can't believe it either. I just can't believe Eric's not human. Santoo, how old do you think Eric is?"

"Well, he looks like a typical four year old boy, wouldn't you say?"

"Could you examine him? Would your technology help you determine his true age?"

"It could, yes. But this might not be wise. You've told me that Eric at times acts mature beyond his years, while at other times he reverts to the age he appears to be. And sometimes you say he behaves as if he's even younger."

"That's right," Daniel said. "Could it be that he can't decide how old he really is? Maybe he still doesn't know how to act."

"I believe Eric could be a very human child. He reverts to a very immature Eric because he is starved for human touch. He is crying out to be held and cuddled. If he acts like a baby, you will treat him like a baby. If the Zeta don't openly cuddle their children, Eric, as a human child must have been starved for affection."

"Oh, dear God, of course. When he's stressed and needs comfort, he reverts to calling us "Daddy" and "Mommy, but when he's sure of himself and at peace, he acts like he's sixteen."

"Daniel, let's wait with determining Eric's true age. Let's allow him to find himself first."

"Could you do a scan of his DNA? Could we determine if he is human, once and for all?"

"Yes, I could do that. But what would it do for you? If he's Zeta will you give him back?"

"No! I don't know . . ."

"Let's talk about you and ta'Sara for a bit. The Zeta have been traumatizing both of you for a long time. I'm somewhat concerned about the aliens taking your eye out."

"It doesn't hurt. Neither of us had any ill effects from it."

"But you know something was inserted into the eye socket-correct?"

"Correct. It was one of those glass beads they've put up my nose more than once. Do you remember some months ago when Sara channeled a Zeta?"

"Yes," Santoo said. "I remember."

"The channeled Zeta told us that the purpose of the beads was to help them monitor our emotions. That's probably what it is."

"Or it could be some kind of visual information gathering device."

Daniel felt his heartbeat quicken. "Like what . . . ?"

"Like a camera, perhaps."

"That's . . . that's impossible. It was only a tiny bead. I saw it before he put it in."

"Your own technology has already developed an image sensor that's less than one half centimeter in diameter. In a few more years you will have a camera as small as a glass bead."

"If what you suspect is true, then they have been watching us through our own eyes. They have been watching everything. Me brushing my teeth, Sara and I making love to each other! I want it out, Santoo! I want you to take it out!"

"That will require surgery, Daniel. Do you really want me to do that?"

"Yes! And I want you to take it out of Sara!"

"Stop, Daniel. Calm yourself. Let's think this through carefully. If I remove it, won't the Zeta just replace it? And if the implant is imbedded deeply, I may need a surgical assistant. Perhaps Karen would assist. And think a bit further. I can remove the camera or whatever it might be, but what about Eric? Might he also have such a device behind his eye?"

"Can you scan him? Why in the world would they need a camera? Can't they telepathically figure out

what we are doing?" Daniel stood up. He was incensed, now.

"'Camera' may be a primitive term for whatever it is. It may have sensor capabilities. It possibly monitors your bodily functions: pulse, breathing, temperature. If that's the case, they really have made you a lab rat."

Daniel sat back down. He felt trapped.

Chapter Sixteen

"Karen, I believe I've made you uncomfortable by asking you to assist me." Santoo and Karen were standing in the medical laboratory of Santoo's starship. Santoo was laying out instruments on a table.

"No, I can handle it all right. Really, I'm fine." Daniel thought Karen looked a little pale.

"But perhaps your friendship is too close for you to perform something as serious as surgery on Daniel and ta'Sara-even my kind of surgery."

"I'll help you, Santoo," Chumaya said.

"No," Santoo said. "It's been too long since you've been in surgery. I'd rather do it my . . ."

"Stop," Karen interrupted. "I said I'd do it. I want to do this." Karen turned and smiled at Sara. "And I want to do this for Sara, too. Actually, I find it fascinating. I'll just have to pretend I don't know these folks."

When Daniel lay down on the table, he simply felt himself drifting off to sleep. Then he heard Santoo say, "Wake up, Daniel, we're finished."

Daniel got up off the table. The horrible nausea he had experienced so many times in the past when he had surgery as a child was nonexistent. He didn't even feel like he was waking from sleep. He was alert and totally unaffected by the surgery that had just taken place. "But you didn't do anything. When are you going to start?" he asked, somewhat confused.

"Look," Santoo said. He held a small cup out to Daniel. In the cup was a tiny bead. "When we finish with ta'Sara, we'll examine both of the objects to see what they really are."

"What about Eric?" Daniel whispered to his father-in-law. "Do you have to remove anything from him?"

"Actually, yes, we do." Santoo's mouth was tense as he spoke. "He appears to have something lodged in his sinus cavity, only the foreign object in him appears to be different than this." With his finger, Santoo poked at the bead he had just taken out of Daniel. "We'll see it in a few moments."

The procedures took a blessedly short time. Daniel could not get over the painlessness and ease of the surgeries. Even Eric hopped up on the table with trust and confidence. What a relief to have something be quick, easy, and comfortable.

They peered at the magnifier screen. Yankee said, "They still look like beads. What magnifying power

are you using?"

"Thirty," Santoo said. "Let's try one hundred." He dialed in a power of what Daniel assumed to be one hundred, then stood back from the screen.

"It still looks like a blob of glass," Daniel said, disappointed.

Santoo grinned. "I guess we will, as you are so fond of saying, have to get tough with it." He pressed several buttons and turned a dial. An image that looked totally different from the blob of glass under the lower power now flared onto the screen. Daniel was amazed at what this magnifying instrument could do. It appeared to be as powerful as an electron microscope, but the device itself looked simple. The image was cross-sectioned and the sections were separated, like an exploded view, and many internal details were now visible.

"What did you do, Santoo?" Karen asked.

"I changed the view so the instrument is now looking at the inside of the bead." Santoo squinted at the screen. "And I believe this is as I suspected—an image receiving and transmitting device. It appears as if it transmits sound as well."

"Is it still working?" Daniel asked.

"I suspect it is. Hmm. This device looks to be omnidirectional. Just as an omnidirectional microphone picks up sound from any direction, so it is with this device. The operator can choose a view, isolating the other views to eliminate confusion, and . . ." Santoo paused as he carefully studied the exploded view, "it appears as if this particular device can see through most types of matter."

"Then when the bead was behind my eye, the being operating the device could see through my eye?"

"Yes. Also through the back, sides, and top of your head. The operator simply chose the view he wanted."

"So you're saying that the Zeta could be looking at us right now?—as we speak?" Daniel asked, mortified at the possibility.

"Probably, yes."

"Do you have a set of pliers, Santoo?" Daniel asked.

"Pliers? That's all you want? Just pliers?"

"Yes. Just please hand me some pliers."

Santoo opened another drawer and pulled out a tool that looked very much like a pair of regular pliers of the Earth variety.

"Thanks." Daniel carefully took the bead between his fingers. "You've got one last look, Doctor," Daniel mumbled to the doctor being who was present only in his thoughts now. Then he laid the bead on one of the pliers jaws, and with one powerful squeeze of his perfect celled muscles, turned the bead into dust. He looked up, immensely satisfied with his destructive act. "You have no idea how good that made me feel."

Santoo just laughed. "If you don't mind, I'd like to save the one I extracted from ta'Sara, Daniel. I'll keep it well shielded so the Zeta can't use it. I just want to study it when I have time."

"What about the object you removed from Eric?" Sara asked.

Santoo put the oval-shaped object into the viewer and a moment later the object appeared hundreds of times larger on the screen.

"What is it? It looks just like the round ones." Sara peered into the screen.

"I'm not sure. The Zeta have added a few new capabilities, I think. No doubt this is able to measure brain waves, tap emotions, maybe even affect and change emotions. But it appears as if it's even more sophisticated than what I took from the two of you. I need to study this further." Santoo looked at Eric, who was playing quietly on the floor with a toy truck. The child had been exceptionally quiet since the procedure.

"Eric," Santoo crouched down next to him. "How are you feeling right now?"

Eric looked up briefly and said nothing. He stared at Santoo as if he didn't know him. Daniel also crouched next to his son. "Eric, look at me. Talk to me." Eric didn't say a word. He put down his toy and crawled into his father's lap. "Good God, what now?" Daniel telepathed miserably.

"Daniel, Santoo and I have made a decision that we hope you will approve of," Chumaya said.

They were home again. Daniel felt safe again. He was concerned at how quiet Eric had suddenly become after Santoo had removed the bead from him, but they had been through quiet phases before with Eric, and Daniel could only hope Eric would eventually come back to them.

Now Daniel looked at Santoo. "Is this the cure you alluded to for more effectively cloaking your ship?"

"Indirectly, yes. Go ahead, Chumaya, tell him."

Chumaya paused dramatically, then grinned and said, "Santoo and I have decided to live here-permanently."

"Don't tease me if you don't mean it, Chumaya," Daniel said.

Chumaya smiled with affection at Daniel. "Does this mean you are in favor of our decision, Daniel?"

"I can't begin to explain how relieved I am. It's been so hard . . ." He covered his face with his hands and tried in vain to hide his tears from them.

Santoo put his arm around Daniel's shoulders. "We know it is, Daniel. We want to be here for you. Perhaps our staying will help relieve both of you of the horrific stress the beings have been subjecting you to."

Daniel quickly wiped the tears off his cheeks. Eric looked alarmed at his father's behavior. "It's all right, son. Dad's all right." He smiled at Eric who was still sitting on his lap. Eric stared at him, but said nothing.

Daniel said, "This is a true act of kindness from both of you. But you are inviting a lot of misery into your lives. You didn't have any contact with the Zeta until you came to Eagle Bluff. How can you even consider subjecting yourselves to these beings? Because that's what you'll be doing, you know, if you stay here."

"We know that," Chumaya said. "But you need us. Can any decision be more simple?"

Daniel embraced Chumaya and squeezed her tightly. "No," he whispered, tears in his voice; "it can't be any more simple. What will you two do with yourselves? Will you still go to other planets on medical missions?"

Santoo said, "Chumaya and I have committed ourselves to an important project off the planet. It's a commitment we must honor. We plan to stay here for two or three more weeks. Then we'll go there and finish the project. After that's finished, we'll come back. Then we will devote ourselves to improving medical procedures on Earth in our spare time."

"What will you do with your lives, then? Living out your lives in Eagle Bluff, Iowa can't possibly be as exciting as flying all over the galaxy."

Santoo grinned. "We may just retire, or certainly take a rest. Maybe Roger would hire me to work in his hardware store. It would be fun to wrap my fingers around a wrench or a pliers."

"You've got to be kidding, Santoo. Chumaya, tell me he's kidding."

"It will be enjoyable to live like an Earthling," Chumaya said. "Don't worry about us. We do quite well in keeping our lives interesting."

"Then I won't worry about you." With puzzlement in his eyes he looked at Santoo. "You will have to hide your ship more effectively than you are hiding it now. I don't want to worry about you being found out."

"We have a place, Daniel. Here-on Earth. At every planet we visit we establish bases for our ships. The base here is quite large and underground. I've told you before that we are not the only people from my planet that are here. There are others, and since we all have varying schedules and points of destination, we all come in our own starships."

Daniel laughed. "So you don't carpool?"

"No, we don't carpool," Santoo chuckled.

"You can permanently leave your starship at this underground base?"

"Yes. But it won't be permanent, will it? I have promised you many times that someday I will fly you to our home planet. And I will. But please give us time to tie up loose ends, as you say. Then we can plan a trip to Teruhl."

"Where is this underground base, Santoo?"

"In Peru."

"Peru?" Daniel said excitedly.

"Yes," Santoo answered with a twinkle in his eye. "And this coming weekend I'm going to fly you and Eric there."

Sara stood with her arms folded, smiling at her husband's joy.

"Maybe the Zeta will leave us alone if your parents live here. Maybe the power of your technology will intimidate them." Daniel laid the book he had been reading face down on the table. "What do you think?"

Sara came to him, sat on his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I think that I am going to carry you to bed," she said impishly.

Daniel quickly untangled himself from Sara's embrace. "You're kidding me."

"Would I kid about something like that? Would I?" She smiled mischievously.

"Sara," Daniel whispered ferociously. He tried to clutch her in his arms, but in a playful show of strength she pulled herself free, slipped off his lap and with a powerful heave, picked him up in her arms. Sara had taken him by surprise and now he was cradled in her arms like a child. He felt foolish. "I'm supposed to carry you. My culture, my upbringing, won't allow me to accept your gracious, but highly unorthodox act of kindness towards me. I'm supposed to carry you, damn it."

"Wanna bet?" Sara said in her best imitation of a midwesterner.

"All right, you've won this round," Daniel whispered. He relaxed in her arms as she quietly carried him to their bed room. "You wouldn't even try this if your parents were sleeping on their ship instead of here," he whispered. "What do you suppose Eric would think if he wakes up and sees his father being carried by his mother?"

Sara gently laid him on the bed. "He'd probably think it was quite tender of me, wouldn't you think?" She went to the bedroom door and quietly pushed it shut. "Wouldn't you think?" Sara said again as she hovered over him and softly pushed her nose into his face.

"Probably," Daniel breathed. "You're probably right."

"They played with each other for a time. Their desire for one another was so great neither wanted it to peak. But when that magic time finally came to the both of them, the wait, the putting off, the anticipation threw them together like fire and fire.

Eric spent the next days in complete silence. Daniel tried not to be concerned, thinking that he was adjusting to life without a device that could have certainly been placed inside his head before he was ever born. The little boy appeared to be normal in every other way, but he still said nothing.

"And here is the nutritious lunch I've packed for my three favorite boys," Sara said. She handed the lunch bag to Eric. "Would you like to be in charge of this sack lunch, Honey?"

Eric nodded. He took the bag and then looked at his smiling grandmother. He smiled back at her, but said nothing.

Chumaya said, "Your grandfather is waiting in the ship for you. You and your father have a wonderful time today."

He hugged her. Then he hugged his mother.

Daniel firmly gripped Eric by his wrist, clearly visualized the captain's bridge on Santoo's ship, and touched the pendant on the amulet around his neck. It warmed beneath his fingers and Daniel no longer felt his feet on the kitchen floor.

Their images fizzed onto the deck. "Daniel, you look very excited." Santoo picked up Eric and held him in his arms.

"Does it show?"

"It shows." Santoo grinned wryly. "You will fly this one day, Daniel." He turned to Eric. "You will fly it one day, too, Eric." He smiled at his grandson. "But I don't want you two arguing about who will fly it first," he said teasingly. He ruffled Eric's hair and then turned back to the control panel.

Now Santoo's fingers flew over the control panel. The image on the viewscreen told Daniel the ship was rising. They hovered above the trees for a second or two. Then the image on the viewscreen rapidly became smaller as the ship ascended.

"We're above the air traffic lanes now." Santoo pressed the control panel again, and settled back in his seat.

Chapter Seventeen

They had flown for only a few minutes when Santoo said, "I'll slow down when we reach the Peruvian coast. There is something quite interesting I want to show you and Eric. But if we are going to be back in time to help Roger with his hotel this afternoon, we'll have to watch the time."

Daniel glanced at his watch. It had been less than half an hour since they left Eagle Bluff. Although Daniel appreciated and respected the speed of his own shuttle, it couldn't move in Earth's air space as fast as the starship.

"Sorry to intrude on your thoughts, Daniel. I'm happy you are enjoying yourself today. I've wanted to take you flying for quite some time now. Let me find the spot I want to show both of you. Then we'll hover over it while we eat our snack. I believe . . . yes, there it is. Eric, tell me, what is that a picture of?"

Eric squinted at the screen. A huge figure, a line drawing, was inscribed on the Earth below them. He shook his head.

"Still not talking are we? Well, do you think it looks like a spider?"

Eric nodded. "That's exactly what it is supposed to look like."

Eric fumbled in the lunch bag and handed each of them a peanut butter sandwich and an apple. Daniel absently took a bite of the sandwich and then hoisted Eric onto his lap as he gazed at the screen.

"Daniel, we are on the coast of Peru-quite close to the base, actually-and the Andes mountains are just to the east of us. The pictures below us . . . wait, let me zoom back."

"Impressive, isn't it?" Santoo said. Below them, incised on the ground were huge line drawings of animals and geometric designs. "Tell me what you see," Santoo said.

"I see the spider and a . . . let's see . . . it appears to be a monkey with a curled up tail . . . and a lizard, and some kind of bird," Daniel said, awe struck.

"I believe the bird is a humming bird," Santoo offered. "Daniel, these figures were made sometime during the thousand year period between five-hundred BC and five-hundred AD by the Nasca Indians. They were the forerunners of the Incas. There are hundreds of these drawings that can only be seen from the air. I want to show you the spider again." Santoo zoomed in until the figure of the spider filled the screen. "Look at the longest leg, Daniel, the leg that's reaching to the left. It has a triangular shape on its end. Do you see it?" Santoo tapped the screen with his finger.

"Yes. What is it?"

"It's the spider's reproductive organ that is located on the end of its leg. This organ can only be seen on a real spider through the aid of a microscope. How did a primitive people know the reproductive organ was there?"

"And why did they bother to make these beautiful drawings if they could only see them from the air?" Daniel wondered out loud. "And how did they make them so perfect if someone couldn't direct their work from the air?"

"They were visited by advanced beings, Daniel."

"Yeah," Daniel said wonderingly. "Got to be."

"Daniel, I'm trying to give you a feeling for the fact that your planet has been visited for thousands of years by a variety of aliens from other planets."

"Were the aliens that made these drawings your people, by chance?"

"No. Remember that my technology is only beyond yours by probably three-hundred years. When these drawings were made, our people were just as primitive as yours, relatively speaking."

"Then who . . ."

"I don't know, nor do my people know. And we don't know why. Were the people on Earth trying to please the aliens? Were these primitive people trying to lure them back again with pretty pictures? Or were the drawings functional?" Daniel watched Santoo make directional changes on the control panel. "We're approaching the base now. The base is inside that mountain."

After only a few seconds, as the ship closed the distance between it and a mountain side, he saw doors appear on the screen. His heart started to flutter. What would he see inside? Santoo pressed a contact

switch and the doors slowly opened.

Carefully Santoo maneuvered the huge ship through the doors. Once inside, he slowly guided the ship down a tunnel that to Daniel's way of thinking was far too narrow for the ship to pass through safely. But Santoo was a skilled pilot. Not once did Daniel feel in danger.

In less than a minute they came to the end of the tunnel where Daniel could now see a vast space that had been cut out of the inside of the mountain. "We're here," Santoo said. "I'm going to set it down with the others."

The "others" were starships similar but not identical to Santoo's starship. The difference in the appearance of the ships was analogous to different car models in a small parking lot. On the screen Daniel could see six ships parked in a row. Santoo's ship made seven. He watched the screen closely now as Santoo expertly set the starship down, using marks on the floor to guide him the final distance.

Santoo shut down the captain's bridge and said, "We can get out, now. Come on, Eric." Santoo took Eric by the hand as Eric downed the last bite of his sandwich. "Are you all filled up, now?" He smiled at Eric.

Eric nodded his head. They walked through the passageway that passed along the center of the ship. For an instant Daniel felt intimidated by who just might be on the other side of the door. He was going to converse with other people from Santoo's planet. Just what was a small potato like he doing in a place like this? But then, as they came to the outer hatch, the door that would let them out of the ship, he felt the touch of his father in law's hand on his shoulder.

"Apologize to no man, Daniel. You are equal to anyone on the other side of that door. Don't be intimidated by my technology-or my friends. You are my friend. Now let's go out."

Daniel let out a breath and quickly squeezed Santoo's hand. "Thanks," he said softly. He took Eric by his hand and opened the door.

Daniel's breath was taken away at what he saw. The hanger space cut out of the mountain had to have been at least a thousand feet on each side with a ceiling height of at least three hundred feet. Daniel turned to Santoo. "And you're telling me not to be intimidated?" he choked.

"I am. Your own Earth technology just completed a huge tunnel under the English channel. Put things in perspective, Daniel. Come, I want you to meet someone, if he's here today."

They walked quickly past the starships lined up along their way. Daniel didn't know if he was more impressed by the starships or by the sheer space cut out of this massive mountain. Still, Santoo was right. The only advantage Santoo's people had over his own was time-time that gave them a technological lead.

They came to the side of the hanger, and along the wall was a building that looked very much like an army quonset hut. They stepped inside. The furnishings looked very Earth-like. In fact, Daniel suspected that the furnishings were from Earth. A door ahead of them was embossed with what he recognized as the writing of Sara's planet. Santoo spoke into a small panel mounted beside the door.

Daniel heard a man's voice on the other side say something.

Santoo opened the door. The man sitting behind his desk grinned broadly when he saw Santoo. He chattered a greeting to him. Santoo quickly greeted the man in return. The man looked at Daniel and Eric.

"Hello," he said in perfect English. He offered his hand to Daniel. "I'm glad you came with Santoo today. I'm very happy to meet you, Daniel." He looked down at Daniel's side. "And Eric."

"We're happy to be here," Daniel said, but didn't know what else to say.

"Well, sit down, all of you. Daniel, would you care for some coffee?"

Daniel couldn't hide the look that had crossed his face.

"Hasn't Santoo told you that many of us have come to enjoy the coffee here?"

"I'm just still in shock at the impressive facility you have here. Excuse me, I don't want you to think me rude."

"I don't think you're rude, Daniel. You are among friends-relax."

Daniel sat down on his chair. Eric crawled up onto his lap. Daniel liked this very friendly man.

"Daniel," Santoo said, "I would like you to meet Zarr Wysong. He is the head of this facility."

"And I don't live on Teruhl anymore. I'm an Earthling."

"Do you live in this complex, then?" Daniel asked.

"No. I live in the village about forty miles from here."

"It sounds like quite a technological contrast-spending your working day in this place and the rest of the day in a village that probably doesn't have much more than running water."

"Actually, I've been trying to change that. I've married a wonderful Indian woman. She's very bright and she, I, and some of our more advanced Earth friends are slowly but surely modernizing the town. The village is poor and the adults there desperately need paying work." Zarr took a sip of coffee and set it down on his desk. "I'm truly glad to meet you, Daniel. Santoo has told me so much about you."

"It seems my reputation has preceded me."

"It has." Zarr smiled warmly.

"Zarr," Santoo said, "I showed Daniel and Eric the Nasca Indian pictures this morning."

"Really? I'm sure you found them quite amazing."

Daniel laughed. "I've seen photographs of them in books, but there's nothing like the real thing."

Santoo looked slightly uncomfortable.

"What?" Daniel said. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No, of course not. But I may have."

"I doubt that, Santoo." Daniel was puzzled by Santoo's manner.

Santoo quickly glanced at Zarr, then back at Daniel. "Daniel, I've been discussing your experiences you've had with the beings with Zarr. I know you probably don't appreciate me telling others about this, but Zarr and I are very close friends and sometimes . . . well sometimes . . ."

"You have to talk to your friends about it," Daniel interrupted. "I understand. I don't mind, really." He didn't mind. He didn't know why it made Santoo uncomfortable.

Santoo visibly relaxed. "Daniel, it has bothered me for quite some time that I don't know who these people are. I'm sure you think I should know these things, but I don't. And I wanted to know if Zarr might have known something I didn't."

"Do you?" Daniel asked Zarr.

"No," Zarr said. "Of course, if our planet belonged to the Alliance of Planets, we would know these things. We'd know lots of things." Zarr put his head down and almost pouted.

Daniel looked at Santoo. "What's he talking about?"

Zarr looked up. "You haven't explained the Alliance to Daniel?"

"No."

"If Santoo hasn't told me, maybe I shouldn't know about this," Daniel suggested.

"I should have told you, Daniel," Santoo said. "It's just that it is so very irritating to me that we aren't members, I haven't gotten around to explaining it. Zarr, would you care to explain it to Daniel?"

Zarr reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a chocolate bar. He half hid it in his hand. "Can Eric have this?" he whispered.

Daniel laughed. "I telepath quite well, Zarr."

"Oh. Is it all right for Eric to have this?"

"Sure," Daniel telepathed in return.

Zarr reached across his desk and handed the bar to Eric. Eric quietly peeled off the wrapper. "Now, the Alliance of Planets is just exactly that. It's a group of representatives from planets in this galaxy. They only allow planets they consider to be spiritually advanced enough to join. Teruhl isn't a member, much to Santoo's dismay. Mine too. Earth isn't a member either, of course. Your people won't even acknowledge that we are here. The reason both your people and my people are so ignorant about other alien races is because we deliberately leave them alone. We don't want to get involved with them for fear of stirring up trouble with a race that may be vastly superior to us. Now, if we belonged to the Alliance, we would know about these different races. And chances are great that we would get along with them."

"So if you don't belong to this exclusive club, you have to behave like an outsider because it's a matter of self defense?"

"Exactly."

Daniel, in frustration, quite involuntarily put his hand over his eyes.

"So getting back to the problems you are having with the Zeta," Zarr said kindly-"I don't know much about them, but I do know that their race has been in existence for thousands of years."

"Do they belong to the Alliance?"

"Not likely. They were approached long ago, but refused. Or should I say, simply ignored the query."

Daniel leaned back against his chair until the back squeaked. "I'm not surprised. I can't imagine these people being spiritually advanced enough to be part of the Alliance."

"Neither can I," Zarr said. "Santoo tells me they are an irascible bunch."

"Zarr, these people are making our lives hell," Daniel finished.

"Yes, we know. I wish I knew more about them. You probably know more than anyone else in the galaxy, Daniel."

"I never thought of it that way, " Daniel mused. Santoo cleared his throat. "Tell us more about this woman you've married." Santoo said.

"She's a Native woman I met in the village. I love that woman. I'm having a wonderful time introducing her to the intellectual side of life."

"Do you have children?" Daniel asked. He thought that question was polite and safe.

"Not yet. We've only been married a year."

"Does the Native population know of this base? Do they see you fly in and out of here?"

"Oh, of course," Zarr said. He slid his chair back and reached for the coffee pot. "Santoo, haven't you told your son-in-law anything about it?"

Santoo grinned. "I thought I'd leave that up to you. You're doing quite well so far on your own."

"Well, all right, then." Zarr grinned. "Yes, Daniel, the Natives know about us. They've always known about us. If you want to hear some real flying saucer stories, just go back to the early books written on the subject. Many stories have come out of this area."

"I've read them. I just didn't think I'd be sitting here in the middle of living proof."

Zarr showed Daniel around the landing facility, although there wasn't much to see. The base was simply a huge space cut from the center of the mountain. Starships came and went, although while Daniel and Santoo were there no other ships came or went. Zarr kept the lights on, so to speak, and he logged the flight plans the Teruhlian pilots were required to file every time they went to a different planet. Daniel learned there were starship bases on other planets as well, and on each base there was a "Zarr" that kept track of flight schedules. The facilitator at each base was much like someone on Earth who kept track of airline flight schedules.

As they walked back into Santoo's ship, Santoo said, "Since we're leaving the ship here, we'll have to get my shuttle out of its bay. I want you to have this experience, Daniel."

"Wait, I can't fly the shuttle out of here. You have your shuttle rigged for telepathic flight. I can't fly with those kinds of controls."

Santoo got down on his haunches, his eyes now level with Eric's. "Eric, your father worries about everything. But we're going to make him fly the shuttle anyway." Santoo straightened back up.

"Santoo, I can't . . ."

"I've already rigged my shuttle with joystick controls, just like yours. I prepared it just for you. Now, I don't want to hear another word. Besides, I'll be sitting right next to you most of the time."

"Most of the time?"

"Yes. There will only be a short time when you'll fly the shuttle out of the bottom of the ship while I hover it over the hanger floor."

In a sickening flash of understanding Daniel now realized why the ceiling of the hanger was so high. In order to get a shuttle out of its bay, the shuttle would have to come out of the bottom of the starship. This would take some expert flying ability, something Daniel knew he didn't possess. Santoo looked at Daniel, then Eric. "Come on, you two, let's go."

"Are you nuts, Santoo?" Daniel said, exasperated.

"I hope not." He grinned happily. "If I am, we'll never make it home by this afternoon to help Roger with his hotel remodeling."

"I . . ."

"Come on." Santoo led them to the end of the hallway and opened a door at the end. Santoo's shuttle was nestled in its stabilization harness. "Daniel, I've been playing with you. The shuttle as well as this starship has sensors that won't allow it to crash into the walls of the tunnel."

Daniel breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"I'm sorry, Daniel. If you don't feel comfortable flying the shuttle, just tell me. But you should know that it's quite impossible to put us in any kind of danger."

"Since there are safety factors built in . . . I think I want to try it after all."

"Fine. Would you like Eric to be with you as you take the shuttle out of the ship, or would you rather he ride with me?"

"I think I'd prefer he stay with you."

"All right. Eric and I will go to the bridge and then I'll raise the ship from the floor. When I telepath that we're ready, start the gravity drive and I'll release you through the loading bay doors. All right?"

"All right." Daniel climbed into the shuttle and waited for Santoo to give him instructions. While he waited he familiarized himself with the inside of Santoo's shuttle. It was almost identical to the shuttle Santoo had given to Sara and Daniel, but it gave him confidence to study things anyway.

"Are you ready, space pilot?" Santoo telepathed cheerfully.

"I'm ready."

"Go through the exact start procedure you use on the other shuttle. I'll let you know when I'm ready to release you."

