

THE RECLAMATION

The Reclamation by Thorn Osgood
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Author's Note

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Table of Contents

[Part 1](#)
[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Part 2](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)
[Chapter 38](#)
[Chapter 39](#)
[Chapter 40](#)
[Chapter 41](#)
[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)
[Chapter 44](#)
[Chapter 45](#)
[Chapter 46](#)
[Chapter 47](#)
[Chapter 48](#)
[Chapter 49](#)
[Chapter 50](#)
[Chapter 51](#)
[Chapter 52](#)
[Chapter 53](#)
[Chapter 54](#)
[Chapter 55](#)
[Chapter 56](#)
[Chapter 57](#)
[Chapter 58](#)
[Chapter 59](#)
[Chapter 60](#)
[Chapter 61](#)
[Chapter 62](#)
[Chapter 63](#)
[Chapter 64](#)
[Chapter 65](#)
 [Part 3](#)
[Chapter 66](#)
[Chapter 67](#)
[Chapter 68](#)
[Chapter 69](#)
[Chapter 70](#)
[Chapter 71](#)
[Chapter 72](#)
[Chapter 73](#)
[Chapter 74](#)
[Chapter 75](#)
[Chapter 76](#)
[Chapter 77](#)
[Chapter 78](#)
[Chapter 79](#)
[Chapter 80](#)
[Chapter 81](#)
[Chapter 82](#)
[Chapter 83](#)
[Chapter 84](#)
[Chapter 85](#)
[Chapter 86](#)
[Chapter 87](#)

[Chapter 88](#)
[Chapter 89](#)
[Chapter 90](#)
[Chapter 91](#)
[Chapter 92](#)
[Chapter 93](#)
[Chapter 94](#)
[Chapter 95](#)
[Chapter 96](#)
[Chapter 97](#)
[Chapter 98](#)
[Chapter 99](#)
[Chapter 100](#)
[Chapter 101](#)
[Chapter 102](#)

[Part 4](#)

[Chapter 103](#)
[Chapter 104](#)
[Chapter 105](#)
[Chapter 106](#)
[Chapter 107](#)
[Chapter 108](#)
[Chapter 109](#)
[Chapter 110](#)
[Chapter 111](#)
[Chapter 112](#)
[Chapter 113](#)
[Chapter 114](#)
[Chapter 115](#)
[Chapter 116](#)
[Chapter 117](#)

[About Thorn Osgood](#)

THE RECLAMATION

PART 1 – FAMILY BIRTHRIGHT

Chapter 1

Corilan closed the back door to her new place and carefully removed her siec, making sure the acidic residue on its outer surface did not make contact with anything. After taking off her gloves, she removed her ENAZ mask and placed it on one of the moving crates nearby. She examined the siec—a cloak made of biodegradable mesh that served as a sieve to catch and block atmospheric particles. The particles grew heavier after dark and attached to the fabric, creating large clumps of acidic residue that could easily rub off on her skin or quickly eat through more vulnerable materials. Two more wears, she figured. After she shoved her gloves in one of the siec's pockets, she hung the cloak on the coatrack by the back door. The visibility lens and nasal filters in the mask could be cleaned later.

For nearly five years, this was the process she had gone through daily to go outside, and she was pissed. Life did not have to be this way—it was a widely known fact that the deterioration of the environment was caused by the actions of humans. Yet industry and national leadership chose to do nothing that was truly effective. She dreamed of finding a way to resolve the environmental problems, in spite of the indifference of corporate CEOs and government leaders. Her body became rigid, and her teeth clenched; her hands tensed and became fists at the thought. Those avaricious, self-serving bastards! To lead opposition against the environmental status quo and reverse the damage, that's what she wanted. Every time she put on her outer gear or removed it, these were the thoughts that filled her mind, leaving her helpless and frustrated.

Catching her runaway thoughts, she refocused her thinking and realized she was still standing by the back door.

Then she remembered what she had placed in her shoulder bag the day before the move. Her eyes scanned the tops of the moving crates and boxes stacked on the floor and furniture. She located her bag, browsed the contents, and found what she was seeking. She stared at the letter in her hand. She had found the piece of cursive-written correspondence on the floor when she'd come home the day before the movers arrived, and had stuffed it in her shoulder bag without opening it and continued packing. Who took time to write hard copy anymore? Moving to the kitchen counter, closer to the light, she opened the letter.

March 27, 2040

My Dear Daughter,

I received your thank-you card. Good to hear from you. I hope you'll be happy in your new place.

You are probably surprised to hear from me so soon, but as I said in my previous letter, I would like to see you. I know I have not been a part of your life since your mother died, but I have not forgotten you.

I would like to see you on the second Sunday of next month. I will be in Pond Park at 6:00 p.m. If you decide not to come, I will understand. No matter what happens, you will always be loved.

Love,
Your father

Corilan laid the letter on the counter and pursed her lips—Nolan Troxler, her father. So soon? She hadn't expected he would respond at all. Why would he? This was his second letter to her in her life. No surprise that he felt unworthy. Really, there was no other way he should feel. She hadn't seen him in a little over twenty years. Hell, she couldn't even remember his voice. The way she looked at his message, it was as if he was telling her, "*I'm here now, let's be family. Oh, and by the way, you've got two weeks to decide.*" What made him think he could just arrive in town and tell her that? She felt anger rise inside, and a flush of warmth swept over her. Okay, her father had been widowed early in his marriage, but did that mean he'd had to abandon her?

She pulled out her wallet and looked at the pictures of her parents that her grandmother had given her. They looked so happy in the photo. Her own hazel eyes and thick, wavy, amber brown hair were just like her mother's. Why did her father stay away? It could not possibly be because of her mother's biracial heritage, could it? He always knew her mother's background, and it had not mattered before. What was it with him? The anger boiled up and flowed. Tears rushed down her cheeks. Why was she crying, anyway? She probably was not going to get to see him even if she agreed to the meet-up. He might not have the backbone to face her. Seeing her in person would not be the same as writing to her. Just more disappointment for her, she thought.

This had to be some kind of ruse. Why would he just show up, after two decades of silence? What did he really want? After returning the pictures to her wallet, she put it in her bag along with the letter. Then she flipped the light switch off and strolled over to the window, pulled the drapes aside, and gazed outside.

Dressed with the window's dirty splotches, the polluted air looked like misshapen corporeal images. One thing was certain: No matter where she moved, she could never get away from the air pollution choking out Earth's natural environment. For a moment, she stared at a hazy gray spot glowing in the darkness; probably the moon. She rubbed her eyes and shifted her thoughts. She liked this new, small, quiet community in Bowie, Maryland. It suited her well—not rowdy with people coming and going constantly. Most likely the neighbors were aware of the vacant detached town house in their cul-de-sac. They would awaken to a new resident on their block.

A problem with broken windows and the words "queen bitch" graffitied on her vehicle, along with feces smeared on her apartment door, more than once, had prompted her to contact law enforcement. She suspected Arley Hackett, a terminated employee from her job, but could not prove he was the vandal. The police's recommendation was that she should move. "For your safety," they had said. Her instructions to the movers had been an unmarked truck and a night

move. She felt like a thief, and her paranoia was growing. What if the vandal found her new residence?

"Stay alert and be prudent, and know that you're doing the right thing," the voice inside her head said.

"I didn't move here to continue glancing over my shoulder and wondering if I would have a skunk carcass or worse at my front door," she shot back, annoyed with herself for being jumpy. Why was she so afraid, anyway? Communication with or from the voice was part of her life. As far back as she could remember, Innerme, her name for the voice she thought of as being male, had spoken to her, guiding her whenever she sought help—sometimes when she didn't ask.

"You have done all you can do, except perhaps get a security system installed. Think about it. Would it make you feel safer? Relax you from being so uptight? You put yourself in a pins-and-needles state on your job daily, but you enjoy it. You do not need negative stress, and the vandalism problems are exactly that."

"*Maybe the security system would help. I'll find out more and think about it,*" she replied, calmed from her prior outburst.

Stepping away from the window, she glanced at the television. Probably not a good idea to turn it on, but at least it would soften the amplified silence. After plugging in the TV, she made a space on the couch and slumped down, resting her head on the pink and green cotton quilt made by her grandmother. Exhausted yet restless, she would never get to sleep now. Nerves, and not knowing what might happen if she slept, made her resist her weariness. If only her Scottish terrier, Sir Henry, were with her instead of in the kennel where she'd placed him until she was settled. She'd feel less uneasy.

Her father's request to meet flooded her thoughts again. Had he been watching her? How had he known about her moving plans? Being suspicious made sense, but she had to admit that curiosity was overwhelming her. Why now, after all this time?

In the last six months, her father had paid off all her student loans. That in itself was pretty fantastic, but she wondered why he hadn't contributed to her tuition while she was actually in college.

She considered the benefits of getting to know her father. Having a blood relative to visit and do things with on occasion might be nice. Well, only if they had similar interests. What if he wanted to control her life, tell her what she should do, criticize her choices, insert himself in every aspect of her life? He might not see her as an adult. In his mind's eye, he might still think of her as a five-year-old and treat her like one. Just the thought caused her to sit up and stretch.

On the other hand, what if she were sick or dying? Would he be there for her or would he disappear for another decade, letting her die alone? She knew she would be there for him if she made him a part of her life.

After all, she reminded herself, there wasn't a line of people waiting to befriend her. She had always felt like she did not belong, did not fit in, and she was okay with that. Going her own way, doing her thing was the code she lived by. Maybe getting to know her father would lead to something fresh and more interesting in her life. That definitely would interest her.

During her college years at the University of Maryland, she had spent her time studying, working with the Chesapeake Bay restoration program, attending environmental conventions, and occasionally going roller-skating. Not the types of activities one would find most students doing. She'd had two college boyfriends, but she had not been willing to allow time for them outside of her preferred activities, and they soon went their own ways.

Interacting with more than a few people made her feel tense. One instance specifically stood out in her mind. College students who were not members of fraternity or sorority communities often spent social time together, and she was a part of that group. On those few occasions when she did hang out, she had observed and listened to everyone's snipes, constant negative remarks, and other idle chatter, which never interested her. While at a pizza restaurant one evening, she had asked, "Has anyone read the latest news on U.S. environmental issues?" Chatter at the table shut down that instant. Everyone stared at her. Finally, one of the guys said, "No. We're all in denial." Laughter flooded the group, and everyone acted as if she hadn't spoken. That had been her last group activity.

Since entering the workforce, she had not taken time for social activities. Getting ahead in her career had been her primary concern, and now she wondered if that had been entirely the best decision. Although, thinking back on her past social experiences at parties, dating, and spending time with her peer group, social encounters had always been slim. Perhaps her choice was just her way of doing what she always had: focusing on what she could do that was most important, undisturbed by the social tides around her.

Aside from being a chance to expand her social life, a meeting with her father might also expand her knowledge of her family background, which was currently limited to what her grandparents had told her about her mother. If she got to know him, she might be able to understand things about herself. Why she had a voice that talked to her. Why she was so obsessed with preserving the environment. Were these not reasons enough to meet with her father? Admittedly, she was very curious about her family tree.

Her thoughts faded as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 2

When Corilan returned from her walk with Sir Henry the following afternoon, her neighbors to the left were outside, busy with yard work. The man, in a brown siec and mask, was raking debris from the yard. A woman bent over, weeding a rock bed, looked up and waved, her face covered with a brown mask beneath her forest-green siec hood. Most yards nowadays contained gravel instead of grass and colored rocks instead of flowers. If the heat had not burned the grass and other vegetation off, acid rain guaranteed its destruction, except for certain weeds that seemed to thrive. The woman got up and came over toward her.

Corilan adjusted her mask under her siec hood, hoping to see more clearly. Although the cloak wasn't heavy and allowed some airflow, she felt as if she were starting to overheat. Just thinking about the itchy skin irritation that would occur if she didn't wear it made her skin crawl; not to mention the infection that would come from it.

"Hello, welcome to the neighborhood," the woman said, holding out her gloved hand.

Corilan did the same and they shook hands.

"I'm Della Mae Hill," the woman said cheerfully.

"Hi, I'm Corilan Troxler. Happy to meet you. Your yard looks great," she added, gesturing toward it.

"Yes, we try to get out and keep things looking presentable, the best we can, even though it gets harder and harder," Della Mae said. She was medium height, and looked slightly overweight.

The man had stopped raking and was coming over. "Hi, I'm Alexander Jackson Hill. Most people just call me AJ. I see you've already met my wife, Della Mae. Welcome to the neighborhood." He looked down at the dog.

"This is Sir Henry," Corilan said. The dog looked up, wagging his tail.

"Hello there, Sir Henry." AJ held out his gloved hand toward the dog's air filter muzzle. Sir Henry wagged his tail and came closer. AJ scratched around the dog's neck, over his siec. "Good boy. I love dogs and cats. Right now we have a cat, Stanley. He's in the house; a big gray and white fellow with yellow eyes. He and Sir Henry will meet in time, I'm sure."

After greetings all around, they showed no sign of interest in returning to their yard work. "Why don't you come in?" Corilan offered.

"Oh no, I'm sure you're probably still settling in. But we'll be happy to sit on the porch and talk for a little while," Della Mae said.

"Great, let me grab a few chairs. I'm not sure that swing is secure." She pointed to the porch swing that was already installed when she leased the property.

They followed her to the porch and waited outside with Sir Henry.

When she returned to the door with folding chairs, AJ helped her get them outside and they were all soon seated.

"So, what can you tell me about the neighborhood? My first impression was that it was a safe and quiet community. Was I right?"

AJ and Della Mae chuckled.

"We thought so, too," Della Mae responded. "We've been here for eight years now and haven't had any problems."

"Yeah, everyone pretty much stays to themselves, so there's no neighbor feuding," AJ said with a laugh.

"And we don't know of any robberies either," Della Mae added.

Then AJ sat forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "I apologize if I'm getting too personal, but I was wondering, what made you move in so late at night?"

Della Mae elbowed AJ. "That's not our business," she whispered.

"It's okay," Corilan said. "I'm sorry if I disturbed you all."

"Oh no, we were still up," Della Mae assured her.

"No, we weren't asleep, it just seemed odd, you know?" AJ said.

"Yes, I suppose it might." She wasn't sure she should tell them, but what if Arley found her? Wouldn't it be beneficial for a neighbor to know the situation? What could it hurt? "Where I lived before, I was having problems with harassment and vandalism from one of my former employees. He was terminated by upper management's decision, but he blamed me for his dismissal."

"I assume you reported him to the police?" AJ asked.

"Yes, I did. They told me that without proof there was nothing they could do, and their only recommendation was that I should move. So I did. I thought it better to move after dark. But I knew it was him, based on the messages he would leave on my windshield."

"Oh, Corilan. That must have been so frightening and frustrating for you. Do you have any family around here?" Della Mae asked.

"No. My father is all I have, and I don't know him very well. We're trying to get better acquainted now. My mother was killed in a car accident when I was five. I was raised by my grandparents, and they're dead now."

AJ sat up in his chair. "Try not to worry. Hopefully your former employee won't find you here. We'll keep a lookout for anyone suspicious as much as we can. Just be careful." He stood up and added, "We've enjoyed talking to you and I look forward to chatting with you again, but we need to get back to tidying up the yard."

"I've enjoyed talking with you all, too. It was nice meeting you and I appreciate your concern," Corilan said.

"Nice meeting you, too," Della Mae added following AJ's lead.

"Thank you. You're very kind." A feeling of warmth and happiness spread through her as she watched the two of them return to their yard work.

Chapter 3

Friday morning, Corilan sat at her kitchen counter going over in her mind what had happened each morning since Monday. She had not felt rested, like she had been mentally awake all night or even gone somewhere. She had awakened in her nightgown, and no other clothes were lying around; that is, nothing she would have worn outside. Still, she'd been sure something had kept her awake, but she could not remember what. What was causing her to feel this way every morning? Was this real—she was tired, or was she having some sort of psychotic break?

"Innerme, what is happening? Have you been able to discern yet what is occurring during the hours I'm normally asleep?" She had had discussions with Innerme about this phenomenon since the first occurrence, without receiving any helpful information so far.

"I have not, but after an in-depth search of your ancestral essence, there are indications of some niches that are sealed."

"How is that possible? You are in my head, you know everything about me." Surprised, she'd responded out loud.

"That is true to a point."

"What do you mean?" She stood up.

"I have full knowledge of you and your activities, and I converse with you on that level. Direct information about your ancestors, or things they have hidden away, is not available. However, I can say that since this sealed niche has been carried forward in your ancestral essence, it must be very important, and will be revealed at some point."

"How will I know if I'm the one for whom the sealed niche will be opened and its message revealed?" She was pacing around the kitchen now, speaking out loud. "For that matter, how do I know if it is related to what is happening to me?" She placed her hands across her breasts.

"You don't, and there is no action you can take. This is a wait-and-see process. Patience is what is needed."

"But—"

"There is nothing else I can say," Innerme interrupted. *"It is possible I may have told you more than I should have, since it will cause you to worry unnecessarily. Remember, you may not be the one."*

Surprised and frustrated at Innerme's response, she slumped down in a chair at the kitchen table and considered the situation. No need to make this more complicated by trying to tie her restless nights to a "sealed niche" in her "ancestral essence." That was the first time Innerme had used these terms. She was sure the sealed niche meant that a memory was kept from being recalled. The hidden ancestral essence even Innerme could not open. Like he said, she'd have to wait and see. He must have discerned more than he was telling, or had whatever happened to her impacted him as well?

Before she could mull over the possibility, a strange feeling flooded her thoughts. Her vision blurred as if a curtain had been pulled before her eyes. When she blinked and tried to refocus,

she saw a dark city: buildings covered with slime, streets and walkways blotched with a gunk substance that emitted vapors. People in siecs with nasal filters or complete masks and oxygen packs were walking around, careful not to fall in the sludge on the streets and sidewalks. Less-fortunate city inhabitants were in tattered array with no protection from the poisonous atmosphere save for rags on their heads and around their noses and mouths.

"Please, can you spare some of your lunch, or money so I can buy some food? Please, sir," one of the beggars said, walking alongside a siec-protected citizen.

"No," the man snapped loudly, "and leave me the fuck alone, you miscreant." His tone was foul and menacing.

Other beggars had turned to watch the exchange. With the man's last scathing, shrill word, the beggars attacked him, pulling him to the ground and kicking him over and over.