"All right." Daniel turned on the viewscreen and he started the gravity drive. He switched the view so he could see below him. He supposed there probably was a warning light or a dialogue box on the screen that would tell him when the starship's bay doors were open, but he didn't want to look for that now. Santoo would tell him what to do.

"Watch the doors, Daniel." The doors slid back. "I'm releasing you now."

"Go ahead." He didn't feel the stabilization harness let go because the gravity drive had already isolated him from the forces of the Earth around him.

"You're free. Take it out."

Daniel gripped the joystick and slowly twisted it. The shuttle gently floated down, out of the bay. He guided it over the parked ships below him, then set it down on the floor and waited for Santoo to set the ship down.

Finally, the shuttle's hatch opened and Eric crawled through it. Santoo came in behind him. "Nice job, Daniel," Santoo said. He sat down in the seat next to Daniel. "Come here, Eric, and sit on your grandfather's lap." Eric scooted up on Santoo's lap. "Your father is going to fly us home."

"You have to guide me out of here. I'm not sure I can do this part alone."

"Of course you can. Take it up and slowly head towards the way we came in."

With finesse Daniel didn't know he possessed, he flew the shuttle towards the opening of the tunnel and smoothly took it through the tunnel and out the doors. "Damn, that was fun!"

"You did well. I'll navigate-you fly."

Daniel took the shuttle straight up. Then he sat back in his seat as Santoo set the course for home.

They said little for a time. Eric relaxed against Santoo's chest as Daniel watched the viewscreen for oncoming aircraft. He wasn't concerned about it; they were well above where most aircraft could fly. Still, Daniel had spent too many years behind the wheel of an automobile to stop looking both ways now.

"Daniel, I don't know if Sara has told you this or not, but Zarr was once her fiance. About three years ago they were planning to marry."

"Why are you telling me this?" Daniel suddenly felt confused.

"Because the rest of the story is quite interesting. ta'Sara was the one who broke the relationship off. She told Zarr he wasn't right for her. She loved him, but she knew he wasn't the person she was supposed to marry."

"How did she know that?" Daniel felt somewhat calmer now.

"She knew that because she said her dreams were showing her another man-a man that would be very important in her life. You, undoubtedly, are that man. And you were in her dreams because, unknown to either of you at the time, you knew each other since you were children."

"Huh," he mused. "We were childhood sweethearts at five-years-old. I can honestly say I loved her when I first saw her. Maybe I owe the Zeta."

"Zarr is a very nice man. But he would have never been my son-in-law. He never had a chance."

"Daddy!"

Daniel was startled by the sound of Eric's voice. This was the first word Eric had uttered since Santoo had removed the bead from his skull. He looked at Eric's face. The child was looking at the monitor screen and pointing. As he redirected his attention to it, he saw a huge chevron shaped craft hovering in front of them. "Damn, it's the Zeta ship."

"My friends!" Eric said gleefully. "I want to see my friends."

"We can't see them now, Honey," Daniel said almost frantically. "Maybe another time."

"I like my friends. I want to see them! I want to go there." he begged.

"You can't see them today, Eric." Daniel looked wildly at Santoo, his eyes asking Santoo what to do. Daniel had hoped fervently that Eric wanted nothing more to do with the Zeta. Now it appeared he did.

"Eric," Santoo said firmly, "you cannot see your friends today."

"When can I see them?" Eric's lip turned down in a pout.

"Eric," Daniel said frustrated, "You told them you wanted to live with Sara and me. Don't you remember? You told them we were your parents now. Have you changed your mind?" The Zeta ship hung before them like a condor drifting on the wind.

"No. But I want to see them." he whined.

"No, son, you can't. I'm sorry." Eric's face was a maze of emotions. The boy stared at the viewing screen, as though in a trance. Daniel held his position. He felt that he must not give in.

The Zeta ship hovered, appearing uncertain as to what to do next. Then it simply disappeared before their eyes.

"I'm going to sleep now," Eric announced. He snuggled into Santoo's chest, put his thumb into his mouth and went to sleep. When his breathing changed to a little-boy snore, Daniel said, "Did you notice how the Zeta ship almost instantly responded when I made it clear that Eric wasn't going to see them?"

"Yes. They could have taken him from us, but they chose to abide by your rules. Curious. Here's something else that's quite curious: neither you nor I have tracking beads in our heads. I took the bead out of your head and Eric's head, so we know you both are clear."

Daniel turned away from the screen. "Are you sure of that?"

"Yes. But that doesn't mean they haven't put something back. They can come in the middle of the night and put back what I took out."

"I want you to check him again, Santoo."

"Then we have to turn around. I left all my medical equipment on the ship."

"Damn. That's right. What do we do?"

"Let's return home; we need to plan our next move. The Zeta are unstoppable, you know. If they want him 'bugged' they'll certainly have it that way."

"True," Daniel admitted.

"I scanned Eric's head, Daniel. I didn't scan the rest of his body. I can see, now, I should have. These people could have other beads implanted in other places in our little boy. If the devices are microscopically small, I'll have a difficult time finding them. If we detect one in the heart, say, or a major organ, we are dealing with a delicate operation to remove them."

"But you have the healing capability. . . ."

"I do. Eric wouldn't die because of such surgery, but it could prove to be a difficult procedure for a little boy, only to have the Zeta reverse it at some later time."

"What if there are no more devices inside him? Could the Zeta control him in other ways?"

"Telepathically? Most certainly. We really don't know much about them, Daniel. They are secretive and have their own agenda. They have never shared information with anyone."

Daniel stared straight ahead at the view screen. He wanted to get home and talk to Sara. And of course, Roger would be waiting.

Chapter Eighteen

Daniel changed hurriedly into his work clothes. The afternoon was wearing on, and Roger would be working full blast by the time they got up to the hotel. He thought about the breathtaking sights he'd seen this morning.

Sara was delighted that Eric had begun to speak again. She joined him in the bedroom, sitting on the edge of the bed to pull on her work boots. He squeezed her and told her how much he loved her. "Daniel, I can hardly breathe," she whispered against him. "You're holding me too tightly. You're troubled. You only squeeze me like this when you're troubled."

"It's been quite a day." He paused, not knowing if he should bring it up. Then he said, "I met Zarr."

Sara let out an involuntary gasp. "Oh . . . really?" she stammered.

"Come on, Sara. You had to know he was probably at the complex. He works there. He's a nice man."

"He is very much like you. Uh, what did he have to say?"

"Your father told me that you two were engaged."

"Uh . . ."

"Why didn't you tell me about him?"

"I don't know, Daniel. Maybe because I don't think about it very often anymore. Maybe he's just another person who was in my 'former' life, if you know what I mean. And you worry so much, I didn't want to make you feel insecure about us."

"Your father told me about the dreams you used to have about me. I'm flattered. I only wish I would have had dreams about you."

"Look at it this way-if you would have met and married me before you married your first wife, you wouldn't have had Rachel."

"Of course I wouldn't. Having Rachel as my daughter was the reason for that marriage, bad as the marriage was. But I still wish I could have had the good fortune of dreaming about you after the marriage was over. I put in some lonely years there. Empty years. It would have been nice to know you were out there somewhere, trying to find me." He squeezed her again.

"Daniel, you are hugging me so tightly, I can feel the wires of your exo." Sitting next to him, she reached under his shirt collar and absently fingered the wires of the exoskeleton. "Daniel, do you really need this anymore? Your strength without it is far beyond normal Earth strength now."

"I still feel like I need it to protect me from the Zeta. I can't give it up until I know they are no longer a part of our lives. And if they should paralyze me again . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Daniel, what good has the exo done you in regard to the Zeta? When you're wearing it, the Zeta simply shut it off. And when you're not wearing it, your superior strength dissolves under the power of their stunrods."

"I'm not ready. I went without it and found myself feeling really vulnerable. I can't let go of it yet."

Sara lightly traced her finger along his cheek bone.

"The Zeta confronted us today. I had the exo on. I felt-safer. I still need the exo."

Sara turned pale. "What . . . what did they do?"

"Nothing. They pulled up several hundred meters from us and just hung there in space, glaring at us with their big ship. Eric became excited. He said he wanted to see his friends, but when your father and I firmly said no, the Zeta ship simply disappeared."

"I'm glad you're safe, Sweetheart. I'm so relieved you're all right. But you mustn't let that set you back. Please don't use the exo for a psychological crutch."

Daniel stood back from her and clutched her shoulders. Then without a word he unbuttoned his shirt.

"You're right. I'm using it as false protection." He pulled off his pants, removed the exo and hung it up by the bed. "I'll just have to 'tough' it out There-it's off. Are you happy?"

"Yes. I like you much better without it." Sara smiled. Daniel thought briefly of her unconditional love for him. Why would it matter if he wore the exo or not. But his mind was running on to other things.

"Sara, I know your father removed that bead from Eric's head, but we think . . . that they might have other ways of controlling him. The Zeta found us. Eric wanted to board their ship. I wouldn't allow it. Could he still be connected to them somehow?"

Sara suddenly looked aghast. "Father would have picked up anything else inside of Eric from the scan. I don't know how he could have anything else in him unless it's so tiny . . . I don't understand these people. Why do they think they have the right to do this? They raised Eric to four-years-old and now they are treating him like a tagged animal. What do they want from one little boy?"

"Sara, we don't know. Your father and I didn't even think about all this until we were headed home from the base. That's when the Zeta made their sudden appearance."

"Then Father hasn't re-examined Eric?" Sara's voice trembled.

"He will, he will," Daniel said reassuringly.

"It's always something with these . . . people. You've had quite a busy morning."

"I have." He glanced at his watch. "It's two-thirty. We have plenty of time for a quick lunch. Let's do that and then go help Roger. We promised we would help him today and I know your father is looking forward to going."

"Yes, you're right." Sara rubbed her face. "Of course you're right. I'm being impatient. I'll go out and call them in for lunch."

Daniel was struck by the unbridled enthusiasm of Santoo and Chumaya. Here they were, humans from another planet, dressed in jeans and sweatshirts, swinging hammers and horsing their handsaws as if it were a natural part of their technological lives, yet he knew they had never used such primitive tools before.

"Where did you learn to do this, Santoo? You and Chumaya are handling Earth tools like you were born with them in your hands."

Santoo chuckled. "We're good observers, Daniel. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know how to swing a hammer." As Santoo turned to speak to Daniel, he yelped. Santoo had hit his fingers with the hammer.

If Santoo wouldn't have been in such pain, Daniel would have laughed. But Santoo was hurting badly.

Daniel quickly glanced up and noticed Saul standing within twenty feet of them. Ann had brought Saul with her. She had said he was a good carpenter. He was, but he knew nothing about Santoo and Chumaya. Daniel didn't want to put another troublesome variable in Saul's equation so Daniel took Santoo by his shirt sleeve and steered him into a newly sheet-rocked room. Then he gripped Santoo's wrists, placed himself in that state where he could clearly see Santoo's human energy field, and visualized him as healed. The energy drained from Daniel, and if Santoo wouldn't have quickly steadied him, he would have gone to his knees.

"I'm fine now, Daniel," Santoo said. "That's twice I owe you."

Daniel laughed, then whispered, "When I've paid you back for the three-hundred million dollars you gave Sara and me in cut diamonds, then you can owe me."

Santoo grinned and patted Daniel across his shoulders. "Fair enough. Let's get back to work."

As they came back into the room where everyone else was working, Roger, grinning, stood in their path. "You hit your thumb with a hammer, didn't you, Santoo?"

"Yes. And if you tell anyone, I won't work in your hardware store like I promised you."

Roger laughed. "Then I'd best keep my trap shut."

"Good plan," Santoo teased.

"I'm taking a break," Daniel said.

"Let's go, then," Roger said. "Saul, you want to get some air with us?" The air inside the hotel, even on this brisk spring day, was thick and fetid with the pungent mixed odor of freshly sawed wood and mildewed walls that had yet to be replaced.

"Don't mind if I do."

Saul was friendly enough, Daniel decided. He just was having a difficult time separating Saul from where he had most often seen him. Several times during the day Daniel had caught Saul looking at him with an almost begging, ravaged plea in his eyes.

The four of them walked outside and stood under the trees and talked. It was a perfect afternoon to be here. Daniel conceded that the beauty of the Earth from Santoo's starship was spectacular, and the meandering Andes Mountain range was majestic. But out here, this place, where an old, dilapidated turn-of-the-century hotel sat nestled in the trees on the top of a wooded bluff along the Mississippi River, was truly beautiful. His family and friends were here, swinging hammers, sawing wood, painting walls. In the distance he could hear the children laughing and playing among the trees. The low, distinctive moan of a grain barge's horn filtered up through the trees as it made its way on the river. Birds and squirrels chattered above him. Life was beginning anew.

What kind of life did the Zeta enjoy? Daniel wondered. Locked into their drab, sterile environment, they captured human beings and treated them like lab animals. How would a Zeta being react if it were living here? It couldn't live in a beautiful place like this, Daniel decided-no more than he could live on their ship. In the end he felt that the Zeta enjoyed nothing. Something else drove them. Pleasure was not a part of their composition.

Even Saul's presence couldn't dampen Daniel's enthusiasm today. Saul was a good man. He simply had no knowledge of his double life. And even if he knew, there would be little he could do about it.

Suddenly Roger's children came running up to him. They looked upset. Eric wasn't with them. Daniel said, "Where's Eric?"

Ryan, Roger's older boy, looked at Daniel and said, "That's what I want to tell you-Eric doesn't want to play with us anymore. I told him not to play on that side. Dad and Mom don't want us to play on that side." Ryan pointed to a line of trees on the opposite side of a shallow gully. Daniel put up his hand in the sign for 'stop'. "Slow down. Start from the beginning, Ryan."

Roger said, "We told the children to play in the trees over by the housing development side. It's along the fence line and they can't get into much trouble over there. But the other side has some gullies. It's not dangerous, really, but we always tell our children to stay away from that side just in case."

"Did you tell Eric to stay away from that side as well?"

"Yes."

"Then he disobeyed your orders. I'm going to pay that young man of mine a visit." He was irritated with Eric's defiance. More oddly, Eric hadn't shown this side of himself before. He turned to walk towards the tree line, but he felt a firm hand on his elbow. It was Sara's. He turned to her. "He's behaving in a way I don't like, Sara. I'm going to find him and explain how we expect him to behave."

"Daniel, he's in no danger. If he were, he would have telepathed fear. He probably just wandered off by himself. Don't be so hard on him."

"No," Ryan said. "We told him to stay away from that side, but he said his friend was calling him. He had to go see his friend."

Daniel and Sara looked at each other.

"Daniel," Roger said, trying to be helpful, "Eric has a good imagination. He probably just forgot himself and . . ."

Abruptly, Saul said, "I want to help you find Eric."

"Fine," Daniel replied. "Come on."

Together they headed towards the trees. "He couldn't have gone far, Daniel," Saul said. Daniel thought he noticed fear in Saul's manner.

"You're probably right. He's probably not in any danger. If he were, Sara would know," he said through gritted teeth.

"Then try to calm down. Is it worth becoming so upset?"

Daniel turned around and looked back at the hotel, just before they were swallowed by the trees. Everyone had stopped working and were standing outside, watching Daniel and Saul walk into the timber. Then Daniel turned back around and stopped. "Let's use some strategy, Saul. I'll bear left and you bear right. Then, we can both loop back. Okay?"

"Okay."

They began to call Eric's name. Daniel trusted Sara's telepathic sense. She would know if Eric was in trouble. But when Eric didn't answer, he began to worry. The timber was already thick in late spring. If Eric had fallen and accidentally hit his head, he could be unconscious-or worse. If that happened, Eric wouldn't be able to telepath fear to Sara. At the thought of this, Daniel became truly frightened.

When he began to bear right he heard Eric's voice. "Oh, God, Sara, Eric's all right!" he telepathed with relief. "Keep calling, Eric. Keep calling so we can find you," Daniel yelled.

It was only a few more yards when Daniel almost stumbled over his son. Daniel picked him up in his arms. "You scared me, young man. You scared me."

"I was playing with my friend. I was safe. I was playing with my friend."

"Well, you can tell me about your friend later." Daniel put his hand to the side of his mouth and called, "Saul, where are you? I found Eric."

There was no answer.

"Saul?" Daniel called again.

Again no answer.

Daniel looked at Eric. "We have to find Saul, Eric."

"Saul is back there." Eric pointed to a patch of saplings, all growing close together.

"Then let's go find him." Daniel carried Eric so he could walk faster across the timber floor. When he reached the patch of saplings, he considered setting Eric down because carrying him through them didn't seem like a wise thing to do, but Daniel suddenly grew concerned for Saul. With his hand he shielded Eric's face and walked into the saplings.

"I played with my friend in here," Eric said.

Daniel almost tripped over Saul as he pushed himself through the trees. Saul was sitting on the ground, still as stone.

Chapter Nineteen

"Saul?" Daniel put Eric down beside him and then got on his knees in front of Saul. "Saul, talk to me."

Saul looked straight ahead, as if he were looking through Daniel.

Daniel said, "Eric, I want you to stay right here with Saul. Don't leave him. I'm going to get Karen."

"I won't leave Saul. He's my friend."

"I know you won't, Honey. Daddy will be back in a minute." He stood up and pressed his hand against

the pendant of his amulet. In an instant he was in front of the hotel.

"Karen, Santoo, I need you both." Daniel took Karen by her wrist and said, "Follow us, Santoo." The three of them instantly flashed back to the thicket of saplings. Eric was talking to Saul, but Saul still wasn't responding.

Daniel said, "I lost track of Saul. Then, when I found Eric, he told me he was playing with his 'friend' in here and that Saul was in here, too."

The three of them pushed limbs aside to make a clearing for themselves. Santoo reached down and gently pulled Saul to his feet. "Check his eyes, Karen," Santoo said.

"His eyes are fine," she said puzzled. She took his wrist. "His pulse is pretty slow, though."

Santoo picked Saul up and slung him over his shoulder, then carefully made his way out of the saplings and laid him down on the ground.

Daniel said, "Should I get Ann?"

"No," Santoo said, "not yet." Santoo turned to Eric. "Eric, did you speak to Saul before your father found you?"

"Saul saw my friend. Then he sat down on the ground."

"Did he speak after he saw your friend, Cutey?" Karen asked.

"No," Eric said. "He just sat down on the ground real slow. He didn't say anything."

"Eric," Daniel said, "this is very important. What kind of friend were you playing with?"

"He was one of my friends from up there." Eric pointed to the sky.

Daniel flinched when he looked up. He expected the Zeta ship to be hanging over them, but all he saw was a blue spring sky mottled with clouds.

"What was your friend's name?"

"Aznar," Eric said matter-of-fact.

At the sound of the name, Saul lurched off the ground.

Santoo grabbed his arm and pinned him back down.

The instantaneous power of Sara's amulet brought her and Ann to Saul's side. "What's wrong with him?" Ann asked fearfully.

"We're not sure, Ann," Karen said. "He reacted to a name that Eric just spoke: Santoo has to hold him down."

Saul was still feebly struggling against Santoo, but Santoo's physical strength was far superior to Saul's; there was little danger of Saul getting away from them.

"Let go of him, Santoo," Ann said quietly.

Santoo looked up from the ground. "It may not be wise, Ann. He has reacted violently to something Eric said. Let's just give Saul a chance to catch his breath."

"Let him go," she whispered. "I'll take care of him. Please, all of you, leave us be now."

Santoo looked at Saul. "Saul, Ann is here and she's going to take care of you. I'm going to let you go, but don't run. Ann will take care of you. Do you understand me?"

Saul stared dully at Santoo.

Santoo slowly let go of Saul's arm. Then he got up and, except for Ann, they all backed away from him.

Ann lifted Saul's head and cradled him in her lap. Then she began stroking his forehead. "It's all right, Honey," she said soothingly. "It's all right." She looked up and quietly told them all to go away. They walked back out of the trees and up to the hotel.

A flurry of questions followed, but neither Karen nor Santoo had answers. "Let's just wait a little while," Santoo said. "Perhaps Ann can reach through whatever veil has been placed over Saul's mind. I'm quite mystified."

"Can't you read his thoughts?" Roger asked.

"I could, but it's not my place to. His thoughts are private and they should stay with him unless he wishes otherwise."

They waited a few minutes more. Daniel became restless and considered going back into the woods. It was with relief when he saw Ann and Saul walk slowly out of the trees.

"Saul's all right," Ann called. She had her arm around him and Saul was mechanically putting one foot ahead of the other. "You can all go back to work now."

For an instant they stood and looked at each other. Going back to work seemed like the right thing to do. "All right, my loyal helpers," Roger said gleefully, "let's stop jawin' so we can get my beautiful hotel finished sometime in this century."

As they walked back into the hotel, Daniel and Sara stayed behind. Daniel leaned down and looked into Eric's eyes. "Eric, when Roger or any other responsible adult gives you a reasonable order, I want you to follow that order." He looked up at Sara for support.

Sara eased herself down on her haunches in front of her little blue-eyed boy. "Honey, your father and I love you and we want you to listen next time when someone tells you to stay out of a dangerous area."

"I will, Mother. But Aznar . . ." Eric quickly lowered his voice. "Aznar wanted to play with me," he whispered.

"Is Aznar one of your friends up on the ship?"

"Yes."

"Does Saul know Aznar?" Daniel asked.

"Yes. He knows Aznar."

"Honey, did Aznar speak to Saul when he played with you out in the woods?"

"He tried to, but when he did, Saul sat down and didn't say anything. Aznar was afraid; so was I. I heard Father calling for me, but I was afraid to answer."

"Eric," Sara said, "you can't play with Aznar or any of your other friends from the ship anymore. You live here; you don't live there."

Daniel was troubled by the fact that several times today Eric had gone from four-years-old to the maturity of a teenager and back again. In the blink of an eye lash he was once again four-years-old.

Julia stepped out of the hotel's front door. "Ryan . . . Tyler . . . Molly," she called. Her children, hovering under a nearby tree, came to her. "Now, listen to me . . . Eric, you listen, too . . . I want all four of you to play out in the front of the hotel. I want you in my sight at all times." She gave each child a firm but kind look. "We're almost ready to stop work for the day. I don't want to have to go finding any of you when it's time to eat. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," they murmured, "we understand."

"Good. Now play right in this area. Keep an eye on your friend Eric." She smiled at Eric, then continued, "He's a wanderer. We don't want to lose him again. In a little while we'll start that big bonfire. That will be fun, won't it?"

As the children moved away from them, Sara said, "Julia, thank you. Your children are a wonderful influence on Eric. Now if we can just get Eric to understand that he's a human who lives on this Earth rather than a Zeta that survives on a starship."

"He'll be all right. Frankly, I think he's adjusting quite well."

They worked another hour before they quit. Roughly half the rooms in the hotel were in different stages of almost finished. Several rooms needed another coat of paint on the walls while several more needed baseboard and mouldings. The other rooms still needed a significant amount of work done. It was the middle of May. Daniel estimated that with everyone helping, the hotel could be ready for whatever its purpose was to be in another six weeks or so.

Saul had gone back to work with the rest of them, but he was quiet. Ann spoke to him now and again, but for the most part she left him alone. She knew, too, that Saul had to discover for himself the connection he had with the Zeta.

Sundown came and went in a spectacular display of blazing orange fading into delicate magenta streamers across the horizon. When the sun was down, Roger and Yankee built a roaring bonfire and everyone roasted wieners on the ends of sticks. Sara fussed about the fact that this wasn't a particularly nutritious meal for the children, but on the whole she accepted it with good grace.

After the meal, the children roasted marshmallows while they all sat around the now sputtering fire. Daniel had brought his guitar, and they sang with him as he entertained them. Eric sat close to him, as if

he was afraid the Zeta would come and take all this away from him.

Saul sat and stared into the flames. Ann whispered in his ear now and again-no doubt, Daniel thought, in an attempt to comfort him. It made Daniel uncomfortable when Saul looked his way several times during the evening. Daniel felt sorry for him. Daniel didn't know if he would feel this way towards him if he saw him up on the Zeta ship again.

The fire sparked and sputtered and smelled of resin. The children had finally fallen asleep. As Daniel experienced the direct elemental warmth of the fire, he thought of how basic life is. On any planet, regardless of how technically advanced, survival depended upon staying warm. If the Zeta were sitting around this fire, the fire would keep the Zeta alive. Daniel still didn't know anything about the physiological character of his adversaries. Did they breathe? Did they chew food, swallow it and eliminate it? Did they procreate by passing the seed into an egg? Did they feel physical pain? Was there deep within them a place where they experienced love and hate, joy and sorrow, inner peace and inner anxiety? He didn't know. But he was sure that the life-giving power of fire was universal.

Daniel was almost not surprised at what happened next. It came gently-without warning. It simply appeared above the fire, softly flapping its wings as the smoke rose around it. An eagle hovered above the flames as if it were suspended on a fine wire strung from the tree above it.

Suddenly, the eagle began to burn. It flapped its wings feebly, but the fire overcame it and its struggles ended as the fire consumed it. They sat, staring at the smoldering body in the flames. The smell of burned feathers was strong on the air. Then, like a blooming flower, the eagle rose from its burned flesh and became whole. Then it was gone.

The scream that came from Saul was bone-chilling. When the eagle had appeared, the children were sleeping. Now they were awake-and they were frightened. Almost instantly, Sara and Julia were on their feet. They grabbed the children and quickly took them into the hotel-away from Saul who was very nearly out of control, now. He screamed himself hoarse, and while Yankee and Santoo held him down, Karen ran for her doctor's bag.

Karen's hypo needle quickly took effect. Saul clutched Daniel's shirt, and with his speech slurred by the drug, he said, "Please, Daniel, tell me what I don't know. Oh God, please tell me."

Roger said, "We'll all go, Daniel. We'll leave you with Saul."

"No, Roger. There's another good hour or two left in the fire. Enjoy it. We'll pack up and go home. I'm sure Saul would be more comfortable there."

"I appreciate this, Daniel," Saul mumbled thickly.

"It's time you know. It's time you dig into your memories."

Sara stood by Daniel's side: she and Julia had returned with the children. "Eric," Daniel signed, "how would you like to spend the night with your sister?" Daniel looked at Rachel. "All right with you?" he signed to Rachel.

"Of course. You know I'll take Eric any time I have an excuse." She looked down at her new little brother. "Come, Eric. I'll make some popcorn for you and Steve before we go to bed."

Saul was lying quietly on the couch in Daniel and Sara's living room. Santoo had just used his healing power to clear Saul of the hypodermic drug that had clouded his brain just an hour before. He looked at Santoo appreciatively. "Santoo, I'm not even going to ask how you did that. There are so many things I don't know about any of you." Saul looked at each one in the room. Then he smiled at Ann. "The only person I really know about is Ann. And I'm not even sure why she's been keeping my memories from me. You know about them, don't you?"

"Somewhat," Ann said. "Sara has told me what she knows. I think it's time we learn what's in your mind." Ann sat by the couch, close to Saul. "Now we will see how good a hypnotist Sara has turned out to be. Are you ready for whatever she may uncover?"

"I've got to be. I can't live like this anymore."

Sara pulled up a chair next to Ann's. "Saul, since you've never undergone hypnosis, it may take several sessions before we find out anything of consequence."

"No," Ann said. "I've hypnotized Saul several times on a superficial level just to get him to relax. He may be able to go quite deep into a hypnotic state. But we never went into what he remembers. I want you to do that."

"Wonderful. Then let's begin."

Sara skillfully talked Saul into a state of deep relaxation. Again Daniel marveled at how intuitively bright Sara was. As he completed his thought, Chumaya smiled and affectionately patted Daniel on his arm. He turned to her and telepathed, "Were you reading my thoughts just now?"

"I didn't have to," she telepathed in return. "Your love for my daughter is spilling from your eyes."

"Saul," Sara intoned, "you are rapidly reaching the point where you will be able to recall what is happening to you. How do you feel?"

"Afraid. I feel afraid." Saul shifted his body uneasily. Ann rested her hand lightly on his shoulder in an attempt to comfort him.

"I understand that this may be traumatic for you," Sara said. "Do I have your permission to proceed, even though you are frightened?"

Saul sighed deeply. "Yes."

"All right. I want you to think back to a time that was especially traumatic for you. Perhaps it was the death of someone close to you. Perhaps you or someone close to you had a catastrophic . . ."

"They hurt me," Saul interrupted. His body stiffened on the couch.

"They?"

"It was for my own good. They said I would grow from the experience."

"All right, let's go back to the time and circumstances of this event. I'm going to count to three. When I reach three, you will recall every detail of the event. One-you are moving towards the event. Two-you

are almost there. Three . . . tell me what you see and feel."

"I'm . . . I'm in bed. It's the beginning of winter, last winter, I think. I wake up to a sound in my back yard. I get up and look out the window."

"What do you see out the window?"

"I don't see anything. It's the middle of the night, but the street light across the alley gives some light. I don't see anything." Saul began to breathe rapidly.

"What's wrong, Saul?"

"I . . . I don't want to turn around. I don't want to go back to bed."

"But it's not happening now, Saul. You're here, safe, with all of us-with Ann. It's not happening now. I want you to turn away from the window and go back to bed."

"I can't, damn it!"

Ann looked at Sara with alarm. Sara slowly and firmly shook her head. It was clear to Daniel that Sara was going to continue with this line of questioning until the truth came from Saul.

"Turn away from the window, Saul. Do it . . . now."

Saul's body suddenly stiffened. "God!"