Tears flooded Corilan's vision as she watched. She wiped her eyes on her blouse sleeve, wondering what this meant. Before she had time for more contemplation, the panoramic view moved on.

Homes were covered with pollution, doors hanging askew, windows broken; dead dogs, cats, rats, and other small wild animals that lived among people were scattered about in various stages of decomposition. Then her breath caught. Hundreds, no, thousands of people were slumped about on the ground as far as she could see. Their bodies were covered with oozing sores. Some were dying and others were dead, most decomposed to skeletons.

"What is wrong with these people? What is happening?" she heard herself say out loud, and wondered why she had spoken. No one was with her, and this could not possibly be real or she would have known about it.

"These people are the casualties of environmental negligence. Their infirmities are the result of poisonous pollutants that have ravaged their weakened bodies so quickly that identification and prevention were not possible," a voice said.

She jerked around from the table to see who was behind her. There was no one. "*Innerme, is that you?*"

No response came.

Sir Henry raised his head, stared at her a moment, then stretched out on his side.

Corilan stood up. "*Please show yourself and tell me what this is about,*" she demanded. Her eyes scanned the kitchen around her. She didn't hear or see anything else out of place, so she sat back down in the chair. Perhaps she just thought someone had spoken, but she had received an explanation—or had she told herself that? It must be an apocalyptic vision, right? Thinking about it now, she realized that no military scenes were in the view; no war. What else would cause that kind of devastation? If environmental negligence was the cause, she must have seen an ecological apocalypse. Then, as if a flash of light had illuminated her thoughts, she realized that these scenes were the ones that had been coming to her over and over every night.

Again, her vision blurred. When she refocused, darkness surrounded her. In a nebulous view that looked like pictures of outer space, she saw three prominent planets and many stars.

"This is the Lumenthon Galaxy, known to you as the Milky Way," a voice said.

Suddenly, fast-moving spacecraft—some larger than anything she had seen on Earth, and smaller ones comparable to the size of space shuttles—were tracking toward the largest of the three planets. Her view seemed to zoom closer, as if she were inside one of the spacecraft. When it appeared that the spacecraft were close enough to enter the planet's atmosphere, it discharged something that made a blinding flash. Seconds later, from a distance away in space, a visual of the planet lit up with white, blue, and red fire flashes. When the flashes dulled, multiple balls of fire fiercely glowed in place of the planet. *"Those balls of fire are the final pieces of Zarnoh, our largest planet,"* the voice interjected.

"Our largest planet?" Who was speaking to her?

The spacecraft then headed toward another planet and repeated their actions. It was a beautifully tragic sight. They were destroying worlds in seconds, and how many lives? She wanted to speak, but her absorption with what was occurring kept her silent.

"That was Lumenia, my home, the planet of science. It consisted of the homes and facilities for study and experiments of those in the scientific professions, along with support resources," the voice added.

Next, they turned to the smallest planet of the three. When the largest in the fleet reached the planet's atmosphere, instead of dashing off after their attack, it broke apart and dissolved. For a moment the remaining ships looked as if they were suspended, then Corilan saw two flashes. The planet broke into two fireballs. One continued to disintegrate into smaller burning pieces. The other fireball looked as if it had burned out but continued to drift away from its original orbit.

"That was the end of Lumenos X7e, our last planet exploration. It was in progress when our galaxy was destroyed. The piece that did not burn up is what is now called planet Earth."

"I'm sorry that happened, if in fact it did. Who are you, and why should I believe you? Your power obviously gives you quite a bit of latitude, like entering my thoughts and giving me visions and dreams, for starters. However, you could have made all this up."

"I thought you might be suspicious. That is why I wanted you to see what happened. What you saw is from our records, along with the records from one of the attacking spacecraft after it crashed."

"So I should just believe you?"

"That is correct."

This was too far-fetched for her to accept, and she could see or sense no reason she should be told this information. *"Why are you showing me these things?"*

"The tragic conditions on Earth were from a simulated view of the future. A clip of where Earth is heading so that you can see what will happen to the inhabitants of the planet. The images of the Lumenthen Galaxy were to show you how the Milky Way Galaxy came into existence and why we are here."

"And I want to know this information because?"

"That is where I came from. I am part of the exploration team that was on Lumenos X7e when our enemies attempted to destroy the planet."

"Okay. So what do you want from me?"

“Humans are not the only beings on this planet. What humans are doing will destroy us, too, if their actions are not stopped. I want to enhance your abilities in order to help you fulfill your desire to preserve Earth’s environment. It will be beneficial to us as well.”

She wanted to ask how the voice knew what she wanted to do, but did it matter? Instead, she considered the offer. She had no idea how her abilities might be enhanced; nevertheless, that idea got her attention. This could be the key to impacting the world. It was certainly a weird coincidence.

“In what way would my abilities be enhanced?” she asked.

“Your entire being would be more alert, and stronger. You would likely develop abilities that humans do not have, but you would have to discover them. I would become your guide, assisting you in reaching your goal.”

“You mean you would replace Innerme?”

“Ultimately, yes.”

“Stop. That’s enough. I don’t want to do this.”

“Will you not at least think about it? Talk to Innerme.”

Dammit. “I will do that, but I doubt if it will make a difference. Please leave. I’m done with this discussion.”

Silence expanded in the house. Her mind was filled with all that she had seen, and she felt anxious, not knowing what might happen next.

While showering, she tried to defend as rational an idea most people would call lunacy. What if the voice was right? It could be the opportunity of a lifetime. If she succeeded, with the voice’s guidance, life on the planet would be better for everyone. Although—the voice said he would replace Innerme. She didn’t see herself moving forward without Innerme. The ability of the new voice to give her dreams and visions was worrisome. Was he really a being from another planet now living on Earth?

Conversely, what if the voice was wrong? She could continue seeking a solution to fix the environment. Yeah, sure. Her plan consisted of thoughts of what she might do, and no documented specifics. Thinking of all the projects she had led made her feel foolish. Too much passion had her wound up tightly and not thinking clearly, she told herself. Doing this alone was not possible. She worked best with help—the same reason she was the project manager of a team. That was what she needed to reach the masses: a team. Something needed to happen soon. Very soon.

Chapter 4

When the second Sunday of April arrived, Corilan was not ready to decide whether or not to meet her father. Nolan's request had stayed with her while working, watching television, browsing the Internet, walking her dog—during every waking moment. Not to mention what was happening to her when she supposedly was asleep. She felt exhausted, and her work performance was down. How could she let her father affect her in that way? Why should he? He had no place in her life. So why was she so worked up?

At three in the afternoon, she put on her outer gear. Taking Sir Henry's leash from its hook beside the back door, she turned to call him, but he was already rushing toward her. She put his muzzle air filter on, along with his dog siec and pawtreads, attached his leash, and went outside.

Walking in the opposite direction of Pond Park, they strolled down Evergreen Parkway. She smiled at the street name; it probably was true ten or fifteen years ago, but not anymore. Even though the skies were gray, the trees leafless, and dead vegetation coated with black residue, she barely noticed. Spending unnecessary time outside was not what she would normally choose to do, but she told herself she needed space to amble in the open. More time to think and refocus.

Moments later, when Sir Henry captured her attention as he trotted along in his pawtreads on the pollution-residue-blotched sidewalk, she did not like what she saw. Along the edge of the walkway was a dark and thick substance that she had not noticed in prior walks—or had she not paid attention? Nothing like motor oil, she observed. It must have been dumped, since it only covered clumps in about a four-foot-square area. Before Sir Henry got too close, she pulled him away. She wondered if she was becoming numb to the environmental problems, too.

More had to be done, but she had not discovered what might help. She spent most of her time lately on her job as an IT project manager at Everett & Jank, an accounting firm in the DC Metro area. She loved leading her team to success. The only thing she could imagine that would give her a better feeling would be a confirmed announcement that the environment was no longer a danger to the Earth's inhabitants.

Walking past the Bowie Town Center office, she stared at the exterior. The tan masonry and red bricks now had huge, dark brown and black streaks running across them. The bricks were glazed with a charcoal-colored film. The building had been built less than five years ago. It was amazing how fast the pollution had grown to the current state.

Had the city had this exterior buildup analyzed for its potential risk to humans? These were the types of concerns she wanted to focus on solving in her free time, not appeasing her guilt-ridden father who wanted her forgiveness.

Her face twisted into a smirk as she followed Sir Henry past the town center. She wanted to cry out in frustration, but knew it would not help. Her father was being selfish. She had finished school, had a good job, and upward mobility had already kicked in with her promotion from software engineer to project manager. So she had had a few hiccups. That was life, wasn't it? Her life was hers, with whatever warts there might be. No one had comforted her through all the

mean things others had said or done to her. She had borne the pain and made it through on her own. Sure, she had scars, but she was coping.

At the next corner, they turned right and pressed on. Giving herself extra time to sort out her feelings was not working as well as she'd expected. Her time was about five minutes from ending. She considered where she was now. Subconsciously she had arrived at one of the Pond Park entrances; not the main gate but an entry point just the same. It seemed she was destined to come, regardless of her indecision. The curiousness of it made her remember the sense of urgency she had been feeling ever since the dreams and visits from the voice began. Most interesting to her was the fact she was not wholly afraid of not being completely in control. Maybe it was because she was so used to Innerme guiding her when needed. Why not just go with the flow?

Casually walking with Sir Henry through Pond Park now, she scanned the benches. Despite her misgivings, she had decided to meet with her father—might as well. She was curious to see what he looked like now and what his response would be to her presence.

In the distance, she saw a man in a gray siec sitting alone on one of the benches and wondered if it was her father. The man had a sunglass cover over his mask lens. She smiled. No one had seen the sun for months. His head was tilted down. The cloak's hood and his ENAZ mask prevented much more discovery. She told herself that at least she and her father had one thing in common: enough awareness of the toxic environment they lived in that they took measures to protect themselves. A few more steps, then she stopped. "Hello, are you Nolan Troxler?" Looking at him now, she felt a fluttering sensation in her stomach, then a surge of anger swept over her as she watched him.

The man raised his head and stared at her momentarily, then removed his sunglass cover and nodded. "Yes. Yes, I am." Without further hesitation, he rose from the bench, adding, "Hello, Corilan."

Standing her ground, she watched as Nolan came over to her from the bench. "Thank you for coming. It's so good to see you," he said, hugging her like he was holding on to a rope to be rescued.

She allowed the embrace, but remained rigid, her hands at her sides. How dare he act as if she had accepted him back into her life!

Nolan stepped back and stared at her, his eyes welling with tears. Overflowing, they ran down inside his mask. "How about we get something to drink over at the eatery on the corner?" He pointed up Northview Drive toward the town center shopping area.

A nod of her head was her only response, then she redirected Sir Henry and walked beside Nolan toward the park exit. Inside she was furious and wondered how her father could be so congenial. It was as if he had only been gone for a week or two and this was just a "hello, I'm back" meet-up.

"So, who is your little friend?"

"This is Sir Henry."

The dog looked back at her and Nolan, then continued walking.

"Hello, Sir Henry." He clicked his tongue, and Sir Henry looked again. "It's quite upsetting to see a dog with an air filter mask, a siec, *and* pawtreads. Who would have imagined our environment would come to this point?" Nolan commented, shaking his head.

"Yes, it's pretty bad. I got these things for him a year ago. It occurred to me that if I needed breathing filters and outer gear, he did, too. Funny thing was, at first he would paw at the filter and pull his pawtreads off. Then one day he fussed so much I let him go without the gear. The next day, I was able to put it on him and he didn't mind at all, and he's been wearing the gear ever since." This was not what she wanted to talk about. She could talk for hours on environment-related issues. Manipulation, that was all this was, and she was not going to be handled.

The food shop's parking lot was in view now. Something suddenly occurred to her that made her rethink going to the eatery. "I don't think I can take Sir Henry inside."

"No problem. I'll grab us a couple of drinks and we can sit in my SUV. That okay?"

"Fine." She shrugged. Her lack of enthusiasm covered her like camouflage.

When they were nearer, Nolan pressed his key fob. "See the lights blinking over there?" He pointed.

She nodded.

"You and Sir Henry go get in, and I'll bring the drinks."

Turning toward the vehicle, she walked over with Sir Henry and got inside. He hadn't even asked her what she wanted to drink. Danger! Takeover in progress, she thought, but did not say. A smirk of resentment formed on her face. How would he know she didn't drink coffee or sodas?

When Nolan returned and settled in the SUV, he handed her a hot chocolate, then left a cup of water in the serving tray and set it on the floor in the back for Sir Henry. He pushed his hood back and took off his ENAZ mask. Corilan removed the dog's muzzle filter and her mask.

Not bad. She did drink hot chocolate, sometimes even though it was hot weather. "Thanks," she said coldly, then added, "What made you get this gas-guzzling SUV?"

He appeared taken aback at her question, then shrugged. "I guess you cannot tell at a glance, but this SUV uses biodegradable fuel and there is no exhaust, period."

"Really?" She had not expected that he would be concerned, him being so self-centered.

"Yes."

"Sweet" was her abrupt response, then silence.

After taking several sips of his coffee, Nolan turned toward Corilan. "You seem uncomfortable. Is there something wrong?"

"Yes" was her drawn-out response, followed by, "There is."

"You want to talk about it?" He looked at her, his eyes tired but caring. His salt-and-pepper-colored hair hung to his shoulders, surrounding gray-blue eyes, a neat mustache, and well-groomed stubble.

"Well, ah, I've been wondering. Since I received your two letters, after over twenty years of not a word from you, now you want to be in my life. Why now?"

“You’re all grown up now and I think you should know your family birthright: where your family comes from, who we are, our beliefs, our lifelong endeavors, and the potential for special abilities in your bloodline.”

Special abilities? That was curious, but she was too frustrated about her past to ask. “So what about while I was attending school? Didn’t my existence count for anything then?”

“Of course it did. It’s just that . . .” His words faded away.

Silence sat between them for a while.

Nolan repositioned himself, turning more to face Corilan. “For one thing,” he continued, “I didn’t want to interfere with the way you were being raised. I figured your mother’s rearing turned out well, and having her parents raise you, I expected yours would, too. And since your mother and I didn’t know each other until we were adults, I thought perhaps I should wait. Although it may sound silly now, I didn’t think so at first.”

She smirked and shook her head. “I don’t believe you. Why would you not want to be a part of my growing up? Most parents want to be involved with their child’s development. Did you get remarried and have another family?”

“Absolutely not,” he snapped. After a few seconds he took a deep breath. “Then you grew up. You look just like your mother. I saw her in the photos your grandmother sent me of you. It was painful, yet thrilling at the same time. I was tied to the memories of the past. I’m sorry.”

“So it took you twenty-plus years to get your nerve up to spend time with me? I still look like my mother. Sounds like a pat answer to me.” The words lashed out of her mouth like a striking snake.

“That’s not my intention. When it occurred to me that I was letting my life slip by without seeing and spending time with you, I contacted you, hoping to change that. It was very important that I see you, be a part of your life.” He looked beyond her, out of the passenger window, and continued. “I have spent many long hours in my work and with colleagues. For a long time I was more absorbed than I realized.”

Corilan thought of her own long hours on the job. In her role as a software engineer, it was not uncommon for her to work after hours on software applications from Friday evening until Sunday afternoon with breaks only for physical needs. Once she became a project manager, she reviewed project specifications, kept track of status, and worked risk management meticulously outside of her job.

“What kind of work do you do?” Her voice was softer now, the edginess almost nonexistent.

“I work in information technology, web design along with several other IT areas, and I dabble in inventing from time to time. What about you?”

“Currently, I’m a software engineering project manager for an accounting firm.”

“That’s great. Sounds like we have similar interests in certain fields.” He grinned.

She stared at her father, wondering if she should believe anything he had said. He was calm, seemed patient. It could be a façade, she considered.

Nolan’s face became stern. He seemed to realize she was not warming to him. “Look, I know I have by no means been father of the year, but I never forgot about you or your needs. I made

sure you were provided for and sent you gifts for your birthdays and Christmas, too. I love you, Corilan, I do. I've told you why things happened the way they have. I'm here now and I'd like to spend time with you. Is that possible?"

"I don't know. What did you have in mind? And what about this potential for special abilities in my bloodline?"

"As I said earlier, I would like for you to learn about your birthright, mostly what your ancestors practiced throughout their lives. Also, for you to learn the ability that *you*, the most recent *resultant*, have the potential to have, or may already have. I want to take you to the School of Ancestral Guidance, SAG, and have you apply for membership in the alumni organization. You will be tested and trained."

"Ancestors? Sounds like our family records reach back four or five hundred years." A smile almost emerged on her face. "What do you mean? Was Grandmother right? Sounds like a cult." Her mother's parents knew hardly anything about her father's background until he had proposed sending her to a special school. The matter was never discussed after that and the school's name was never stated. It was the only information she had ever known about her father.

"What exactly did your grandmother tell you?"

"She said the school you wanted me to attend was a cult, and my grandparents did not like the fact that they would not be able to attend functions or have access to all the information taught at the school since they were not alumni themselves."

"They told you that?" He shook his head.

"Yes, they always explained things to me in detail."

He nodded. "They've raised you well."

"Grandmother said she wanted me to have choices and not be trapped by knowing only one way to think or one thing to believe."

This brought a smile to Nolan's face as he stared into the distance. "That reminds me of my own stubbornness when I was young, regarding my social associates: the 'on the edge' friends I had outside of SAG. I rebelled and wanted to make my own way, refusing to wait until I completed high school. Of course all SAG students were free to go to any higher education institution of their choice and socialize as they wished after graduation, but they were required to receive the teachings of the SAG fundamentals first. I refused to believe that the people who belonged to SAG were the only ones with ancestral guides, well, positive guides. Fortunately, I was so near graduation, I was allowed to finish, but I was barred from automatic inclusion in the SAG Alumni Organization."

Looking at Corilan, he said, "But I was right, I found someone, with my ancestral guide's help; someone with the SAG aptitude—outside of the organization. Her parents had had the perfect temperament."

"My mother?"

"Yes. Have you figured out why you have such an unusual name?"

Corilan smiled. "Actually I think I have. I believe it is a combination of Mom's name and yours. 'Cori' from Coriander and 'lan' from Nolan."

“Yes. We wanted your name to reflect a part of each of us. Your mother crafted the name.”

“This ancestral guide, what is it? What kind of help does it give you?”

“My ancestral guide, MAG for short, is a voice inside that imparts direction or assistance to me when I ask. It is not my consciousness. An ancestral guide is the culmination of one’s ancestors’ wisdom passed down to the current resultant. Having awareness of one’s ancestral guide imbues that individual with an opportunity to sustain positive living in harmony with the planet—assuming the resultant follows their ancestral guide’s advice. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” She hesitated. “I do.”

“What’s the matter? You looked surprised.”

She shrugged and hoped her face did not reveal anything more. The desire to tell him about Innerme, who she now realized must be her ancestral guide, was strong. Yet she could not. Why should she share this with him, something she had never told anyone? Worries about what others might think about her sanity had made her refrain from ever saying she heard a voice in her head.

“Every member of SAG has an ancestral guide. The SAG Alumni Organization has some of the most talented professionals on Earth among its members. So how about it, will you go with me and apply for SAG Alumni Organization membership?

“Since I am not a SAG graduate, how would I be eligible?”

“As an adult you would be tested to determine your aptitude for what SAG students learn regarding Earth guardianship, as well as the expected temperament as a member. There will also be home-based study regarding the organization and its traditions and disciplines. That is the path for adults to join the SAG organization.”

She nodded but did not comment.

“I will be applying for reinstatement as a SAG graduate.” With his eyes fixed on her, he added, “I think you would be quite surprised about our environmental work, history, and ancestral guidance. So, will you go with me to apply?”

Searching his face with her eyes, she wondered what she should do. He seemed sincere. “Is there some specific reason I need to go with you?”

He glanced away as a look of astonishment flashed on his face. Then he met her gaze, the surprise already faded. “No, there is no reason. I just thought you would prefer to go with me since I am your father and an alumnus of SAG.”

“SAG has a website, right?” she queried, ignoring Nolan’s reaction and response to her question. She wondered how she had missed finding them on the web.

“Yes, they do.”

“I’ll check it out and decide what I want to do, on my own,” she responded while staring through the windshield.

She saw his head bob in her peripheral vision, then he cranked the SUV. “Which way to your place? I’ll drop you off.”

Chapter 5

After Nolan dropped Corilan off at home, she quickly removed Sir Henry's outer gear and then her own. When she was through examining it, she freshened up and turned on her computer. What Nolan had told her made her anxious to learn more about the School of Ancestral Guidance.

She could tell he was annoyed with her decision to act without him, because he had remained quiet all the way to her place. When they arrived, his only response had been, "Good night, Corilan; we will talk again soon," and she had gotten out of his SUV. Going to SAG on her own would be the only way it would happen—if she decided to do so. For her, going with him was an added pressure, one she did not want.

The SAG website came into view on her screen. The center section of the page displayed a long list of news headline items: climate change, water pollution, air pollution, and others. One that caught her eye in particular was about acid rain deposition. She knew that it was the result of pollutants from a host of industries. A stroll through Druid Park in Baltimore last year, during a lunch break, came to mind. The lake had been covered with floating, dead fish. A foul smell had covered the area like the stench of a garbage truck making pickups in high temperatures. Acid rain had been responsible for that disaster.

The article on the SAG website stated they had submitted a report to the U.S. Congress on the most recent findings and current effects of acid deposition based on studies performed in 2039 on the most sensitive ecosystems. The article pointed out that acid deposition was causing human breathing disorders like asthma, bronchitis, and pulmonary edema. Altered soil chemistry was causing loss of plant nutrients. Chemical imbalances in lakes and streams were a growing cause for the death of fish, and were expected to have far-reaching impacts in the oceans if no changes were imminent. Complete destruction of the environment and human health was projected to be less than ten years away.

A frown creased her brow as she reread the SAG projection and remembered the scenes in her vision about the sick and dying people. These problems had already started. She rechecked the date on the article: January 3, 2040. It was now April, and no updates had been posted. She wondered if SAG's report had even been read, much less reviewed for action.

Under the "Accomplishments" tab was a long chronological list of completed undertakings that dated back as far as 1892, along with the SAG members' names underneath the description of their achievements. Prior to that date, descriptions of SAG's activities were documented by the city and the issue resolved. More than two thousand entries were listed in descending order since the organization's founding in the spring of 1865. Early accomplishments were local to large cities, and they broadened with U.S. population growth. The documented information showed that SAG had spoken out to various members of government on air, water, acid rain, industrial emissions, energy emissions, and much more, resulting in regulations being enacted over the years. However, from what she could tell, access to leadership had become difficult in

recent times. Comments on recent report submissions and requested meetings showing various agency contact names were noted “no response received.”

On browsing the “About” tab, she found their purpose: to serve as guardians for planet Earth and to ensure Earth inhabitants have the ability to live healthy lives. On top of that, SAG was an international organization and could be found on every continent and in most countries. A smile spread across her face and she beamed with satisfaction.

Curious as to what else they might have, she opened the “Resources” tab.

“Whoa!” she exclaimed.

On the screen before her was the Earth Renaissance Show website. She had attended the ERS every year since she was in high school. How had she not known the ERS was connected with SAG? Well, thinking about it now, she realized she had not researched the ERS website as she was doing for SAG. What a mistake, she thought. Perhaps she might have already applied to SAG. Applying to become a SAG Alumni Organization member was definitely a yes.

She stood up, stretched, then went to the couch and slouched down to relax. Random thoughts about the visions came to her.

“Innerme, are you there?”

“I’m here.”

“You’ve already told me you heard what the voice said, but we did not discuss the voice’s statement about replacing you. How do you feel about that?”

“I have no feelings, per se. I am at your service, and if that is what should happen, I have no objection. I believe this is what is supposed to happen. I cannot explain why I sense this is my destiny, but I do.”

“If I were to allow the voice to help me now, don’t you think I would be moving too fast?”

“Under the circumstances, I do not think so. For quite some time now, you have been attempting to sort out a way to make the broadest impact to reach people regarding the environmental problems. I believe you have a good chance to do that if you follow through with joining SAG and working with the voice. You must make the final decision,” Innerme finished.

Innerme’s inferred point about her attempt to develop a plan without success was obviously true. In the past five years, she had only completed small environmental contributions. She had responsibilities at work and had only been able to volunteer occasionally outside of her regular job, but maybe things could be different. It was scary how she was thinking. She shivered as she thought about what might be possible. Was she nuts?

The voice had come once and conversed with her while she was awake. She wondered if there was anything she could do to make it happen again. Maybe if she concentrated on her desire to speak with the voice. She closed her eyes and focused. Several minutes passed and no response came.

“You wanted to speak with me?” the voice said suddenly.

She jumped and sat up on the couch. *“Oh! I mean, yes. Sorry, you startled me.”*

“I will soften my tone. Have you decided to accept my offer?”

“I need more information. How will you become my guide?”

“During my Trans-Luminescence Cycle, I will be in physical form and will come to you and infuse my life essence with you. That will create a permanent link to me, making me your ancestral guide and establishing the basis for abilities you will discover.”

“What exactly would happen to Innerme?”

“In your case, Innerme’s purpose was to be your guide from childhood to adulthood. He was to bring you to this connection with the original natives of Earth. His job is done. As an intangible part of you, he will be absorbed as a part of the infusion for a higher level of communication with a direct original native of Earth.”

“So this infusion—why do I need it if I can converse with you without it?”

“You can communicate with me because I have remained in proximity of you since the meeting with your father. I reach you through Innerme’s essence, but that only happens if I can determine if you are trying to reach me. This method will not provide you with the abilities you need, nor give you instantaneous connection with me.”

“Okay. So you want to help me by connecting through an infusion that will enhance my abilities, too, but why me?”

“As the current resultant of your heritage, you have been selected to be the liaison for the citizens of Earth who choose to join up with SAG in preservation of the environment. You have grown up as a citizen of the world, empowered with the wisdom and insight of the need for that critical push to pull planet Earth from the brink. When you join SAG it will be a symbolic unification with Earth’s guardians and the people of Earth at large.”

“I understand that you and your people live on Earth, but why do you want to save humans? Why is that so important?”

“Our scientists are the reason humans exist. The problem with humans is their aggressive behavior. Aggression permeates nearly every element and molecule of this planet. We removed this factor from ourselves before we reached our fifth continuum, but for this planet it has not been possible. However, through breeding, we have been quite successful, as you can see in SAG members.”

“You mean the Lumenians have influenced SAG member propagation throughout the years?”

“Yes, though they are not aware, and as you can see they are a committed organization. Now that you know the background, understand that we are very attached to our success and invite citizens who have the same commitments as the SAG organization to join with them.”

“You want to save the people who care about Earth?”

“Yes.”

Assuming she passed the SAG examinations, she might be a force to consider. *“What is your name?”*

“I will tell you when you give me an answer as to whether you will accept the infusion and unite with me for the benefit of humans who agree to participate in Earth’s preservation. Will you give me an answer now?”

“As of now, I am not convinced that I should do this. Thank you for responding.”

She was annoyed with the response. Or was it that it wasn’t what she wanted to hear? Whatever the case, she was not going to be goaded into making a rash decision. She needed to do some more thinking about the voice’s proposal.

Chapter 6

Midafternoon on Monday, Corilan was seated in the lobby of the School of Ancestral Guidance headquarters, waiting to be called to see the SAG alumni president. She had seen the building cornerstone engraved with the year 1866. Now her face was beaming as she took in the beautiful nineteenth-century architectural interior. The main floor opened to skylights five levels above with ornamental cast-iron balconies surrounding floors of rooms and an open, broad walkway circling each floor level. Although the skylights were now blotched with huge stains, she imagined the building when it was new. Striking round and rectangular ornate pillars supported each level. “Surreal” was the word that came to mind as she considered the circumstances of her presence. It was kismet, plain and simple.

“Miss Troxler?” the receptionist called.

Corilan looked up.

“Mr. Swain will see you now. Right this way.” The receptionist walked toward Mr. Swain’s office door with Corilan following.

According to the receptionist, seeing Mr. Swain instead of the membership administrator was not the standard procedure for potential external admissions, but since such admissions happened so rarely, the administrator was available only two days a week. However, instead of turning anyone away, other officials took turns seeing prospective members on the days the administrator was absent.

When she reached Mr. Swain’s open door, the receptionist stood to the side.

“Good afternoon, Miss Troxler, please come in,” Mr. Swain said, beckoning her inside.

“Hello, Mr. Swain.” His hair was dark, with a hint of gray at the temples, and he had deep gray eyes that instantly caught her attention. She did not look away, and neither did he.

He stood, and they shook hands. “Please have a seat,” he said, and sat down behind his desk. “So, you are interested in applying for membership in our alumni organization?”

“Yes. I would like the opportunity to go through your testing and training as soon as possible.”

“How did you hear about us?”

Should she mention her father? “The School of Ancestral Guidance came up in a discussion. Curious, I found your website and learned more about your organization. Being that the environment’s condition is at the top of my list of concerns, I would like nothing more than to get involved with a group whose mission is inclusive of all environmental concerns.” No need to tell them about the discussion with Nolan, she decided.

Swain smiled. “You certainly have the right point of view.”

“Also, I am curious after reading your accomplishments shown on the website,” she continued.

“In what way?”

“The organization has made very impressive contributions toward environmental preservation over the years. However, in the last five years or so, I did not see very much new or revised legislation initiated or supported by the SAG Alumni Organization. Why is that?”

The expression on Swain’s face took her by surprise. He seemed taken aback, with a *who-are-you-to-question-our-progress?* look on his face.

He leaned forward, rested his elbows on the desk, arms folded, and said, “In the past few years—and I’m sure you’ve noticed—the environment has deteriorated significantly. I cannot explain why, but our government appears to be following the same trend of descent in that they refuse to even discuss environmental issues. Why? We do not know exactly, but we are doing everything we can.”

She opened her mouth and was about to speak, but Swain continued talking.

“At any rate, we can discuss the situation further after you have successfully completed the testing and training. I will have the receptionist give you an application package. Fill out the forms and return them to be scheduled for testing.”

“Thank you, Mr. Swain.” She stood, shook his hand, and went to the receptionist’s desk.

After she had gotten the package, she returned to the lobby and sat down. Flipping through the forms, she realized she already had all the information she needed to complete them, so she filled them out.

When she returned to the receptionist’s desk with the completed application package, she was scheduled to begin testing on Saturday morning. She had no idea what to expect, but she was pumped.

Chapter 7

Corilan's excitement about the SAG testing continued to escalate as she went through her weekly routines. She sat stroking Sir Henry's back as she thought of the most recent events with the voice and her need to make a decision. She couldn't explain why she was eager to decide, other than the fact that the voice's proposal seemed like an opportunity to fulfill her longing to stop the destruction of Earth.

The night visions had continued, but now she was fully aware and remembered them, all revealing scenes of people in various states of suffering. One dream showed people dazed and slumped in various positions around a fire, their bodies skeletal, with blotched skin, raw in places, blistered in others, yet still alive. It was a haunting image she could not get out of her head.

Thinking about the voice's message, she realized that these people might not ever be saved. The voice said she was to be "the liaison for the citizens of Earth who choose to join up with SAG in preservation of the environment." Obviously there were millions who did not give a damn about ecology. So what would happen to those who did not have an interest in environmentalism?

"Innerme, everyone on Earth is not going to participate in Earth conservation. This voice has got something more in mind than preserving the Earth," Corilan said.

"Yes. I believe so."

"So what is going to happen to people who don't care about preserving Earth?"

"They will suffer the consequences."

"And that will be what, death? I don't see how those who participate in Earth conservation will fare differently. We all are inhabitants of Earth."

"I cannot provide an answer, but I believe the voice can."

His response caused a smirk to cross her face, but she needed answers. Closing her eyes, she focused on the voice.

"You have a question?" the voice said after several minutes.

"Yes. I think you are fully aware that everyone in the world is not going to take part in Earth preservation. So what's going to happen to those who don't, if I decide to do the infusion?"

"They will perish as a result of the way they have chosen to live. We have no desire to save humans who have no interest in their world's condition. From the perspective of some humans, it might be considered cruel. However, Earth has reached a state where indifference is causing its destruction. What better solution than to let them destroy themselves?"

"According to you, your scientists created life on this planet and wanted to save their creations. That was one of the reasons not to let humans die. Why would you allow such devastation?"

"This method will allow removal of aggression. In our creation of humans, this flaw developed in our experiments and marred our work. We believe in the potential of our creations."

By giving humans who are committed to preserving Earth the opportunity to live in harmony with us, we can correct the problem.”

Going over the response in her mind, she understood his point but did not feel comfortable with the outcome.

“If you infuse with me and allow the original natives of Earth to help get those who commit connected with SAG, Earth’s inhabitants will be much happier and the environment will be rejuvenated for the future,” the voice added. *“What is your answer?”*

She still did not have a viable alternative, but the voice’s plan seemed so radical. What wasn’t he telling her? There had to be more. *“So how will the humans who commit to Earth guardianship escape this final devastation?”*

“I cannot provide that information until you are infused with me. What is your answer?”

“I need more time.” A feeling of emptiness swept over her and she knew the voice was gone.

What the voice said was disturbing at first. Then she considered how criminal charges and judiciary outcomes of crime in general often appeared to the public. Bargains were frequently made with the accused or when punishments were meted out there were potential ways to shorten prison time. Two came to mind: In some cases, early parole was granted for good behavior, especially in overcrowded prisons. For someone wealthy and affluent enough to afford one, a top lawyer could be so convincing in court the person charged might never be successfully prosecuted. If the courts could not consistently carry out punishment, how would they ever get tough on establishing and enforcing the regulations that were needed to clean up the environment? Maybe leadership was resigned to the idea that the world’s condition was inevitable and nothing could be done.

Did it matter? It certainly did to her, and she wanted to confront the citizens with her case and let them decide.

Her thoughts drifted until she remembered that four days had passed since she had met with her father and brushed him off with her response to investigate and decide about SAG on her own. He had said they would talk soon, but he had not called. Not a huge surprise, though she was still puzzled about why he had insisted on meeting with her. Was it truly all about joining the SAG Alumni Organization? He hadn’t really talked about anything else.

There had to be more about her father, his heritage, and what they did in SAG. Or was it that his ancestral guide had prodded him to see her? She had to consider that he could have told her the truth and she was just not ready to accept it. Regardless, she wasn’t going to call him.

Chapter 8

At fifteen minutes before nine on Saturday morning, Corilan sat in a classroom at the SAG headquarters school, waiting for the instructor to arrive and begin the testing session. A young man entered shortly afterward, spoke to her, removed his outer gear, laid it aside, and took a seat. He looked bookish in his horn-rimmed spectacles, navy chinos, and plaid shirt. She smiled and continued to doodle on a small writing pad she had on her desk. Most people would be playing games or surfing the Internet on their mobiles, but she used hers only for conversations or texts. When she'd finished making a flower out of dots, she looked up to check the clock on the wall and was stunned at what she saw.

Her face flushed from the warm rush of heat covering her. She wasn't sure if she was angry or surprised—maybe both. There, walking through the doorway, was her father. What the hell was he doing here? Why did he have to end up in this test session? Did he come on his own initiative or had someone contacted him? No one had even asked her if she knew Nolan Troxler. Was he tracking her? Dammit!

She shifted her eyes away, hoping he had not noticed her staring. In her peripheral vision, she saw him coming over to her. Oh no, not now.

At that moment, the testing instructor made a brisk entry to the classroom, placed some test booklets on the desk, and said, "Good morning, everyone."

The three students immediately looked at the instructor and responded to the greeting.

"I'm Sally Maultsby, your test instructor for this Saturday and the next. If you need to do anything before the testing begins, you have five minutes. Our next official break will be in ninety minutes. If your test is completed sooner, you may submit it to me and go on break."

Corilan had regrouped and had on what she hoped was her best poker face. Nolan had taken the seat parallel to hers in the row on her right. A feeling of dread regarding what he might say spread over her; she had no idea why. She was trying to sort out her reaction when Nolan turned toward her.

"I'm happy to see that you've decided to be tested for SAG Alumni Organization membership. Do you have any questions that you did not see answers to on the website?" he asked.

Corilan looked at him. She had not spoken to him about her decision to apply to SAG and she didn't expect to see him here. He was smiling and seemed quite happy; she couldn't sense any frustration in his tone for not telling him. She swallowed. "No questions," she heard herself say with a cracking voice, her throat still dry.

"I would like you to come over to my place for dinner tomorrow afternoon, say four? Here's my address and mobile number." He handed her a business card. "It's on the back."