"What do you see? What do you see, Saul?" Sara asked doggedly.

"It's . . . it's not human!"

"How is it different from a human being, Saul? Tell me."

"It has a head, big eyes, arms and legs, thin trunk."

"So far the being seems quite human."

"It's not. It's not like us. It's not human. It moves like . . ."

"Like . . . ?"

"Strange. Like a grasshopper. Like a spider, maybe. I . . . I . . ."

"Saul, do you want to move past this memory?"

"No! I want out! Get me out of here!"

"Get him out, Sara," Ann said.

"No," Sara whispered, "not yet." She turned back to Saul who was bordering on panic. "Saul, I want you to try and hang on to this relaxed state a little while longer. Can you do this for me?"

"Uh, uh, uh . . ."

"You can do this. I know you can. We're all here for you."

"I'll try . . . I'll try."

"All right. I want you to again look carefully at the being that's in front of you. Do you know this being? Have you seen it before?"

"It's a he. The being is male."

"All right, do you know him?"

"It's the doctor. It's the one that Daniel always calls the doctor."

Sara turned around and quickly glanced at Daniel, then turned back to Saul. "Saul, where have you heard Daniel call this being the doctor?" Sara pressed.

"On . . . on the ship . . . I'm on the ship with Daniel and with you. Many times. Many times . . . Sometimes Eric is with you. But Eric hasn't always been with you. Eric was born on the ship and I was so relieved when they finally let you have him and Daniel hurt me because he thinks I'm disloyal to humans and Daniel stands up to these people and sometimes even hurts them when they corner him and the beings have been taking me since I was three years old and Ann is sometimes up there with me and I don't know how to protect her from the physical examinations and . . ."

"Saul, I'm going to count backwards from five to one . . ."

"Uh, uh, uh, uh, I'm on the ship they take me and I can't stop them and I can't stop them and I'm not one of them and I didn't ask for this and I want out I want out . . ." Saul was gulping chunks of air.

Sara took his wrists in her fingers. "Saul, we don't want Karen to have to give you another hypo to calm you. I'm going to help you calm yourself. Five-relax, four, three-relax deeper, two, one-you are completely relaxed. Take a long, easy breath and relax . . . relax . . ."

Saul inhaled deeply, then gradually expelled his air.

"Do you feel well enough to continue?"

"I can breathe again."

"All right. Concentrate on the being before you. Do you know why the beings take you? Has the doctor told you why they take you?"

"The doctor is telling me now. He says that I am the person who must keep everyone calm."

"Calm when we are taken by them?"

"Yes."

"Who have you seen on the ship besides Daniel and Eric and me?"

"Ann is there. I can't help her when she comes up. They do things to her and they make me stand and watch. I watch her scream."

Ann flinched. Sara put her hand on Ann's shoulder to comfort her. "Does Ann remember when the beings take her?"

"No. She almost never knows she's being abducted. But they take her. They take her all the time."

"Who else do they take?"

"I've seen Rachel there."

"How many times?"

"Twice, I think."

"Who else? Have you seen Steve there?"

"I don't think so. I've seen Yankee up there, though."

"Karen? Have you seen Karen as well?"

"Yes. Karen has been up several times. Yankee's been up many times."

"Do they subject Karen and Yankee to their physical examinations?"

"Yes . . ."

"Are you present when they examine Yankee and Karen?"

"Yes. But I can't stop them. I can't stop the physical examinations. Daniel, where's Daniel?" Saul tried to open his eyes.

"Lie still, Saul. Daniel is right here. He's sitting close to you. Why do you ask about Daniel?"

"Because they put him in the tank. They tried to make him understand that the rods through the fetuses heads didn't really hurt them. They made him believe they put a rod through his head. I stood there looking down at him and I couldn't help him and he screamed in the fluid and I couldn't hear him because he was in the fluid but I could hear him scream in my mind and I wanted to tell them to get him out and I wanted to pull him out and then . . ."

"Saul, I'm going to talk you out of your state of deep relaxation, now."

"I'm sorry, Daniel. I'd help you if I could . . ."

Sara put her hand on Saul's arm. "At the count of one you will be released from your relaxed state. Three, two, one, open your eyes, Saul."

Saul opened his eyes. He breathed rapidly, trying to find his equilibrium. He clutched Ann's hand tightly. "I remember it all, now." He sat up and rubbed his forehead. "I remember it all." He looked at them sitting around him. "What do you want to know?"

Chapter Twenty

After Saul drank half a mug of black coffee, he began to talk. He recounted in detail every one of Daniel and Sara's abductions where he had been present. Daniel's blood ran cold all over again as Saul reconstructed each abduction they had suffered through. And now Daniel at last realized that Saul, too, had suffered through Daniel and Sara's abductions-and Ann's. He was as much an abductee as they were.

Saul knew Eric was born on the ship, but he didn't know how old Eric was. He began seeing Eric only a few months before he saw Daniel and Sara for the first time. Sara wanted to know under what circumstances Eric was conceived; Saul didn't know. Daniel wanted to know why the beings finally gave Eric to them; Saul didn't know that, either. Neither did he know why Eric was chosen to live with human parents. The fate of the hybrid child seemed a mystery to him as well.

"Why don't I remember my abductions?" Ann asked. She began to tremble.

Saul took her hand and held it firmly. "I don't know. I've begged them to stop taking you, but they do what they please. Maybe they are showing some consideration for me by erasing your memory so you won't have to suffer."

"Saul," Daniel said, "I hate these beings. Yet, when the doctor scans me with his eyes, I feel drawn to him. Later, when I get back on the ground and start thinking about it, I feel hatred towards him for manipulating my emotions. How does the doctor affect you?"

Saul drained his coffee mug and held it out to Daniel where Daniel filled it up again. "You have to understand that the doctor wants me for his own purposes."

"And they are . . . ?"

"They are to have me keep all of you who are abducted as controlled as possible. I'm like the bait. I lead you in and my presence is supposed to make you feel calmer. If that doesn't work, I'm supposed to help restrain you. They could do all that, but they know that humans will be looking for other human faces in the confusion. They want something from you. I don't know what it is, but I do know that they feel the calmer you are, the more they can get out of you. They give me these tasks to do, and I do them."

Santoo said, "What if you would resist?"

"I can't resist. First I feel powerless, and then I don't feel anything. It's like I'm detached from what's going on in front of me. I just do it. The first experience Sara uncovered-the experience where a noise woke me and I was confronted by the doctor being-that was where the doctor told me for the first time that my purpose was to keep everyone calm. I didn't know what he meant then, but when I started seeing you come up I understood what I was supposed to do."

Chumaya had been quietly listening. She had offered nothing. But now she softly spoke. "Saul, would it upset you to recount the details of this experience for us? It seems to have been a pivotal point in your relationship with the Zeta. Perhaps the recalling of it will be helpful to us."

"Well, when I turned from the window and saw the doctor there, I froze in terror. It doesn't matter how many times they take you; you never get to know them. They are too alien. And the memories of the

physical examinations and surgeries fill you with so much anxiety, each time you see them, you want to scream. I felt that way when I saw the doctor. But eventually he calmed me with his eyes. He explained that he needed my help. He said there was a group of people he was paying special attention to and that it was important these people endure the abductions that were to follow."

"Are you 'attached' to us, then? You are there for us?" "I think so. And some others, too. But not for everyone. They take a lot of people on board. Some of the people they take are very passive. They don't need me to assist with those. The Zeta tell me nothing. I just seem to know which individuals I'm supposed to help-usually the ones who have some awareness-some energy. Does that make sense?" He looked at Sara-his eyes pleading for an intelligent answer.

"It makes perfect sense. Since the beings have told you nothing about us or why we are being treated like this, which makes no sense, it makes sense."

"Yeah. A negative times a negative gives a positive product, algebraically speaking," Saul said.

Santoo said, "Saul," Santoo put a spoonful of sugar in his coffee, "tell us everything you know about the beings. How do they live? Do they have a sense of fun or a sense of humor? What are they like physiologically? Tell us everything you can about them."

"I'm not sure they live by taking in oxygen. If they have a respiratory system, it's not obvious. Their skeletal structure seems to be boneless. This makes sense if they have evolved from insects. They move like insects, and their eyes seem to gather an incredible amount of light."

"Do you know this for a fact?"

"No. But the ship is always dimly lit. They don't seem to need much light to see clearly."

Sara said, "What about those children we've seen that appear to have human-sized eyes? Are they uncomfortable at this level of light?"

"Not on the ship, no. I would think that direct sunlight could be quite a problem for them, though."

Sara said, "Eric didn't seem to have a problem with light."

Saul said, "I suspect that's because Eric is probably human. A human could quickly adjust to light level changes because their eyes are strong."

"Fully human?" Sara said. Her voice leaped with hope. "Do you believe Eric is fully human?"

Saul said, "He looks human to me. He's a handsome little boy."

Daniel said, "The Zeta have led us to believe that Eric's eyes are black. I don't know what to think. The most prominent feature of the faces are the huge black eyes. But it seems as if they have at least a suggestion of a nose and mouth. Do they use these openings?"

"It could be that they breathe so slightly, the nose simply hasn't developed like our noses. As for their mouths, I've never seen them eat. In fact, I've never seen them open their mouths. The mouth opening is a small slit no longer than an inch. They telepath only. And they don't really telepath in English. You just seem to know what they say. It's difficult to explain. I don't think they have vocal chords capable of generating intelligible sounds. But they do make sounds-peeps and chirps mostly."

Daniel looked at Santoo. "Wouldn't air be required to make sounds?"

"Not necessarily. The sounds could be generated by the simple movement of a diaphragm or similar apparatus inside the body. The organism could be set into motion by electrolytic energy inside the body much as an eel generates electricity inside itself."

Saul said, "I've heard them make sounds when they are excited. Daniel has gotten grunts of fear from them when they corner him and he has to defend himself."

"So they do feel fear, then? They have emotions on some level?" Santoo asked.

"I can't say. I think they make fearful sounds, because that's what it sounds like. But I don't really know. I think I try to give them human emotion. So do you, Daniel. They don't have nearly the full spectrum of feelings like we have, though. In their past history they almost blew their own world apart. When they finally managed to save it, they engineered a new race of beings, and in the process, deliberately engineered out the range of emotions from themselves because they felt these emotions were responsible for their woes."

"They told you this?" Sara asked.

"Yes. They told me that much. Little more."

Santoo said, "Daniel and ta'Sara have told us about the channelling session they and Ann had some months ago. It seems the Zeta wanted them to know about their past history."

Saul said, "Think back to the time when I appeared in the bottom of your shuttle. That wasn't me. They sent a hologram image of me. They do that sometimes. They use me more than I know."

"Why do they channel information to us when they could simply telepath? We would be more accepting of their whole agenda if they would just cut out the dramatics and approach us in a more reasonable way."

"Sometimes they want to have you physically there with them. Sometimes they are studying you. They want the emotional outbursts. They want the struggle."

"They are contradictory. Maybe they don't know what they want." Sara was the one who spoke.

Daniel asked, "Can the Zeta procreate?"

"I don't know."

"Do they have genitals?"

"They always wear some kind of uniform, so I'm not sure if they have genitals. If they do, there aren't prominent bulges under their uniforms."

"And the uniforms have a symbol of a snake on it," Daniel mused. "Maybe that's why I have such a revulsion to snakes. Maybe in the back of my mind the snake is there on the uniform of the Zeta."

"Could be." Saul sighed. "I've always been terrified of snakes, too."

Sara said, "Eric is very close to one of the tall Zeta females. He insists this being is his mother. Is this possible?"

"It could be, yes."

Sara's voice was trembling, now. "But Eric is human. How could he come from a being that alien and still look human?"

"When you are as scientifically advanced . . . wait, I take that back . . . engineered as these people, anything is possible."

"So she could be his mother?" Sara whispered.

Saul looked at her with comfort in his eyes. "Does it matter, Sara, where Eric came from?"

"No . . . no, I guess it doesn't."

Daniel squeezed Sara's hand tightly. "Saul, who is Aznar, the being Eric says is his friend?"

"Aznar is half human and half Zeta in appearance—a true halfling. But he has the personality and emotional characteristics of a full human. That's why Eric and Aznar are friends. Eric sees himself in Aznar, even though Aznar's appearance would frighten human children here on the ground."

"The children we have seen seem so lifeless. I don't think I've seen Aznar among them."

"You haven't. There are lots of children you haven't seen. Besides, Aznar is more adult than human. You've seen none of the hybrid adults."

"How many children would you say are on the ship right now?"

"Hundreds."

Sara squeezed Daniel's hand so hard he thought she had broken his fingers. He felt sick. "This . . . this is a shock, Saul. This is truly a shock."

Saul looked at Ann. Tears were streaming from her eyes. "You get used to it." He reached over and gently dabbed the tears from her cheeks. "It's this I can't get used to."

"Saul," Santoo said, "I think it's time we tell you about ourselves; about where we've come from."

"You don't have to; the Zeta have already told me everything about you."

"They have?" Santoo asked, incredulous. Daniel noticed that Santoo—usually unflappable and very much in control—was visibly shaken. "What have they told you?"

"You and Chumaya and Sara come from the planet, Teruhl, thirty light years from Earth. You come to earth-like planets to bring your medical knowledge. You started paying visits to Earth about seventeen years ago and you started coming to BioMed fourteen years ago. In fact, you arrived here on the very day Daniel moved into town. Eventually you decided to build an underground shelter for your shuttle and

... Ann and I ... " Saul looked at Daniel. "It was Ann and I who were out there on your property that night when you brought the shuttle in. It was us, wasn't it?" Saul looked at Ann as realization came to him.

"If it was, you gave us quite a scare," Sara said.

"We're harmless. We just like to go exploring at night. You'd think I'd be afraid to do that, wouldn't you? I'm easy picking for the Zeta, running out there in the woods at night."

Santoo said, "We are all 'easy pickings' for the Zeta no matter where we are. But perhaps you are not as frightened of them as you think."

"Maybe not." He sighed loudly. "Ann, let's go home."

"Wait," Daniel said, "I have one more question: Santoo tried to take everything out of Eric his scanner could detect. Is Eric still clean of the Zeta's implants?" He dreaded Saul's answer.

"No." Saul paused, then said, "They put a camera behind Eric's eye only a couple of days after Santoo took the tracking bead from Eric's skull."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. I watched them put it in. Everything Eric sees, the Zeta see."

Chapter Twenty-One

Daniel couldn't get to Santoo's space craft fast enough. No one-no one-was going to look in on the private life of his family through the eyes of his son. How had Santoo's scanners missed a camera? How tiny must it be? How many sensors were in the boy? How many did the Zeta need? His mind raced with confusion. He could only imagine what Santoo was feeling right now.

"It'll all be over soon, Daniel," Yankee replied softly. He was sitting behind Daniel in the shuttle's jump seat. Chumaya was seated next to Daniel and she held Eric on her lap. "Besides, you enjoy flying your shuttle. And it doesn't take very long to get there. It's like a trip across town."

"Not soon enough," Daniel grumped. "Chumaya, you're seeing my grouchy side. I don't mean to be this way."

"I know you don't. Part of your grumpiness comes from living under the constant strain of the Zetas' presence." She cuddled Eric to her. "Eric, there is no other grandson I'd rather have than you." She kissed him on the cheek.

They had reached the coast of Peru. Daniel pointed out the animal figures to Yankee as the shuttle passed quickly overhead. Daniel promised Yankee that when they had the time, Daniel would bring him back to show him the details of the terrain. The mountains loomed ahead of them now. Santoo's shuttle was ahead, and Daniel was closely following him.

"Geez, surely we're not going to fly in there, Daniel?" Yankee pointed at the viewscreen.

"We are. Hang on to the seat of your pants." The door in the side of the mountain opened and Santoo's shuttle disappeared into it. Daniel followed. Although he knew in his mind that he couldn't crash into the

walls of the tunnel, his heart didn't believe it. Even as he was reassuring Yankee that it was safe, he didn't believe it. He was immensely relieved when they reached the end of the tunnel and came into the large hanger area.

"Oh, my God," Yankee said. "If I'd tell them about this in Eagle Bluff, they wouldn't believe me."

Daniel laughed. "And that's our best security, isn't it. No one would ever believe a fraction of what goes on in our lives. At work they just think I take a lot of personal days."

Daniel flew the shuttle over the line of starships parked on the stone floor below them. Then he gently set it down next to Santoo's shuttle. With great satisfaction, he turned in his seat and looked back at Yankee. "We're here."

Yankee gawked as he stepped out of the shuttle. Karen, stepping out of Santoo's shuttle, had the same open-mouthed expression on her face. Daniel now knew what he himself had looked like the last time he was here.

Santoo said, "I'll go check in with Zarr. You go on into the ship. ta'Sara, would you and Karen get the examination area ready for me? I'll be back shortly."

Daniel felt a sense of urgency as he ascended into Santoo's ship. No one spoke as they moved down the hallway and entered the laboratory. Lights came on, and Karen and Sara quickly surgical instruments from the storage cupboards. Daniel held Eric as he watched the scanner screen light up. By the time Santoo returned, the room was ready.

Santoo took Eric gently from Daniel's arms. He set him on the table and angled the scanner to the side of his head.

"Just ignore this big old thing, Eric. Think about what your dad is going to give you after I take a look here."

Eric spoke solemnly. "We are going to have a chocolate shake at the Eagle's Nest."

"That is correct, young man. Just as soon as we are finished. But first we have to look into your head."

"You can look into my head, Grandfather?"

"Yes I can. We're going to look at your whole body. Sit very still," Santoo laid Eric on the table and Daniel couldn't watch anymore when Karen handed Santoo the laser.

Daniel had worried for nothing. When Eric awoke he didn't even know he had been operated on. The surgery of Santoo's technology caused no pain and left no scars. And healing was almost instantaneous. But that didn't mean surgery wasn't dangerous. If Eric could have experienced the robotic surgery available on Santoo's planet, there would have been no danger at all. But robotic surgery, even on Teruhl, was technologically intense. Santoo was running the equivalent of a first aid station on board his starship, and Daniel was well aware that even a finely tuned hand-held surgical laser could kill in the hands of a shakey-handed surgeon.

If the Zeta would have simply parked the tiny camera bead behind the eye, removal of the bead would

have been relatively simple. But the Zeta were sadistically clever: they implanted beads in the abductee's optic nerve. This was unnecessary from a technical point of view since the camera bead operated independently of the optic nerve. But Santoo suspected the Zeta buried the bead there because they wanted to make the bead difficult to remove should the abductee be operated upon. Earth's medical technology would have been hard pressed to enable a surgeon to remove the bead without blinding the patient. That is, even if Earth technology would have seen the bead.

"What'll ya'll have?" Dorothy, the Eagle's Nest's ever cheerful waitress, was hovering over them with her order pad at the ready.

Santoo looked at everyone. "Are we all agreed then?" They nodded and murmured their agreement. "All right, I believe we will have a chocolate shake." Santoo closed the menu with a snap of finality.

"Would that be seven spoons to one shake?" Dorothy looked across the table at Eric with merriment in her eyes. "Are you all going to share the one shake?"

"No!" Eric said frantically. "I want my own shake!"

"I think Dorothy is teasing you, Cutie," Karen said.

"Yes, Honey, I'm teasing you. I'll be right back with your shakes."

Sara's head craned around and there was disappointment in her eyes. "Harriett and Benjamin just walked in." Sara had just telepathed what Daniel didn't want to hear. "What?" he telepathed in return.

"Don't look towards the door. Harriett and Benjamin are over by the door and they are coming our way." Harriett and Benjamin Stanwick were Sara's supervisors at BioMed. Daniel knew they would stop and talk. He hoped he could be polite enough, yet indifferent enough so they would keep their visit brief.

Chumaya quickly glanced at Sara. From the puzzled look on her face, Daniel knew she was alerted by Sara's telepathed thought.

"Well, hello, Sara . . . Daniel. How nice to see you here. Eric, how are you?" Harriett stopped at Eric's chair.

"I don't want to talk to them tonight," Daniel telepathed.

"We're stuck," Sara telepathed in return. "Be patient; they'll leave in a minute."

"Do you mind if we join you?" Benjamin asked. "I don't think we've all met, but I suspect these two,"-Benjamin glanced at Santoo and Chumaya-"are Sara's parents. Am I right in this assumption?"

Daniel sighed inwardly as Sara introduced her parents, then Karen and Yankee. Sara always introduced her father as Samuel and her mother as Rosemary since the names Chumaya and Santoo weren't particularly Earth-like. He'd have to watch himself tonight so he wouldn't give them away.

"Please join us," Sara said. Without further encouragement, Harriett and Benjamin pulled up chairs from the next table and sat down.

"Daniel," Benjamin said, "you're looking mighty healthy lately. Have you run across some new wonder drug?" He chuckled in a way that made it difficult for Daniel to interpret what the chuckle meant.

"What do you mean?" Daniel answered half defensively. "I feel fine. In fact, I always feel fine."

"Yes, I know, but . . . well, the way you carry yourself lately is quite striking, actually. Maybe Sara is responsible for that." He turned and smiled at Sara.

"Maybe so," Daniel mumbled. Daniel was disappointed. He wanted to spend this time with his family and friends. He wanted to spoil his son. Eric had just had a surgical laser in his skull. Daniel didn't appreciate this intrusion. "Excuse me," Daniel said abruptly. "I have to go to the restroom."

"So do I," Benjamin said. "Is there room enough for two in there?" He laughed and pushed his chair back.

"I'm sure there is," Daniel laughed halfheartedly.

Together they walked into the restroom. They stood side-by-side at the urinals, talking over the divider. Daniel made a witless comment about great minds meeting in the restroom. Benjamin laughed. Daniel just wanted to take his family home.

As they started to walk out the restroom door, Daniel opened it for Benjamin. As Benjamin thanked him and passed by him, he brushed up against Daniel. Daniel knew the act was deliberate, but it happened so fast, Daniel didn't have time to fake a fall. He was so comfortable in his new, strong body, he simply stood there, solid as a rock, as Benjamin, easily eighty pounds heavier than Daniel, caught Daniel off guard.

Benjamin said, 'Excuse me', but didn't react to Daniel's obvious strength.

They went back into the dining area and sat down. The rest of the evening seemed like an eternity to Daniel. When Benjamin and Harriett finally got up and left, Daniel looked at them all. "I'm in big trouble; I think Benjamin knows I'm no longer a cripple."

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Daniel, you can't worry every time someone appears to know your secret. If you do, you won't live to two-hundred and fifty years old."

"I should laugh at this, Santoo?" Daniel looked down at Eric. "Go get your jammies on, Eric. Scoot." As Eric obediently went to his bedroom, Daniel said, "I knew this day would come. I just knew it."

"Is Benjamin a decent man? He seems to be."

"I don't know. Sara, you know Benjamin; you work with him every day. Is he a suspicious kind of man?"

"I don't believe so. He doesn't seem to have any particular interest in you."

"But you're not sure?"

"I think Benjamin is fine. Why worry about it? Let him think what he wants. We can't do anything to change how he may look at you."

"Maybe we can. Santoo, would it be possible to erase Benjamin's memory. I mean, just the part that thinks I'm no longer a cripple?"

"I could erase the events of this evening, but I couldn't erase anything as specific as his attitude towards you. Besides, he and Harriett are probably talking about this right now. I can't erase that."

"Why not?" Daniel felt himself becoming desperate.

"Because it's not ethical. This isn't a matter of self defense, Daniel. We are not Zeta who indiscriminately erase events in their human abductees' minds."

"But this is a matter of self defense. My happiness and the happiness of my family could be at stake."

"Perhaps. But ethically I simply can't erase a person's memory because he happens to make us uncomfortable." Santoo put his hand on Daniel's shoulder in a way of comforting him. "We're human beings, Daniel."

Yes, Daniel concluded, they were human beings.

"Sara? Have you put the exo somewhere? It isn't here." Daniel looked at the empty hooks on the bedroom wall. The exo was gone.

"Sara called back from the bathroom. "No, Daniel. I haven't touched it since you took it off yesterday." She entered the room. They both stared at the wall.

"Someone broke in here!"

"For the One-In-All's sake, Daniel, don't get paranoid. I'm sure there's a good explanation as to where it is. I'll ask Mother if she moved it for some reason. It probably needed a good airing out." Sara made a face that suggested that someone had bad body odor.

Daniel laughed. "Maybe she did. A little sunlight wouldn't hurt that thing, would it? It isn't exactly something I'd send to the dry-cleaners." He put the thought from his mind and eased himself onto the bed.

Just before Daniel went to sleep, he knew they were coming. He tried to get up to warn everyone, but the Zeta were already melting through the walls of his bedroom. He heard Chumaya scream. That had to mean the Zeta were in Rachel's bedroom as well. "Eric," Daniel called, "Stay calm. Daddy's coming." But when he tried to get off the bed, a nightmare appeared in front of him and pushed him back onto it.

A soft blue light diffused throughout the room and the light made the Zeta appear as emaciated ghosts. Santoo and Chumaya were at the doorway, and Chumaya had Eric in her arms. They stood like zombies. Daniel didn't know if they were too frightened to offer resistance or if the Zeta had paralyzed them and somehow suspended them in place. "Santoo?" Daniel called frantically.

But Santoo didn't answer. His eyes were glazed over-uncomprehending. Daniel rolled over to comfort

Sara, but Sara wasn't in the bed. "What have you . . ."

Now the doctor being appeared. He carried something in his hands. With a start, Daniel realized the doctor was holding his exo-skeleton. Unceremoniously the doctor dropped the exo in a heap by the bed.

"We have studied this object you wear. It is useless. We have rendered it so."

"You took my exo-skeleton? You took it from me?" Daniel telepathed furiously.

"It is useless. We have neutralized it. You will not use it again."

"I don't believe this . . ."

The blue light made the being's huge black eyes appear even deeper than when Daniel had seen them in the dim white light on the ship. Daniel's skin crawled as the being, with the jerky movement of a spider, reached for Daniel and clutched his arm.

Daniel had all his strength; they hadn't paralyzed him. In a display of will he powerfully pulled his arm towards his own face. The being's gaunt face came closer and closer to Daniel's own face until the being's eyes were within two inches of Daniel's nose. The insectoid eyes of the doctor drilled into Daniel's mind and into his very soul. Without wanting to, Daniel fell back onto the bed. He felt safe. Then he felt a sharp sting on the side of his head and his body became limp. The doctor had paralyzed him with his stunrod. "Where is Sara?" Daniel weakly telepathed.

"She is with the Zeta," the doctor telepathed in answer.

Daniel felt Santoo and Chumaya's thoughts plunge into his brain. He knew they were as frantic as he.

"She's my life. Please don't take her from me," Daniel pleaded.

"ta'Sara will serve a better purpose with the Zeta," the being telepathed.

"Take me to her," Daniel pleaded.

The doctor being stood away from Daniel's bed.

"Please take me to Sara! Please!" Daniel asked, so frantic now he couldn't think straight.

One by one the beings melted back through the walls. Finally, only the doctor remained. "You're doing this to terrify us, aren't you?" Daniel telepathed with hope in his thought. "But you can't study us now because we are all free of the tracking beads. Sara, Eric, myself-we're all free of them. So how will you study us? We're here and you're up there."

"Look at Santoo and Chumaya," the doctor ordered.

Daniel felt his strength coming back to him. He turned his head and looked at them. Then he turned back to the doctor. "You've put beads in their heads," Daniel voiced angrily. "You bastards put beads into their heads." Daniel lunged off the bed and tried to grab the wasting humanoid form before him, but the doctor disappeared, then just as quickly reappeared at the sides of Santoo and Chumaya. He quickly tapped them with his stunrod, and as their paralysis left them, they collapsed on the floor at the sudden, disorienting return of their strength. In the motion of an intelligent beetle, the doctor took Eric from

Chumaya's arms as she collapsed. He sat Eric on the bed, looked at him quickly, then disappeared.

The three of them began gasping and sobbing in spasmodic bursts of panic. Eric sat on the bed, motionless.

"I don't know if I can do it, Santoo. Assisting you is one thing; actually performing the surgery without you to guide me is another." Karen rubbed her forehead in frustration.

"You can do it, Karen. You have to."

Karen looked desperately at Chumaya. "Can't you . . . ?"

"I'm not a surgeon, Karen. I'm a biologist. I can't help you. Santoo can take the beads out of me, but he can't take them out of himself."

"Damn, Santoo, do you know what you're asking me to do?"

"Yes. And I have complete confidence in your ability as a doctor. Karen, I feel so miserable right now I suppose it's making me a little reckless, but I'm going crazy with the thought of what the Zeta have done to us. And I'm going even crazier at the thought of what the Zeta are doing to ta'Sara. You are the only person I can turn to."

"What's the point of all of this? They'll just return and abduct you and put them back in again."

"I'm not going to let those bastards control me-us. It's the principle now. They have got to be stopped. Any way we can."

"I suppose . . . I suppose I could try. You'll have to brief me intensively, though. I'm not walking into your medical lab unless I know every single move I'm to make."

"Fine." Daniel saw relief spread across Santoo's face. "Let's go. I'll brief you on the way."

Daniel didn't have to ask Santoo to navigate for him; he knew his way to the starship base. But Sara's absence was weighing heavily on him: it was difficult to concentrate. Eric was sitting on Chumaya's lap, sucking his thumb. He seemed to a very little boy today. He took his thumb from his mouth and looked up at Chumaya. "I want Mommy."