Without responding, she took the card.

Nolan hesitated a moment, then moved a few seats forward in the row.

When the five minutes ended, the instructor handed out the testing booklets, went through the instructions, and started the examination.

Chapter 9

When the SAG testing session was finished for the day, Emil Toth stood briefly in his long gray siec and ENAZ mask on the walkway near the street in front of the SAG building. He adjusted his mask, then turned right and walked down the hill toward the next cross street.

As he neared the corner, a man in a parked, pollution-stained coupe opened the car door and got out. The young man moved quickly to the car and slid into the backseat. The other man returned to the front passenger seat, and the car moved away from the curb.

The occupants rode in silence for several blocks, then the driver, a pinched-face man named Jack, said, “So how did it go, Emil? Will you be joining SAG as a full-fledged member?”

“Yes, I think so, sir. I feel confident with the tests I’ve taken. It was not complicated.” Emil had been hired to seek membership in the School of Ancestral Guidance Alumni Organization. Emil’s IQ was 185. He had a PhD in sociology and a master’s degree in psychology, both from UC at Berkeley, along with several undergraduate degrees.

Emil’s contract employer had tried all sorts of angles to get someone admitted to SAG, without much success. The first break had come when they used an applicant who had an eidetic memory. After he had taken the day’s battery of tests, he typed and delivered the test questions to Emil’s employer. Some of the world’s most brilliant minds had been contracted to evaluate the questions and provide their consensus on what the answers should be, based on SAG’s mission. This information had been instilled in Emil, who was expected to apply the answers even if the test were restructured, and now it would soon be time for the outcome. This was Emil’s final day of written testing. Membership in the SAG Alumni Organization was imminent.

“So, was it just you testing today, like last week?”

Frank was always curious as to how many outsiders were trying to get admitted to SAG. During his ten years of surveillance, he had seen only about 60 individuals attempt the testing, outside of the 520 sent by his employer. He could always tell who the applicants were by their time of entry and departure to the SAG building, since testing was always on Saturdays.

“Ah, no. There were two people who came today—a young woman and, I am guessing, a relative. They didn’t come together, but they had a few words.”

Frank was surprised. He was not on the daytime surveillance cycle for SAG these days. “Two others on the same day, in the same session?” He frowned.

“The woman looked old enough to be college level. And the man old enough to be her father, but both of them were given test booklets,” Emil replied.

Frank and Jack looked at each other as if communicating with mental telepathy.

“What did this guy look like?” Frank asked.

“He was tall, around six feet, had shoulder-length gray hair, and a mustache with a close-cut beard. He was slim and seemed to be in good shape. Oh, and the tester called him Mr. Troxler.”

“Looks like the prodigal son has come home,” Frank said with a smile. He had heard about Troxler from other surveillance teams that had watched the Troxler family from grade school

through graduation. The idea and intent being their employer wanted a complete history of selected families and where the SAG students ended up in society—their goals and achievements.

“What about the girl—I mean, woman?”

“The tester referred to her as Miss Troxler. That’s why I assumed they were related.”

There was a long silence, then Emil said, “Is there something else I need to know or do?”

“No. You’re doing great. Just let us know when you get your test results.”

Emil Toth was dropped off at his apartment across town, and the two men drove toward their office complex in Arlington, Virginia.

“What do you think this means, Nolan Troxler showing up at SAG with, who, his daughter?” Jack asked.

“I don’t know, Jack,” Frank replied deep in thought. “We stopped surveillance on Nolan the year I came on board. He had a job with some IT corporation. His marriage ended when his wife died—car accident, I believe. They did have a kid, and she went to the mother’s parents. All that is in the files.” Nolan was the only alumnus Frank knew of who had never returned after he graduated from high school. Why he’d never returned had not been discovered.

“Whatever the reason he left SAG, it looks like he wants to be reinstated, and he’s taking the external route, along with his daughter,” Jack commented.

Frank nodded. “Yes, and I think this return needs to be scrutinized. I’m going to report it and recommend additional evaluation.”

Jack nodded in agreement. “At any rate, it sure looks like things are going to go our way this time. The testing, that is.”

“It certainly seems that way, but I would not be at all surprised if another failure is looming.”

“You’re an absolute pessimist, Frank. But I think you’re truly going to be surprised this time.” In contrast to his partner, Jack tended to be more of an outgoing, mainstream, team-player type.

Frank pursed his lips and watched the traffic and people crowding into the street as rush hour mounted. Jackson Little had been his partner on surveillance for seven years. Frank knew Jack was aware of how suspicious he was of most everyone’s actions. His employer’s attempts to get an informant into SAG were quite familiar to him. They had spent millions in surveillance and bugging and had taken legal action through spurious applicants claiming rejection without merit—all to no avail. SAG had not broken any educational rules, and they were a private school; nothing legal could be done.

* * * * *

Frank and Jack entered the main headquarters building, and Frank went to his office area. Sitting down at his desk, he reached for his mobile, which began ringing before he had touched it: his boss. He answered.

“So, how did the testing go?” the boss asked, obviously aware that Emil’s application procedure was winding down to completion.

“Emil seemed very confident that he has excelled and will soon be joining the SAG alumni. He said that having the testing content in advance really made it easy to take the tests.” Frank made an effort to sound positive.

“Great.”

“One other thing, sir.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m not sure what it means, but Nolan Troxler and his daughter were being tested as well.”

“Nolan. Yes, he’s the one who disappeared from the SAG activities after high school graduation.”

The man had an incredible memory. “Yes, sir. It seems curious that he’s back on the scene, don’t you think?”

“I agree. Place him under surveillance and let’s see what turns up.”

Chapter 10

After many disputes with herself on why she shouldn't go to her father's home versus why it might be to her advantage, Corilan finally decided to go. Instead of contacting Nolan about her decision, the following afternoon she put Sir Henry in the car and drove to Baltimore.

A downpour came as she made her way up Highway 139 to Greenway. All the vehicles around hers were all streaked as if splashed with paint remover. She knew that the falling acid rain would create more of its freestyle artwork on her car's paint as well.

When she crossed University Parkway, she noticed a Guilford Park sign, confirming that she was close to her turnoff on Chancery Road just as it appeared on the digital map online—absolute confidence in GPS she didn't have. She was relieved that the rain had abated. Being out in acid rain always stressed her. Turning right onto Chancery Road, she drove up one block and there was the house, one house ahead on the left. She pulled to the right and parked. Sir Henry rushed between the seats wagging his tail and prancing about briefly, and then sat down in the front passenger seat.

She reached into the console, pulled out a small pair of binoculars, checked the house number again, and then double-checked that the address was the same on the card Nolan had given her. This was the correct address. Mouth agape, she stared at the exterior. It was an enormous two-story brick home with dormer windows, which was likely a third level. To get closer, she looped the block and parked at the curb in front of the house.

She walked with Sir Henry up the bricked walkway and steps. After scanning the gravel-covered ground's landscaped artistry where grass once grew, she continued toward the arched, recessed double-door entryway. The oversized dark brown doors were made of wrought iron, and sconce lanterns of antique brass, once complementary to the entrance, now testified to the corrosive forces of the environmental downturn. She felt sure this was the wrong address, but she pressed the button to the far left anyway. Confirmation was always best.

Seconds later, one of the doors swung open and a middle-aged woman stood observing her.

"Hello, I'm looking for Nolan Troxler. Does he live here?" she asked the woman.

The woman smiled. "Yes, he does. You must be Corilan."

"Yes, I am."

"Come on in. He was hoping you would come. Dinner will be ready soon," the woman said, shutting the door. "You can put your outer gear right here, and here are some fresh slippers for you." She gestured to a shoe rack with a pair of slippers on top. The woman looked at Sir Henry, who was already watching her and said, "And how are you, little fella?"

Sir Henry wagged his tail and continued to observe the woman.

"This is Sir Henry."

The woman nodded. "Oh, and by the way, I'm Martha, the housekeeper and sometimes cook." She smiled.

When Corilan finished removing their outer gear, Martha turned toward the inner area of the home. "Right this way."

Corilan and Sir Henry followed, taking in the expanse and beauty of the interior. Through all of this, she scolded herself for even coming inside after Martha confirmed it was Nolan's residence. Nevertheless, her need for answers had propelled her through the door. Now she could hardly contain her desire to confront her father.

Martha led her from the entryway to the living room. "Please go in and have a seat. I'll tell Mr. Troxler you're here."

She turned to thank the woman, but the sound of her footfalls was already fading down the hallway. Instead of sitting down, she browsed the room, moving about over the solid wood floors, scrutinizing its furnishings and lighting. Two crystal chandeliers with candle-shaped lights shone from the high ceiling. A cranberry-colored couch and matching pattern fabric chairs sat atop a winter white background rug covered with cranberry and blue paisley floral embellishments. Floral drapery edged the large expanse of windows.

She turned from the seating area and faced the fireplace. It was huge but looked as if it had not been used in many years. Lifting her eyes to the images on the wall above, she moved closer to get a better look at the portraits. Sir Henry nosed the fireplace and proceeded to enter the hearth. She shortened the run of the leash and he sat near her feet.

Instantly she recognized two of the pictures. On the left was a portrait of her father. On the right was one of her mother. She assumed both portraits had been created about the same time—they were like the pictures given her by her grandmother. The middle portrait, larger than the other two, was of her father standing beside her seated mother, and Corilan standing in the center beside her mother in front of her father. Not able to break away from the emotions that swelled inside, she remained frozen and staring at the portrait.

"Hello, Corilan."

Breaking her captivation, she spun toward the door. "Hi," she responded dryly. "I didn't hear you come in. How long have you been standing there?" She moved to a nearby chair and sat down. Hold off for now, maybe you'll learn something new, she told herself.

"Just a few moments," he replied, and took the closest seat to hers. He observed her for a while and then spoke. "Are you so angry that you choose not to be seen with me?"

Finally, he was reacting to her applying to SAG independently. Corilan shrugged and turned her gaze toward the windows. "Being angry with you has nothing to do with whether I'm seen with you."

"After you did your research and made your decision to join the SAG Alumni Organization, why didn't you tell me? We could have applied together."

"First of all, I don't want to be tagged as Nolan's daughter. The organization knows who you are, in or out. I wasn't raised by you, and I want to be accepted or rejected for me, who I am. I may be your seed, but that is apparently all you wanted me to be. The follow-on was you fulfilling your obligations. Second. Why should I report my decision to you? From what I see"—

she gestured, stretching her arms outward—"you've done quite well on your own. No need for me to ruin that by being an added concern."

Nolan looked up at the ceiling, down at the floor, then leaned forward, resting his elbows on his legs. "With regard to this house, I did not buy it. The house has been in the family for a hundred and twenty years. My grandfather had it built in 1920. Believe it or not, it was cheaper for me to stay here than find my own place that would allow for me to have a laboratory and other equipment. Besides, I was born here, and I am quite fond of this home."

"I guess it never crossed your mind that after Mom's parents died, I had nothing. They didn't have a family estate and their home was not paid off. All I had was a storage unit and my dormitory room."

You didn't even contact me and offer to take me in," she continued. "Yeah, I probably would have said no, but you never asked. Yet you had all this. I could have stayed here and attended college to finish up." She glared at Nolan. Seeing that his expression was solemn, she wondered if his guide was giving him counsel. It damn full well better be the case. She switched her eyes toward the windows.

Finally he spoke to her. "Listen, Corilan. I can see that us getting to know each other is going to be difficult, but will you give it a chance? I believe you want to, but you're fighting it."

"Yes, I am. I still cannot believe you lived here all the time I was with my grandparents and you never even invited me to visit. What kind of love do you have, long distance only? I was no more to you than a charitable donation to save a child in a foreign country; just send your monthly pledge and be on your way." With that, she got up and led Sir Henry to the front door.

"Corilan, I'm really sorry about how things happened, but it's not the way it appears, I promise you. Please don't be this way," Nolan pleaded.

She put on her outer gear and Sir Henry's, ignoring what Nolan said. Then with her hand on the doorknob, she turned to her father. "By the way, you have a beautiful home." Her grip on the knob tightened and she opened the door, letting herself and her dog outside. She went to her car, disheartened and unable to understand her father's past behavior.

Being polite and showing good manners was what she had been taught, but today she had responded as if she had no clue about such things. Seeing where and how her father was living since her mother's death was too much to swallow. Guilford Community might not be as exclusive a neighborhood in the present as it had been in the past—its history reached back to the nineteenth century—but even its current status represented more than she had. He was living there alone. Alone. Did he consider her presence too much trouble? Her thoughts raced on as she contemplated what could have been but was not, because of his selfishness. Tears streamed and the sobs ebbed and flowed as she drove home.

Chapter 11

With the first Saturday's eight hours of testing completed and three days of the work week done, Corilan thought she was having a good week. Out on her last walk for the night with Sir Henry, she pondered her major concerns. Her night visions of the world's dismal future had not stopped, but she was coping. Understanding what they were about helped a great deal, especially since she was now taking action. She was pleased that Innerme supported her decision to join the SAG Alumni Organization, and it increased her confidence about reaching out to citizens everywhere. However, she was concerned about the voice's proposal. She had not given a yea or nay reply, and the voice had not come to her in a while. Maybe she shouldn't be concerned, but she was interested in what the voice had said.

Her relationship with her father had not changed since she'd stormed out of his home. Now she was debating whether she should call and apologize. *For what?* had been the question that popped in her mind every time she considered doing something. What she had said was how she felt, and if what she accused him of was in fact true, she wasn't sure she could forgive him. Perhaps he should tell the truth about what really happened, she concluded.

Returning inside, she soon had herself and Sir Henry squared away for relaxation. She curled up on the couch and continued her deliberations.

"I believe it is time for me to make a final decision, Innerme. I want to have all the faculties I can obtain when I become a member of the SAG Alumni Organization. Can we talk about it?"

"Of course, but how do you know if you will pass all the testing that will be presented to you?"

"You sound as if you have doubts about me."

"Not at all. I am questioning you this way so you can look at both sides of your decision."

"Okay. The questions on the tests are about one's character and are completely in harmony with how I have chosen to live. Although I have no key to the SAG tests, I feel absolutely correct on all my responses. If I'm wrong, then I probably shouldn't be joining this organization anyway, and I will keep searching."

"Your attitude is as it should be. In regard to the voice, know this: I was aware that a higher level of communicators existed, but not specifically who they were. I could not tell you even that morsel because I didn't know you would be selected. All cannot know of the original natives of Earth, so the selection would only be revealed to the person chosen. Now that you have been selected I can say you have received the honor of the ages. Only a few humans have ever known there is even a possibility of other beings existing among humans on Earth. None who are alive have seen or confirmed that it is true. I feel honored to have hosted and witnessed such a presence. Being chosen is an honor for you and your ancestors."

"You sound as if you know what my decision to the voice will be."

"I believe you have more questions but will concede to the voice's request."

"We'll see. I'm going to seek the voice right now."

“Proceed.”

Several minutes later the voice responded. *“This will be your last opportunity to respond, yes or no, to my proposal. My Trans-Luminescence Cycle occurs every five months, which means I will be in physical form for three days starting tomorrow, Thursday. I must have your decision now. Will you accept the infusion?”*

“I have been thinking over this infusion and have decided to do it, if you will agree to certain conditions.”

“Conditions were not anticipated for such an honor as this, but tell me and I will consider your desires.”

“I need to have control of my mental faculties as I do now—with guidance, of course. Any enhancements that might occur from this infusion can be used at my discretion.”

“Your requests seem reasonable and are granted. On behalf of the Lumenians, I require that you must agree to complete the process for membership at the School of Ancestral Guidance upon receiving this procedure, fulfilling all expectations as a member of the SAG Alumni Organization. If we proceed, I will need a secure place to stay.”

“You will be safe in the basement of my home. Are there any special preparations required?”

“None, other than plenty of water with chlorine and fluorides removed.”

“No problem. Anything I should do?”

“You will be instructed when I arrive.”

“What are you called?”

“I am called Earthos.”

Corilan got up and went downstairs to the basement to prepare for her guest.

Chapter 12

When Corilan arrived home from work on Thursday, the only sound was Sir Henry's incessant barking while standing in front of the basement door. No one was in sight, but it felt like there was a presence in the house. Before, when she had these feelings, the voice had spoken to her, but not this time.

"It's okay. Quiet, boy," she said, patting Sir Henry's head.

After returning from taking the dog out and removing their outer gear, she looked in all the rooms. They were undisturbed. Was he, or it, here? She wasn't sure what to expect.

Stepping quickly through the basement door, she closed it behind her. "Hello," she called down the basement stairway. She waited for a response. There was none. A physical check was better, she decided. With a flip of the light switch, she proceeded down the steps and called again. "Hello." Still no response.

Nothing was different in the partitioned-off storage area; the bed looked wrinkled but she could not recall whether it was already that way. She returned to the foot of the stairs then remembered the bathroom, went to the door, turned the knob, and pushed inside.

"Oh!" she gasped, startled at what she saw through the glass door, slumped on the shower floor. She froze in place as her eyes took in what was before her: a translucent form, similar to a human in that it appeared to have arms, legs, a body, and a head—of sorts. The head had a green luminescent glow about it that flowed down the center of its back side as far as she could see. Its back was against the glass wall near the shower door. The translucent form rose from the floor in what seemed to be a blink of her eyes.

Reality and fright of the unknown saturated her being and she rushed from the bathroom, toward the stairs.

"Hello, Corilan," the being said, suddenly standing in the bathroom doorway. "I did not mean to frighten you. I was not exactly sure when you would return." It reached over and took a towel from the rack and proceeded to dry its translucent form.

Stunned, but recognizing the voice, she began to relax. Its voice was in itself a very calming sound. "Your body, what is it?" she asked, still reluctant but curious.

She stared as it walked from the bathroom, unashamed of its uncovered form. It was more than seven feet tall, and appeared neither male nor female—no sexual organs were visible, and mammary glands were not protruding. She gazed in awe. There was no hair on its body, and it had strange openings where humans had ears. She caught herself and closed her gaping mouth. It must not have heard her. Or had she even spoken the words aloud? She wasn't sure.

Remembering her manners, she said, "Ah, I mean, would you like some clothes? Or can I get you something?"

"Something casual and soft would be fine. Thank you," it said, and went to the bedroom.

What did she have that it could wear? First she should decide what gender of clothes she needed. What was the name? Earth? No, Earthos, that was it. The name sounded masculine, and

its voice did, too. So, male it was. She would just have to see what male-oriented clothing she had, since she did not have any men's clothing.