Chumaya's voice cracked as she said, "I want your mommy, too." She cuddled him, then, and tried to rock him. As Santoo was explaining every single step of his surgery to Karen, Chumaya would occasionally touch the navigation screen when Daniel would stray off course.

Daniel felt totally helpless, as they all did. The hour that had passed since the doctor being had told Daniel that he had Sara aboard the Zeta ship seemed like an eternity to Daniel. He couldn't live without Sara. He and Sara had struggled so hard in the early days of their marriage to make their relationship work. They were bonded for life. They both knew that. What must Sara be going through now? He tried to console himself. Eric had always been returned to them. But then he knew that Saul may have had a hand in that. Would Saul be up there with Sara? Could he help her? Would he remember who she was?

Shortly they arrived at the base. Daniel guided the shuttle through the tunnel as skillfully as if he'd been doing it all his life. He set the shuttle down and they got out.

Zarr suddenly appeared. He had used his own amulet to teleport himself from the other side of the cavernous space. "I didn't know you were coming in tonight." He quickly looked at everyone. "Where's ta'Sara?"

"They've got her," Santoo said. "They've got her on the Zeta ship."

Zarr looked at Daniel, wide-eyed. "Well, what are you going to do about it? Why are you here? You should be trying to get her back." Zarr looked wildly at Santoo. "Why in the hell are you here, Santoo?"

"How do you suggest we get ta'Sara-take her from the Zeta? Even if our technology matched theirs, they have more people on their side."

"Don't call them people, Santoo," Daniel half snarled. Chumaya was gripping Daniel's arm.

"No," Zarr said, "don't call them people. Let me help you get her back."

"Zarr," Santoo said, "I know you mean well, but on this planet we simply don't have the resources to get her back. The Zeta have us at a distinct disadvantage; and as much as I love my daughter, I'm not going to approach the Zeta. We still don't know if they are friend or foe."

"They are our mortal enemies, Santoo," Daniel said, teeth gritted. "How could you possibly think otherwise after all we've been through with them?"

Santoo shook his head. "I swear they are playing with my thoughts. I don't know what I'm saying. Let me concentrate on one thing at a time." Santoo said, "Zarr, the Zeta have implanted tracking beads and perhaps even a remote viewer in my and Chumaya's head. I'd like you to meet my good friend, Dr. Karen Wilson. She's assisted me in the past and tonight she's going to take the beads from Chumaya and me."

Zarr looked at Karen in awe. "You've got courage-that's for sure. I would help you if I could. But I'm an engineer, not a surgeon. I'm afraid you're on your own, Karen."

"I know," Karen said solemnly.

"Are you familiar with Santoo's equipment?" Zarr asked.

"Somewhat. It's not much different from our own. You have a much better anesthetic, though. And I'm quite apprehensive about removing the remote viewer bead from Santoo and Chumaya's optic nerves. We're not sure if the Zeta put viewers there, though. I'm hoping they didn't."

"Santoo, why don't you help Karen through Chumaya's surgery first?" Zarr said. "That way she will be more ready for yours."

"That's what we plan to do." Santoo sighed.

They went into the starship and then walked into the lab. "Daniel, if you're curious, you may watch Karen perform surgery on me."

"Maybe I will."

Santoo and Karen readied themselves for surgery. There was no need for sterile masks and gowns; the lab was made germ free electronically. Nor was there need for knives and sutures. The laser scalpel cut and perfectly cauterized at the same time, and when surgery was finished, it would be impossible to see where the laser incision had been made. Daniel had never witnessed actual surgery with Santoo's technology but Sara had explained the workings of it to him.

While Chumaya's surgery was going on, Daniel sat with Eric outside the lab. He didn't want Eric to see Karen cutting into his grandmother's skull. Now he turned at the footsteps coming up behind him. It was Zarr.

"How is the surgery going," Zarr whispered.

"I think all right."

"You're worried, aren't you?" Zarr said sympathetically.

"Zarr, I just keep hoping that Sara is being treated decently up there."

"What do the Zeta want with you and ta'Sara, Daniel?"

"If I knew, and if it were within my power to give it to them, I would. But I don't know what they want. As much as I despise them, they did give us Eric." Daniel looked down at Eric who was sound asleep on Daniel's lap. "He's been as much a God-send as Sara has."

"The Zeta haven't bothered my people for a long time-at least, not to my knowledge. They certainly seem to be bothering yours, though."

"They treat us like animals." Daniel looked down at the floor. "Just like animals."

"Have you seen these people, Zarr? Have you experienced the terror I've experienced?"

Zarr waved his hand from side to side. "No, no, I haven't. But Santoo described his one experience with them. I believe it was the night before your healing when a Zeta came into your daughter's bedroom and communicated something to Santoo."

"Yes," Daniel responded quietly. He didn't like to remember these things.

"The way Santoo described the being left me quite unsettled. What kind of biological life form do you think they might be?"

Daniel glanced at Eric to make sure he was still sleeping. Satisfied that Eric was far beyond hearing their conversation, Daniel said, "They are humanoid, but they move like bugs. Their eyes are black and enormous. I don't think they have a nose they breathe through. In fact, they may not breathe at all."

"There are fairly complex organisms even on your own planet that live without breathing."

"True. But I've been very close to their faces and I don't think they breathe," Daniel said, somewhat satisfied that he had finally decided that the Zeta may not be air breathers.

"Do they eat? Do they have mouths that open?"

"I've never seen them open their mouths. The mouth is about an inch long, and it's such a small slit, it may not be a mouth at all."

"How many digits do their hands and feet have?"

"Three fingers and an opposable thumb, I think."

"Feet?"

"I've never seen their feet. They wear some kind of foot coverings-boots, I think-and they also wear a tight fitting uniform-it fits like a second skin and matches their skin tones. But their skin is grayish, and it doesn't have moles or discolorations. Of course, neither do you people. With nearly perfect cells, those anomalies don't occur, do they?"

"No. You'll gradually lose the moles and discolorations on your skin, too, as time goes on."

"Oh, great. Then I'll have something in common with the Zeta."

"Perhaps we have more in common with the Zeta than we realize." Before Zarr could elaborate on his remark, Chumaya walked out of the lab.

"I'm finished. Daniel, would you like to watch Santoo's surgery? I believe Karen would welcome the support."

Daniel stood up with Eric in his arms. He was weary of Zarr's well-intentioned questions.

"Zarr, I believe Chumaya needs a little break. Would you please hold Eric while I help Karen?"

Zarr took Eric, and Daniel went into the lab. Several times he became sick at the sight of Santoo's skull laid open. But he managed to stay on his feet, and even directed a few supportive words here and there.

It had been four days since the Zeta had taken Sara. Daniel felt like he was sleepwalking. He made a weak excuse to Harriett on the telephone that Sara was ill and wouldn't be in for a few days. How long he could keep this up, he didn't know. He knew from the tone in Harriet's voice that she did not believe him. Sara was never ill.

Santoo and Chumaya kept Eric while Daniel went to work in the afternoons. He had missed several days at work and had much to catch up on. His supervisor seemed oblivious to his comings and goings. Margaret had decided long ago that hiring a handicapped person was doing her part in complying with the law, and she wasn't about to concern herself with counting the days that handicapped person made it to work.

But in a couple of weeks Santoo and Chumaya would have to go off planet to finish up their last assignment. He felt helpless again. Always the Zeta could make him feel this way. Daniel felt Chumaya's hand grip his shoulder. He sat down and began to sob uncontrollably. He felt comfortable in doing that because Santoo had taken Eric to the convenience store out along the Interstate, and they were

alone-alone to emotionally break down if they wanted to.

They embraced each other and wet each other with their tears. "Daniel, we won't leave you until ta'Sara is back home with you. The assignment will have to wait. We won't leave you."

"I can't go on like this, Chumaya."

"Perhaps the Zeta can't either."

"What do you mean?"

"It's occurred to me that none of us have beads in us, now. The beads have been surgically removed. You have said that you think the Zeta study our emotions through these beads. Correct?"

"That's what we think. That information came through during the channeling session a few months ago. They implant the beads so the beads can read our brain chemistry. They deliberately upset us or enrage us so they can read our emotions. Their own emotional physiology is dismal compared to ours. By studying our emotions, they hope to duplicate it in themselves."

"Don't you see, Daniel? The beads are gone. There is nothing left for them to study, is there?" Chumaya said hopefully.

"You're right. Of course, they could come down right now and put the beads back in us-but they haven't. At least, not yet. My fear is that they are doing something to Sara. They might be implanting hundreds of gadgets in her. We'll never keep up with them. I hope they tire of this game soon." Daniel rubbed his eyes: he was weary beyond description.

"We can hope." Chumaya tightly pinched her eyes shut in an effort to stop her tears. "Oh, Daniel, I can't live without ta'Sara, either."

The burst of light that came from the ceiling was so intense, it was almost white hot. Daniel and Chumaya held onto each other as the Zetas' light beam hauled them through the roof and into the sky.

Chapter Twenty-Three

As Daniel and Chumaya soared up the beam, Chumaya's thoughts tumbled into him. In a burst of terror she was realizing that the Zeta had taken her many times before. Daniel could hear her telepathed anguish. She was flooded with memories. She, too, had been abducted by the Zeta since she was a small child. She telepathed the scenes in one strong image. Daniel looked below him. Then he looked at Chumaya. "If it helps, Chumaya, you're one of us." He smiled encouragingly in the Zetas' teleporter beam. "When we get up there, we'll have to hang onto each other. We don't want to become separated."

"They're going to hurt us, Daniel. They always hurt us, don't they?"

"Usually."

They passed through the bottom of the Zetas' huge starship and landed softly on the deck. "We must stay together, Chumaya," Daniel said again. He gripped her arm tightly and there came a blinding burst of light.

He immediately found himself in a drab gray room and he was sitting on a hard bench along a wall. Chumaya was sitting to his right.

"Daniel!"

Daniel turned to his left. Santoo was sitting next to him! "Where's Eric?" Daniel telepathed frantically. The Zeta had taken Eric again-Daniel was sure of it.

"I don't know," Santoo telepathed. "I had an urge to take Eric for a drive outside of town. Don't ask me why. I just found myself driving outside of the city limits. Then I drove the car to the side of the road. Eric could still be in the car for all I know."

"So he didn't come up with you?"

"No."

Daniel tried to put his arm around Chumaya in way of comforting her, but he couldn't lift his arm. He could turn his head, but his limbs were immobilized.

The room they were in was huge, and there were rows upon rows of benches throughout the area. At least eighty percent of the benches were occupied, but the benches directly in front of him were empty.

As suddenly as Daniel and Chumaya had arrived in this place, images appeared in front of him. Roger and Julia were suddenly seated directly in front of Daniel. Daniel heard Santoo and Chumaya gasp in his telepathed thoughts. Roger looked like a zombie. To Roger's left appeared Rachel and Steve. To Julia's right appeared Karen and Yankee. And to Karen's right appeared Ann.

They sat paralyzed: breath ragged, eyes wild. "Tell them they will be all right, Santoo."

"Daniel assures us we will be all right," Santoo telepathed. Daniel knew Santoo was afraid. He sensed the fear in all of them and he knew Santoo's telepathed assurance did little to alleviate it. But Daniel couldn't show his fear. He was their lifeline up here. Where was Sara? Where was his little boy? He knew where his daughter was. She was sitting in front of him, and the courage and stubbornness he sensed from her to see this through almost bled from her pores. Daniel reveled in the fact that the Zeta would not have an easy time with Rachel.

They sat for an interminably long time. Daniel's back was beginning to hurt and his throat was dry from fear.

The other people sitting on the benches were all human as far as Daniel could tell. They sat as quietly and as still as iguanas stalking flies. Occasionally a human would turn its head slowly and look at Daniel. Then it would turn away and stare at someone else.

Daniel estimated there were at least five-hundred people in the room. He and Sara had been here once before. But they hadn't waited this long. The waiting was killing him. He knew, though, that on the outside, he looked as passive and dazed as everyone else sitting on the benches.

A being appeared-a Zeta. It wasn't the doctor. Another appeared, then another, then another. Daniel felt his body rising from the bench. He saw Chumaya and Santoo rising with him. They were floating above the floor. Unable to guide themselves, the Zeta pushed and steered them out of the room and down the hallway.

"Daniel, what are they going to do to us?" Chumaya telepathed fearfully.

"Try not to act afraid. They want you to be afraid. Don't give them the satisfaction."

Santoo had telepathed almost nothing during their stay in the room with benches. Daniel was fearful that Santoo was afraid. Santoo was Daniel's strength. Even when Santoo was light years away from him, he drew strength from Santoo's friendship. At the thought of Santoo caving in to the Zeta, Daniel became terrified. "Santoo, you've got to bear up. I'm scared to death without you. Please talk to me."

"I'm not afraid," he telepathed measuredly. "I'm trying to figure them out. Don't telepath to me again. They will know ."

As the Zeta pushed them through a doorway, Daniel tried not to think about Santoo. He had to keep his mind empty to protect himself from the Zeta.

"Ahh!" The Zeta painfully slammed Daniel onto a hard tabletop. Chumaya was dropped onto the table next to him and Santoo was put on a table on the other side of him. "I've got to keep my mind blank," Daniel thought. "Blank. Nothing."

A huge head hovered over him now. The eyes tried to suck him in, but he fought it. "You have taken the beads from yourselves. This entity will put them back." With noticeable ferocity the doctor clamped Daniel's jaw in its four-fingered hand. With the other hand Daniel saw the long screwdriver-like device come towards his nose. With the speed of intelligently directed lightning the doctor jammed the thin shaft up Daniel's nostril. "You bastard!" Daniel telepathed. "You bug-eyed bastard!"

The doctor stood up, slowly rolling the shaft between his fingers, smugness radiating from his expressionless face. "Yes," the being telepathed. "The bead is again recording your anger."

The doctor deftly fitted another bead on the end of the long shaft. He bent over Chumaya as if she were a cadaver about to be dissected, and shoved the shaft up her nose. Chumaya moaned in terror. Santoo telepathed the desire to kill.

"You, Santoo, have been stubborn and unyielding even as a child," the doctor telepathed. It skittered quickly to Santoo's side. The doctor's hand holding the long-shafted tool snacked out like a mantisse's death stroke. The shaft went up Santoo's nose. Santoo's fear plunged through Daniel like an icicle, but Santoo didn't cry out.

Daniel winced when the doctor withdrew the shaft. There was blood on it. Blood began trickling from Santoo's nose and pooling into his shirt-front.

"The beads are necessary," the doctor telepathed. "You will not remove the beads again. The beads are necessary." The doctor left the room.

Santoo turned his head towards Chumaya. "Are you all right?" he telepathed.

"Yes, but are you? You're bleeding badly."

"Daniel," Santoo telepathed, "I have learned to hate them. I am ashamed of the hate I feel towards them."

"I've hated them from the very first day they showed themselves to me. For thirty-nine long years I've hated them."

Daniel flinched as he felt someone come up behind him. It came around and stood between Daniel and Chumaya. "Saul! Thank God you're here! Help us. Please help us. Where's Sara? Is she all right? Is Eric all right?" His thoughts tumbled from him in a ragged panic.

"Sara's all right. Eric's not here to my knowledge." Saul looked at them, his expression blank, almost uncomprehending.

"Then he's still in ta'Sara's car!" Santoo frantically telepathed. "He's alone out on that country road."

Daniel suddenly felt sweat pouring from him. What a dilemma this was: Sara was somewhere on this nightmare of a ship, and his little boy was uncared for on the ground.

The doctor came back into the room. "What in the hell have you done with my son?" Daniel telepathed angrily.

"The boy is unharmed. He sleeps in the vehicle by the road."

"What if someone has found Eric by now?" Chumaya telepathed frantically. "What if someone takes him to the police station? How will Daniel explain his apparent irresponsibility towards Eric?"

The doctor looked nonplussed through his expressionless eyes. "An interesting set of circumstances. It will be useful to study Daniel's emotional reaction . . ."

"You idiot!" Daniel snarled "What if a child molester has taken Eric? Is that what you want for him?"

The doctor telepathed nothing in return.

"Is it?" Daniel pressed.

"The beads are again recording well."

Daniel felt himself becoming woozy with anger.

"Don't pass out, Daniel," Santoo telepathed. "I need you. Stay alert."

"Sara!"

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Sara!" Daniel telepathed again. Sara was now standing next to Saul. She looked haggard and exhausted. "May I go to them?" Sara asked the doctor.

"Go," it telepathed.

Sara came and stood between Daniel and Chumaya. She kissed them both. Then she went to her father and kissed him. "I've missed you all so." Tears coursed down her cheeks. "I've missed you all so much."

The doctor came and stood close to her, his monstrous eyes drilling into her.

"Leave her alone," Daniel telepathed wearily. "Just let her go home with us."

"She is needed here."

"Damn it, stop playing head games. What do you need her for? To upset the rest of us? Just let us go," Daniel telepathed. "Eric needs us. He needs his mother."

Suddenly the being looked directly at Saul. "Send them home," the being abruptly telepathed. He turned and gazed at Sara. "ta'Sara stays."

"No, oh please, no! Let me go home!"

Feeling his strength coming back to him, Daniel sat up on the table. Santoo and Chumaya did the same. Daniel went to Sara and hugged her tightly. He looked straight into the doctor's eyes. The doctor tried to manipulate Daniel's emotions with his mind as he had done so many times before, but Daniel didn't cave this time under the doctor's stare. Daniel said very slowly and in a very measured tone, "I'm not leaving here without Sara. I don't care if you take my life from me as I try-I'm not leaving without her."

The being's frail body swayed slightly at Daniel's remark, as if it had responded in some tiny way. The doctor looked at Sara and then pointed to the door.

Saul led them down the hallway to the transporter beam. "Where's the rest of my family, Saul?"

"They'll all be returned to their homes."

"And Ann, she'll be returned to you as well?"

Saul looked at the floor. "I don't know how I'm going to handle this with her. This time up everyone will remember everything. The doctor says now it's time for all of you to know and remember."

Daniel hung tightly to Sara all the way down the transporter beam. He was going home with her.

They found Eric safe in bed, pajamas on, quilt tucked under his chin, sleeping soundly. Sara gently nudged Eric awake. When Eric realized his mother was home, he cried with relief in her arms. She rocked him until he went back to sleep.

Rachel had called Daniel; she was terrified. She and Steve had remembered everything and they were afraid to go to bed. Daniel hadn't heard anything from Roger and Julia or Karen and Yankee, or from Ann. Saul would have to take care of Ann.

Santoo and Chumaya had insisted on going to Rachel's to stay the night with them. Daniel knew they were deliberately removing themselves from the house so Daniel and Sara could have some time alone. Before Santoo left, he had to wash and change because the blood from his nose had caked on the front of his sweatshirt. He commented he could do little to calm Rachel and Steve if he appeared to them as a bloody mess.

Daniel went to Rachel and tried to calm her, but Santoo had the cooler head. He could calm her better

than Daniel could right now. They would talk about all this tomorrow, as well as, no doubt, many days to come.

When Santoo's amulet whisked he and Chumaya away, Daniel carried Sara into the bedroom. He held her and cuddled her. He spoke softly to her. He told her he would give his life for her. And he knew he would. If the Zeta had any plans at all of taking her again, he would kill them to get her back.

Daniel awoke in the middle of the night with Sara's arms around him. She was crying. Daniel reached over and turned on the bedlamp. Sara's coal black eyes shone in the lamp's yellow glow. For an instant Daniel saw the doctor in her face, but he calmed himself then; the eyes belonged to his best friend. "What's wrong?" he whispered.

"Nothing's wrong. I just awoke and thought for a moment I was back on the ship. I was frightened." She gripped his shoulders so hard it hurt.

"I know this is difficult for you, Sara, but please tell me what happened to you."

Sara turned on the clock radio and found a late night station that played relaxing music. She fiddled with the volume until she was satisfied. "I don't want Eric to hear our conversation, Daniel. This background music should cover up our whispers."

"Yes, good idea. Of course, if you're really worried about Eric hearing this, we could telepath."

"No. I want to speak. I want to tell you in my own words what this experience was like. We are human. We have voices, unlike the Zeta who just stare and project frightening thoughts."

"All right," Daniel said. "Tell me whatever you feel like telling me." He sat up and propped himself against the headboard. He put his hand on her arm and said, "Before you get into the details of it, while you were there did you make any kind of effort to find . . . ?" His voice trailed off. He couldn't bring himself to say, 'our baby?'

"I looked," Sara whispered sadly. "I looked in as many areas as I could. There were too many rooms. Many, many babies. You wouldn't believe how many children are there. I had hoped that the doctor would show me. But he didn't. If he wanted to measure my pain, that would have been the best way to do it. Why didn't he show me?" She was sobbing.

"Sara," Daniel said kindly, "I shouldn't have asked you that. I'm sorry." He hugged her briefly, frustrated now. "I wish you could have found it. I don't know why that sick bastard does what he does."

"Our baby is not an 'it,' Daniel." Sara's voice was rising above the soft music.

"Shhh, you'll wake Eric. I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"Our baby is not an 'it,'" Sara said again. "Our baby is a person, a human being, and those monstrous beings have our baby."

"Sara, we don't know for a fact that they have our baby-
anymore . . ." Daniel trailed off.

"What do you mean? They took the fetus from me. They took it out of me and then took it from the

room. Our baby is on their ship. Are you saying that something has happened to him?"

How strong her ties were, Daniel thought. Even though he knew the fetus was probably changed beyond all recognition by the Zeta's endless genetic manipulations, Sara still clung to the hope that her child would be restored to her. But for all anyone knew the fetus could have died. He didn't want to bring up that possibility to her—at least not now. "No, Sara. I'm not saying that something has happened to our baby. Forget I said that. I just want you to think. Don't let them get to you. Please tell me what happened to you."

"Daniel," Sara sobbed, "They have our baby."

Daniel looked into her eyes. "What are we going to do about it?"

Sara put her hand to her mouth as if for the first time she truly understood the reality as well as the futility of it. "Oh, my God, what are we going to do?" She began to cry.

Daniel felt like someone had slapped him. He, too, was truly facing this dilemma for the first time. He held her and stroked her hair. "Sara, you can't brood about this for the rest of your life. We have a long life ahead of us. We can't brood forever."

"I know," Sara whispered against his chest. "I know."

Daniel felt so badly for her, but dwelling on their stolen baby would only make matters intolerable. "Let's change the subject, Sweetheart," Daniel said.

"They're crazy, Daniel," Sara said flatly. "The Zeta are crazy."

Daniel sighed. "What did you do? What did you see? How did they treat you?"

"It's difficult to remember everything. I wasn't thinking clearly at times. The thought of me living the rest of my life with them terrified me beyond words. I tried to stay very calm. I tried not to feel."

"Try to recall everything that happened to you. I want to know."

"When I came on the ship they took me to one of those rooms with the tables in it. They made me lie down on a table and the doctor put another bead into my head, and he made it clear that he didn't want Father taking the beads out of me again."

Daniel clutched Sara's hand. "Then what happened?" he whispered.

"Then they took me to another room and left me there."

"For four days?" Daniel shuddered at the thought.

"No. I think they wanted me to rest. But I couldn't, of course. There was a bed there, but I didn't use it. I paced the floor instead."

"Then?"

"Then they came for me and took me to a room full of children. They instructed me to play with them. I did while the Zeta watched every move I made."

"And you did this for four days?"

"Yes. Oh, Daniel, the children are living in misery. The Zeta don't know how to care for them. Giving them food and a place to sleep is one thing, but giving them real love is another."

"What did you eat?"

"They gave me some kind of vile tasting paste that I squeezed out of a tube into my mouth."

"Like toothpaste in a tube?"

"Yes, exactly like toothpaste. But toothpaste has a pleasant taste. This paste was bitter. It upset my stomach, so it was impossible to eat enough to be satisfied."

"Do they have teeth? Do they masticate food like humans?"

"I don't think so."

"And you drank . . ."

"Water."

"Did you see the Zeta eat?"

"No. They were very elusive about their private activities. I saw no work routine. I didn't sense them communicating with each other. I saw no private living quarters. I saw no emotional exchanges between them. I felt no joy or sorrow from them. The few beings I saw moved like robots."

"Do you think that's what they might be?-highly advanced robots?"

"I don't think so. I believe they are living beings. Occasionally I would catch them transmitting very rudimentary thoughts. A robot can't transmit thoughts. Of course, they could be artificial life forms, I suppose."

Despite Daniel's revulsion at the Zeta holding his wife prisoner for four days, he felt himself drawn into the fascinating lives of these insectoid beings. "Can an artificial life form project thoughts, or even think independently?"

"Yes, if the life form had a soul living within it."

"Hmmm. Did the doctor show himself?"

"I saw the doctor only when he put a new bead into my head. After that I never saw him again."

"Did you see the female being?"

"Yes. She and several other females watched me when I played with the children."

"If the Zeta are capable of any level of emotion at all, do you think the females have a greater capacity for that?"

"It's difficult to say. Possibly. I sensed that they may be more nurturing than the males." Sara gave Daniel a puzzled look.

"What?"

"Could it be that these beings are androgynous?"

"You mean both male and female?"

"Perhaps neither. Perhaps the fact that some of the beings are nurturing towards others has nothing whatsoever to do with whether they are female or male. Maybe some of the beings are simply more nurturing."

"These people are truly a puzzle, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are."

"How old was the oldest child you saw there?"

"Oh, Daniel, there are children there in their late teens. I also met several adult hybrids."

"Did they speak to you?"

"No. I believe they wanted to. They had fully developed mouths that indicated to me they were capable of speech. But they seemed uncomfortable to speak while the full-blooded Zeta adults were standing close by."

"I can't imagine being shut up in that place, Sara."

"We don't know that they are. Perhaps they take trips to their home planet-or any planet for that matter. We don't know they live their whole lives on the ship. I hope they don't."

"I have something to tell you. It's important."

"Tell me."

Daniel didn't know how to tell Sara, so he simply said it. "Sara, the beings have been abducting your parents since they were children."

"They have been abducting my parents?" Sara whispered incredulously.

"I probably should have let them tell you themselves. They began to remember things in the presence of the doctor."

Sara looked sadly at Daniel. "Then we can't escape the Zeta. They truly are part of our lives just as Saul said."

"It appears so." Daniel softly stroked her hair. I have to give the Zeta credit for one thing, though. Eric made it clear to the doctor that he didn't want to go back to the ship. They could have easily taken him along with you. They could have easily taken him tonight. But the doctor didn't. He-or she-respected

Eric's decision."

"But they don't respect ours, do they?" she whispered.

"Let's go to the kitchen and get you something to eat." He kissed her and then got out of bed. He put his hand out to her. "Come on," he said tenderly. "I'll make you something. What would you like?"

Sara crawled out of bed and took Daniel's hand. "I would like to simply sit at the kitchen table and talk."

"As good as done."

As they walked quietly down the dark hallway, Daniel heard the patter of tiny feet behind them.

"Mommy?"

Sara scooped up her little boy in her arms and cuddled him tightly. "Honey, I'll never leave you again."

Karen and Yankee were mysteriously quiet about their experience with the Zeta. Daniel suspected they hadn't remembered it. Saul had said that everyone would remember this time. Did that mean everyone who was abducted the night before had also been abducted at some time in the past? Yankee had. Ann was quite sure she had been abducted as a child. Rachel had been abducted at least twice, but she hadn't remembered the actual encounters. She only had suffered a total regaining of her hearing-twice, only to have it taken from her as quickly as it had been given. Steve had uncomfortable feelings at one time or another, but he didn't know what the cause of this was. Roger and Julia had never had any experiences as far as Daniel knew. But that didn't mean the Zeta hadn't abducted them: it only meant the Zeta may have totally suppressed their memories.

When Daniel came home from work the next afternoon, Ann's car was in his driveway. His heart lurched into his throat. This wasn't going to be pleasant. When he walked into the kitchen, Sara was trying to calm her.

"Saul can't help what he does, Ann. You've got to believe that the Zeta have him so ensnared in their own convoluted purpose, Saul simply can't resist them."

Daniel sat down on a kitchen chair. Ann looked woefully at Daniel. "Daniel, I kicked him out of the house last night."

"Ann . . ."

Ann put up her hand. "No, Daniel, don't give me the same lecture Sara just gave me. When Saul is on their ship he still has the capacity to think. He can tell them no. He can refuse to cooperate."

"That's what I used to think. Remember, I was so angry with Saul that I gave him a black eye. I know what you're going through. I know this isn't easy for you."

"You're damned right it isn't easy," Ann said angrily.

"How did Saul react when you told him to get out?"

"That's what's so upsetting; he was so nice about it. He said he didn't blame me." Ann's voice was a

mere whisper now.

"Aren't you worried about him?"

"No. He can go back to the Zeta for all I care."

"Do you know what I think?" Daniel said. "I think you regret kicking Saul out. And I think your own stubborn pride won't let you ask him back."

"Daniel Alan, I'm not asking Saul back," Ann stormed. "He's made his bed and now he can lie in it." Ann took a quick swallow of tea.

A quiet little voice from the living room said, "I like Saul. He's my friend."

"Eric," Ann said, "come here, Sweetie. Come sit with me."

Eric went to Ann and climbed on her lap. He looked searchingly into her eyes. "Saul watches out for me. He likes me."

Ann put her arms around Eric and hugged him like a teddy bear. "Oh, Eric, I know you love Saul. I love him too. But why does he do things for the Zeta? He's a human, not a Zeta. Do you understand what I am trying to say?"