After rummaging through her clothes, she decided on sweat pants and a cotton sweatshirt. Underwear didn't seem important for now. The items she picked were at least three sizes larger than her own clothes. They had been mixed up with her things when she had moved out from staying with a group of college friends before she had moved into her apartment. Why she had kept them, she did not know, but today they were needed.

She returned to the basement bedroom. Earthos was sitting on the bed, thumbing through one of the books stacked on a small table beside it.

Handing him the clothes, she said, "This is the largest size I have. I can get something more appropriate shortly."

He held the pants up to his form, and then the shirt. "These look suitable," he replied, and proceeded to put them on.

Mesmerized by the continued shameless display of his uncovered body, from her perspective, Corilan again asked, "What gender are you, male or female?" She felt her face grow warm, but she wanted to know. Allowing this alien to stay in her house, she had every right, she reasoned.

Earthos finished pulling the pants on. "I do not have a gender," he replied, and sat down on the bed.

Corilan sat in a straight-backed chair against the wall.

"When you could reproduce, were there genders, like male and female?" She wasn't sure whether he had told her or if it was revealed in a dream, but she knew that the Lumenians had become sterile many millenniums ago.

"No. We could be whatever we wanted to be—we could reproduce and deposit."

"Like a hermaphrodite?"

"Similar, but our physiology is much more perfected. Our scientists tried to infuse this physical ability in our experiments but it was not successful. It is considered an anomaly in humans."

"Have you deposited or reproduced?"

"Yes, once."

"Where is your, ah, creation, and what did you call it?"

"My creation was called Eboe, and Eboe decided to be human and died many cycles in the past."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

Seemingly indifferent to her response, Earthos hugged himself and patted the clothing he had just put on. "I have always wondered how these would feel. They are more comfortable than I imagined."

"You've never had clothes on before?"

"No. I could not risk being seen during my cycle. I had to think of my people."

"So what is your level among your kind?"

"I am what humans might call prime, the Prime Being."

“Is that the highest position among your people?”

“Yes.”

“Awesome,” she marveled. He went into the open area of the basement and sat in one of the overstuffed chairs, his attitude calm and relaxed.

Corilan followed and sat on the sofa. A curious thought came to mind. “Why would the Prime Being risk himself to have direct contact with a human?”

“Since I am Prime, my people felt that I had the best chance of having success. And, since we spend most of our time observing humans, why not? We have existed for many thousands of years in our current states—there’s no life and death cycle, so the risk, though minimal, is actually rather exciting. In addition, *you* are a unique specimen and considered to be highly evolved.”

After pondering his reply, she realized something was different. Where was Innerme? She felt empty. Not once had he communicated with her since the arrival of Earthos. Thinking about it now, she realized their last communication had had a sense of finality to it.

“What should I do now?” she queried. Talking to Earthos’s voice was one thing, but seeing him was over the top.

“You must prepare yourself for the unification.”

“How do I do that? And what is unification?”

“You should cleanse your being inside and out; I will tell you what to use. Then, I will perform an infusion of a portion of my luminescence to you. The infusion unifies us for communication and enhanced abilities.”

“Will it hurt? How is it done?” She felt her heart begin to race, panic growing inside.

“You need not be afraid. Stay calm. It will not harm you. Your natural abilities will be further enhanced, as we have discussed. The greatest ability will be to communicate directly with me, whether I am in cycle or out. You will have a permanent link to us, the people of the Lumenthen Galaxy, through me. The destruction of our universe by humans must cease, and with your help, we can reclaim Earth and bring it back into balance.”

She stared at Earthos with a questioning look. “So how can Earth be fixed in such a short time?” What could she or SAG do in a process that seemed to require iterations of change over many generations? Inspired, she asked softly, “What can I do?”

“Get writing tools and I will tell you,” Earthos directed.

She knew Earthos was referring to the infusion, but she wanted to address the reclamation he spoke about. First, however, the infusion had to occur.

Earthos gave Corilan a list of natural herbs and organic items to purchase and told her how to use them for the cleansing.

“When this is completed, your reasoning ability will be magnified, your sensory detection will increase, the insights you need to bring the right leaders to understand and act will be extremely enhanced,” he assured her.

These abilities sounded as if they would give her the potential to be very beneficial in whatever medium of communication she would perform. What would the unification do to her

physical body? The Lumenians were potentially eternal beings. That might not be such a positive experience from a human's perspective. On the other hand, some humans would give everything they had to live forever. She'd never considered such a far-fetched possibility.

"Will this infusion make me live forever like you?"

"We do not know. The unification has only been performed once in the past."

"So what happened?"

"He was accused of being possessed by the devil and burned at the stake, in 1515."

"Mercy." If she discovered abilities that were visible to others, she wondered what would happen in the present day. "Why wasn't he protected in some way?"

"The infusion was not as concentrated as this one will be, and I was not the Lumenian the chosen human was infused with. From a scientific perspective, we are confident in our success this time."

"Was his mission the same as mine?"

"Yes, but it was a proactive tact that we were seeking. If we had been successful, I would not be here now, and life on Earth would not be on the verge of extinction."

The words Earthos spoke were extraordinary and gave her much to ponder. However, the outcome of the previous infusion caused her anxiety and made her wonder if she would be killed because of her abilities. That was silly, she reasoned. These were not medieval times. Although, she wondered if anyone would believe her when she imparted her message. Should she even go through with this process?

"Are you sure people will listen?" she asked.

"Yes, they will listen. The previous human unification occurred centuries before SAG was founded. This group has worked diligently to engage people who believe in ecological conservation and living wholesome, organic lives. Many are in positions of power, all over the world."

"What about regular folks? They cannot be left out."

"That's where you come in. You will be the ball joint or liaison between the people of the world and the SAG alumni leaders. As a product of world citizenship, you will be empowered with wisdom and insight."

The solemn determination that Earthos radiated with his words saturated her being. She was frightened in a way, yet she felt compelled to meet the need that he described. When she had conversed with Innerme, conveying her frustrations about the environment and what she wanted to do, he always ended his feedback by saying, "*You will know when the opportunity is presented.*" She was sure that Earthos and SAG were the opportunity. It would be up to her how to unify the many environmental groups, leaders, and ordinary citizens in guardianship of Earth.

Chapter 13

Corilan had acquired the herbs Earthos prescribed and begun the internal cleansing the day before. It was early Friday morning now. She had called her job and taken the day off. Then, she'd fed and walked Sir Henry, but abstained from food herself. Her offer of breakfast to Earthos had been declined except for a request for more chlorine- and fluoride-free water. After the herbal laxatives completed her abdominal evacuation, she had scrubbed her body with herbal cleansers.

Feeling empty but stable, Corilan now stood in the doorway of the basement bedroom, wearing only her robe. Earthos sat on the bed near the side table, where he had placed several odd-looking tools and a tiny ceramic bowl.

The instruments were not hers, and she wondered where he had obtained them. However, now didn't seem to be the time to ask.

He beckoned to her with his hand.

"Please lie here on your stomach." He motioned horizontally at the bed, then added, "With your head near me, but turn your face away from me."

She followed his instructions without a response.

He pulled the robe away from her torso. She felt his hands gently move her hair from the side of her face and neck. His touch was soft and felt like tepid flowing water as he massaged her upper back area. It was so relaxing she felt as though she were floating; awareness drifted into unconsciousness.

* * * * *

From among the instruments on the side table, Earthos chose a long, cylindrical tool made of a metal alloy, shaped like a straw on one end and a sharp point on the other. With one hand he slowly pushed the pointed end of the tool into what appeared to be his nostril, then held the tiny ceramic bowl to the other end. A green-tinted fluid with a bright glow began to drip into the bowl. He pushed the tool farther and the flow of the substance increased. When the bowl was full, he removed the tool and set it on the nightstand, then squeezed the nostril area together and held it for a few moments.

With a tool that looked like a miniature metal back scratcher from antiquity, he scored Corilan's neck and the center of her back to her waist until the blood beaded to the surface. He dipped a small brush into the extracted fluid and dabbed it on the scored skin of her neck and spinal area, repeating the process until all of the substance was absorbed.

* * * * *

Eight hours later, Corilan awakened with a start. Where was she? What had happened? Then she remembered the infusion. She peeped from the bedroom into the open basement area. Earthos was sitting in one of the chairs, sipping water.

"You have rested well," he said. "How do you feel?"

Interesting, she observed; she was nude to the waist and she wasn't shocked or embarrassed. Was it a side effect of the infusion, no shame like Earthos? "I feel fine." She pulled her robe up and put her arms through the sleeves and went into the sitting area. "Is the infusion complete?"

"The physical connection has been done, and next is the communication portion. That will take longer, but I will teach you the basics. You will learn other things as you mature in communicative techniques."

"When do we start?" She recalled what Earthos had said about his earlier telepathic communication being made possible because he had been in proximity and used Innerme's essence. Since the infusion was complete, she wondered how different thought transference would be.

"We will begin now."

Earthos rose and walked away from where she stood until he reached the basement wall. Facing the wall he said, "Think of something to tell me, and call me in your mind, not out loud. Concentrate and send me the message now."

Corilan closed her eyes and thought of Innerme. She felt strange, like there was no area in her mind where Innerme ever existed. She concentrated harder and focused on Earthos. "*What happens next?*" Her face warmed and her thoughts seemed amplified, then faded like an echo.

Earthos responded, "*I received your message.*"

Her eyes widened and she grabbed her head. "Oh! That's pretty loud."

He turned toward her. "I apologize. I will mimp with less effort in the future. It appears that compatibility is even more superior than had been expected."

"Mimp?"

"Call through mind impulse."

"Oh. Okay." She hoped Earthos would be, at a minimum, as great a guide as Innerme had been.

"The first steps are now complete. You will continue to discover other abilities that you have. Your intuition will guide you, as will I."

He held up his right hand, then said, "One more thing. Look in one of your reflection glasses."

Corilan went to the bathroom mirror. "Oh my! How did this happen?" She lowered her robe around her shoulders for a better view. "When did it happen?" Her shoulders and head were engulfed in a luminescence of pale fluorescent green, just like his.

"*It occurred when I infused you with a graft of my physical form's life essence,*" Earthos replied telepathically.

"*Where? I didn't feel anything.*"

"*On the back of your neck and spinal area. My Lumenian life essence infused with your Earth organic molecules, which has mutated you to a level with abilities beyond humans, and likely Lumenians as well—not that you have a higher status, you are just different. It purified you, healed, and left no mark.*"

Corilan felt the back of her neck. Nothing was different. Although, there was something. She touched her face. Her eyes were clearer—colors were more distinct, her vision stronger—her hair was shinier, and her golden-tan skin was as soft and supple as a baby's.

He stood behind her as she stared in the mirror. “*You must not tell anyone. Only you and the SAG members' ancestral guides can see your luminescence. Who you are will be revealed through their ancestral guides. The glow will be the key for your access to the people with power to make the changes that will clear a path away from planet Earth's destruction,*” he said.

Not revealing her infusion with Earthos or awareness of the original natives of Earth wouldn't be a problem, she thought. In addition, she hadn't told her father she had a guide, either.

“*Your father is a very important man in our quest to save the planet. He is in grave danger because of that. You cannot tell him due to the potentially added risk to his life and yours.*”

“*Are you reading my thoughts?*” burst from Corilan in surprise at Earthos's comment. She assumed that they would be communicating telepathically from now on since she was infused. Knowing what latitude he had in her mind was vital.

“*Yes. I have that ability, but I will not intrude unless you invite me or if you are putting planet Earth at risk,*” he replied.

She hadn't considered such a circumstance. Either one of them could be used to get to the other. “*Could I be attacked for informing people about green living?*”

“*It is possible. Change is something the powers that be are not interested in.*”

Corilan and Earthos returned to the open area of the basement and sat down.

“*You will learn through direct communication with me, unfiltered, as well as through SAG training,*” Earthos continued. “*You have a very important role to fulfill. Your intellect will be strengthened, making you able to cope under any circumstance. All actions will be unified mentally with me—I, Earthos, am your new guide.*”

“*Innerme never influenced my biological and personal needs,*” she said.

“*Beyond what the infusion has done, neither will I, unless there is interference with the reclamation.*”

“*Tell me about the reclamation.*”

“*It is the restoration of the Earth to its natural state. Your role is to make this known and give everyone that cares the opportunity to be guardians of Earth.*”

“*I want our world to return to an ecologically balanced state for the safety and well-being of mankind. Is that what you mean?*”

“*Affirmative. We are in sync.*”

“*I will do whatever is required. Show me what I must do.*”

“*We will move forward as one from this day forth.*”

“*Oh, one more thing. You said your cycle is three days, and tomorrow is your third day. I cannot be here because it will be my last testing day with SAG. Is that a problem?*” she asked.

“*No. I will be fine and back to my incorporeal state before you return. Remember, you may mimp me at any time.*”

Chapter 14

Tense and excited, Corilan sat in the SAG headquarters lobby. The Saturday testing sessions and the home study course, Universal Harmony Training, had been completed. Now it was time for her final interview before the SAG Alumni Organization board members.

The Universal Harmony Training had turned out to be quite interesting. SAG's founding year was a fact she already knew, but in the SAG history booklet there were more details, including a list of the twenty-one founding fathers' names. She'd been shocked to see the Troxler name: Montgomery Troxler of New Jersey, to be exact. There was no doubt in her mind that he was a relative of her father's. Even with the rift between them, she was gratified and proud of the fact that her family felt like she did.

More impressive was how they had learned about the presence of their guides. After their monthly meetings during their first year, they had family gatherings and socialized. Montgomery Troxler made a discovery and shared his observations about the founders and the family gatherings. He pointed out how it seemed that they had the same characteristics, one big family. Over time all the founders agreed, and the topic came to the table for discussion in a meeting, months later. Reasons for the similarity were tossed around, but the founders were not satisfied and kept digging.

Confused, one of the members thought the answer was really simple, and explained, "This discussion is moot and unnecessary. When we eat or council our children or do whatever it is we do, inside our minds we are guided by a voice on what the best action to take should be. The voice always gives positive direction on caring for Earth and if we ask, our daily lives, too. I'm guessing that is true for all of us?" And they all agreed and applauded his explanation. Since they all had voices and their school-age children had already sensed and questioned about the voice in their heads, they were convinced it was hereditary. In the end they called the phenomenon one's ancestral guide, and made it a requirement for membership. That is when the organization's name changed from "Guardians of Earth & Healthy Living Organization" to "the School of Ancestral Guidance Organization."

Another segment of her study had been the SAG Member Handbook, the organization's traditions and disciplinary actions. One tradition and disciplinary action in particular stood out in her mind. Regarding one's commitment to Earth's preservation: "Rejection of one's Earth preservation life work, without cause such as disability, illness, or mental defect: the member shall be permanently disallowed by the SAG Organization." This was definitely not an organization for members with just their name on the books.

Last was the Earth Preservation Life Workbook. It was to be used as a log for all the areas in which a member worked, along with one's accomplishments. Her life work choice would be reported to the appropriate area once she finished the rest of her entry requirements. She felt tingly with excitement being so close to membership. This was her final step.

Corilan and Earthos had discussed the board interview, and he had sounded quite interested in observing every detail today.

“Your acceptance into the SAG Alumni Organization will be the beginning of your mission,” Earthos had said.

She had sought further details, but his only response was, *“When you go before the board their ancestral guides will speak to them of the significance. The board will sense the inspiring aura of your presence and the glow of luminescence will be visible to their guides.”*

In awe at the notion of what he had said, she wondered if the board would in any way expose what their guides sensed about her. If they did, what would she say? It made her uneasy since she could not speak of Earthos. Whatever the case, she resigned herself to follow SAG’s directions and to wait for further guidance. This was the beginning of understanding her heritage.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the receptionist spoke and beckoned to her then led her to a small lecture room. When she entered, she felt like she was outside of herself, watching the event unfold. The board members were seated in tiers and the alumni officers sat at a long table on the floor level in front of the tiered seating. A nameplate was set in front of each officer. Her eyes glimpsed Gerald Swain, the board chairman, then raced on to the other board officers. The sergeant-at-arms pointed to the chair facing the group. She sat down in front of the alumni officers.

“As you have been informed, your testing was successfully passed. Congratulations,” the board chairman said. “You will be questioned by the board members until all queries have been answered. We will then deliberate while you wait in the lobby area. When a decision is made, you will be notified to reappear for our response on your application for membership. Do you have any questions?”

She looked at the board members seated behind the alumni officers. They all seemed fixed on her, as if they were in a trance. She refocused her vision to the speaker. He was fixated on her, too. She did her best to remain poised and unaffected—she had not realized that their guides’ scrutiny would be so intense.

“No. I understand,” she replied.

“Please proceed with your questions,” the chairman said, and nodded to the moderator, who was seated facing the group.

The moderator pressed something on the screen of a handheld device he was holding and the first board member spoke.

The interview questions were many, and every board member had a turn to query her. Most questions were about how she interacted with her guide, what her life goals were, and most of all, what she was committed to doing for Earth’s conservation.

“As a final requirement to the oral interview, please repeat the SAG mission,” the board chairman said.

“The SAG mission is to preserve planet Earth and ensure that inhabitants have the ability to live healthy lives,” Corilan responded.

“The aim?”

“The aim is to reclaim planet Earth and our health for ourselves and future generations.”

“Thank you for your responses. You will have our decision within the hour,” the chairman finished.

Corilan smiled and went to the lobby, where she sat down to wait.

The suspense and expectation of what the board would say were growing inside. Her face beamed with happiness. “*So how did I do?*” she mimped.

“*You were magnificent. Kudos to your past guide. Your clarity and purpose are as if from Zarnoh itself.*”

“*So, what comes next?*”

“*Patience. The plan will unfold soon, and I will guide you.*”

A man entering the lobby immediately caught Corilan’s attention. She’d seen him before, but where? Then she remembered the guy in the examination room, the first day she had begun the testing. It was him.

“Have a seat, Mr. Toth,” the receptionist said. “The board will be with you shortly.”

Toth took a seat in the lobby askew to where Corilan sat. She glanced over at him. He turned toward her and their eyes met.

“Hello,” the man said. “I don’t know if you remember, but we and, your father, maybe?” He waited for her to respond.

She nodded.

“We took some of the SAG tests on the same day,” he said. He extended his hand to Corilan. “I’m Emil Toth.”

“Corilan Troxler,” she replied, and grasped Emil’s hand. Instantly, a vision spiraled her into a scene where she saw a man talking to Emil, instructing him on the importance of passing the SAG test. The man instructed Emil to bring information on everything he saw and heard. The scene faded. She felt her face flush as she struggled to retain a calm demeanor. This must be the work of the infusion she concluded and smiled, weakly feigning shyness.

Realizing what the vision meant, she knew what she had to do. “Excuse me,” she said, staring off in the distance as she spoke. She got up and left the lobby.

She knocked on the lecture room door and opened it. Silence swept through the room like the wave performed by spectators at a sports game. Every eye focused on her as she came closer to the group.

“Mr. Swain, I need to speak with you. I have critical information,” she said, looking directly at him. ‘What could she possibly want?’ flitted to her mind from Swain’s thoughts. She smiled in response.

He stood up and said, “Very well,” then he turned to the board. “I will return shortly; please wait for my input.” He then led Corilan to a side door and entered a small room off the lecture hall.

“Yes, Miss Troxler, what information do you have?”

"The other applicant, Emil Toth—he's out in the lobby now, waiting for his appointment with the board. He *must not* be admitted to SAG. He has been sent to spy on us. I was shown that he is working for some of the industrial corporations."

The president stared at her, his eyes stretched, then a frown formed on his brow. After a few moments he seemed to realize he was staring. Clearing his throat, he regrouped.

She wondered if he was communicating with his guide.

Then he spoke. "All right, Miss Troxler, I will handle things from here. Thank you."

Corilan returned to her seat in the lobby to wait for the formal call to the SAG boardroom. Thinking about it now, Mr. Swain's response to what she'd told him about Emil seemed flat. What would the board do? Would her information be disregarded? She felt sure she had done the right thing. Though she was concerned, she wanted to focus on more positive things, and refocused herself by looking around at the décor of the lobby.

As her eyes took in statues of SAG's pioneers and renowned members, she again marveled at the setting. On browsing the far end of the lobby, her eyes stopped and focused on a man seated and flipping through a small book. It was her father. She pursed her lips and turned away. Apparently, he would be having his board interview today as well. At least she would be finished before him and could leave without confrontation, she thought.

The sound of a creaking door caught her attention, but the voice of the receptionist caused her to look in the other direction.

"Miss Troxler, the board will see you now."

When she returned to the lecture hall, Gerald Swain stood up.

"Miss Corilan Troxler, please step forward." Corilan stepped up to the table in front of the officers. "There has never been an occasion in the history of SAG that we have had an applicant have a perfect test score—external or internal—until now. You have passed our tests, and your interview scores were superb as well. I will also say you must have extrasensory perception. For when I spoke to you earlier you said, 'on *us*' as if you already belonged. As the SAG alumni president, and on behalf of the board, welcome to the School of Ancestral Guidance Alumni Organization, and it has been voted unanimously for you to be a consultant for our board. Do you accept?"

How was this possible? Corilan wondered.

"*Never underestimate the power of the guides,*" Earthos mimped. "*Answer the question . . .*"

"Yes," she replied, tears streaming from her eyes.

The president handed Corilan a leather binder, telling her that the empty space was for her formal certificate, which would be given to her after all the signatures and seals were put in place. She nodded and thanked him.

The applause was loud and the members were on their feet. A reception line had begun forming for her when Swain smiled and held up a hand.

"One more thing, Miss Troxler."

Corilan waited, wondering what was next.

"There's one more ceremony to be performed, one that all members receive, usually on their fifth birthday; however, in your case it will occur at the age of twenty-five," Swain said.

Soon to be twenty-six, she thought.

"The SAG Symbol Ceremony will be performed tomorrow evening at seven. You may want to ask your father about it, since he has already participated in this ceremony."

She gave a weak smile and hoped the surge of anger inside was not apparent. He just had to make it known she was Nolan's daughter. Just because her last name was Troxler did not necessarily mean they were related, did it? Well, it was possible he had been asked if they were related, she admitted. Dammit. Why did she have to be so irritated? Time to perk up, you're a member now, she told herself.

After greeting and thanking everyone, she said her good-byes and left the hall.

Before she could get through the lobby to the exit, her father stepped in front of her.

"Corilan," Nolan said.

She jerked to a stop and glared at him.

"I would like to accompany you to the SAG Symbol Ceremony. It is something that all parents do for their children. May I do that? And congratulations on your membership," he said.

How did he know she had been accepted? Did they tell him before she knew? "Where did you get that I was having a symbol ceremony?" she blurted, ready to snap at whatever his response might be.

"The news of your perfect test score is the biggest buzz SAG has had in quite some time. I have remained friends with alumni members through the years, many being officers," he replied.

She shook her head in disgust. There was no way she was going to get away from being Nolan Troxler's daughter, she could see that now. However, it did not change the way she felt, and she did not have to encourage him to take the role of doting parent when he was not. Then a thought flashed before her.

"Absolutely not. I will not be used as an object for you to flaunt before your fellow members to show how right your theory was about the possible existence of people outside of SAG having ancestral guides." With that, she walked around him and exited the building.

* * * * *

Later that evening, after she and Sir Henry had settled in for the night, she took out the leather binder she had received and ran her fingers across the gold-embossed image on the cover.

She had seen the emblem on the wall in Gerald Swain's office and assumed it was simply an art design. On reflection, she realized the symbol had also been in the lobby, one on either side of the main entrance. It had been on the front of the SAG Handbook that was part of the Universal Harmony Training package, too. Her conclusion had been that it was a SAG logo, but she had read the handbook from cover to cover and seen no explanation or mention of it. Had she missed something? Maybe the insignia's meaning was only given during the ceremony.

Had she not been so flippant, her father would have told her, but she felt no remorse. She could call him now and ask, she considered. No way.

Chapter 15

At five minutes to seven the following evening, Corilan entered the SAG building, removed her outer gear, replaced her boots with a pair of casual dress wedges, and left her things in the coatroom near the entrance. She checked with the receptionist for the location of the SAG ceremonial room, then went to the end of the hall past the administrative area and opened the door on the right. The room was softly lit on all sides. From the entrance, three rows of cushioned pews stretched to the walls on either side of the main aisle. A two-foot-high raised platform about eight feet square was centered in front. The seafoam-colored walls created an ambiance that was soothing and relaxing. SAG Alumni Organization President Swain stood in front near the platform in a muted green robe. Centered on the robe were forest green velvet panels edged in gold leaves, with the SAG symbol embroidered on the panels in the chest area.

“Good evening, Miss Troxler,” a gentleman by the door said to her, his voice resonating in her ears. He would be perfect for movie trailer promotions, she thought. Then she recognized him as the parliamentarian for the board and the schools’ superintendent, Charlton Chadwick. He had introduced himself during her reception. “Go right down the aisle to the front pew on the right and have a seat.” He gestured and smiled.

Corilan nodded and walked down the aisle. At the front-row pews, she stepped to the right and sat down. Across the aisle, she saw Nolan already seated. Not allowing herself to become ruffled, she turned toward the SAG official standing to the side in the front.

The SAG president went to the center in front of the platform and said, “We are gathered here this evening for an occasion that is a rite of passage for all the School of Ancestral Guidance attendees. Or for those who have successfully evidenced themselves as being worthy of investiture in the SAG Alumni Organization. And this evening is such an occasion. We have before us Miss Corilan Troxler, daughter of the recently reinstated Nolan Troxler, to be honored with inscription of the SAG symbol. Miss Troxler, please step up and stand in the center of the platform.”

Stepping on the platform, then facing the pews, Corilan was taken aback. Every pew was filled. The aisles were packed with people standing. The sensation of all eyes upon her was extremely uncomfortable. Their thoughts were hitting her from all sides. She almost panicked but remembered her potential for unknown abilities. Maybe that was what was happening. Reading Emil Toth was a single incident. Hearing multiple thoughts at once was crushing. She moved her eyes quickly to look above and beyond the people to the rear wall above the door.

“You’re doing great, stay calm. Their guides are just anxious to see you. They all know you’re special, and that this is a unique opportunity,” Earthos mimped, comforting her.

The SAG president turned toward her and said, “The School of Ancestral Guidance symbol that you will be given today is a representation of your commitment to its mission. It confirms you as one of us, in duty and in camaraderie to your fellow members. The symbol’s circle represents the Earth. The partial line around the symbol ending with arrows represents the

endeavors of the SAG members moving forward to close the circle. When our mission is complete, we will have a new symbol for those born or joined after the renaissance: a circle inside a circle that meets at the top where the arrows touch together.

“Our guides speak to us through our minds; the foundation of our intent and actions flourish from this point. The symbol of your commitment will be inserted inside your hairline behind your left ear, sealing your obligation to SAG. After it is installed, the pictorial view is interpreted as ‘I am a guardian of Earth guided by my ancestry.’ Raise your right hand and repeat after me.

“I believe and commit to the SAG mission.”

“I believe and commit to the SAG mission,” she repeated.

“And take my place willingly among its members.”

“And take my place willingly among its members.” Sensations from those observing flowed through her, causing an emotional awareness of unity. Following it came a feeling of serenity and happiness permeating her entire being.

“We stand together in unity; one mission, one cause.”

“We stand together in unity; one mission, one cause,” she finished. I am now a part of what was missing in my life, she told herself.

I don’t have to feel odd or strange anymore. I now am who I’m supposed to be, she confirmed to herself.

“The inscription will now be completed,” the president announced, and took a seat on the pew next to Nolan, opposite where she had been seated.

A man came up on the platform with a folded chair, opened it up, and gestured for her to sit. He fetched a small table nearby topped with several items. Her eyes widened when she saw the hair clippers among the objects. Motioning for her to rest her head on the cushion lying on the table, the man pulled a lamp down from above and adjusted it. He smiled.

“It’ll be just a small spot, smaller than a silver dollar. You have plenty of hair to cover it until the spot grows back,” the man whispered.

She gave a subtle nod.

About fifteen minutes later, the inscription was complete.

The SAG president stood up and motioned for her to stand. Turning to the audience, Swain said, “I present to you Corilan Troxler, a guardian of Earth guided by her ancestry.”

Cheers and applause sounded, accompanied by many welcoming handshakes as she made her way through the crowd, out of the SAG symbol room.

Chapter 16

Nearly a week had passed since the SAG ceremony. The time had come for Corilan to state her life work choice for Earth conservation. What was she going to tell SAG? Her response to the board had been more general and had also covered her prior activities. She knew she had to commit to more than what she did in her personal day-to-day existence; living green was a given. Her work choice for ongoing Earth conservation, as with all the SAG alumni, had to be identified and reported. Without a commitment to Earth conservation work, and ongoing active participation in that work, her membership would be revoked. It was one of the reasons she liked the organization: no one could just sit around and have their name on the books. They had to be actively participating. She should be receiving notification of a scheduled appointment to discuss her choice any day now, she figured.

When Earthos spoke of the end of life on Earth, he'd described her role as liaison between the people, which she assumed meant she would be a go-between for the citizens of the United States and the SAG Alumni Organization. The Earth Renaissance Show had caught her interest. At sixteen, she had decided to become a vegetarian with her first visit to the ERS, and she had never regretted her decision.

The ERS was conducted annually in various metropolitan areas throughout the country and internationally. This year, the ERS was starting a public program of seminars, informing and instructing the public on what they could do to conserve the Earth and effectively improve their lives. The website had stated that though it might seem like this type of instruction was going on all the time through various news media and other organizations, the ERS seminars would be different. She now wondered if there might be a role for her.

“Corilan, we need to discuss another topic regarding your soon-to-be scheduled visit to SAG,” Earthos mimped.

“Okay. I was just trying to sort out where or what area I would like to work in my caretaker role. Any thoughts?” So far she liked her new guide, especially his comforting voice. Most of all, she appreciated that he hadn't intruded in her thoughts and inner turmoil about her father.

“It appears you are on the right track in your thinking.”

“Did you need something in particular?”

“When you go to SAG to discuss your member commitment, you need to request a meeting with the board.”

“Why? Won’t they think I’m pushy or aggressive? Will they be ready to listen?”

“They should not, but they might think you are pushy. Maybe they will listen. As to why, this is the earliest reasonable opportunity that you will have a chance. I have an update on planet Earth’s life extinction. Instead of having up to ten years for life on the planet, the projection has been revised to within seven years for life extinction on Earth.”

“Why didn’t you all know this sooner?” This seemed like a bad dream where the good guys were messing up due to poor projections. If the Lumenians had been on the planet as long as Earthos said, why were things in such chaos unexpectedly?

“I know this is frustrating, but the situation is not as predictable as industry leaders and scientists of the world may have led its inhabitants to believe. What is happening to Earth is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. It is a side effect of human industrialization and technological creations. More inventions equal more products, all resulting in accelerated deterioration of Earth’s environment. We can only make predictions based on the damage as it evolves, and extrapolate projections based on growth of new products.”

“So, I go in, and propose my role in protecting the Earth. Then, I switch to the topic of the end of the world.”

“In a nutshell, yes. But you can sort out the best method to get your message across to Gerald Swain.”

Thinking about the information, she realized that her proposed role and the message about the world were in some ways intertwined. Her responsibility to be liaison for citizens who aligned with the SAG organization also included letting them know about Earth’s advanced deterioration and urgent action needs.

“So what do we do?”

“You will need to explain this to the SAG Alumni Board and the Earth First League—they need to attend as well—and tell them the information I will give you. Additional data will be needed for your meeting with the board. Get your writing tools and document the instructions I will give you.”

“Who is the Earth First League, and how do I contact them?”

“The EFL is a group of SAG members who are cutting-edge inventors and have established ecological products for building complete communities that are one hundred percent naturally in balance with the Earth’s environment. Nolan Troxler founded this group and he is the point of contact.”

“How is that possible since Nolan’s membership was just recently reinstated?”

“SAG has no rules about members’ associates after graduating from SAG schools. Nolan remained friends with many SAG members and has successfully established long-term working relationships with some of his former classmates.”

Oh, shit. There had to be another way. Corilan sulked. *“Why do I need to inform the EFL?”*

“This message seriously impacts what they are doing, and the information I will provide you will require their help and participation. Here is the information,” Earthos said.

Moving to her desk, she opened her notebook. *“I’m ready.”*

Corilan began entering the data.

Chapter 17

Right after work on Thursday, Corilan went to the SAG headquarters, and was now sitting in the lobby for her commitment appointment. Usually, the SAG alumni commitment administrator would be the person to meet with, but the alumni president had intervened. Now, she was waiting to discuss and establish her role in SAG with Mr. Swain.

The SAG Alumni Organization president's door opened. "Miss Troxler, please come in," Swain said. He didn't smile, but he didn't appear angry. His attire was well-coordinated and always seemed to accent his eyes. How did he do that?

She smiled and followed him into his office.

Swain gestured toward the two large chairs in front of his desk.

Choosing the one on the right, she sat down.

"Before we discuss what you're really here for today, I would like to backtrack and respond to the question you asked on the day you came to apply for membership," he said, sitting in his desk chair.

She was puzzled for a moment, then she remembered. "You mean when I questioned the SAG Alumni Organization's progress of late?"

He smiled. "Yes. Now that you are a member, I wanted to respond to your question."

This was unexpected. "I didn't mean to criticize."

"Now that I have a better perception of you, I realize that. What I wanted to say is that we are and have been experiencing an intense backlash in recent years from those who oppose what our mission is. In addition, national agencies that address our concerns appear to be frozen in the status quo, hence our constipated state."

Hearing this and seeing the concern in Swain's face, she said, "Hopefully the addition of the ERS seminars will inspire the citizens to reach out to their congressmen to make changes."

"Yes, that's what we're hoping," Swain replied. "Moving on, you're here today to discuss your commitment role in SAG. In our alumni group, which includes *all* our graduates, our commitment to the planet is the buttress to our existence and that of future generations. Everyone is required to choose and commit themselves to an ongoing Earth preservation duty. There are numerous categories and names in each slot. Have you determined what your commitment role will be?"

Corilan nodded. "Yes, I have." Swain's manner was to the point—no small talk, no setting the tone, he just plunged right in. She liked that. "My Universal Harmony Training contained extensive information about prospective areas in which to participate. I would like to work with the Earth Renaissance Show. Since ERS is adding a training seminar this year, I'd like to be a part of that group, and take the process one step further by obtaining signed commitments from citizens who want to be guardians of Earth."

Swain looked as if he'd seen something strange and didn't know how to respond. Silence hung between them as if they were frozen in time.

Finally realizing he was not going to respond, she continued. “I have some thoughts on additional activities that would help encourage people to participate in the ERS’s campaign for Earth. I am requesting the position of chief of ERS allegiants, citizens who pledge as Earth guardians.”

Swain sat forward in his chair, resting his arms on his desk. “I like what you’re proposing. Since this is the first year we’re having the seminars, this would be the perfect time to add the role you’re describing. It would be a good fit for the ERS mission, and would give us helpful contacts to access after the ERS moves on.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Exactly,” she said with a grin.

“I’d like to attach another task to the position you propose. *You* will be our ERS keynote speaker, our face for opening the show in each metropolitan area the show visits and likely closing days as well.”

Corilan frowned. “What do you mean ‘our face for opening the show’?” It sounded like he had already picked a position for her. Could he even do that? Didn’t members choose their own area of service? “Me?” Her face felt flushed, and panic swelled inside. This wasn’t happening. Could they force her to do this? Streams of sweat were running from her armpits down the inside of her arms.

“Yes, I think you are an excellent choice, and the epitome of natural living. You have a compelling appearance that will draw people to listen to what you have to say.”

His gray eyes seemed to pore over her; not in a lustful way, but with esteem. She blushed and looked away. “Thank you, but I need more time to consider this added role. I am too nervous to be in front of a large group. Leading seminars is not the same as being in front of thousands of people in a convention center,” she said, her voice barely audible.

“*This is step one, Corilan—the beginning,*” Earthos mimped.

Ignoring the comment from Earthos, she cleared her throat and looked away from Swain.

“Just so you know, as keynote speaker, you will also be provided with staff to assist with additional research, and you will have access to SAG’s library of publications on our mission topics. Presentation materials have already been prepared. Support staff will be there to manage speaking and scheduling arrangements for all your presentations. You will prepare and present—support resources will do the rest. Security will be provided for you, and the ERS will handle your travel arrangements.” He hesitated, scrutinized her for a moment, then continued.