"Yes."

"Eric," Sara said, "what does Saul do up on the ship?"

"He helps take care of us children."

"How does he do that?"

"He rocks us and reads us stories. Sometimes he chases us when we play games. Saul really likes me. And he likes Aznar, too."

"You mean Aznar, the hybrid child?"

"Yes. Aznar's my friend, too."

Daniel said, "Sara, did you meet Aznar when you were on the ship this last time?"

"Yes."

"What is he like?"

"Aznar appears to be a young adult. He has brown, oversized human looking eyes and a fully developed nose and mouth. But his skin color is more gray than pink. He has three fingers and an opposing thumb like the Zeta. His head is larger and his limbs are longer than a human his age. Aznar eats like a human, although I don't know if you could call eating food squeezed from a tube as eating like a human."

Eric looked sadly at Sara. "I miss my mother."

Sara involuntarily put her hand over her face. Tears popped from her eyes and ran down her cheeks. Ann said, "Sweetie, your mother is right here."

"Sara is my other mother. I miss my mother on the ship. I didn't mean to hurt you, Mother," Eric said. He climbed off Ann's lap, climbed on Sara's, then put his cheek up against Sara's cheek. "I'm sorry, Mother," he whispered. "I don't want to live there again. I just miss her sometimes."

"That's all right, Honey. I understand." Sara gathered herself and then said, "Ann, do you really believe that a man that looks after children under the most stressful of circumstances is worthy of being thrown out of your life?"

"I . . . I guess not." Ann looked helpless now. "What am I going to do?"

Gently Daniel suggested, "You could consider asking Saul back."

Ann put her head in her hands. "I don't know if he'll come back to me. I was really upset last night. I was so angry, I almost slapped him."

"Every relationship has its problems. Daniel and I certainly had problems when we were trying to establish a solid relationship. Ironically, our problems were much like yours and Saul's."

"What do you mean?"

"Daniel had a difficult time accepting me because I wasn't from Earth. He also, as you know, had a difficult time accepting my black eyes."

Daniel said. "You, also, had a difficult time accepting yourself."

"Exactly. And this is what's happening to Saul. He's not from another planet, but he is closely linked with beings from another planet. And he can't accept himself, either. Think back to how Saul reacted when he saw Aznar playing with Eric. And how he reacted when he saw the eagle appear over our campfire. He began to remember his other life then-his other life with the Zeta. He couldn't accept that part of himself."

Ann sat back and looked with understanding at Sara. "This is a nightmare," she whispered. "How can I help him get away from these people?" She quickly got up.

"Where are you going?" Daniel asked.

Ann looked distraught. "I have to go home." She fished her car keys out of her purse and started for the door. Then she turned back at them. "Thank you."

"I tell you, Daniel, Julia and I had the same nightmare-exactly the same nightmare. Explain this to me." Roger was sweating.

"Roger, why are you asking me about this? Isn't Santoo at the store this morning?"

"Yeah, he's there. So what?"

"So you know you could have asked Santoo about your dreams."

"Daniel, next to Julia you're my best friend," Roger pleaded. He sat down and combed his fingers back through his curly hair. "I'm losing my mind."

"Talk to me, Roger."

"Okay . . . okay . . . Last night I dreamed I was taken on board a spaceship." Roger looked away. "I'm frightened, Daniel."

"It was only a dream." Daniel didn't want to lie, but he wanted to protect his dear friend.

"If it was, then Julia and I are telepathing to each other in our sleep. You and Sara can do that; Julia and I can't."

"Is Julia upset about this?"

"She's terrified. The dreams were frighteningly lucid. When we compared stories over breakfast, we knew what the other was going to say before the other said it."

"Were your kids upset?"

"Yeah. It was foolish to talk about it in front of them, but we didn't know when we started discussing it that we had the same dream. It wasn't a dream, was it? This really happened to us last night."

"Yes, it really happened," Daniel reluctantly admitted. "It was only a question of time before you realized it."

Roger exhaled slowly through his teeth. "Maybe I can keep the truth from Julia."

"That's not fair to either of you, Roger. You have to stand together against them. If you don't, you'll isolate yourselves. You can't bear up against them if you don't seek strength in each other."

"My skin crawls at the thought of them."

"Would you like Sara to talk to Julia about this?"

"I'd greatly appreciate it. We've had no experience with this. Lord, how did we get into this, Daniel?"

"The question is, how do we get out of it?"

The jangling telephone shocked Daniel to a new level of awareness. He didn't know why he knew this phone call was going to be bad news, but he knew. He picked up the receiver.

"Daniel, it's me, Yankee. I need to see you and Santoo right away."

"This sounds serious, Yankee."

"It could be quite serious."

Daniel watched his hand shake as he reached for the handle of Yankee's office door. "Don't be afraid, Father," Eric said comfortingly.

Daniel affectionately ruffled Eric's hair. "Okay, brave boy, I won't be afraid."

Santoo was already there waiting for Daniel to arrive. "No fair working in Roger's hardware store, Santoo. The only reason you got here first is because you're only four doors down." Daniel tried to appear light hearted but he knew he was telepathing his concern to Santoo.

"No need to be upset, Daniel. Yankee hasn't given us bad news yet."

While Eric wandered off to Yankee's lounge area replete with television and toys, Daniel fumbled his way to a chair. Santoo sat down next to him.

Yankee scratched his head. "I called you two because someone just came in this morning to ask me about wanting to buy Santoo's land."

Daniel knew his face went white. "You mean the land that has my shuttle hidden on it?"

"One and the same."

"Well now," Santoo breathed. "Who might this person be?"

"He's a fellow named Brady Duncan." Yankee looked at one, then the other. "You don't know him?"

Daniel scratched his chin in consternation. "I think I've heard the name. I don't think I've met him, though. Do you know anything about him?"

"No. I hadn't met him until this morning. Of course, since I've only been here a few months it's hard to know everyone in such a short time."

"What did Brady say?"

"He was very interested in the land. He offered me four or five times what the land is worth. The man was quite adamant about purchasing it. I told him the land wasn't for sale."

"Daniel?" Santoo turned towards him, "when the repelling circuit went down you said that Saul's outdoor group came into the area and looked up at the sound of the shuttle's gravity drive."

"Saul and Ann, yes, but . . ."

"Is Brady Duncan one of that group?"

Yankee thoughtfully tapped his pencil on his desk top. "And what if he were?"

Daniel said, "He may have heard the shuttle, too. We could find out easily enough, I suppose. Ann would know."

Santoo glanced at his watch. "It's nine-thirty. Would Ann be in her office by now?"

"Yes," Daniel said.

"Let's give her a call," Santoo said, and picked up the telephone.

"I know Brady Duncan. He joins Saul's group occasionally." Ann took a bite out of her salad. The Eagle's Nest was busy with noontime diners. She had been busy when Santoo had called earlier, but had joined them for lunch.

"You're sure?" Daniel asked, perplexed now.

"I'm sure. Did he tell Yankee why he wanted the land?"

"No. But he offered Yankee almost five times the land's worth. Yankee is taking care of all of Santoo's business dealings now, so knowing what he knows about Santoo, he's extremely protective."

"How did this man know to come to Yankee?"

Daniel and Santoo looked blankly at each other. "Yes, how did he know to come to Yankee?" Santoo wondered aloud.

"Look, both of you, I think you are worrying for nothing. This man saw your land and wanted it. Then he most likely started calling the lawyers around town to see who handled the property. He couldn't very well call Santoo since Santoo doesn't live here. Right?" Ann looked at one, then the other. "Right?" she asked again.

"Right," Santoo said. "Perhaps you're right. But I think that whatever his motives, we will have to find a different plot of land and build a new hiding place for the shuttle."

Daniel sighed. He knew Santoo was cautious, but right. They would have to move the shuttle hiding place. They couldn't risk it being discovered.

Santoo said, "By the way, does Saul remember he was on the ship with us?"

"No."

"You've talked to him then? I thought you sent him on his way."

"I did. For about half a day. He's back and I took him back."

"Oh the course of true love . . ." Santoo murmured, happily. "But Saul doesn't remember anything about the most recent abduction?"

"He remembers nothing. I related details of my personal experience and I tried to fill him in regarding your experiences, but he swears he doesn't know what I'm talking about."

"Ann," Santoo said, "let me suggest you don't pursue this any further with Saul at this time. Apparently the Zeta don't want him to know. Trying to help him remember could be harmful."

"I suppose it could."

"Trust that if the Zeta take you again, Saul will be there to protect you. Right now that's all you can hope for. That's all any of us can hope for."

"I love him. I don't want to upset him further." Ann wiped her mouth with her napkin and looked at Santoo. "I'll ask Saul about this Brady Duncan. I'll let you know."

"Don't worry about it, Ann." Santoo replied. "It doesn't matter what Mr. Duncan is offering. I'm not going to sell the land. I am going to move the shuttle bays. I'm sure we can find a safer location."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Santoo found a chair and slowly lowered himself onto it. It was imperative they know more about Duncan Brady, and on a hunch, Santoo had decided to question Saul. "Saul, you were in the woods that night when Daniel and ta'Sara tried to bring in the shuttle. You remember hearing a faint hum above you. Correct?"

"Correct," Saul said.

"Was there any other person with you that could have heard the shuttle?"

"Fred. Fred was with me."

Santoo glanced quickly at Daniel in a look of 'I told you so.' "What kind of a man is Fred?"

"A little rough around the edges, you might say. A real outdoorsman. Kind of a military-survivalist type, but a reasonable man on the whole. A natural leader."

"Hmm." Santoo was thinking now. "Did Fred comment when he heard the shuttle's gravity drive above him?"

"Well, he couldn't see anything. At least, I couldn't, so how could Fred?"

Santoo screwed up his nose in thought. "He couldn't-the shuttle was cloaked. Daniel always comes in with the shuttle cloaked." Santoo glanced at Daniel and smiled. "Daniel is the most careful man I've ever known, so I'm truly not concerned that people in your party saw the shuttle. But there is no way to quiet the gravity drive. Strange noises in the air above can fuel the imagination and take it in directions we don't want."

Daniel, perplexed, rubbed his chin. "Do Fred and Duncan know each other?"

"It's possible, I suppose," Saul said.

Daniel didn't like the possibilities of that. "Is Duncan Brady a rich man?" Daniel pressed. "He'd have to be to be able to buy Santoo's land. It's seventy acres of prime timber."

"I don't think Duncan is rich. I believe he has a nine to five job like the rest of us."

"We are going to have to find a new place for the shuttle," Santoo said abruptly. "This man could be wandering around out there as we speak, looking over his prospective purchase."

Daniel looked blankly at Santoo. "So we're going to have to dig another hole for the shuttles?"

"It's starting to look like it. I'm not selling the land, but it they've discovered the shuttle bays . . . Hmmm. It will involve a considerable amount of work, even with power lasers."

Daniel said, "It may be difficult to find another place."

"Roger has land," Santoo said, "and he may be willing to help us out. I'll ask him in the morning. I don't know why this man wants my timber, but I'm not going to wait and find out."

The next afternoon as Daniel left work, he thought about the good day he had. As he drove towards town, his thoughts drifted to Sara and Eric. He was pleased with how well working half days for Eric's sake had solved their baby sitting problem. Soon, though, they would have to discuss the possibility of both of them going back to work full time. Daniel didn't want to leave Eric in the hands of someone whom Eric didn't know that well, but eventually they would have no choice. If they wanted to be effective at their jobs, they would have to find a day sitter for Eric. He chuckled ruefully. Effective at his job? With the Zeta running the show? And the sweet babysitter. Would the Zeta abduct her, too? Eric was to start school the next fall. He didn't want to even think about that. How would he manage in school if the Zeta decided to pull him up through the ceiling?

But they had been fairly lucky with Eric, Daniel realized. Considering where he came from, it was miraculous he had adjusted at all to living on the ground. Daniel thought of the Zeta: about their frightening appearance; their nonhuman behavior; their terrible black eyes that sucked you in with only a look. He wondered how they evolved-what they evolved from. They were insectoidal. He was sure of that. Maybe that's why he had been so terrified of insects all his life. The Zeta had entered his and Sara's lives when they were thirty light years apart and only five years old. These insectoidal beings could somehow reach across that vast distance and have Daniel and Sara on their ship at the same time. It was so mind boggling, Daniel couldn't fathom it. Even Santoo wouldn't attempt teleporting across thirty light years.

Daniel thought back to a specific incident when he was thirteen years old. He had been outside, walking through the grass. When he came in for dinner, he quickly fell into the dinnerside chat of his family. Suddenly he looked down at his pants. There, slowly crawling up his pants leg, was a bright green grasshopper. It was small, he recalled. Not even an inch long, but the sight of it terrified him beyond reason. He began to scream. His father laughed good naturedly and then with a piece of paper deftly scooped the grasshopper off Daniel's pants. With the grasshopper still clinging to the paper, his father took it outside where he shook it off into the grass. Daniel felt foolish, but he couldn't help it. Now he wondered if memories of his abductions by the Zeta had crept through as he saw the tiny example of alien life on his pants leg.

Daniel tried to force these thoughts from his mind as he continued driving into town. He didn't want the Zeta to know what he was thinking. This knowledge would only give them even more power over his life.

Thinking of nothing in particular, now, he drove down the road almost in a daze, so what happened next was like a fist in his face: in a blinding instant the road disappeared and now he was sitting on a table in the alien ship! His brain was spinning so miserably from the sudden shock of displacement, he felt nauseous for a moment. They had taken him right out of his van while he was driving it! He felt no light take him up. He simply disappeared from his van. Where was the van now? Had they let it careen off the road and crash into the ditch? Or had they taken control of it and parked it on the side of the road?

Daniel looked about him, but there was no one else in the room. He rubbed his eyes with his fingers. When he opened his eyes, there still was no one there, but he heard a strange clicking sound on the deck. Something clicked, then shuffled, clicked, then shuffled. He had never heard a sound like this before. He looked across at the door. What he saw there made his blood pound in his head. An insect—a praying mantis fully six feet tall—stood in the doorway! Daniel began to shake; he couldn't stop. He thought every blood vessel in his body would burst. But they didn't. Somehow he managed to control his fear. Even when the huge insect crawled towards him, he kept his fear in check.

Now Saul stood in the doorway. He came to Daniel and put his arm across his shoulders. "I'm sorry about this, Daniel."

Daniel could see the pain and disgust in Saul's face as the insect approached them both. It stood like a statue, its huge compound eyes staring a hole into Daniel's soul. "Give it to him," the insect telepathed intelligently.

Daniel was so angry, he was afraid he would do something stupid. He couldn't let that happen. He thought of Sara and Eric and Rachel. He thought of Santoo and Chumaya and Roger and Steve. He thought of his mother. Daniel gritted his teeth: these beings would not win.

Saul handed a small box to Daniel. It was black except for the top panel that was gray. Daniel had seen this box before. The first time he had seen it was when the aliens had left it in his bedroom. He had tried to open it, but couldn't. When he finally gave up, the box opened by itself. Inside the box were five blue cats-eye marbles. These five marbles, he later learned, signified the age of both he and Sara when they were taken on board the alien ship that first time. It was the Zeta and their maddening puzzles that drove Daniel to the very brink of despair then. He could not allow them to do this to him again.

Cringing under the glare of the mantis, Daniel pulled up on the gray flap. It opened easily. Inside the box were two perfectly round black marbles. He looked up at the black eyes of the mantis. Then he looked back into the box. What did this mean? He didn't want to know.

"I am the boy's mother," the insect telepathed.

Daniel angrily threw the box with its two black marbles onto the floor. "The hell you are! You're an insect! An alien form of life that has no relationship to my son!"

"I am the boy's mother," the insect repeated.

"Daniel, I'm so sorry about this," Saul apologized.

Daniel reached out and held onto Saul's arm. "Just save me from this thing if you can," Daniel pleaded.

"I can't." As Saul stepped away from Daniel, the mantisse reached out with its front leg and with a deft stroke ripped open Daniel's shirt front.

"Oh, God," Daniel moaned as the mantisse drove the claw of its leg into Daniel's chest. "Oh, God, please don't do this. Please don't," he gasped.

He felt the claw turn in his flesh. What did this thing want with him? As he pleaded for mercy, the mantisse began to change into something else. Like the changing image in a computer morphing program, the shape of the mantisse body gradually became more and more humanoid. When the transformation was complete, a full blooded Zeta being stood in front of him. Daniel knew it was the female Zeta that

was Eric's mother. Giddy with relief, he almost welcomed her.

The Zeta stooped down to the floor and picked up the two black marbles. Then it held the marbles up to Daniel's face "Study-pay attention-learn," it firmly telepathed. Then it pushed the two black marbles into Daniel's chest where the mantisse just moments before had ripped open his flesh. When he looked down at himself he was horrified at the gaping wound. Oddly, it wasn't bleeding, nor did it hurt. But the wound was real, and he felt the coldness of the glass marbles as the Zeta's four-fingered hand pushed the marbles into him.

"You can't send me home this way," Daniel said frantically. "My heart is in this wound."

"Do you feel as if your heart is wounded?" the being telepathed inquiringly.

"No, but there's a wound. Please don't let me go home this way."

"Are you going home?"

"If you keep me here I'll die."

"What would you die of, Daniel?"

"A broken heart. I can't be separated from my wife and family." Daniel began to sob. He didn't want to. He wanted to be brave and strong in front of this being-Eric's mother. The being put its hands over the wound. Her fingers felt almost comforting to him. A warmth suffused through his body, and when she took her hands away, the wound was healed.

He began to faint, then. As he fell off the table, he felt loving arms grab him before he hit the floor.

"Daniel . . . Daniel . . . what's wrong with you? Wake up, man. What's wrong with you?"

Daniel opened his eyes and saw Roger hovering above him. Daniel was lying on the floor of Roger's hardware store.

"God, you gave me a start, Daniel. Here, let me help you sit up." Roger pulled Daniel to an upright position. A customer came to him.

"Can I help?" she asked.

"I'm all right. Really, I'm fine," Daniel said. He wasn't fine. He wanted Santoo. "Where's Sam," he asked.

"Sam went down to the Eagle's Nest to get us a couple of chocolate shakes," Roger said. "He'll be back in a minute."

The bell tinkled on the door and Daniel heard the familiar sound of footsteps coming towards him. Santoo looked white. He was frightened for Daniel, and Daniel guessed that Santoo had telepathically picked up on Daniel's fear before Santoo had even walked into the store.

"Jimmy," Roger said, "take care of things up front while we take Daniel into my office." Roger pulled Daniel to his feet and then led him to the back of the store.

When the office door closed behind them, Daniel collapsed on a folding chair. He didn't mind that he

was also sitting on a pile of catalogs and magazines that Roger had left on the chair.

"Jeez, I'm sorry about that, Daniel. I should have cleaned it off first."

"No," Daniel said wearily, "that's fine. I've already had one empty apology today. I don't need another."

"They took you," Santoo said.

"Yes. How did I get here?"

"You drove right into the parking slot outside my store and got out of the van. You kind of stumbled into the door and then collapsed. What happened?"

"Roger, I couldn't have driven the van here. They took me out of it while I was driving into town," Daniel said incredulously.

"I'm telling you that I saw you drive your van up to the front of my store and park. It's sitting out there right now."

"That's . . . this is impossible."

"Maybe not, Daniel," Santoo said. "Have you ever heard of bilocation?"

"I think so. That's when a person is existing in two different places at the same time. You don't think . . ."

"What other explanation is there?"

"Well . . . does your technology enable you to do this?"

"No-at least not in the way you apparently experienced it. When I cloned a new body for Yankee, for just an instant he was in his old body and his new body at the same time. But when he finally found his new body, he left his old body behind."

Daniel shivered. "Yeah, I remember that all too well. But this experience I just had was . . ." A tiny black cricket suddenly skittered across Roger's desk. Daniel began to scream.

"I've got to get a handle on my life, Sara. Look at me. I've driven myself right into a hospital bed." He looked at his family who were gathered around him. "Rachel," Daniel signed, "you look so worried for me. Please don't worry about me."

Rachel began to cry. "I can't help it." She took her father's hand and held it tightly.

Daniel smiled and signed with one hand, "Let me go, Rachel. It's hard to sign with only one hand. Are you trying to muffle your old dad? Have you had enough of me?"

Rachel sniffled and then let go of Daniel's hand.

"Where's Eric?" Daniel asked.

"Julia's taking care of him," Roger said.

"I want to see him."

Sara said, "Perhaps . . ."

"I want to see him," Daniel said firmly.

Steve discreetly closed the door to Daniel's room as if in anticipation of what was to happen next. Chumaya touched the pendant on her amulet and disappeared. In only a few seconds she had returned with Eric.

"How did you explain your sudden appearance to my kids?" Roger said, aghast.

"I didn't," Chumaya said. "I walked through the front door."

"Daddy," Eric said, "are you all right?"

"I am now," Daniel said. He reached out and ruffled Eric's hair. "I want to talk to Eric alone."

They all looked at each another. Sara looked hurt by Daniel's request. "Sara, I'm not shutting you out. I just want to ask Eric a few questions. You know that I'll keep nothing from you."

"Yes, I know," she whispered. "We'll leave you alone." They all left the room until only Eric was standing before him.

"Sit up on the bed, Eric." Daniel reached down and helped Eric onto the bed.

"Did they hurt you, Daddy?" Eric asked sadly.

Daniel sighed. "Kind of. This time they kind of hurt me."

Eric folded his hands as if he were a fully mature little man. "Tell me about it, then."

Daniel told his son in detail what had happened to him. He didn't want to frighten Eric, but he hoped that Eric could provide some kind of clue to the aliens' behavior towards him. And in a very real way he was seeking comfort from a little boy—a little boy who was born on the ship these monsters lived on.

"Have you seen the praying mantisse insect on the ship before, Eric?"

"No." Eric shook his head solemnly from side to side.

"You haven't? Why do you think they wanted me to see this horrible image?"

"I don't know, Daddy. Maybe if you were more patient with them, they would be nicer to you. Do you think that would help you?" Eric asked sincerely.

"Eric," Daniel put his hand on Eric's shoulder, "these beings that you love so much are taking away my freedom. And they're taking away your mother's freedom and everyone else they take onto their ship. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Do you mean they put you in jail?"

Daniel pulled Eric onto his lap. "No, Honey. I'm not talking about that kind of freedom. I'm talking about the kind of freedom that makes you a prisoner of your own emotions. These friends of yours upset people so terribly, they can't think about anything else. That's why I'm in the hospital now. The beings scared me so much, I thought I was going to die."

"Oh, Daddy, please don't die." Tears began to run down Eric's cheeks.

Daniel cuddled him. "I'm not going to die. That's just an expression that right now I very much regret having made to you. What I mean by that is when the beings constantly frighten your mother and me we become very upset with them. We think about them all the time. We are even afraid to leave you with a baby sitter because we don't want the beings to take you back."

"Am I making you sad, Daddy?"

"No . . . no, of course not. You've made your mother and I very happy." Daniel sighed. "I think I'm saying all of this wrong. Why don't you go to the door and tell everyone to come back in."

Karen had released Daniel from the hospital and now they were home, sitting and visiting in the kitchen. Eric was asleep. It was one-thirty in the morning but Daniel wasn't tired-none of them were. Their nearly perfect-celled bodies didn't require as much sleep as the average human. "I should have never talked to Eric about this."

"You're just trying to find answers, Daniel," Chumaya said supportively.

"He's too young for me to have questioned him like that. He's just a little boy and I was expecting him to act like an adult."

"I suspect, Daniel, that this latest experience caused you to make a rather hasty judgement. Don't be too hard on yourself."

"Santoo, thank you for trying to get me off the hook, but it will take me some time to make things right with Eric."

Chumaya said, "Perhaps it's time Eric really knows how these beings are affecting your lives."

"He's only a little boy, Chumaya," Daniel said.

"Yes, he's only a little boy. But he was born on the alien ship. The conditions there appear to be quite terrible for a young child. Yet, Eric seems to have endured it well. Surely you've noticed how very wise Eric is. His maturity is far ahead of other boys his age."

"Well . . ."

Chuamaya reached across the table and gently laid her hand on Daniel's arm. "Trust him, Daniel. Trust him to be strong."

"He seems so vulnerable, though."

"Daniel, I believe that Eric was deliberately sent to both of you."

Daniel looked at Chumaya. "Sara and I often speculate about this. But what would be the purpose of sending us a boy who came from the genes of a full-blooded Zeta female?" Daniel shuddered at the pronouncement of his own words."

"Perhaps the Zeta can't give him what you and ta'Sara can give him. Perhaps they feel he can't realize his full potential unless he is raised by loving Earth humans."

Daniel took Sara's hands in his and he looked lovingly into her coal black eyes. "Maybe your mother's right. Maybe Eric truly needs us . . .

Sara? . . . Sara . . . are you all right?" Daniel sprang up and pulled Sara from her chair. Her head was rolling from side to side. "What's wrong with her?" Daniel asked frantically.

Santoo said, "Lay her on the floor-quickly!"

Daniel did as Santoo commanded. Sara moaned slightly and then rolled over on her side. With her free arm she wildly reached up and put her fingers in Daniel's hair. Then using Daniel's head for leverage, with a lurch she pulled herself to a sitting position. "I'm . . . all . . . right . . .," she said, her tongue lolling in her mouth as if she was drugged.

"You're not all right." Daniel looked at Santoo and Chumaya. "She's not all right. We have to help her."

Before either Santoo or Chumaya could offer assistance, Daniel grabbed Sara's wrists between his fingers. He was going to heal her. He had done this so often, the act came natural to him-even under this insane stress. But when he visualized her etheric body, her life force, he was terrified at the abnormality of it; it had never looked like this before; the envelope around her was swarming like a nest of snakes! "Santoo!"

Santoo took Sara's wrists and looked at her intently. "ta'Sara, say something to me," he said firmly.

"My mind is . . . split . . . I'm somewhere else Am I here?"

Where . . . am I?"

"You're home, Sweetheart. You're in your kitchen," Daniel said. "Look around you. Do you recognize where you are?"

Sara slowly looked around her. "I'm home . . . but I'm not home . . ."

"She's on the ship," Santoo whispered. "The other part of her that's there is telepathing to me. She's afraid. ta'Sara's afraid." Santoo took Sara in his arms and held her tightly. "It will be all right, ta'Sara."

Chumaya ran water into a glass and then held it to Sara's lips. "Drink this, Honey. Stay with us. Drink this."

Sara took the glass in her fingers and greedily gulped the water to the bottom of the glass. Then she began to shake. "Don't let Eric see me like this. Oh, dear God, don't hurt me! Saul, please help me! I don't want to wake Eric. I don't want to alarm him. Eric! Saul! Mother, help me. You are not Eric's

mother! Please don't touch me. Ahhh! Oh, God! It hurts!"

Sara gripped Daniel's shirt and yanked him to her. "It's sticking its claw into me, Daniel! Help me! Where's Eric?" In a lunge faster than anyone could follow, Sara lurched off the floor and ran towards Eric's bedroom. Before they could follow her she came out of the hallway with Eric in her arms. Abruptly awakened from a sound sleep, Eric began crying in terror. Sara stood dazed. Santoo took advantage of this momentary pause in her madness and he immobilized her from behind while Chumaya took Eric from her.

"Mommy! Mommy!" Eric screamed.

"I can feel it in me now! It's cold and it hurts!" Sara put her face into her hands and screamed into them. "Saul, make it stop! Make it stop!"

Then as quickly as it began, it ended, and Santoo, still holding her, let her slowly collapse to the floor.

Then Sara began to scream. "Mother! Mother, help me!"

"What's wrong with Mommy?" Eric wailed. "What's wrong with Mommy?"

Chumaya pulled Sara from the floor and then picked her up in her arms. Sara was hysterical-beyond comfort. Daniel reached for her.

"No, Daniel. I believe ta'Sara needs her mother now. Allow Chumaya to comfort her," Santoo said.

Daniel picked up Eric and held him. "Will Mommy be all right, Daddy? Will she be all right?"

"Shhh, Eric. Mommy will be all right. Grandfather and I are going to take you to bed now. Mommy will be all right."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Daniel and Santoo took Eric back into his bedroom. Eric didn't want to sleep-he was too upset-but eventually emotional exhaustion prevailed and Eric fell into a deep slumber. Santoo and Daniel talked a while, but finally went into their separate bedrooms.

Daniel softly closed the bedroom door behind him: he didn't want to wake Eric. Chumaya and Sara were still in the kitchen. Daniel wanted to take Sara to bed so he could comfort her. But he respected the close relationship Sara had with her mother. Sara would come to him when she was ready.

Water began to run in the plumbing. Someone was filling the hot tub.

"Daniel? . . . Daniel?" Daniel felt a soft hand gently shaking him awake. He rolled over towards the familiar voice.

"Hi," he said. He pulled her into bed and covered them both with the quilt. "I would have stayed with you, but . . ."

"Thank you for allowing my mother to take care of me," she gently interrupted. "You gave me what I needed by leaving me with her."

"I heard the water running."

"Yes. We went into the basement and Mother gave me a bath in the hot tub."

"Like when you were a little girl." Daniel said.

"Exactly like when I was a child. Mother used to sing to me when she bathed me, and I loved it so much when she gave me baths. I needed her care tonight."

"I'm thankful she was here for you. I'm thankful she could calm your hysteria. Two of us admitted into the hospital in one day would have been more than either of us could bear." He sat up and threw off the quilt. "Sit in the chair with me." They made their way to the rocking chair in the corner of their bedroom. Daniel sat down in it and pulled Sara into the chair with him. They rocked for a time, the gentle squeak of the springs lulling them into an almost meditative state. Finally Daniel said, "Did you see what I saw?"

"Oh, Daniel, I saw a huge insect. It was as tall as my father. It was bright green and horrible to look at. The thing moved like a real insect-jerky but intelligently cunning. I thought it was real."

"Was Saul there?"

"Yes."

"And did he apologize for the Zeta?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Did Saul give you a box like he gave me?"

"He did."

"And . . . ?"

"There was one marble inside. It was white, and . . . it was riddled with fissures. Even in my fear of the thing before me, I was temporarily distracted by this one cracked marble."

"Did the insect change to a Zeta?"

"Yes. But before it changed it told me it was Eric's mother. It makes me tremble to think of that now." She looked at him in the half light.

"Was the Zeta the female that says she is Eric's mother?"

"Yes, the same. The being was-kind-that seems so odd to say-to me."

"It was?"

"Yes. I asked her what the glass ball in the box meant. She said it was important to me, to my life."

"What did she mean?"

"I don't know what she meant."

"What happened to the glass ball-the marble?"

Daniel felt Sara tremble against him. "She touched me with her hands and opened the flesh that was over my heart. Then she pushed the marble deeply into it."

"But there's no wound," Daniel said.

"Yes," she whispered. "There is no wound." She stopped and took a breath. "I truly don't know how much more of this I can stand. How can we hope to ever live normal lives if the Zeta don't withdraw from our lives? I'm exhausted. You're exhausted. I don't know what is keeping us going."

Daniel looked off into the darkness. The faint glow from the night light seemed to comfort him in some small way. It seemed to signify that there was a small light, a small hope to an end of this madness. "I've been rethinking our experiences with them, Sara. The experiences we have had with the Zeta have been experiences of pure fear. This latest experience happened to both you and me, but it happened to us separately. I believe the Zeta wanted us to have this experience without the other present. That would make the experience even more frightening. And the insect, the praying mantisse image, wasn't real. It was an image put into our minds by the Zeta, but it was the most frightening image so far."

"So what does this have to do with anything? Haven't you been listening to me?"

"Yes. I have been listening. But think about it, Sara. Are these beings cruel to us because they have nothing better to do with their time? If they've been studying us, wouldn't they have finished long before now? You ask who's keeping us going-I think they are. What if these events are meant to teach us something?"

"What could they possibly teach us, Daniel? And how did you come to think this way?"

"It was something the Zeta female told me. After I angrily threw the box with its two black marbles to the floor, she picked up the marbles and shoved them into my face. Then she telepathed, 'Study, pay attention, learn'. And she was almost impatient about it. She was expressing emotion."

"I still don't understand."

"I'm not sure I do, myself, but suppose, just suppose, that all of these frightening encounters are meant to break through to us."

"In what way?"

"In a way of overcoming our fear. We have been bludgeoned over and over by the physical examinations, by the frightening images like the mantisse and the tank filled with fluid they threw me into and the rod they supposedly pushed through my head, by them keeping Eric for a time, by them keeping you for a time. Maybe they are trying to help us find our courage."

"Oh, stop. Now you're making them into heroes. Whatever bead they put in your head this time must have been a big one. We've got a baby on their ship, and you don't know if it's still there. And now you say we need to let them teach us courage?!" Sara pushed Daniel away and stood up. "I think you are

losing your mind."

"Sara, just hear me out . . ."

"Hear you out? You've got to be kidding. Hear me: If they loved Eric, if this creature was his mother, she wouldn't force him to watch you and I suffer when we are on that ship. She could not bear to see him confused and anxious. She would let him go. She is no mother. What 'mother' appears as a six foot insect? What mother puts fear and loathing into the hearts of her child's chosen parents? If she is his mother, then she is a monster. How does a monster produce such a lovely child?"

"I don't know if she was telling the truth. They don't parent as we do. Eric is resilient. He's young. He came from their ship, so deep down in his heart I think he knows that the Zeta would never truly hurt either one of us. The Zeta know that Eric knows that. Eric always seems to recover quickly from the Zetas' encounters with us. He of all of us has been the least damaged, for all the anxiety they've caused."

"And that means what?" She paused, waiting for an answer.

"Eric is not really afraid of them. He is one of them. Not-not in an evil, unfeeling way. But he understands them. He knows them. I don't know what they are trying to teach us, but they want us to learn something."

"They are the ones who need to learn something," Sara clipped, "I want the glass ball taken out of my chest."

"Karen x-rayed me in the hospital. She didn't find anything in me; she won't find anything in you, either."

"I want Father to investigate with his own equipment."

"Do you really think it's necessary? I'm weary of examinations and investigations, Sara. I'm weary of the poking and the prodding."

"So am I. And if you don't want him to examine you, fine. But I want the glass ball that I know is in me taken out."

Daniel sighed from sheer exhaustion. "All right. Your father can examine me too. Even though Karen's x-rays didn't show anything in me, I'll go along with it. But I want something else."

"What?"

"I want Saul to consent to more hypnosis. I want you to make him dig way down into his mind. He knows them, too, and he can tell us much more."

"Yes," Sara agreed, "Saul is getting off far too easy."

Daniel landed the shuttle next to Santoo's starship. Daniel, Sara, Santoo, and Karen got out. "Come with me, Daniel," Santoo said. "While we're here we might as well get the power lasers from Zarr. Or else I'll have to make another trip back here to get them." He turned and looked at Sara and Karen. "Would you like to come with us?"

Sara looked at Karen. "It's up to you," Sara said.

"Why don't we go into your father's ship and ready the equipment?"

"All right." Turning to Daniel and Santoo, Sara said, "Take your time. Karen and I will amuse ourselves in the ship."

Saying little to each other, they walked across the stone floor. When they arrived in front of Zarr's office, Daniel said, "I thought you might have the power lasers on your starship. It didn't occur to me that you would have them stored at this base."

"The lasers are for everyone's use. We use them seldom, so there is no need to equip every starship with them. We simply keep them here and then get them when we need them." Santoo stopped at Zarr's office door and tapped on it with his knuckles.

The door opened. "Hello, Santoo, Daniel," Zarr said. "What brings you out this way?"

"Hello," Santoo said. Santoo briefly told Zarr his business. Then the three of them went out of the office and walked to a small hut located thirty feet from Zarr's building. Zarr pulled open the door and they walked inside. The hut was filled with equipment. Some of the equipment appeared to be products of Earth technology while some of it looked like nothing Daniel had ever seen before.

"We'll need a lifting motor and a shuttle bed, Zarr."

Daniel's eyes widened. "We can't carry all that in the shuttle, Santoo."

"Yes we can. The shuttle bed hardware is in pieces. We'll have room."

"Would you be needing gravity belts, too?" Zarr asked.

"Yes," Santoo said. "They would be helpful. They may help hurry the work along." Santoo looked at Daniel and smiled. "Just wait until Roger tries out a gravity belt. He won't be able to sleep for a week!"

They took the equipment outside of the hut and laid it on the ground. Then Daniel and Santoo used their amulets to quickly teleport the equipment into the shuttle. When they had all the equipment inside, Santoo said, "We'll have to put this equipment into the service area below. Are you comfortable taking it there with your amulet, or would you rather we pass it down the ladder?"

"I think I'd rather pass it down the ladder, if you don't mind."

Santoo pressed the switch on the wall and the hole in the floor opened. Then he backed down the ladder until he could just reach the equipment that Daniel began handing him. When everything was secure below, Santoo came up the ladder and closed the hole in the floor. "Done," he said, as he quickly brushed the dust off his hands. "Now let's have a look inside you and ta'Sara."

Daniel hated this. Even though he knew it would be painless, he hated this. "Who would like to go first?" Santoo asked.

"I'll go first," Daniel said. "But I really don't think you'll find anything."

Karen swung the arm of the scanner across the table. "Lie down, Daniel," Karen said with authority.

"My, my, aren't we cocky when we're using starship technology," Daniel teased.

Karen blushed. "Is my attitude showing that badly?"

"Your attitude is just fine, Karen. I'm just rattling off at the mouth because I'm nervous."

"Daniel," Santoo said, "we haven't found anything yet. Just lie back and we will see if you have something to worry about."

Daniel lay back on the table top. He had a chilling recollection of the many times the Zeta doctor bent over him. But he deliberately pushed the memories from him as Karen pressed a switch on the scanner arm. The arm moved slowly across Daniel's chest.

"You look, Karen. I want you to have the experience."

Karen smiled at Santoo. "Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity." Karen bent down and looked into an eyepiece. She watched as the arm moved back and forth. Santoo rapidly changed settings on the arm as Karen looked into the eyepiece. "Nothing, Santoo. I see no foreign objects in Daniel's chest." She straightened up.

"That's impossible," Sara said. "I can feel the glass ball in my chest. Daniel says he feels it in his chest too."

"Then let's look at you," Karen said.

Daniel quickly slid off the table, relieved that Santoo wouldn't have to perform surgery on him. Sara sat on the table and then laid herself down. Karen started the scanner across Sara's chest. This time Santoo showed Karen how to change the scanner settings and while Karen did this, Santoo looked into the eyepiece.

"Nothing, ta'Sara. There is nothing unusual in you."

"I'm telling you that the Zeta put a glass marble in me. I saw her do it, Father," Sara said, exasperation in her voice.

"That may be, but there is nothing in you now," Santoo said patiently.

"May I look?" Karen asked respectfully.

"Of course," Santoo said.

Karen looked into the eyepiece as the scanner arm made yet another pass over Sara's chest. "I don't see anything either, Sara. You appear to be as clean."

Sara looked befuddled. Daniel took her hand and squeezed it nurturingly.

"I want it out," Sara whispered, tears in her voice.

"There's nothing to take out, Sweetheart," Daniel said encouragingly. "Two doctors, both of whom you trust implicitly, have given you their opinion, and it's the same opinion."

Santoo said, "ta'Sara, I respect your uneasiness, but you have nothing to be uneasy about." He looked at Karen. "Karen, as long as we are here, I would like to offer you something I know you very much want."

"Oh?" Curiosity spread across Karen's face.

"Yes. Yankee believes you are concerned about Yankee's new life span of two-hundred and fifty years. You would like a life span equal to Yankee's. Am I correct in assuming this?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Then it's as good as done. All you have to do is ask."

"Thank-you, Santoo, for your offer. I know Yankee would want me to say yes. I'll need some mental preparation time, I think. Let's talk about it further when you come back to Earth to live."

Sara stood quietly. Daniel put his arm around her in way of comforting her.

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

Daniel tried to hide his excitement but he could feel his heart pounding against his shirt. He'd have thought that by now Santoo's technology would no longer have such an effect on him. But he had read of gravity belts in science fiction novels. As a child he had dreamed and longed for such devices because they represented relief and escape from his polio affected body. And now he was going to see a real gravity belt work. He, himself, was going to use one.

The bell tinkled on Roger's hardware store door as Daniel pushed it open. "Are you excited, Daddy?" Eric said.

Daniel looked down at Eric. "Can you tell?"

"Always," Eric answered with a father-son intimacy that made Daniel love this boy. At the same time it saddened Daniel at the loss of their baby that he hoped and prayed was still somewhere on the Zeta ship. Almost as if Eric read Daniel's thought, he reached up and grasped Daniel's hand.

They walked to the back of the store to Roger's office. Daniel was disappointed when he found no one there. A clerk came up from behind. "Roger and Sam said I should tell you they're in the utility hut."

Daniel thanked the clerk. He led Eric out the back door and into the tan colored corrugated steel structure behind the store where Roger kept his van and equipment. The van was parked outside, now, and the door to the hut was closed. Daniel tapped on the door. "Anybody in there?" he called.

"Just a minute," Roger's muffled voice sounded behind the door. Roger opened the door. He was grinning.

"Where's Santoo?" Daniel asked.

"He's in the back making himself a cup of coffee." Roger made an expansive movement with his hands

showing the extent of the space Daniel and Eric had walked into. "I backed the van out so we would have enough room to use these belts," Roger said. "Are you ready to try this?"

"Maybe we should wait for Steve and Yankee," Daniel said. He could hardly contain himself now, but he knew that Santoo would prefer to teach everyone at once.

"Yeah, probably so . . . Hey, that's them, I bet," Roger said as he looked up at the sound of the banging door.

As Roger let Steve and Yankee in the door, Santoo came from the back, nursing a cup of coffee between his hands. "Good morning," he said cheerfully. "Is everyone ready?"

"So what are you going to do with your land after the shuttles are gone, Santoo? Sell it?" Roger asked. "That land has got to be worth a fortune. Some developer would make you a fantastic offer . . ."

"Roger, I can't sell it," Santoo said. "My grandson," Santoo looked affectionately at Eric, "needs a place to fish. The pond may not be very big, but it hid my starship once. A boy needs a place to fish—a place to play and explore." Now Santoo winked at Eric. Eric smiled back.

"Well, sure," Roger said. "I just thought . . ."

"You had a good thought, Roger, for an Earthling, but I intend to keep the property, even though our shuttles will soon be hidden on your land. Chumaya and I just may build a big, old-fashioned Earth home back in those woods. Now, let's get to work."

Roger turned to the door and locked it while Santoo laid out the gravity belts on the floor. The belts themselves were ordinary enough in appearance, but Daniel knew the electronic box fastened to the belt was far from ordinary. Although Daniel hadn't yet seen the gravity nullifying power of the belt, Santoo had explained its workings to him the night before. The belt generated its own gravity field much like the shuttle drive. A small control panel on the belt enabled the wearer to change the gravity phase angle in relation to the direction of the Earth's gravity. In principle the belt was simple in design, but Daniel knew that having gravity field technology was many years advanced Earth technology.

Santoo picked up a belt. "Eric, I promise you that I will show you how to use this."

"Can I wear it, Grandfather?"

"You can. But you will have to wait until after I instruct everyone else. All right?" Santoo smiled warmly at his grandson.

"All right," Eric said.

Santoo strapped on a belt and looked at their eager faces. "I'll demonstrate. After you are familiar with the belt's performance, you can try them yourselves." Santoo looked at Roger. "And Roger, if you don't control yourself, you very likely will brain yourself on the ceiling of this storage shed."

Roger laughed uproariously, partly out of anticipation, but partly, Daniel suspected, out of nervousness. To nullify gravity was an alien concept. The closest anyone had come to it was in a swimming pool. But even that wasn't true weightlessness. As Daniel churned these ideas through his mind, Santoo spoke through his thoughts. "Daniel," Santoo said good naturedly, "you think far too much. You will be used to weightlessness much sooner than you think."

Now Santoo set to work. First he demonstrated the control pad on the belt. The yellow button started the unit. A short joy stick with a button on its top gave five directional controls: pull was up; push was down; right was right; left was left; and the button on the top of the stick provided forward motion. The most difficult maneuver to learn was to turn themselves around in space. That was done simply by turning the body. Gravity was nullified, but the body still had mass; it still had momentum. But they all caught on quickly and they laughed like children as time and again they misjudged their speed and slammed into the side of the storage hut. If anyone would have walked by the hut, they would have thought everyone inside was drunk. They were. They were drunk with joy.

"Mommy, it was so fun! We looked like fish in my aquarium! We were swimming in the air!" Eric was breathless as he gleefully told his story to Sara.

"My, it sounds like you had a wonderful day."

"I did, Mommy! I had a wonderful day!"

Chumaya picked Eric up and put him on her lap. "I'm going to miss you so much when we leave, Honey. But we'll be back soon; I promise."

"I'll miss you too, Grandmother." Eric put his arms around Chumaya's neck and squeezed her tightly.

"I wish you didn't have to go," Daniel said. He felt curiously tired.

"I don't want to go," Santoo said. "Chumaya and I have never felt more wanted or more loved in our lives as we have here. When we come back, Eric and I can do some serious fishing." Santoo leaned down and kissed Eric on the cheek. "But let's not be sad. We have a few more days left here before we have to return to space."

"Can we build the shuttle bays in only one night, Santoo?" Daniel asked. Dinner was over and Daniel was fighting hard to stay awake. He noted this as odd because his new cells gave him an amplified energy that made sleepiness almost a thing of the past. Sleepiness was a symptom of his old life.

"Yes. But we'll have to start as soon as darkness gives us the cover we need. Even with the holographic cloaker we'll use from the shuttle, I still prefer the cover of darkness. That way if the cloaking device should fail, we are still hidden from prying eyes."

Santoo looked at Daniel a long while. "What is the matter with you, Daniel? You don't look yourself. Not getting an Earth disease, are you?"

"I can't be. I'm perfect, remember?"

"I saw you limping when we returned today. Are you sure you are feeling all right?"

"I'm sure I'm all right, Santoo." He let out a tired sigh. "I wouldn't miss tonight for anything." But inside, Daniel knew he wasn't feeling his best. His breathing was becoming labored, a reminder of his past disability. A few minutes later, however, he felt better, and said so. He was ready to go to work. Maybe

he was just depressed because Santoo and Chumaya were leaving. That was probably it, he decided.

Santoo, Daniel, Sara, Roger, and Yankee began the task of digging new holes for Daniel's and Santoo's shuttle. And although Roger's property was familiar to Daniel, floating in a gravity belt and dematerializing dirt with power lasers, lit only by short range lights, gave Daniel the feeling of being on another planet.

At first the work went quickly, but the euphoric joy they had experienced with their first exposure to the gravity belts faded rapidly as they got down to the task of digging the hole and installing the motors and shuttle harnesses. In the end it was hard work, but the work was finished by five in the morning.

The next night they filled the shuttle hole on Santoo's property. Then in the graying of the dawn they scattered grass seed across the new dirt. In a few weeks the old shuttle bay would be swallowed up by the timber floor.

They had installed the new shuttle bays side by side in a ravine. That in itself was good cover. But Santoo hadn't brought a sliding deck to conceal his own shuttle; he didn't have enough room to carry the many pieces that when fastened together made the plate that so cleverly slid into place over the shuttle's storage space. Santoo would bring these parts with his starship when he and Chumaya went back into space. Scrap lumber from the hotel served as a temporary cover.

"Done for now," Santoo said. "Let's go home. Now if the night militia group is roaming those woods, they will find absolutely nothing."

Daniel couldn't sleep. He was having trouble breathing. Too much excitement for one night. He rolled over and put his arm around Sara's quiet slumbering form. For a moment he felt safe. The house was quiet. The light beam of the Zeta had left them alone for several days now. Would this be the end of it? he wondered. But he knew better.

He sat up slowly in bed so he wouldn't disturb Sara. The late spring evening was just chilly enough to make the house uncomfortably cool. Concerned that Eric might get cold if he had kicked his covers off, Daniel got up to check on him.

Daniel got out of bed and felt his way to Eric's bedroom. He leaned on the wall for support. Maybe he'd given up the exo too soon. He groaned quietly as his knee brushed against the door jamb of Eric's room. His leg was sensitive and hurt when he put weight on it. The Mickey Mouse night light flooded the room with a warm, friendly glow. But Eric wasn't in his bed! Daniel's nerves were on fire: the Zeta had Eric; Daniel was sure of it.

He tried to think. He tried to stop and reason it out. He knew he had to search the house. He couldn't panic and wake the household and scare everyone to death. These thoughts surged through him as he tried to maintain control of himself.

Daniel walked around Eric's bed, thinking Eric might in his sleep have worked himself off the bed and onto the floor. But Eric wasn't on the floor. Daniel quietly pulled Eric's door shut and then flipped on the bed lamp by Eric's pillow. He got down on the floor to look under the bed. It could have been that Eric was frightened by his dreams and sought refuge under the bed, then fell asleep there. Anything was possible.

But Eric wasn't there. Daniel gathered himself, stood up, and turned off the bed lamp. Then he opened

Eric's door. Not knowing what to do, he made his way to Rachel's room. If he was quiet, he could awaken Santoo, and Santoo would help him look.

As Daniel opened the bedroom door and he could see into the bedroom, relief swept through him. Eric was sound asleep on Rachel's bed, safely nestled between his grandparents. Daniel's knees felt weak. He put his hand against the wall to steady himself. A voice in a whisper, Chumaya's voice, said, "He's all right, Daniel. He's safe."

Daniel went to the side of the bed and leaning over Chumaya, kissed Eric on the cheek. Then he whispered, "Come talk to me, Chumaya."

"All right," Chumaya whispered in return. She carefully got out of bed. As she shifted her weight to the side of the bed, the spring squeaked; Chumaya froze. But Eric slept on. He was in that deep sleep only little boys experience.

They quietly made their way to the kitchen. Daniel found himself holding onto Chumaya's arm for support. They sat across from each other at the kitchen table and Daniel turned the rheostat up ever so slightly-just enough so they could see each other's faces. "I thought the Zeta had him again," Daniel said, shivering with relief.

"I know. But when Eric crawled into bed with us it wouldn't have been practical to wake you just to tell you that Eric was sleeping with us."

"No. It was just a fluke that I woke up anyway. He pinched his nose and rubbed his eyes, then said, 'I've got to stop worrying like this, Chumaya. I can't live in constant fear of the Zeta and what they might do to us.'" As Daniel laced his fingers together and squeezed his hands, his whole body began to tremble with fright. "Sara's at the end of her rope. I try to reason it out, and understand, but I can't."

Chumaya gently touched his arm. "I know that all too well, but I don't know how to help you. I don't know how to help me. We are living a nightmare. I feel very sad that Santoo and I have to leave you once again."

"You'll be back," Daniel said almost mournfully.

"Yes, we'll be back. But at what cost will our leaving be to you? Santoo and I are as powerless against the Zeta as you, but at least we can lend emotional support if we're here."

"You don't have to be here to lend emotional support, Chumaya. Your friendship and your love reaches out to us all the way across the universe." Daniel felt a lump forming in his throat. "Why are they doing this, Chumaya? Are we really supposed to learn something from them? Can anything positive come out of this experience, if this experience ever ends?"

Chumaya looked down at the table. "What part have these beings had in my life? What have they done to me in the past? What do they want with me now?"

"Chumaya . . ." Daniel reached for Chumaya's hand in an attempt to comfort her.

"I'm afraid, Daniel. Please don't tell ta'Sara how fearful I am."

"I don't have to tell her. She already knows."

"Yes," Chumaya said with a sound of resignation in her reply.

Daniel got up and went to the refrigerator and opened the door. He took out a can of ginger ale and handed it to Chumaya. Then he pulled out a can of cola and sat down again. "Do you have any clear memories of your experiences with the Zeta?"

"As a child I had horrible nightmares. Many nights my parents would come rushing to my bedroom to comfort me when I would wake up screaming. Now I know that my nightmares weren't nightmares at all; they were real experiences when the Zeta abducted me." Chumaya took a deep breath and said, "Now some of the memories that eluded me have recently become very clear. Specific memories of past encounters with them snapped into focus when the Zeta took you and Santoo and me."

Daniel took a swallow of soda. "Can you tell me about your memories?"

"No," Chumaya whispered, tears in her voice now.

"I don't want to pry, Chumaya," Daniel said gently. "I just thought that maybe you could help shed light on our experiences." Daniel was hurt that Chumaya wouldn't trust him enough to share her experiences with him. He thought they were much closer than that.

"Daniel, please don't be hurt. I haven't told ta'Sara. I haven't even told Santoo what I experienced. I haven't even told them I remember."

"But why?" Daniel did love Chumaya very much. He would fight for her well-being as strongly as if Sara's well-being were threatened.

"I can't speak of it, Daniel. I can't face the reality of what they did to me."

Daniel sat back on his chair. "What did they do to you?" he murmured.

She hesitated. "There were-examinations. I'm afraid of what that might mean. ta'Sara's eyes-you must know what I'm thinking."

Daniel stared at her. Sara had feared this very thing. She had brooded about the possibility so much, at times it almost debilitated her. Could it be true? Could Sara really have been the result of some sort of genetic mutation between Chumaya and the Zeta? He closed his eyes against the thought.

"I've disgusted you."

"No, Chumaya, you haven't. Sara and I have worried about this possibility so much. We prayed that this could not have happened. I mean, we couldn't think of any way that . . ."

"I fear it may have. I hope with all my soul that I'm wrong. You must promise me that you will tell no one of what I just confided, especially not ta'Sara. Promise me, Daniel."

Daniel picked up Chamaya's hands and kissed them. "I promise, dear mother-in-law. I won't tell a soul. I won't tell Sara. But she already knows. She's been dealing with this possibility for a long time. She'll read my thoughts and she'll know everything we said here tonight" He paused. He was afraid to tell Chumaya what was eating at him.

"Chumaya . . . I need to confide in you, now."

Chumaya leaned forward. "What would you like to share with me?"

Daniel didn't know how to begin because he didn't even know if the conclusions he'd come to were even true. "Your confession a moment ago made me think. I . . . think I know what the marbles mean—at least the black ones." Did he, or was he simply trying to add meaning to his experience of high strangeness with the Zeta?

"You're referring to the experience with the mantisse being that you and ta'Sara both had?"

"Yes. I believe . . ." He hesitated, then continued, "I believe the two black marbles refer to Sara's eyes. I don't know if this means they manipulated her genes to give her those eyes, or if it simply means Sara must face the reality of her eyes. I'm not sure, exactly . . ." Daniel ran his fingers through his hair in frustration and puzzlement.

"But, Daniel, the being opened your chest and pushed the marbles inside you, into your heart."

"Yeah," Daniel said softly, "into my heart."

"Then perhaps the being is trying to communicate in her own strange way that you must face the reality of ta'Sara's eyes-of ta'Sara's origin. Perhaps that's what is meant by her act."

"But I accept Sara's eyes, Chumaya. I accept every part of her."

"Yes, but you had a most difficult time accepting her when you first learned of her eyes, Daniel."

"Sure, but . . ."

Chumaya looked at Daniel kindly. "Everyone, regardless of how certain they are of the way they feel towards another, harbor some guilt, some reservation about the other."

Daniel sighed. "Yes."

"Can you accept her if she is part Zeta?"

"I can accept her. I can't accept them. She can't be one of them. She feels passionately and completely. How can she be part of them?"

"Then you can't accept her?"

"I don't know. I don't know."

Abruptly, Chumaya changed the subject. "What do you think the single marble that was put into ta'Sara meant?"

"Well, Sara said the marble was riddled with fissures. I'm still working on what this might mean."

"Perhaps . . ."

Daniel put up his hand. He didn't have to read Chumaya's mind to know what she was about to suggest. "Now, wait a minute. If you think the busted up marble is referring to my busted up body, you're wrong."

I have perfect cells now. Near perfect, at least . . . I think . . ."

"Yes, Daniel, you were rapidly becoming a nearly perfect physical specimen, but you were not always this way."

"What do you mean, were?"

"Something is changing in you, isn't it? Santoo noticed, and so have I."

"I don't think anything is changing. The Zeta are always up to their maddening tricks. I'll be fine. Sara accepted me the way I was. They didn't have to stage some strange, symbolic event to make her understand that my body at one time was crippled. She knew me back then."

"But perhaps they gave her the marble as a sign that she must accept you fully."

"She has, Chumaya. She loves me-almost without reservation."

"Did you hear what you just said, Daniel? You said ta'Sara loves you almost without reservation."

Daniel was becoming confused. Giving the Zeta some sort of symbolic ability was beyond him at this moment. It was like giving them souls. He could feel the need for reflection and a bit of sleep.

"Daniel, could ta'Sara accept you if you were disabled now?" Chumaya's question pierced his heart. Love was easy when your body was whole and strong. When your mind was alert and functioning. When breathing was easy and deep and strong. When your arms could lift and carry your woman away. He didn't want to contemplate the alternative. Not for himself and not for Sara.

He stood up. "Time to go back to bed. This is only speculation on our part anyway ." He got up from his chair and without warning collapsed onto the floor.

Chumaya rushed to his side. "Are you all right, Daniel?"

He tried to speak, but couldn't. "My leg went out. My God, I can't move," he telepathed.

The Zeta had paralyzed him once again. No-that was not quite right. They had severely reduced his strength. He could almost feel his back curve into scoliosis, even more pronounced than it had been when he was disabled. Was disabled. I'm disabled again. He felt his left leg shrinking. All of the muscle tone was withering away as he lay there. His breathing became labored as his chest muscles shriveled. He tried to calm himself, for he knew that they had to be playing with him, and would soon restore his functions. They always restored him. Hadn't they? Wouldn't they? He felt as though the wind was knocked out of him. Sara and Santoo were now at his side. He could feel Sara's hands on him. He could feel her fear. He could hear the frantic wails of Eric, but he couldn't see him. "Turn me over. Roll me onto my back," he mentally croaked the command.

They did so. He was becoming so weak, he found it hard to breathe. His breath came in great gulps. This was worse than his polio days. This was far worse. "They're taking my strength from me! I can't breathe! Help me! God, help me! I can't breathe!" Daniel tried to keep calm but his panic was compounding his condition.

Santoo said, "Daniel, I'm going to go into your energy field and try to help you."

"Hurry! I feel like I'm suffocating!"

Santoo leaned over Daniel. Daniel didn't know if Santoo took him by his wrists because he could feel nothing. "I don't feel anything, Santoo. They've got me this time. They're sick of me. They're going to do me in."