“For you to do this work, or the position you proposed, you will need to take a leave of absence from your job at Everett & Jank or perhaps resign at some point. Every three or four days, you will be in a different metropolitan area. In either case, you will be compensated for your services. The decision is yours.”

“I don’t know if I can do this. I’m shaking just thinking about it.” She hugged herself and rubbed her arms. “I understand about the travel and the particulars if I decide to take on this additional task as keynote speaker. Travel won’t be a problem in either case.”

"Wrap-up planning for this year's ERS tour is in progress now, so I will need a final response from you within the next forty-eight hours," he said, and then repositioned himself at his desk as if he had said, "That's all I have to say."

Corilan received the subtle implication. "Thank you, Mr. Swain. I will get back to you within the allotted time." Then she remembered Earthos's instruction to go before the board. Well, that could be done when she gave her final response, although that would make it necessary to see Swain again and not answer back by phone, as she had intended.

* * * * *

Frustrated and near tears, Corilan tossed her things on a chair in the living room and flopped on the couch. Why did everything have to be so damned complicated? Why couldn't she just work with the people who came to the seminars?

"*Earthos*," she mimped. "*I can't do this. I'll be at the podium in a blur of 'Uhs' followed by huge blocks of silence. And when I do say something, it'll sound like a first grader just learning to read.*" Her body jerked as a chill raced up her spine.

"*You have plenty of time to practice. The task you have chosen on your own put you in the ideal position, giving you direct communication with the seminar attendees as well as the ERS and SAG officers. That is very important.*"

"*I think so, too, but Mr. Swain kyboshed me with this idea of being the keynote speaker. I can't do that. I'll probably pass out from fright.*"

"*Being the ERS keynote speaker is a very important responsibility, and it broadens your influence—more opportunity to reach out to most of the patrons. People who may not have otherwise attended the seminar will go because of you and your charismatic presentations.*"

"*Huh, I wish that would be the case. What you're saying sounds encouraging, but I don't think I can do it. When a large crowd of people is present, I try to be as invisible as possible and no one is even paying attention to me. If I am the speaker, everyone will be watching me. Even if I finally could give a speech, it would be so robotic. I need to be natural, like talking to a friend. That's the kind of speaking I would want to do.*"

"*It sounds like you already know what the finished result should be. So figure out how you are going to get from 'No, I can't' to 'This is how my presentation will be.'*"

"*You're making up my mind for me, aren't you?*" Corilan mimped.

Maybe Earthos was right, but just words alone did not turn one's will into final success, did they? Wasn't her basic plan to reach people all over the nation and bring them together to fight for the preservation of Earth? That was exactly what she wanted to do, and who was going to be the front of this group? Now that the reality of what was required faced her, she did not feel ready to take on such a position. Pure imagination was all her bravado had been, she now realized. Still, she had allowed herself to aspire and find a way. Regardless of how unconventional the method, it was before her now, and the ERS was renowned throughout the states, even worldwide.

There were still more than three months remaining before the tour. The Miami show kicked off the first Saturday in January. That should be plenty of time to prepare and practice her first speech. If she could get through the first one, perhaps the others wouldn't be as tense.

"I will work with you and be with you every step of the way when you do your first keynote. After that, I think this dread you feel will subside and you will not need any special attention."

"That's what I'm hoping will happen. I'm depending on you to support me, and I believe I'll get some help from the ERS staff, too."

"Then it is settled, you will serve as chief of ERS allegiants and keynote speaker."

"I'm nervous about speaking, but I really want the chief role, and I think they're tied together—in Mr. Swain's mind, anyway."

"Sounds like you are still seesawing. Just remember to set up the discussion about Earth and the need to speak with the board. On the flip side, telling Gerald Swain 'no' will not help grease the skids to get a meeting with the board."

Chapter 18

Swain smiled as Corilan finished telling him that she would accept the keynote speaker position in his office the following afternoon. "In addition," he said, "I have notified the ERS director of your position request regarding allegiants, and she will be in touch with you very soon to provide the paperwork and any additional information you'll need."

"Thank you, Mr. Swain. I will begin work on the presentation data immediately. Here is my first contribution." She held out an envelope to Swain. All alumni paid 2 percent of their income to the organization for administration support and for the education of their children for their first twelve years; this was hers.

"Give that to my assistant. She will provide you with additional instructions," he responded.

Corilan placed the envelope back in her pocket. "Also, I have given my current employer two weeks' notice that I will be leaving." The decision had not come easy, but she had to seize the opportunity before her.

"Thank you for your full commitment to the ERS. I hope you will find your new position to be fulfilling. Oh, by the way, we have an office space for you here. You can get the key from the receptionist."

She nodded but did not move to leave, while she tried to figure out how she might change the subject.

He studied her. "Is there something else?"

"Uh, yes. I would like to request a special meeting with the alumni board, including the Earth First League and the ERS director. I have something very important to discuss."

His eyes seemed to penetrate deeper into her. "First, I think we need to discuss the justification for such a meeting."

"Earthos, some assistance, please."

"I'm here. Give him a quick overview, not too much info. Everyone should hear this together."

"I've been shown some very important information about the condition of our planet and what needs to be done. Our planet is deteriorating much faster than we are being informed by our government. The information will also fit in with the ERS presentations."

"I see." Swain stood up and put his hands in his pockets. He walked to the corner window and looked out.

From what she could see, not much area was visible through the pollution-covered window. She watched him but said nothing.

"Hang on, his guide is reasoning with him," Earthos mimped.

About two minutes later, he returned to his desk and sat down. "I have to say, your request is unprecedented, as, of course, are you." He smiled. "I will grant your request, under one condition."

“What do you need?” She wondered if he felt she was overstepping her position. After all, not only was she new to SAG, she was not an officer, nor a member of the alumni board. Yes, she was an advisor, when the board sought her counsel and she was asked to attend a board meeting.

“You are within your scope as an advisor to make this request. You will only be presenting the alumni board and the EFL with what needs to happen. Their guides will do the rest. Do not overthink this, Corilan.”

“In addition, I need to have the content of whatever information you need to present two days before the meeting.”

“*What should I do? He’ll have all the info before the board sees it.*”

“*Give him an outline of the basic points. That is all he should need.*”

“I can give you an outline of the presentation,” she replied.

Nodding, he gave a weak smile. “How about we meet Saturday at ten in the morning?”

“It’ll be tight, but that works. I’ll have the presentation outline to you by Thursday morning.”

He nodded. “The required attendees will be notified immediately. Please be fully prepared, Miss Troxler.”

“No problem. Thank you, Mr. Swain.”

They stood and shook hands.

“As we say in SAG, GOWAG, which means ‘go with ancestral guidance,’” Swain said, and walked her to his office door.

Chapter 19

Everyone in the lecture hall and on the conference call screen had just returned from an hour break. Corilan had presented her message and case for action from Earthos to the board and special attendees. No one had intervened and all had listened attentively, though with looks of skepticism at times. Now it was time to field questions. She hoped that her responses would be adequate.

Green lights quickly lit up on a device beside the lectern. She pressed the green light nearest to where she stood.

“No offense to you, Miss Troxler, but your message sounds extremely incredible. How can we be sure this is accurate information? You’re a new member, not seasoned in our traditions, yet you propose this message that life on Earth will become extinct within seven years. Why should we accept what *you* have been shown when our guides have not told us of this event?”

Every board member in front of her and on the videoconference looked stern, applauding the man’s question.

“All of you can see what is happening in the environment; you don’t have to have a science degree to realize mankind cannot exist much longer. As far as documented research, no, I do not have that. You would have to go to national government agencies for such information. Well, then again, they’re the reason we’re in this predicament. Their estimations and controls have all been used to their political advantages. Lastly, I have no interest in providing false or misleading information. What you say is true, I am new in your organization, but I have been aware of my guide’s advice and have been following it for more than twenty years. My question to you, all of you, is this: Is your guide advising you that my message is untruthful, or is this query retaliation because I’m a nonentity with a huge message?”

She glanced at the questioner, then around the room. No response came from anyone. The man muted his voice amplifier.

Moving her finger to the next lit button, she pressed it.

“Conducting the ERS and giving seminars about Earth conservation would seem futile, since life in the world is dying. Why should the ERS even go on the road this year? What’s the point?” was the next question.

Another round of applause rang out.

Corilan smiled. Everyone was alert today.

“The ERS is a tool through which SAG has access to the public, allowing us to spread our message on living green and using eco-friendly products. In the presentation portion of the meeting, I spoke of a refuge location where individuals on Earth now would be able to reside during its ruin and later return to a rejuvenated Earth. Hence, the seminar training received by citizens who commit to being guardians for Earth will be usable.”

From what she could tell, her responses were going over the audience like the droppings from a flock of birds. Was anyone really listening or contemplating her responses at all? She moved on to the next inquirer.

“Why not replace the normal ERS cycle with an end-of-the-world campaign? Then the com-link and commitment would not be needed,” the next questioner asked.

The com-link had been presented as a communication device that would be used to interface with allegiants, those who committed to Earth guardianship. This device would be injected into an allegiant as part of the commitment process. It would inform the allegiant when it was time and where to go to cross over to the interim environment; what Corilan had referred to in her presentation as the Ephemeral Passage. It was a place for the SAG members and allegiants to stay until Earth rejuvenation was complete.

Ignoring the round of applause each question was apparently going to receive, she responded. “To run a campaign of urgency saying the world is at an end does not advance SAG or ERS intentions. We want to bring together citizens who would essentially commit to guardianship of Earth. Taking this approach could create controversy that raises issues to the national government level, where different claims have already been made regarding the Earth’s environment, like pollution and other problems we are currently experiencing. It could cast a negative perspective on the ERS and SAG, making us appear to be doomsday criers, and that’s all the people would hear—fanatics with a message of disaster. That is not what we want. More information needs to be shared that will draw out people who care about planet Earth.

“Our mission is to garner those who have sincere concern and will work to ensure that a polluted environment of the like that exists today never happens to our planet again. That being the case, we have to follow through our standard ERS cycle. In addition, with the new seminars, we can sign up those individuals who have an honest interest in being caretakers of the Earth for the greater good.”

Again, total silence. Scanning the faces, she saw no smiles or pleasant countenances. She pressed another green-lit button.

“What happens to all the people who are not interested in Earth conservation or green living?” another inquirer asked.

The room remained quiet, speaking volumes concerning the members’ opinion on the query.

“As I stated earlier, only individuals who are committed to Earth’s guardianship will have access to the refuge. Consider this: If anyone could cross, what would be the point? The Earth would return to its current state, or even more dire circumstances. That is one of the reasons SAG’s efforts have not immediately caused change. However, Earth could have reached this low point even sooner were it not for SAG’s endeavors. SAG’s works have been overpowered by the industrialists’ and engineering technologists’ willful insistence in expansion of even more environmentally destructive inventions.”

Questions from the members continued on and on. At about four o’clock, they began to debate whether action should be taken in support of Corilan’s message.

A little after seven that evening, Gerald Swain stood up.

“I want to thank all of you for your questions and patience in sorting out the particulars of the message brought to us by Miss Troxler. After all the discussions and clarification, I believe this is what we have concluded and will take action on: one, we will move forward with the ERS tour; two, we will ensure that the seminars include the message of Earth’s accelerated devastation; three, citizens must sign commitments and get the com-link to become allegiants. Resources will be provided for support tasks, and the EFL will create a national database for allegiant data.

“I believe Earth has reached its final pivotal point. This is *our* time to shine. Let’s make it count for the sake of the Earth, our lives, and the lives of our descendants and those of Earth who care.”

The parliamentarian then executed the required procedures for voting to be carried out, and when they finished, the meeting adjourned.

A feeling of light-headedness was the only sensation that registered in Corilan’s mind. Movement around her seemed distant, like she was viewing the ordeal from a video. Had she heard correctly? They had accepted her proposal?

“*Well done. There is a lot more detailed work to be accomplished, but I believe they got it!*” Earthos mimped.

Experiencing the response to her presentation had been like being processed through a meat grinder. Support for such a radical action had not come easy, but it had happened. Their ancestral lineage had remained focused.

“*Do you think the board members will genuinely support this abrupt acceleration in saving the Earth?*” Corilan asked.

“*I believe they will. What you said was quite a surprise. They went a long way today in clarifying and voting to take the necessary action to make things happen.*”

Satisfied with the outcome, she began to realize this brought her closer to getting her message out. This would give absolute assurance of a rejuvenated Earth to those who had a willingness and desire to be guardians of Earth.

Chapter 20

The sound of an engine in Corilan's driveway prompted her to go to the front window. Sir Henry rushed past her, barking as he went to the door. She peeped through the drapes at the edge of the window. Discouraged by what she saw, she stood to the side of the door, waiting for a knock. Sure, she could open the door before that happened, but she didn't want her action to be misinterpreted. She was not happy about the unannounced visitor. Thirty or so seconds after the rap on the door, she opened it.

"Hello," she said, keeping her voice neutral.

"Hi, Corilan, I'd like to talk with you. May I come in?" Nolan asked. He wasn't smiling today, she noted. Maybe he was finally realizing he needed to level with her.

"Come in. Have a seat," she said, and motioned with her hand toward the couch and chairs.

After Nolan entered, he laid down the package he was carrying, then slipped out of his boots, removed his outer gear, and turned his siec to fold it with the reverse side out. "Where should I put these?" he asked, holding up the stack of protective wear.

"I'll put them on the storage bench by the back door," she responded, taking the items. Nolan went in the living room and sat down.

When Corilan returned, she sat in a chair across from his. "What's this about?"

"I brought this for you." He handed her the package. "It's a custom-encrypted mobile. I have one, Swain has one, and all the EFL members will have one soon. We need to be careful, and this will help."

Taking the package, she looked at him. "Thank you."

"That is something I wanted you to have, but my visit is about us, Corilan, and about SAG, everything," he said, then looked away from her.

She observed his demeanor but remained indifferent, though it was obvious that more was going on with him than she could discern from his statement. Relaxing back in her chair, she gazed at him in silence.

"I've told you what happened with me, and I am trying to make amends, but your actions are driving me away. What is it that you want from me?"

She pondered his question. What did she want from him? Honestly, she wasn't sure, except that she didn't think he should expect her to say "Welcome back, Dad, I forgive you for not seeing me for twenty years and not even stepping in after my grandparents died." That was not who she was. She couldn't let down the barrier she had around her.

"When you put it like that, I guess I don't want anything from you. In our first meet-up you said you wanted me to know about my family heritage. You have not talked about anything but the School of Ancestral Guidance. SAG is not everything; surely there is more. After my visit to your home, I still don't know much, other than three generations of Troxlers have lived there. You don't know me and I don't know you. We're strangers with a bloodline link. That's all."

He stared at her, rarely blinking. She was beginning to feel uneasy but continued.

"What I found most disturbing was that after Mom's parents died, you did not come for me. I know you knew, because their attorney told me you had been notified. I was in the dormitory during the school year, but what about the summer? I could have been sleeping on the streets and you would have never known."

"That didn't happen; you were in summer school" was his quick reply.

A frown and the need to belt out a scream enveloped her, but she held it together. Her father was an idiot; that was the only conclusion she could make. "So you tracked me down behind my back. Apparently you decided, what, 'Oh, she's fine, she's in the summer session'?" She held her hands out. "I suppose it never occurred to you that I went to summer school because I had nowhere else to go. You could have asked me, let me know you were there for me."

He was shaking his head now. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I never considered that."

"Yet you think I should feel all welcoming and magnanimous to you. And another thing that I find troubling is the meeting in Pond Park. If I had not come to the park, was I never to at least know where you lived or be able to reach you? You have strategized your dealings with me like a board game. What do I need to do next, for you to apportion to me . . . what? More information about your family? To be told about who you really are in the business world? To be put in your will?"

Nolan had laced his fingers together and was observing them in his lap as she continued her rant. "None of that matters anymore," he said, staring at his fingers.

She hesitated, then said, "Okay, for the most part, but to work as hard as you have to not be involved where I was concerned, you could hardly change your mind to do otherwise in an instant; unless something more ominous than 'letting my daughter's life slip by without seeing and spending time with her' gave you incentive to do so. You asked what I wanted from you. Actually, I would like to hear the truth."

He shook his head, then stood up and walked over to the window, looked out, then back at her. "You would be an excellent litigator." He smiled.

She shrugged. "I have no interest in judicial concerns."

"Tell me about the documents that you gave me at your presentation to the board members. Where did you get that information?" He was calm and focused on her, waiting for a reply.

"Is there a problem with the documents? Do you need additional data?" She knew he was referring to the data she had received from Earthos and brought to the SAG board meeting. She'd given the information to Nolan to help the EFL create communication links and injector tools.

"No problems. The documents contain comprehensive specifications. Work has already begun. But where did you get that information?" he persisted.

"My guide gave it to me," she replied.

He looked intently at her for some time. Finally he spoke. "You spoke about your guide in the board meeting. Why didn't you tell me you had a guide when we first talked about SAG and members having ancestral guides?"

“I had no reason to tell you anything.” She glanced at him across the room. “I was being interrogated at that meeting and found it necessary to validate my message. I was impressed to speak about my guide’s role in my life.”

Bobbing his head, he began pacing around the room. “You have made a huge impression on SAG, from your warning about the guy who passed the written test to the message of life on Earth ending within seven years. I think it has inspired us members to rally support for greater impacts on the environmental outreach with regard to citizens. That being the case, I would like for us to have a good working relationship where SAG is concerned. How do you feel about that?”

“Is that what’s most important to you?” It was first and foremost to her.

After a walk around the living room, taking in all the knickknacks, coffee table books, and magazines, he went over to Corilan’s chair. “Yes. Yes, it is,” he replied.

“Me, too. A good SAG working relationship it is,” she said, with the hint of a smile.

“Thank you. I’m glad we agree. Now I’ve got to go.”

“I’ll get your things,” she said, and retrieved his outerwear from the bench.

As he was putting on his boots, he stopped and looked at her. “Please don’t give up on me. You’ll see that I was not the delinquent parent that you think I was.”

She smirked and remained quiet. Sure, that’s why he changed the subject instead of responding to her seeking his truth.

Chapter 21

This was Corilan's first time at the SAG office assigned to her by Gerald Swain at their headquarters in Baltimore. Until her two-week notice from her regular job was complete, she would be coming only in the evenings after work. She had been given the nod to bring her dog along so that she could stay longer. Sir Henry seemed quite pleased with the arrangement and was presently browsing her office. The ERS director and training seminar manager would be arriving soon for their first scheduled meeting at six.