"Nonsense, Daniel," Santoo said encouragingly.

But Daniel knew Santoo was very alarmed. "Chumaya . . . ta'Sara . . . both of you join me in this healing effort," Santoo said, his voice cracking with emotion.

"I'm dying, Santoo. I'm dying. I can't breathe." Daniel felt himself blacking out. When he awoke, he was in a hospital room and on a ventilator.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Daniel stared dully at the people standing around his bed. "What . . . happened . . . to . . . me . . .?" Daniel said as he waited for the ventilator to give him enough breath to speak.

Santoo telepathed, "Apparently the Zeta are keeping you in a paralyzed state, Daniel. We've tried to help you, but we don't seem to be very effective." Then he added, "I'm telepathing this sensitive information to you because doctors and nurses have been coming and going into your room ever since we brought you here."

"Yeah," Daniel said. His breath hissed as he talked. "I . . .

understand . . ." Sara was holding his hand and Rachel stood like a statue next to her father. She looked as if her heart was going to break. "Could . . . we have . . . some time . . . alone . . .?" Daniel asked.

"Of course," Chumaya said. Rachel looked as if she had just had her life taken from her. "I can't sign . . . to you . . . Baby . . . I can't . . . talk

to . . . you . . . Sara reached over and wiped his eyes with a tissue.

"You can telepath to me, Dad," Rachel signed. "You can still communicate with me." Her smile was a mix of encouragement and profound sadness.

"I know, Baby. I'm so frightened," Daniel telepathed.

"I know you are," Rachel signed.

They left the room, then-all except for Sara. "What have they done to me, Sara?" Daniel telepathed. "What have they done to you and the rest of my family? What are we going to do?"

"We will cope, Daniel," Sara said simply.

"No, you will cope. I will die. I can't live this way forever."

Sara put her arms around him. "We have to wait and see what the Zeta do next. You cannot give up, Daniel. I will not allow you to give up. There are many people who have suffered catastrophic accidents

and diseases and are living full lives in spite of it. You must not give up."

Daniel thought of the cracked marble. He had perfect cells. He had beaten polio. He was strong and whole and on the way to living a healthy two hundred or so more years. Was this to be his fate? Would he live out his life as a broken shell of a person? Were the Zeta telling him this in their own sick way? This was worse than the worst days of his boyhood. At least he had always been able to breathe then. Now he couldn't even do that. He remembered an older girl in his town, a girl named Jane, who had gotten polio a short while after he had. Jane was in an iron lung when he had visited her. He remembered feeling terrified, hearing the pumping of the machine that was forcing her lungs to expand and contract. He remembered she could only move her head. He couldn't even do that, now. He'd thanked God right then and there for his good luck. He'd lost much of the use of his legs. Jane had lost much more. Now he was worse off even than she. "Sara," Daniel telepathed, "your father hasn't tried any of his technology on me yet. I'm here in this hospital room with end of the millennium technology keeping me alive, but your father hasn't had a chance to try his own techniques on me."

"Father isn't hopeful, Daniel." Sara was wiping tears now.

"Why not?"

"Because Father is sure the Zeta are immediately nullifying his attempts to help you. He has tried numerous times to bring you out of this, but he thinks the Zeta are nullifying his efforts."

"Then there's little anyone can do. If your father can't help me, no one can help me."

Eleven days had passed since Daniel had fallen victim to the Zeta's paralysis. He had regained some of his arm and leg function, but was still far worse off than any time he'd spent as a polio survivor. Santoo and Chumaya had delayed their trip to another part of the galaxy. They were not about to leave Daniel's side. Daniel felt himself slipping away from them all day by day. Visitors came and went. Benjamin and Harriet stopped by often. And Roger was a regular. Even Michael Torgelson came by more than once. At least no one would suspect Daniel of magically losing his disability, now. Santoo was helpless. He had tried, but finally realized he didn't have the ability to perform a permanent healing. Karen had at times taken Daniel to several different rooms in the hospital so Santoo could try to help him away from prying eyes. But nothing Santoo had tried seemed to do much for Daniel. And they knew why: Santoo's procedures would restore Daniel for an instant, but the Zeta would simply return him to his previous state. Their technological power was massive compared to Santoo's.

Karen hovered over Daniel. He appreciated her care, but had no hope that she could help him. Karen had diagnosed Daniel's sudden illness, for the benefit of the other doctors, as Post-Polio Syndrome. Daniel knew what that was. When people first fell victim to polio, usually at a young age, the virus destroyed horn cells in the spine. This effectively severed communication between the brain and the muscle bundles. The affected muscle bundles atrophied, leaving only a few bundles to do the job of what would normally be many. Over time the few remaining bundles, having overworked themselves through the years, finally gave out. It was not uncommon for polio survivors to have sudden attacks of permanent paralysis. The diagnosis was an easy one for Karen to sell, and for all they knew, it was the right diagnosis. Sometimes, with bed rest, those attacked by PPS at times got a good deal of their strength back, but sometimes they did not.

But Daniel didn't know if the Zeta would be so kind. They had shown him no kindness in the past and he didn't expect them to show him kindness now.

Saul came to see Daniel every day. He was distraught by Daniel's ventilator and struggles with breathing. He had no idea how he could communicate with the Zeta on Daniel's behalf. But Daniel was glad when Saul would come. Saul was a kind man, and Daniel knew that Saul was simply a pawn in the Zeta's game.

Sara was there. Sara was always there. She never left his side.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Two weeks later found Daniel operating a motorized wheelchair. He was heartsick. He had lost everything, and wondered if Sara would ever be able to stick with him. The Zeta had allowed him to recover before, but this time they were taking their time. And even though he knew better, he at times panicked that the Zeta weren't behind his sudden paralysis at all. Santoo and Chumaya were leaving the planet. Daniel would have loved to have flown to the starship with them, but he knew he wasn't up to the trip. Besides, the wheelchair was cumbersome and would take up needed space. So Sara and Eric would go with them to the base, and his only comfort was knowing that the trip would provide intimate time for them.

Daniel went to his telephone and managed to punch the speed dial. "Roger, Santoo said he's heading our way and would have the starship over the hotel in just a few more moments."

"Okay. Is Sara bringing you out?"

"No. She followed her parents to the Peru base. She and Eric are heading back now and it will take her awhile, so you'll have to pick me up."

"She's . . . not going to help you come out?"

"Damn it, Roger, there's nothing wrong between us, if that's what you're thinking. Our shuttle doesn't have the speed the starship does so Sara won't be back for awhile."

"Sorry, buddy," Roger said. "I'll be right there." Daniel hung up the phone and waited for Roger.

"We've arrived, Daniel." Santoo's telepathed voice rang clear in Daniel's head. "All right," Daniel telepathed in return.

"We are directly above you. The ship is cloaked. The area is too small to accommodate the ship, so I believe I will bring the cover plates to you one at a time with the aid of the amulet."

"Roger's coming up, Santoo."

"You've been teaching him the ways of the amulet?"

"Yes" He looked at Roger who was patiently waiting for Daniel to speak to him. "Roger, Santoo's ready for your help."

Roger looked at Daniel, a slight look of fear in his eyes. He puffed out his cheeks. "I'm glad I've

practiced with this thing." He took the amulet off Daniel's neck and put it on his own.

"Don't panic on me," Daniel said.

"I won't panic." Roger closed his eyes and as they had rehearsed, Daniel visualized Roger's target point. He telepathed to Roger a clear image of the bridge of Santoo's ship. In an instant Roger had disappeared.

A few moments later Roger and Santoo were on the ground. Santoo was laying his own load onto the grass. As Santoo disappeared to go back to the ship to get another load, Daniel explained to Roger how to assemble the plates. It wouldn't be long and the two storage bays would be finished and hidden from view.

Santoo appeared for a moment, took Daniel's hand, smiled and said, "Until I see you again."

"Have a good trip," Daniel said. Daniel was crying openly. He couldn't hold back his misery.

"Daniel, we don't want to leave you and ta'Sara. It's tearing my heart out to leave you. You know this. I didn't even want Chumaya to come down and say good-bye. It would just make it that much more difficult for us all."

"Santoo, the Zeta will do what they please with me whether you are here or not. I'll be fine." He didn't have the strength in his arms to wipe his own tears or to embrace Santoo.

Santoo held Daniel for an instant. Then he let him go, touched his amulet and disappeared.

Daniel heard a faint change in the sound of the starship's drive: He knew Santoo was in the captain's chair and was preparing to head out into space. Santoo uncloaked the ship and it became visible to them for just an instant. Then it was gone.

Roger carried the plates up to the hotel to store them inside. The plates weren't heavy, just bulky. Steve and Yankee would help Roger assemble the sliding cover the next evening, if it didn't rain. It was imperative they cover the shuttle bay with a permanent cover. Daniel and Sara's shuttle was already obscured by the cover they had been using in the old location, but Santoo's shuttle was wide open to anyone who might wander onto Roger's land, although few did. This was a much safer location than the open woods that lay relatively close to roads. In a few days Roger would have Santoo's new repelling circuit installed around his own property. Santoo assured Roger that it would be impossible for anyone to wander onto the land when the circuit was operating.

Roger stacked the plates just inside the door. As he was finishing, Daniel was startled at the sound of a cell phone ringing in Roger's van. A feeling of dread poured through him.

"I gotta get that." Roger turned and ran to the van.

A moment later he was back at Daniel's side.

"We gotta go, Buddy. Right now. That was Steve. He's found something out by the old abandoned Wagner property."

"Found what?"

"I'll explain on the way. We have to get you loaded up." Roger looked wild and he manipulated the wheel chair roughly. Daniel winced. If only he could use the pendant to transport both of them. But he didn't even have the strength to lift his legs. His transporting days were on hold for now. The ride in the van was bumpy and seemed to take forever. Daniel's delicate energy reserves were ebbing fast. He was again having trouble breathing. More and more he felt trapped in his old body. The exo-skeleton had not helped him. Nothing had helped. He was a Polio survivor in the worst sense of the word.

As Roger turned the van into the long farm lane, Daniel heard Steve screaming at them to hurry. The screaming came from behind the tree line up ahead. Daniel felt eerie as Roger plunged through the trees and down the hill towards Steve's voice. Santoo used to hide his starship here. Daniel was healed here only a few months ago. He prayed that Steve wasn't wrong; he prayed that it wasn't Santoo's craft that was down. He sat in the van, watching and waiting.

"Follow me!" It was Steve's voice. Daniel couldn't see anyone. He was alone and he was totally helpless.

After what seemed to be an eternity, Steve came running across the open field toward the van.

"You have to see this, Daniel. I'll carry you." He opened the van door and scooped Daniel up into his arms. Daniel gritted his teeth against the jostling he was getting. He didn't want to be carried like a baby. But there was no choice. Steve hurried through the trees until they came to a sight that made Daniel sick to his stomach. A craft-not an airplane, not the starship or the shuttle-but a strange metal craft lay in a twisted heap on the ground. In the middle of the wreckage a column of smoke went up. At first he thought it was his own shuttle. Sara! But it wasn't. It didn't look like his shuttle.

"It's burning, Steve!" Daniel yelled. "There might be someone inside! Put me down. You've got to go in there!"

Steve put Daniel on the grass. "It's too risky, Daniel. We don't even know what it is."

"I know what it is!" Daniel panted. "It's a Zeta shuttle craft! Go! Go!"

Steve ran to the burning wreck and frantically pulled on the door, but it was warped and jammed by the crash. Roger grabbed its edges and strained to pull it open and the door gave way. They piled through the doorway and Daniel lost sight of them.

"There must be someone in there," Daniel called desperately from where he lay. He could not see clearly from his spot on the grass. He tried to crawl forward. His lungs were burning from the exertion. "Follow me." That was Roger's voice he heard. Then Daniel heard nothing. The fire was out of control. He tried to change his direction, crawling away from the vehicle rather than toward it. He could not move but a few feet; then he lay on the grass, exhausted.

He turned to see Roger and Steve carrying something from the craft. It looked like a body. They ran over to him and lay the thing down next to him. Daniel was aghast-the being was a Zeta, and it lay on its back, its limbs moving feebly but purposefully.

Daniel stared at the being. It lay with its huge, black lidless eyes staring upward. "Are you all right?" Daniel asked. "Can you telepath?" With a tenderness towards this being he didn't know he possessed he touched its head with his half paralyzed hand and with the back of his fingers stroked it in a comforting way.

"Injured . . . Please help this entity . . ." it telepathed feebly.

And then in a sickening flash of recognition he knew: this being was the female that was Eric's mother!
"Oh, dear God, Daniel said, frantic, "how badly are you injured?"

"Limbs . . . limbs . . . pain . . ."

Daniel looked at the being's limbs. Now he could see the frail, gray left leg of the being sticking crookedly to one side. It was broken above the knee. But the other leg as well as the arms looked sound. "I think only your one leg is broken," Daniel offered hopefully.

"Daniel," Roger shouted behind him, "the fire is starting to creep across the grass! We've got to move you away from here!"

Daniel looked at the flames eating away at the twisted wreck. "Okay," he said with a calmness that amazed him. "Look for something that we can wrap around her leg to immobilize it."

Roger picked up a piece of metallic-like paneling laying nearby that had blown away during the crash. They used the panel as a splint and Roger used his shoestring to wrap the panel along the Zeta's broken leg. The being groaned into Daniel's thoughts as they unintentionally displaced the broken limb. "Sorry," Daniel said. "I'm so sorry, but we have to get you out of here." He took the being's small hand in his own. It was all he could do. The heat from the flames was making him sweat.

Steve put his arms under the being's legs and torso. "I'm going to lift you up and carry you out." Daniel couldn't believe that a Zeta was feeling anything, including pain.

"Get them away," the being telepathed with an urgency Daniel didn't know it possessed.

Daniel gripped his amulet and visualized the farmyard. "All of you hold onto me. I can try to teleport us as a group if you hang onto me." He had to do this. Daniel had to overcome his paralysis and do this. He visualized a point close to the van and in an instant they found themselves there.

"Not bad," Steve choked. From behind them came the sound of an explosion.

Daniel looked at them both in alarm. Now that his eyes were clearing, he could see that their faces were beet red. "You're burned, both of you!"

"We'll be all right," Steve said. "Tend to the . . . the being first. We'd better move quickly. The firetrucks will be here soon. I'm sure someone has called this in by now." Steve looked down at the Zeta lying so still on the grass. His eyes registered horror at the very alienness of it, but Daniel was proud of Steve as he watched him make a valiant effort to keep his fear in check.

"What can I do for you?" Daniel asked it.

"Nothing," the being telepathed. "You can do nothing."

"But your leg-it's broken."

"You can do nothing. Allow this entity to die."

"No, I'm not going to let you die."

"Leave this entity."

"No," Daniel said stubbornly. "We're not going to leave you here. We've got to get you . . ." He hesitated. "How will we get you back to the ship?"

The entity telepathed nothing.

Daniel looked up at Steve and Roger who were now hovering over him. He could hear sirens in the distance. "Roger, maybe we could take her into the hotel."

"Yeah . . . yeah, I suppose we could," Roger stammered. "We can't leave it out here-that's for sure. Do you want to take it in first and then come and get us?"

"Yes," Daniel said. "And this being isn't an 'it'; this being is a 'her'." He smiled at the expressionless face that continued to stare at the sky. "I'm sorry we have to hide you," Daniel said. "But if anyone should see you . . ."

"This entity understands," the being telepathed. "This entity will die without your help."

"You're not going to die," Daniel said encouragingly.

"Let me take her, Daniel. I can visualize the inside of the hotel," Roger said.

"Good-you take her." Daniel was relieved Roger was willing to try to transport her with the amulet. Daniel's last attempt at transporting them all to the van left him fearful he didn't have enough emotional strength left to focus his target point.

Roger bent down and put his arms under the entity and gently lifted her up. Steve quickly put Daniel's amulet around Roger's neck and Roger closed his eyes. Then he and the Zeta were gone.

Before, Daniel was the strong one, the hero. Now he lay helpless in the grass, wondering what was going to happen next. Even his horrific experiences with the Zeta had not prepared him for this overwhelming sense of helplessness.

"Daniel! I have to carry you to the car before the firetrucks get here." Steve picked up Daniel as he spoke. From far away Daniel could hear the fire trucks.

"How are you going to explain me being out here?" Daniel asked

Man, I don't know. I wish Roger would get back. What if he's stuck with the amulet?"

"Drive the van with me in it into the trees. Let me sit. Maybe I can call to Sara. She should be getting back soon with the shuttle."

Without another word, Steve placed Daniel onto the passenger seat, then hurried around to the other side of the van and climbed in. He started the engine and he pulled the van over the ruts and into the woods. Daniel could see the wreckage from his seat, but to his relief the fire had consumed almost all evidence of a wreckage.

"This is the best I can do. I sure miss your strength, Daniel."

"Steve, this is pure hell for me. I'll take the Zeta anytime."

"I gotta get back out there by my squad car. They'll be here any minute. I'll be back as soon as I can." Then Steve was gone. Daniel spent the next half hour watching the firefighters douse the blaze and scratch their heads at its cause. The wreckage had disintegrated in the blaze and left no trace of its nature. It took a long time for them to leave the scene. He was tired from sitting without some support. His chin was drooping over his chest. Breathing was difficult. He tried to pull himself up, but found he could not. What was happening to Roger?

Suddenly he sensed a person near him.

"Daniel, it's me." It was Sara, opening the door of the van. "I've been cloaked and hovering over this place for an hour, waiting for the firefighters to leave."

"And I've been hiding in this damned van. Take me to Roger at the hotel, Sara. Take us with the amulet."

"No. I'll carry you to the shuttle." She scooped him out of the seat and ran to the waiting craft. The cloaking dissolved as they drew near. In an instant she had placed him in the passenger's seat.

"I'm damn sick and tired of being carried," he mumbled.

The being was silent. It lay on the floor in the entryway of the hotel. Roger saw Daniel and Sara appear, but his face registered no surprise. He knew that Daniel and Sara's intimate telepathic connection meant that neither was ever out of touch with the other.

Daniel could see the chest area of the Zeta move slightly in and out like the fleshy thorax of a grasshopper.

Roger couldn't take his eyes off the being. Daniel said, "Roger, this person is Eric's mother."

Roger slowly turned his head and looked at Daniel. "Can't be. That thing isn't human. Eric is human." Roger put his head down in the body language of nonacceptance as if willing it would make it so. Daniel was concerned; the being still lay unmoving on the carpet. Sara placed Daniel next to the being. When Sara kneeled at her side, she asked, "Will I make you uncomfortable if I touch you? I want to try to heal you."

"You may touch this entity,"

Sara carefully unwrapped the make-shift splint. She was shocked at the sight of the being's leg. "You have an open wound on your leg," she said. "I thought your leg was only broken. I . . . I don't know if . . ." Then, without dwelling further, Sara bent over the being's face. "I'm going to grip your wrists so I can see your energy field." Sara glanced at Roger and said, "Straighten out her leg."

Roger carefully clutched the being's frail limb through the folds of his jacket. As he slowly straightened the being's leg, Daniel sensed great pain in the being. He wanted to clutch this insectoid humanoid to his breast and comfort her, but he knew that even if he could, the being wouldn't be comfortable with such an act. "It's all right," he soothed. "It will be over in a minute."

Sara gently gripped the being's thin wrists. Hold me as best you can, Daniel. I will need your healing strength as well as mine." Sara pulled Daniel's paralyzed arms around her middle. She smiled at him. "I need your strength," she said softly. Suddenly, the being's energy field popped into Daniel's awareness, and he had an overwhelming feeling of oneness with this person. It was as if he had known her all his life. He looked at Sara. She was mesmerized as well.

The wound was no longer there. Sara had successfully healed her.

"Dear God," Daniel choked. He rolled himself back against the wall of the hallway; Sara half-crawled over to him. She looked exhausted. Roger patted Sara on the shoulder. "Good job," he said, smiling.

Daniel lay on the floor, panting. "Sara," he whispered, "put my hand into the being's hand." Sara put Daniel's hand into the being's four-fingered hand and Daniel held it as best he could. The being telepathed, "Would she have made the same effort for an entity that was not Eric's mother?"

"Yes," Daniel said, "She would have made the same effort."

"Your thoughts are true. This entity knows you are true."

Daniel felt a wave of warmth flooding through him. This being should be respected, not reviled. He had been so wrong about them. He wanted to somehow make amends to this strange, alien race. Why, he wondered, were they so brutal to him and to others? Why didn't these beings look for the good in him instead of constantly trying to pull the bad from him?

Sara rose and stood over the entity, just as the doctor on board the Zeta ship had stood over her so many times. She, the Earth mother, was the one in control now. Sara could destroy this being if she wished. But she wouldn't. She was not Zeta. She was a mother, as this entity was a mother.

The on-going telepathy between Sara and the being slipped into Daniel's thoughts. "Because you had to be brought to a point of decision, Sara, Daniel. You had to be filled with hate before you could make a valid decision to love. These contrasting feelings are necessary so one can know the existence of the other. This entity knows you are capable of love. The Zeta know about love . . ."

Daniel was sure this being knew about love, but he suspected the Zeta, in the end, were like everyone else-some knew love and some knew hate.

Chapter Thirty

The tent Roger had loaned Daniel was large enough to sleep six adults. Plenty of room, even when Steve would get off duty and come to sleep the rest of the night with them. The spring night was warm. Sara had put up the tent, and they were going to try to stay out here all night. He wasn't sure he could make it, but he was going to try, for Eric's sake.

When Sara helped Daniel into the tent, Rachel and Eric were playing cards. Eric was squealing with delight as he captured a pile of cards in a ferocious game of Slap Jack. "Daddy, Mommy, I'm beating Rachel. Rachel, you're so slow!" Eric signed. "I'm going to beat you. You'd better watch out!"

Rachel grinned happily as Daniel caught her eye. Rachel was doing what every adult did with a young child-she was allowing Eric to win, and from the looks of it she was enjoying every minute of it.

"Eric," Sara signed, "it's getting quite late. You can finish this game, but then you'll have to go to bed."

"Oh, Mommy," Eric signed, disappointment in his voice.

Daniel glanced at Sara. "All right," Sara conceded, "I'll make a deal with you. When this game is finished you must lie down on your mattress, but you don't have to go to sleep right away. You can listen for awhile. Okay?"

"Okay, Mommy," Eric said grudgingly but obediently.

Daniel felt a hand on his shoulder, shaking him awake. "Daniel," he heard someone whisper quietly. "Daniel, wake up, I have to talk to you. Please wake up." In his state of half awake, Daniel recognized Steve's voice.

"What? What?" He could not believe he had been sleeping so soundly. What?"

"I've got to show you something, but I don't want to wake the others." Steve said, voice shaking.

"That might be kind of difficult, Steve, seeing as how I'm out here in my back yard in the dark and I don't move so well anymore."

"I know," he whispered. "I have your chair here. I'll put you in it. Then we can go up by the porch and turn on a light."

There was a sense of urgency to Steve's request that made Daniel uneasy. "All right, but I don't want to alarm Sara or Rachel. I wish you knew how tired all of this moving around makes me. You forget I'm disabled."

Steve slowly dragged Daniel from the tent. Sara stirred, but went back to sleep. Steve put Daniel in the chair with a thump, and Daniel's power chair bumped along the grass. Daniel struggled to breathe. "Now, what's so important that you had to wake me out of a sound sleep?" Daniel suspected Sara had to be awake by now. Steve pushed the chair up to the back door, then carried Daniel into the house. With Daniel still in his arms, he struggled to turn on the living room light, then set Daniel on the couch.

Steve fumbled in his shirt pocket and pulled out what looked like photographs. He laid them face down on the coffee table and covered them with his hand. "Before I show you these, I want to explain how I got them."

"Go ahead, tell me." Daniel was curious now.

Steve sucked in his breath. "Ah . . . well . . . an hour or so ago as I was making my rounds, I found the front door of the Eagle's Nest unlocked. The building was dark, so I assumed the last person out forgot to lock the door. I pulled the door open and clicked on my flashlight. Then I turned the lock on the inside of the door. I stepped back out onto the street, but as I started to pull the door shut, I felt a hand from inside the building grip my wrist. The guy who had me was strong and before I knew it he yanked me through the door, back into the restaurant. I heard him whisper, 'Quiet, Steve.' Jeez, I thought, I know this guy. I recognize his voice; I knew it was Saul."

"Saul . . . ? Show me the pictures, Steve."

"Not yet. Let me finish. I said, 'Saul, what are you doing in here?' He said, 'I want you to take some pictures. I have a Polaroid and I want you to turn on your flashlight so you'll know where to point the camera.' I turned on my light and Saul was standing there with a camera. 'Now, Steve,' he said, 'it's important you take these photos. It's extremely important you all accept the physical reality of them. Are you ready?' I told him I was, but nothing could have prepared me for what I saw next. I was so scared, I dropped the flashlight onto the floor."

Daniel felt sweat breaking out on the back of his neck. He looked at Steve's fingers that covered the photographs.

"Please, not yet, Daniel." Steve resumed and said, "Saul picked up the flashlight and pointed it. Then he handed me his camera. 'Take some pictures, Steve. Show them to Daniel and Sara. Show them to all your friends who are involved in this.' So I took them-four of them." Steve looked at Daniel with sympathy in his eyes. Then he turned over the four Polaroid snapshots and spread them out on the bed. In each of the photographs was pictured a full-blooded Zeta alien holding a well developed human fetus.

Daniel felt the blood rushing from his brain, and as he began to faint, he heard Sara's telepathed voice of alarm screaming into his mind. Hands firmly gripped his wrists; Sara, with her healing powers, was bringing him back to consciousness.

She was next to him, holding him as he shook. His heart was very close to breaking. "Look," he choked. "Look at the photographs."

"Oh, dear God," she sobbed. "That's my baby! That's my baby!"

"Enough," Daniel said. "This is enough. Steve, go to the tent and try to get some sleep."

"I can't sleep, Daniel," Steve said angrily. "How do you expect me to lie down and go to sleep after this experience?"

"You have to stay with Rachel and Eric." Sara stood up and pulled her amulet from beneath her shirt.

"Where are you going?" Steve asked.

"Daniel and I are going to confront Saul," Sara said sternly.

"I'll go, Daniel. You can't . . ."

"We're going together," Daniel interrupted. "I'm tired of 'can't', Steve. We'll be back before daybreak." Sara took Daniel by his wrist and then she touched the pendant of her amulet. Instantly they were standing in front of Ann's apartment. Daniel sagged to the ground.

"I shouldn't have brought you, Daniel. This will kill you."

Daniel gritted his teeth. "Knock on the door." Only a few moments passed before Daniel heard footsteps coming to the front door.

"Come in, Sara," Ann said sleepily. "What are you doing here? What are you doing here, Daniel?"

"Is Saul here tonight?" Daniel asked.

"Why, yes. He's still asleep."

Before Ann finished her sentence, Sara deposited Daniel on the nearest chair, and walked quickly past Ann and into Ann's bedroom. Daniel was slumping on the chair and couldn't get his breath. He heard Sara scream, "Get up! Get up!"

"What? Wait! Wait, I'm not dressed. I'm naked. Give me a chance . . ." He stopped in midsentence. "Sara, what in the hell are you doing here?"

Ann said, "Let's all go into the living room. Surely we can resolve this problem, whatever it might be."

They returned to the living room and sat down. Sara quickly sat Daniel up and Ann propped pillows behind him so he could breathe. Sara quickly recounted Steve's experience to them. Then Sara took the four photographs from her pocket and laid them on the coffee table. Ann's face turned white. Daniel looked at Saul.

"How did Steve get these photographs?" Saul asked.

"You don't know?"

"Daniel, if I knew, I wouldn't have asked."

"Steve used your camera," Daniel said incredulously. "You handed him your camera and he took the four shots you see here."

"And this supposedly happened an hour ago?"

"Saul," Daniel said with mounting impatience, "you were in the Nest after it closed. You pulled Steve back inside. He clearly saw you in his flashlight beam. You called him by name; you knew him."

"And then . . ."

"The Zeta appeared with this fetus in his arms," Daniel said impatiently. "I've already told you the story. You were there. Steve was there. A Zeta being was there."

Ann shook her head, "Saul was with me all night."

"How do you know he didn't leave while you were sleeping?" Sara asked.

"Because . . . well, because . . ."

"Ann and I were making love until only about fifteen minutes ago," Saul interrupted. "If you must know, there is no way I could have been in the Nest an hour ago with Steve because I was with Ann."

"Another damned puzzle," Daniel said.

"No," Sara said, "it's not a puzzle. "We know the Zeta can take part of us and leave part of us behind. They have already done this with you and I. They, no doubt, have just done this with Saul."

"Come to think of it," Ann said, "Saul was quite distracted at times." She suddenly blushed.

Saul looked at Sara, then Daniel. He punched the pictures with his finger. "I swear to you, I don't know anything about these pictures. I don't even own a Polaroid camera."

"I do," Ann said.

Ann got up and went into the bedroom. She came back with the camera and set it on the coffee table. They looked at the camera as if it was a wad of plastic explosives about to ignite. Ann said, "Last week I put in a brand new pack of film because Saul and I had planned to go to the river tomorrow."

"Have you taken any pictures since you bought the film?"

"No," Ann said quietly. "But if you look at the film counter, it shows that four pictures have been taken."

Chapter Thirty-One

The next day Daniel had planned to go to work, knowing that he would attract, ironically, more attention in his wheelchair than when he was in the peak of his superior strength. He knew that once, seemingly a lifetime ago, he'd gone to work as a disabled person. It was obvious to him now that the Zeta were not going to restore his physical health. It was time to go on living. His breathing was his biggest concern. After a day of sitting upright, he knew he would be exhausted. His heart rate was already accelerated, and it was only 8:30 in the morning.

Sara drove him to the college, and helped explain the circumstances to his concerned colleagues. He sat in the same place virtually all day. He tried to help his students, teach a chemistry class, and answer his numerous piled up voice mail messages. He had struggled to use the men's room and wondered if he would have to hire an aide. The thought upset him. He wanted to be normal. And normal was super-normal. He didn't want to become the old Daniel. He wanted to have his perfect cells back. Never would he have believed that the Zeta could have reversed Santoo's work. And yet, as he considered it, he knew they could do anything they pleased.

The day was long and horrible for him. He didn't think 4:30 would ever come. But it did. A friend put his briefcase on his lap so he could take it home. It felt like a stone. He could barely push the switch to power the wheelchair. If Sara hadn't appeared in the deserted hallway with him, he would have sat there all night.

He tried to catch his breath in the car. He was going downhill fast. He felt tears come to his eyes. He had achieved his dreams: Sara to love him, another child, and his health. Now, to add insult to injury, the Zeta were entering a part of his life they had previously left untouched.

If Benjamin could only see him now. If Jack Hudson were here . . . his present state would certainly put to rest any questions they might have about his fitness, or lack of it.

By the time they reached home he was convinced that he needed to call a doctor. He needed help breathing. How could he tell Sara that their time together was over, maybe forever? He felt her hand squeeze his. She knew. She already knew.

The ventilator pump was the only noise to pierce the deathly quiet in the hospital room. Karen had just left, and had told Sara that Daniel was dying from congestive heart failure. His heart had been working too hard for the last two weeks since the increasing paralysis had set in. He could no longer breathe on his own. His rib muscles were weak and literally could not expand and contract his lungs. Daniel lay in a blur of images and emotions. In just two weeks he had gone from being stronger than any man on Earth to this state. Surely the Zeta knew what they were doing. Surely they would restore him, as they had done many times before. If only they hadn't taken his exoskeleton. And why? Why were they doing this to him and to his family? What was the point? Was he now to show them how humans die?

The room faded and returned, over and over, as the evening went on. He saw the faces of his friends. He thought he saw a priest. He didn't need a priest. He saw Sara's tear-streaked eyes peering at him with love and concern. He couldn't talk to her. He didn't have the energy. He even found it difficult to telepath. His spirit had been stripped from him.

Where was Eric? "I don't want Eric here, do you hear me?" He tried to telepath, but no one answered him. He saw them talking among themselves from a distance, and then Sara would loom closer for a moment and stroke his hand. The pain in his chest grew more intense by the minute. If only he could breathe. If only he could say something that made sense.

If only . . .if only . . .if only

He saw Eric, now. Eric was below him. "Eric!" He called, but Eric didn't hear him. "Someone take him home . . ."

People gathered around the bed. He could see them. They were crying. He felt himself rising to the ceiling. The pains in his chest had stopped. He tried to move towards his family. He could see Sara put her face on his chest. Karen pushed her away and something was wheeled into the room.

"Clear," Karen was shouting. "These paddles are charged . . ." Thump! But he felt no pain. He watched this dance of desperation below him and he felt no pain.

"My God, I'm here!" Daniel said. "Look at me!" he screamed at them. Santoo looked stunned. Steve was swearing profusely. Chumaya was holding the children, trying to shield them from what was happening.

And then he knew. "Oh, dear God, I'm dead!" Those below him, his dear family, were looking down at his body on the bed. Santoo and Steve were crying now. Karen pushed them all away again and prepared the paddles for another try. They were trying to bring him back. Chumaya dropped his wrists at Karen's command. He thought she must have been trying to pour her healing energy into him. Sara was holding Eric against her, rocking him back and forth as she sat in a chair in the corner. When Karen put down the paddles, he saw Santoo and Chumaya together try to send their healing powers, but Daniel knew their efforts were futile; he was dead.

He continued to rise higher, ever higher, until he was above the Earth and soon the people below him became very small. He felt a loving presence at his left. He turned in the air to see Sara. He put his arms around her. He could feel her in this space. He felt free. And he felt more love for Sara than he had ever felt before. An unfettered love. An unconditional love. Then she fell away from him, back towards the Earth. "Sara!" She was gone and he was alone. "No! Don't leave me, Sara! Don't let me go!"

Now he heard a low sweet murmuring that slowly grew in volume until his spirit, his soul, was immersed in the music of angels. He was propelled towards a light and now found himself moving in a tunnel. He

moved quickly but effortlessly. He was bathed in a glow of twilight and could see the soft light faintly radiating off the inside of the tunnel. This was exhilarating. What was the purpose of a physical life? Sara would understand if he couldn't go back to it. Life was pain and sorrow and grief. This was life. This was living life to its fullest.

"Ohhh!" He felt an angelic presence, a holy presence accompanying them along the tunnel and he could see a brilliant light at the end of it. No, he could feel the light, a living presence, and he knew the light was God! He smiled. "I'm going home, Sweetheart. I'm going home. I'll wait for you."

"Daddy! Please don't die! Please please don't die!" It was Eric's voice. He continued up the tunnel. "Daddy! Oh, God, Dad, please don't leave us! Please don't leave us!" He knew it was Rachel calling him to come back. How close they sounded. The voices of his children were calling him-calling. He forced his onward progress to stop and looked back. All the way back.

"I . . . I can't leave them. They need me. I have to go back."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Daniel awoke with pain searing through his body like white hot fire. "God! Dear God, I want to go back! Send me back!" Daniel was furious. It was as if he had lived in water all his life and was now dragged out of it onto a table littered with broken glass. When he opened his eyes, the eyes of the doctor being peered down at him. "Why?" he heard himself gasp.

The doctor telepathed, "You are of no use to us if you are dead," before he again slipped from consciousness.

"You were clinically dead, Daniel," Santoo whispered softly. Daniel tried to move his mind towards the sound of Santoo's voice. He opened his eyes. The searing pain in his chest was gone. His breathing was deep and calm. "Sara," he whispered.

"I'm here, Sweetheart." He felt her hand on his face. He felt her healing touch, her calming voice.

Daniel's eyes focused on Santoo, then on Chumaya. "You two are supposed to be out in space. What are you doing here?"

"We couldn't leave you, Daniel," Santoo said. "We were so concerned for all of you, we simply turned around and came back-home."

Daniel smiled tiredly. "I'm very glad you did. What happened to me?"

Santoo said, "I believe you have been set free from the Zeta's torture."

Daniel looked at this man who was so very wise. "How do you know?"

"I know because the beings telepathed it to me."

Sara smiled. "And also me." Karen was standing by the door of his room. She was protecting them from anyone who might walk in on this strange conversation.

Daniel looked at Eric's distraught face. He smiled with relief at his son. "I'm all right, Eric. Your dad is all right."

Sara helped Eric up onto the bed and Eric, with his thumb firmly planted in his mouth, cuddled into Daniel. "What do you mean when you say the Zeta telepathed to you?" He looked at Sara, then at Santoo.

Santoo said, "Apparently they found it fit to allow ta'Sara and I into their thoughts. I believe they have released you from your debilitating paralysis. They literally brought you back to life."

Daniel put his hand on Santoo's arm. "Santoo, Sara, I had a near death experience."

Santoo's right eyebrow went up. "Really?"

"Really. I . . . I didn't want to come back." Daniel felt guilty now.

Santoo suddenly looked intrigued. "Then why did you?"

"I heard Sara calling me. I heard Eric and Rachel calling me to come back," Daniel said, almost whispering now. "I couldn't leave them."

Karen had checked Daniel's vital signs and officially declared that he was no longer in heart failure. When she asked if he wanted to try to walk, Daniel looked at her strangely. "I don't think I can walk, Karen."

"Try," Karen said. "Just try. If the Zeta have spared your life, it's only logical they will have given you your total physical well-being back. Then again . . ."

"Wait," Daniel said. "He remembered what the doctor being had telepathed to him. "The doctor-the doctor being-told me I was no good to them if I was dead." The message was cryptic, as usual, and Daniel dismissed it for the time being.

Sara leaned down and kissed Daniel on the cheek. "We aren't finished, yet, Daniel," she whispered. "They can't take my man down. He's too tough." She grinned and stepped away from the bed.

Daniel said, "Help me get up. I want to see if I can walk."

Karen and Sara moved to either side of him and eased him off the bed. They stood away from him and for the first time in what seemed like a century, Daniel was standing alone. He stood with tears streaming down his face. He took a step and was astonished to see his own legs and feet responding. He was going to be all right. "Sara," Daniel choked, whatever games the Zeta have played with me for whatever reason, I think I've weathered their test."

Sara smiled and hugged him. Suddenly, she looked at him oddly. She put her hand on Daniel's shoulder and lowered herself onto the bed.

"What's wrong, Sara?" Daniel asked.

Sara's face was ashen. She suddenly began speaking in an odd, straightforward manner, clipping her

words, as if someone was speaking through her. "She's channelling," Daniel whispered.

"Perhaps we . . ." Santoo began.

But Daniel interrupted. "No, let her go. We've been through this once before. Someone wants to tell us something and they are using Sara so they don't frighten us by showing themselves. This isn't Sara talking; it's the Zeta. They will give us information. Listen."

The voice through Sara continued, "Your trial has been long and you have all performed admirably. You have been faced with what to you was emotional torture, but it was necessary to approach you in this way."

"Why? Daniel asked.

"Humans require direct lessons," the voice through Sara said.

"Do you feel that humans are a lesser form of life than you?" Santoo asked. "Is this why you act like bad parents to us, and is it why you treat us as if we were your bad children?"

"This entity understands why you fear us. We are . . . incapable of displaying our emotions in the tender way you humans do. We regret this. We communicate with you the best way we can. But you constantly overreact to our intentions. This is why the one you call the doctor wishes for this entity to communicate with you now in this way. You are not threatened when we communicate in this way. You may ask this entity questions now." The voice stopped and Sara sat silently before them-like a robot waiting to perform.

Daniel said, "I have been impressed with your technology. I am grateful you saved my life. Thank you."

"The one you call the doctor needs you."

"Why does he need us?" Daniel asked.

"That question is best left to another. It will be answered soon. Have you another question?"

"Yes," Daniel said. "Is our baby alive?" He felt his voice tremble when he asked it.

There was silence in the room. Sara sat still as stone. Then she began, "Your baby is alive. It is being prepared to be placed into ta'Sara's womb. She will carry the baby to full term."

Daniel began to shake. He could feel Chumaya's hand on his shoulder, but Sara sat, wooden, not reacting to this good news she had so longed to hear. Daniel choked back tears as he began to voice the question Rachel was now signing to him. "Is Rachel's baby alive?"

"Your daughter's baby is not alive."

"I don't believe you!" Rachel signed angrily. "If you could save my father, if you could bring him back from the edge of death, you could have saved my baby!"

"Allow this entity to rephrase the answer. Your baby is alive on our ship, but your baby has too much Zeta DNA to grow and prosper in open human society. Perhaps with the others, however . . ." Sara's voice trailed off.

"What?" Daniel asked angrily. "What do you mean 'Perhaps with the others?'"

"That question is best left with another. Please ask your next question."

Daniel looked at Chumaya. "Ask it, Daniel. We both want to know."

Daniel said, "The insectoid being gave us enigmatic riddles that frankly I'm sick and tired of trying to decipher."

"You are referring to the glass spheres put into your hearts?"

"Yes," Daniel said. "What did this exercise in fear and frustration accomplish?"

"The clear but fractured sphere placed into ta'Sara was allegorical as were the two black spheres placed into you. You and Chumaya have already deciphered, as you say, the meaning. You, the imperfect one, are represented by the cracked sphere. You are not whole, yet you are whole. You must learn to live with your body as it is and consider it whole." The voice through Sara sounded like a strict teacher instructing a student.

"But I want my body to continue to improve, damn it! I don't want your people to reverse what Santoo has done for me." He felt Santoo lightly touch his arm in way of calming him.

"You will not lose your strength, Daniel, and you will live as long as ta'Sara. You will, however, retain your distinctive limp so that no one will know you have this wonderful body. You will no longer need the exoskeleton; it has served its purpose. But your lesson in this lifetime is to excel in spite of your disability. The reason you and ta'Sara have been called to this mission is because neither of you is perfect. The black spheres were given to you as a reminder that ta'Sara's black eyes are a great disability to her, even though the disability is only in her mind. Her eyes, as well as your body, are not disabled. It is only how you perceive yourselves that disables you."

Still Sara didn't react to the words she was speaking. The information coming through her would have surely affected her had she been aware, but Daniel supposed she was temporarily switched off so she could relay information without distractions.

"And what about the eagle? What does the eagle mean?"

"The eagle is a magnificent creature. It is strong and cunning. It is also compassionate to its young. A mother eagle teaches her babies to fly by a most peculiar method. She pushes them out of the nest. Then she dives down below them and catches the babies on her back. The babies experience great fear when they fall, but eventually, as the mother eagle does this over and over again, they overcome their fear and learn to fly. You have all learned to fly. You are angry with us, but when you learn why we need you, your anger will disappear. Do you have still more questions?" Sara's voice was flat and emotionless.

Daniel looked at Santoo, then Chumaya. They shook their heads. The rest of them did the same. Now Daniel felt a warm little boy on his lap. He hugged Eric to him. "No," Daniel said. "I believe that's all the questions we have for now."

"Excellent. This entity has a request. It is necessary you comply."

"Ask," Daniel said.

"All those in this room are requested to gather tomorrow evening at the top of the bluff area that you call 'the hotel'. All others who are to be involved will be notified of this request. You already know who these people are. They are the ones close to you. Please insist they come."

"We'll come," Daniel said.

"Excellent. Daniel, you need rest, and by tomorrow you will be able to walk unassisted.

Sara's blank stare disappeared. She looked at them all and began to sob uncontrollably.

Chapter Thirty-Three

"Aznar!" Eric shouted happily.

Daniel tried to stop Eric, but Eric bolted from him and ran across the grass to the figure standing there. Dusk offered no details; Daniel could see only the shape of what looked to be a man.

As the man came closer Daniel could make out larger than normal eyes set into his very pale face, although the low light could have misrepresented what was there. His nose was half as large as a normal nose might be, and his mouth was small with thin lips. His head had the distinctive shape of a Zeta, but he also had human features that made his face look far less frightening. The man's limbs were thin, but not overly, and his trunk was adequately robust. "May I approach?" the being asked. Eric had the being's five-fingered hand clutched in his own as he happily walked beside him.

"You may," Daniel said. He looked at his friends. They appeared calm, if not intrigued by their visitor.

The being came to them. "Sit down," Roger said, as if he were asking the being to sit and have a beer. Daniel couldn't keep himself from grinning.

The being sat at the table with them. The crickets and frogs were beginning their nocturnal concert. "I apologize if my appearance makes you uncomfortable," he began, "but the one you call the doctor knew he wasn't the one who should talk with you. I have been elected, so to speak, to be his voice. Is this acceptable to you?"

They all murmured their acceptance. The being laughed. "I suppose almost anyone is acceptable over the doctor!"

Sara said, "He's caused all of us a lot of pain."

The being put its head down. "Yes, I know. Perhaps my manner will be more representative of what the doctor has in mind. I am Aznar." Aznar looked at Eric who was hanging on his every word. "To begin, I am sure you are all curious about me, so I will tell you that I am a hybrid. I am part Zeta and part human. I cannot live on your planet in open society because those who see me would consider my appearance monstrous. I cannot live in pure Zeta society because I am equally monstrous there."

Daniel immediately felt sorry for this man. It appeared he was truly isolated from everyone.

The being continued. "The Zeta have been experimenting with human and Zeta DNA for a number of years. They are convinced that they can recover the emotions they deliberately bred out of themselves in

the far, distant past, and they are using human DNA to do this. They feel that mixing these two species, Zeta and human, will give them a race that can again procreate. They also seem to need your emotions. They have discovered that emotions are key to procreation and continued survival. If they again procreate, they know that they have to nurture their offspring. They don't know how to do that."

Yankee said, "Procreate? The Zeta can't reproduce?"

"No. At present the Zeta are keeping their race alive by cloning. There is no sex. There is no . . ."

"Love," Daniel interrupted. "There is no love."

"Sadly, this is true. I wish it were otherwise. But there is love among we hybrids. We experience love and hate and indifference and even depression. Regardless of how Zeta we hybrids may be, we are far more human than Zeta. Unfortunately, living on the ship with the pure Zeta is a taxing life for us. Many of us die from lack of love. Sometimes abductees are brought into the nurseries, as you and ta'Sara were, to hold the babies and to hold and play with the older children as well. We of human blood will die if we are not held and loved."

"What are you asking of us?" Sara said. "If you would like us to help care for your kind, we will do this. But we will not subject ourselves further to the doctor's harsh manner. We will not be subjected to the bizarre lessons he confronts us with. He may demand that we help him in whatever he might have in mind, but I will no longer be a helpless pawn when I am taken there." Sara looked at Daniel, then at the others. "And I think I speak for my husband, my family, and my friends."

Sara was steamed. Daniel loved it when Sara was steamed. She had a gift for cutting right into the core of the apple.

"That is why I am here. I want to make a proposition to you all, and believe it or not, you will have the freedom to say no. Regardless of your answer, you will not be confronted in a negative way by the doctor again. You will not be taken from your beds and you will not be terrified by implants and frightening medical procedures."

Daniel felt good about this man. "What would you ask of us?"

The being took a deep breath. Daniel was relieved to see that the being had a normal respiratory system. "Ann," the being said. "Which of you is Ann?"

"Uh, I'm Ann." Ann looked frightened now. Daniel didn't think she had reason to be.

The being fixed his large eyes on her. "Ann, you have recalled your experience in the woods as a young child. You remember seeing a door, but were afraid to open it."

"Yes," Ann whispered. "I was very afraid."

"But you opened it, didn't you?"

"Yes," Ann said, her voice barely audible now.

The being looked at Sara. "May I hold Eric?"

"Yes, you may," Sara said.

The being put Eric on his lap. Eric laid his head against the man's chest. Then the being again returned his attention to Ann and said, "The door led downward, into your home. This will be upsetting to you, but you were raised in an underground facility with other hybrid children. You, Ann, are a hybrid."

"Why, you're crazy!" Ann said. "Who in the hell do you think you are, telling me something like that? You're crazy!" she said again.

"No, Ann. Your parents were not your birth parents. They were two people who were trying to make life easier for a group of children who desperately needed their love. Your sister was also a hybrid. Your adoptive parents had to keep the children who didn't look human from open society because no one would have understood. However, you and your sister were very human in appearance, just like my friend, Eric, and your parents decided to raise you above ground."

"You're nuts! I don't remember any group of hybrid children! I had a very normal childhood!"

"The doctor knew you would react this way. I can only tell you that it's true. I don't know if the Zeta in charge of that particular project selectively erased your memory, or if you simply blocked your life with them from your mind. Human memory is very fragile. When events are traumatic, the brain shuts off those places of horror. Since you were happily living above ground with the rest of the human race, no doubt the children below ground horrified you. But part of you remembers the door in the forest."

Ann began to cry. "Wait," Daniel said. "Stop. What do you want from us?"

"The doctor wants you to nurture his hybrid children."

"What do you mean by that?" Daniel asked. He felt Sara grip his hand.

"Our children need love, Daniel. You and ta'Sara know this all too well."

"Yes, but . . ."

The being's thin lips formed a smile. "The Zeta need to place more hybrid children on the planet into permanent homes. I would like to show you these children." He looked at Eric who was still sitting on his lap.

"Please, Father," Eric pleaded.

Once again Eric had made an instantaneous switch from four-year-old little boy to a boy with maturity far beyond his age. It was unsettling to Daniel. And it was especially unsettling now. He glared at Aznar. "You want us to voluntarily subject ourselves to the Zeta? You must be insane. Are you asking us to submit ourselves to the doctor? Is this what you are asking?"

"You will live within the shadow of the doctor all of your lives. The baby that ta'Sara will carry inside of her is hybrid. Eric is hybrid. Ann is hybrid and any children she bears will also be hybrid. You cannot leave the Zeta behind."

They sat in stunned silence.

"You-you-altered our unborn child?" Daniel was seething.

"No. ta'Sara is hybrid. You know that, don't you ta'Sara?"

Sara nodded, mutely.

"From her mother's abduction many years ago, ta'Sara was altered. Your baby will be part Zeta. Can you live with this fact?" Aznar looked directly at Daniel.

"Yes," Daniel said. "Yes, I can live with that." He squeezed Sara's hand. Her fingers trembled in his gentle grip.

"Now," Aznar said, "I am asking all of you for your help, and I give you my word that no harm will befall any of you anymore. No more tests. No more abductions."

Daniel looked at the others. "Ask them," he said wearily. "They should have a vote. I have no right to make this decision for them."

Santoo said, "Daniel, Aznar appears to be sincere."

Daniel squeezed Sara's hand hard. "What does he want from us?" he telepathed.

"I'm not sure," she telepathed in return. Sara looked at her parents, as if seeking an answer from them.

The others mumbled among themselves. Finally, Ann said, "I want to see the children." She looked at Saul. Saul nodded. "Saul will protect me."

Daniel thought Ann looked frightened. He suspected she was agreeing out of fear. "You're sure?" he asked.

Now Ann's lower lip began to tremble. "I want to see my own kind," she whispered. The rest of them began speaking as individuals. Were they simply being loyal to him, Daniel wondered? He didn't know. Now he looked at Sara. He knew what she would say. "Shall we?" Daniel asked.

"Yes," she said firmly.

Aznar said, "You have all made a courageous choice. You will not regret it."

Chapter Thirty-Four

They stood as a closely clustered group at the front of the hotel. No wild beings came to drag them away, and to Daniel's immense relief, the doctor was nowhere in sight.

"Come," Aznar said. "I want to show you something most important."

"I want to go with Aznar," Eric said.

"Go ahead," Sara said. "We'll be right behind you."

They followed Aznar into the woods and through a maze of trees until the path ended at a door in the forest floor."

"What's this?" Daniel asked. Ann looked frightened.

Aznar said, "As you all have been diligently working to restore the hotel, the adult hybrids have been working underground, preparing a place for the children." The door slowly slid open and like frightened puppets the children all scrambled up and into the fading light of the woods. Daniel gasped. The variety of Zeta-human life forms in front of them was staggering. There were more children than Daniel had ever seen. Aznar said, "You may interact with them, if you like."

Some of the children were curious and approached them; others ignored them. Daniel estimated there were at least three hundred children. How many other places, like this one, were there? he wondered. Sara said, "Aznar, how can we take care of all these children?"

"You can't, of course. But you could take care of some of them. Other cooperating humans will take care of the rest. There are many on this planet who have consented to do that."

Yankee had been silent, but now he asked, "So you are proposing we come here and play with these children from time to time?"

"No," Aznar said. "I am proposing you keep a group and raise them as human beings. There are rooms down below these stairs. Ann will know how to find her way around, won't you Ann?"

Daniel felt like he had just been slammed in the face with a board. He looked at the others. They said nothing, but looked shocked. "That's impossible," he said. He could barely get the words out.

"No, it's not impossible. The eagle has been most enigmatic, but the eagle directed you to finish the hotel structure. Yes?" Aznar looked at them as if awaiting confirmation.

Daniel was beginning to put things together, now, and he thought at that moment he was going to faint. He rubbed his eyes and looked at Roger. "The hotel. My God, they have been preparing us for this moment. They had this in mind for us all the time. You want us to use the hotel to house some of them."

"The ones who resemble humans, yes. The others . . ." Aznar put his head down, almost in sorrow. "The others will have to stay here. We can keep them on the ship, but if they live here, you can visit them from time to time. You can love them. I gave you my word that the abductions would stop. The doctor doesn't want you on board the ship anymore. He wants you to be emotionally healthy so you can care for the human hybrids in the hotel and the more Zeta-looking hybrids here. The adult hybrids will help care for the more Zeta looking children, and they will live in this facility. It's quite large, and once you have accepted this idea, I will show you."

Daniel said, "But this place will be found out. People who live just over there," he pointed through the trees to the housing area on the perimeter of Roger's property, "will hear children. How will we explain their presence?"

"For now, there is a tunnel between this underground facility and the basement of the hotel. We haven't broken through yet because we didn't want to frighten you. But in a matter of minutes we can link this underground facility to the hotel."

"So if people begin snooping, all the kids in the hotel can run into the tunnel and back here. Is this the idea?" Daniel said, irritated. "What kind of life would that be for them?"

"A woeful one, at best," Aznar said.

"There has to be a better way that these children, at least the human children, can live out in the open," Sara said.

"There is. The humans who cooperate with us will plant false papers in the right places and the existence of every child you care for will be legally justified."

Daniel looked at Sara. He knew she was thinking what he was thinking. "You can do this? Why didn't you help us when we made the effort to adopt Eric under false pretenses?"

"Because," Aznar said, "even though Eric is not of your blood, he is your son in your heart. It was important that you as parents make this effort yourselves."

Now Roger looked at Julia. "What do we do now?" Julia pinched her eyes shut and slowly shook her head.

"Listen," Daniel said, "you can't expect us to give up our lives . . ."

"For these children?" Aznar said. "Are these children not worth your effort? You can heal these children, Daniel. Their hearts are broken. You can mend them. You can heal their souls." He looked over at Ann, who was cuddling a child. Aznar smiled and said, "Ann, there is someone who would like to see you." At that moment a hybrid adult female stepped from the doorway. "Mary! Oh, my dear God, Mary! It's you! Mary! I didn't think I would ever see you again!" Ann ran to the being and hugged her fiercely.

Aznar said, "I would like to introduce all of you to Mary. Mary was one of the children who was raised with Ann. You can see they are as close as sisters. Mary loves her human parents just as Ann does. But when Mary became an adult she left her group-and her human parents. She knew she couldn't possibly be accepted by humans, but she is tolerated on the ship because there are many hybrid children there who benefit from her care. But there are few people like her who will make such a sacrifice. Mary wants to help you raise children like herself. Eric's mother was also such a one." Aznar looked at Ann. "And so is Ann."

It took them a while to accept their new mission. They all talked it over among themselves for several days, but once they decided that this was what they wanted to do, they worked furiously to finish the hotel. Now they had a purpose for this elegant old landmark on the bluff. Daniel and Sara now knew what they would do with their three-hundred-million dollars in cut diamonds-Santoo and Chumaya's wedding present to them. It would be used to feed and clothe fifty children. And they planned to take many more.

Daniel was beginning to like Aznar. They were alike, in a way. He was a gentle being, and would undoubtedly make a good intermediary in years to come.

"Goodness, Daniel, your perfect cellular body will have a stroke if you don't calm yourself." Sara laughed gently and kissed him softly. "Eric, we must keep your father calm."

Daniel put his arms around Sara. "I wanted so much to take you down river on the Delta Queen. Remember when we used to talk about that?"

"Yes, I remember. But this is far more exciting, isn't it? This is what we are to do, Daniel. We can make

a difference to these children."

"We can," he said softly. "We can."

Sara explored the underground rooms and helped several children find places to call their own. Many looked to be almost pure Zeta. In former days Daniel's skin would have crawled at the mere sight of them, but now he was starting to feel a profound attachment to these children. They could not help the way they looked, the way they were. Physical appearance, he at last realized, had nothing to do with the beauty of the soul, and these children shone like stars.

They had wanted to visit Teruhl, Sara's home planet. That would have to wait. Maybe someday. Maybe.

When Daniel first came down with polio at five years old, could the Zeta have stopped the disease before it wrecked his body? Why did the doctor treat them so cruelly for so many years? Was it really to toughen them and prepare them for what they were about to do, or was it just the cold actions of an alien being? And most importantly, what was the real motive of the Zeta? Were they truly interested in the welfare of the hybrid children? Or were people like Daniel and Sara simply convenient dumping grounds for children the Zeta didn't know how to handle? Somehow the answers weren't important now. They had children to raise-to nurture-to love. To help become fully human.

One of the children-a child with strong Zeta features-cowered next to Daniel. Daniel picked the child up and set it on his lap, just as he had done when they had rescued Eric from the Zeta. This was his and Sara's child now. And Ann's and Saul's and Roger's and all of the others who had committed themselves to this massive endeavor. Most important, the child belonged to itself. No one owned this being. She had a spirit, a soul, that was going to live with Daniel and his friends for a time. They would take care of her and they would love her. And with every fiber of their being he knew they would help this child's soul to grow.

"I love you, Sara. I love your black eyes. I love your Zeta blood."

"I love you, Daniel. In the wheelchair, in the hospital, I loved you. But I must learn to love me. And you must learn to love you."

Daniel smiled at her. They had the rest of their lives to do that. Daniel smiled at the child, it's huge black eyes bulging from its huge, gray head. He could feel the child snuggle slightly against him. At that moment he welcomed this being into his life. He touched Sara's stomach ever so lightly. She was pregnant again, and this time the Zeta had impregnated her ever so gently. He and his beautiful wife from the stars were about to begin an adventure few souls would have the privilege of knowing. He remembered the words of the Zeta being who claimed to be Eric's mother. "Study, pay attention, learn."

The End

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