Instead of getting on with an outline of the planned work she'd had in her head for days, she sat pondering the SAG board meeting where she'd given her presentation. Replaying the Q&A segments over and over in her mind caused her to sit still as if mesmerized, staring into oblivion.

As she'd fielded questions, the condescending inquirers had hit her with verbal lashes that could have made her shrink away, but she had not. Instead, she'd felt the zeal for her message become ignited, empowering her responses with conviction to every negative they had presented.

"Yes, that is exactly what you did," Earthos mimped. "You have more confidence than you think."

"I guess so. Maybe I won't be as intimidated to speak as I imagined, except the number of people will, without a doubt, be much larger."

"True. Still, you have time to practice. The ERS administrators should be very helpful to you."

At the end of Corilan's meeting with the SAG board, Swain had informed her there was a package for her in her office. It was sitting in her tray on the desk. She focused on it now and picked it up. What had Swain left her? Opening the package, she found her signed and sealed membership certificates and a SAG Symbol Ceremony booklet. Ah, the missing information from the Universal Harmony Training. All her SAG credentials were in order. She returned the items to the envelope, started to reach for her bag, then hesitated and returned them to her desk. She decided to keep them at the office for a while.

A light rap sounded on her office door. "Come on in," she said.

Two ladies entered; they were the other meeting attendees for whom she was waiting. She had not met either of them and felt a little uneasy, as she had in the past in getting acquainted with co-workers.

"Good evening, I'm Lydia Solomon," the tall middle-aged woman said with a smile, and held out her hand. She was a handsome woman with a hint of gray to the side of her widow's peak, her dark hair pulled back into a roll.

"Hello, I'm Suzanne Withers," the other lady said, a broad smile spreading across her face. At medium height with dark eyes and a tanned complexion, she was pleasant, but Corilan sensed she was uncomfortable.

"Pleased to meet you both." After shaking hands with the two of them, she laughed and said, "As I'm sure you already know, I'm Corilan Troxler."

"Yes, your fame definitely has come before you," Lydia said, with just a hint of sarcasm.

Sir Henry remained seated by her desk, observing them, as they sat down at the rectangular meeting table across from her desk. There was plenty of room for others to work in the area as well. She had been surprised at SAG's decision to give her such a sizable office to use. The rationale for the spacious room could have been the anticipation of support resources, along with the usage being temporary, until the ERS tour began in January.

Lydia opened her notebook. "Before we get into the administrative stuff, I want to tell you about some changes that have been made in our tour locations this year. This is for your information, if anyone asks."

"Changes?" Suzanne said.

Corilan was surprised that Suzanne was not aware of the changes.

"Yes, the ERS committee made the final decision this morning. The ERS tours for California, Arizona, and Nevada have been canceled. Since most of California was lost to that earthquake disaster five years ago, there has been a steady exodus of the remaining population. Most of the southwestern areas of the country continue to be drought-stricken, with Arizona, Nevada, and California being the most devastated. More than ninety-five percent of the populace has moved to other states. With those population shifts, other tour stops have steadily increased in volume, including Portland, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; and even Boise, Idaho."

Remembering the destruction of California, Corilan replayed the data from the news reports in her mind. More than half the population was lost when massive land segments along the shoreline fell away into the ocean during and following record-breaking tidal waves brought on by a massive earthquake and its aftershocks. The event had left a permanent scar on the Earth. It was a devastating show of what nature was capable of. Pulling her thoughts away, she spoke.
"What about Texas?"

"Texas is having severe drought problems, but we are going to do the tour there this year because the people have remained. Even so, we'll need to prepare ourselves for record-breaking heat. We may need additional protective gear; time will tell," Lydia replied.

"How are the people still living there if the heat is that extreme?" Corilan asked.

Shaking her head, Lydia said, "I assume they have their own methods of dealing with it. Since we live here, we may not be able to cope as well."

Corilan had seen news reports about the drought and the record-breaking heat index, but now that she would be traveling to these geographic areas it made her nervous. Regardless, though, the tour message needed to go everywhere.

"As for eight other states—Alaska, Delaware, Rhode Island, Montana, North and South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming—they are not on the tour. The SAG schools in those states will provide seminar literature and citizen commitment forms to become allegiants along with com-link injections to those who seek them. As always, we will run advertising in those areas throughout the year." When Lydia looked at Corilan, she seemed to recognize the questioning look on her face and added, "The populace of these states is too small for a large tour. In the case of Delaware, they can go to the Baltimore or Philadelphia tour; Rhode Island and Vermont

people can go to New Hampshire or Massachusetts. Or, in either case they can simply go to their SAG school locations.

"Now, about our ERS planning," Lydia continued. "I wanted to meet with the two of you together since the areas you will be managing will interface and are new for the ERS. Our organizational structure has always been a director at the top, fanning out at the bottom levels where more support services are required. Here is the structure of responsibility based on what the SAG board members have agreed upon for this year's tour." She gave handouts to Suzanne and Corilan.

Scanning the organizational structure for her area of responsibility, she scrutinized the name under the title "chief of allegiants" and the boxes for commitments, support services, and contact data. Farther down, a single box in the center of the page said "keynote speaker" with her name underneath in parentheses.

"Suzanne," Lydia continued, "what was set up for the training seminars, hasn't really changed your purview. Except that there will be a follow-on connection for attendees who want to sign a commitment, which, of course, we hope they all will. You and Corilan can work that out yourselves."

Suzanne nodded.

Lydia looked at Corilan. "Any questions?"

"I see that the keynote speaker box has my name in parentheses. What does that mean?" Corilan asked, looking at Lydia, then at Suzanne.

Suzanne looked away.

Corilan refocused on Lydia. Her face was now flushed, and she was squirming in her seat, but did not respond.

"Why is my name in parentheses?" she persisted. She'd scanned the entire sheet's management structures, and her name was the only one in parentheses. She was sure it was some kind of indicator.

"Well, uh, I'm not as confident as Mr. Swain that you are suited for that position. So the structured format is merely an indication that a change may be needed."

A no-confidence vote, right in her face, but that was all right. At least Lydia was honest, and yes, she was new. Yet, she still was offended. What was it she'd told Earthos about help?

"So when and how will you make your final decision?"

"After the first presentation."

Did Lydia have the independent power to remove her? Seemed unlikely, since Swain had proposed the position. "If my presentation is unsatisfactory, who is my replacement?"

"I'm not sure in the long term, but I will be the immediate replacement."

There it was. Lydia had intended to have that slot for herself. "I was hoping that you and Suzanne or some other person you might recommend would be my coach for practicing my speeches ahead of time. Since we have time now, I would appreciate any help you have to offer. Is that possible?"

Lydia and Suzanne glanced at each other, concealing their facial expressions. “Sure,” they replied in unison.

“Maybe we can get one of the SAG instructors to come in on occasion, too,” Lydia added.

Being that Lydia had attended her board meeting presentation, this was definitely an insult. “That sounds great. Thank you,” she responded, careful to keep her tone unflustered.

“One more thing, ladies,” Lydia said. “For the seminar group and the allegiant administrative support, we have a list of resources that can help with the tasks prior to and during the tour. Suzanne, I believe you’re already working on this. So, Corilan, you’ll need to document descriptions of the tasks for which you need support, and we’ll sort out the resources.”

“That sounds fine.” Corilan smiled, although she felt very uncomfortable with the looks that passed between Lydia and Suzanne. As a newbie, she couldn’t help but wonder if they were going to give her a rough time. With her coming from outside SAG, working in the organization together was a new experience for them and for her, but their treatment of her was quite familiar. What was it about her that made people react this way?

Chapter 22

On Monday evening, Frank sat in his vehicle reviewing the reports of the shift surveillance team on Nolan Troxler that had relieved him and his partner, Jack, on Saturday night at midnight. He was curious as to whether there had been more activity at Corilan's house. When he and Jack had followed Nolan to her home before the end of their shift, they had noticed a man browsing the area, with particular interest in Corilan's house. The man appeared to be doing reconnaissance. For what purpose, Frank had been curious. Jack had followed the man and had done a thorough check on everything he'd discovered. However, the shift report included no additional information about the man being on site.

Was the man after Corilan, or was he planning something for her as a way to get through to Nolan? Frank knew it was a stretch, but sorting out possibilities was part of his job as team leader. The only reason he was on this job was because of special interest in Nolan Troxler's past.

"Where's the info you found about the prowler from Saturday night?"

Jack tossed his head toward the backseat. "It's in my digital on the seat."

Frank twisted sideways, reached back, and retrieved the digital, a.k.a. "medusa" by the users, an ugly four-by-six-inch black box given to each of them by their employer for use as a field computer. It also contained defense weaponry: a stun gun, a laser, and a mini missile were part of the package. Scanning Jack's report, he bulleted the particulars: "Arley Hackett, currently named Peter Delaney; charged with child molestation while serving as a substitute teacher."

Frank frowned. "That's not what I expected." He slumped in the seat, contemplating the findings. "I don't believe he was out here scoping Corilan's place if he's a pedophile. You followed him a long way to where he parked. He was careful, partially, anyway. We spotted him because we know the tells. There's gotta be something else going on here."

"Maybe his fantasies vary, if he's completely fucked up," Jack suggested.

Frank shook his head. "Nah, I don't think so." He jumped when his medusa vibrated in his siec pocket. "I'm never going to get used to this goddamned thing," he exclaimed, and jabbed his hand in his pocket to get the device. It was his boss. He did not care whether Frank was in the office or not—e-mail was always his boss's last option. He glanced at the time: six thirty in the evening. With no bright gray haze visible, it was often hard to tell evening or morning if the temperature remained the same. He opened the call.

"Hello, sir."

"Listen, Frank, I just received a request for Project 7. Our clients are requesting additional action. Instead of surveillance of the SAG headquarters and selected members, they want scandals and other ethics problem scenario setups executed. Use the names on the list that have not been processed. Effective immediately, you will take action using the new level, understood?"

"Yes sir, but . . ."

“But what?” His boss sounded impatient.

“Well, the point is, setups take time, especially using our methodology.” You know; the one you badger us with? Frank thought. Your favorite slogan, “Whatever action is taken, it must never be traced back to us.” He continued, “If this is supposed to be a rush order, I don’t see how that would be possible.”

“Put your best efforts into this elevation. Since the names on your list have raised some real concerns for our clients, this is a heads-up. I’ll be sending out a memo to all the project leaders shortly. We can talk more about this in a few days.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“One more thing. Emil didn’t pass the oral test. He called a few days ago. Just wanted to let you know since your team was chauffeuring him for the testing.”

“Sorry to hear that. He was halfway there.”

“Better than any of the others. He thinks he was sabotaged. You might want to talk to him just to get a clearer picture of what happened; it may be beneficial as we move forward.”

“I’ll do that, sir.”

“Carry on.”

Frank closed the call, thought for a moment, and considered the time. Since it looked like Troxler was in for the night, why not call now? Like his boss said, it might be good information for later.

“What’s he want now?” Jack asked.

“More scandals and ethics issues set up. Also, Emil didn’t make it.”

“Damn. He was doing good. What went wrong?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.” Frank found Emil’s number and pressed Send.

“Hello, Frank?” Emil queried.

“Hey, Emil. Sorry to hear the bad news.”

“Yeah, I was surprised myself.”

“What do you think happened?”

“I’m not sure. All I know is everything was fine until I entered SAG’s lobby and waited to be called in for the oral testing.”

“So what happened in the lobby?”

“Miss Troxler was in the lobby, too. I introduced myself and shook hands with her. When she gripped my hand, I felt her eyes boring into me. I don’t know how to describe the feeling other than I sensed she could read my mind and knew I was an infiltrator. After we shook hands, she left the lobby, went to the lecture room where the board was meeting, and returned a few minutes later. When I went for the oral test, I was questioned for about forty minutes, then they asked me to wait in the lobby while they discussed my performance. Later I was called back in and informed that my oral test was unsatisfactory for obtaining membership. That was it. Very disappointing.”

“So you think Corilan told them to block your acceptance?”

"Absolutely. She could see inside me. I know it sounds unbelievable, but that's what happened."

"Thanks, Emil."

"No problem."

After clicking off, Frank reflected on what Emil had said about Corilan. If what he said was true, then why would she have been there for testing? If she was there to scrutinize Emil as some sort of informant, that would mean she already had connections to SAG, right? None of it made sense.

"So?" Jack held out his hands.

"Emil thinks Corilan read his mind and told the SAG board not to accept him."

Jack laughed. "You're kidding, right?"

Frank shook his head. "No. That's what he said."

"Maybe Emil was too close to the edge of insanity and that's why he was rejected. Jesus Christ, that makes no fucking sense."

* * * * *

Near midnight, Jack saw a vehicle parked in front of Nolan's house. He was on watch while Frank took a break. He reached over and shook his partner. "Hey, Frank, Hackett just went in Nolan Troxler's place."

"That's damned odd. How'd you know it was him?" Frank stretched and shifted in his seat and sat up. Although he had been instructed to stop surveillance, he assumed Nolan was still a special case, and had continued observation.

"I recognized his car, Hackett's tag number."

"Shit, it's extremely odd that Nolan would let somebody like Hackett inside."

"Yeah, I think so, too, unless Hackett had a persuader. I'll see if I can get a closer inspection point," Jack replied, and slid out of the car in search of a better lookout near the residence.

About ten minutes later, Hackett came outside with Nolan Troxler, whose hands were wrapped in duct tape. He escorted Nolan to the passenger side of his car, put him in, and closed the door.

"What the fuck?" Jack exclaimed on the two-way. "Do you see what Hackett is doing?"

"Yes, I see them."

"What do you wanna do?"

"Get back here and let's follow this asshole and see where the hell he goes."

Moments later, Jack eased back in the car. They watched as Hackett pulled away, then followed after he made a turn at the corner three blocks down the street.

"This guy is persistent, I'll give him that. Whatever he's up to, both Troxlers must be involved," Jack commented.

"My guess is he's doing this to get at Corilan, since he went to her place first and his reconnaissance apparently didn't turn out well."

Jack bobbed his head. "That makes sense. He definitely wasn't following us when we tailed Troxler to her place. I'm just curious as to why he's so ticked with her."

"With the way things are going, it probably won't matter from our perspective."

"True, he's got our . . ." Jack's words faded as he and Frank watched Hackett pull up to the entry pad in a storage facility, punch in a code, and then enter the gate.

"Holy fuck! He's got this all planned." Frank turned at the next corner for a loop-around.

"Let me out," Jack demanded. "I want to get closer. We need to know exactly what's going on."

Frank stopped the vehicle. "Don't do *anything* but observe, clear?"

"Clear," Jack confirmed, and rushed back toward the storage facility area.

"I've got a visual down the row where Hackett is. He's put Troxler in a storage unit and is locking it now," Jack said into his headset a few minutes later.

"Okay. Come on back," Frank said softly.

When he returned, Frank said, "It will be daylight in a few hours. Let's see what he does next."

"Works for me. We'll know if he makes any calls. I've got a detector on his place," Jack said.

* * * * *

About six thirty that morning, Frank and Jack tailed Hackett to a hotel, where Jack observed him making a phone call. Using an amplification device, Jack listened and recorded Hackett's conversation.

"Corilan Troxler," Hackett said, "I have your dad. You can get him back for five hundred thousand dollars. I think that's reasonable for all the trouble you've caused."

"Who is this?" came a low-volume response from the other end. There was a pause, then, "You kidnapped my father? Why?"

"You. You got me fired. Now I can't get a job. Give me five hundred K for the pain and trouble you've caused and you'll get your father back, or I will kill him. I have nothing to lose," Hackett said bitterly.

"And how do I do that?" she asked.

"You'll need to pay by seven o'clock Wednesday morning, in about twenty-four hours. No police, and no investigators. Just get the money. I'll contact you with further directions before seven on Wednesday. Deviate from my instructions and your father dies, understand?"

"Understood," came the reply.

"Get the money," he demanded again, and hung up.

On returning, Jack got in the vehicle. "This is even more interesting," he said, and played the recording for Frank.

"Damn. This guy's pissing his pants because he got fired?" Frank shook his head.

"Look at the bright side, he's not going postal."

"Yes, well, fuck. How disappointing." He smirked.

"So now what? Do we report him to the police?"

Looking at Jack, he frowned and rolled his eyes. "You're kidding, right? We *never*, I repeat, *never* report anything to the police."

“I know, I know. Just pulling your chain.” Jack laughed.

He ignored the remarks. “You know we were told to start watching Nolan Troxler, and very recently, his name was added to our more aggressive acts list.” This entire situation might pan out to our advantage, he speculated but didn’t say. “Let’s keep on this one for the next twenty-four hours and see if Hackett gets his bluff called.”

Chapter 23

When Corilan answered the ringing phone and heard the voice on the other end, she stiffened. Although she asked who it was, she knew it was Arley Hackett. Had she heard correctly? He had kidnapped her father and wanted a ransom of \$500,000 to let him go or he'd kill Nolan, because she got him fired from his job. Where would she get that kind of money?

She had responded as if it were possible. Why in the name of good or evil had she done that, she wondered, still standing with her mobile in hand.

Hackett had repeated his demand curtly and clicked off.

Dammit. She tossed the mobile on the bed. What the hell was she going to do?

Subconsciously she wrung her hands while pacing back and forth beside the bed. Then she picked up the mobile and called Nolan's number, which went straight to the message recording. *What should I do?* repeated in her mind like it was preset to infinity. Then guilt over fights with her father began to squeeze into her thoughts, but why? Because Arley had kidnapped him to get back at her? It could have been the same scenario from her father's side, assuming his work with the EFL was as high-risk as she'd been told.

This thing with Arley had troubled her from the day he was fired. Was it her fault? Had she not performed her duties appropriately? Maybe she should have reacted sooner when he first started harassing his teammates about doing things his way, but she had not. His peers had laughed at him, viewed him as impetuous, but ignored him and went about their work without concern. No one had complained.

Pissed off, he'd come to her. Arley had told her he was not being respected. In addition, he'd expounded on how his intellect was so much above hers, and on and on as she had watched and listened to him in her office, his leg bouncing nervously on the ball of his foot. Finally she had asked him to leave, feeling that he was going to snap at any moment. He had refused, so she called security. When he reacted violently to security, upper management terminated him immediately.

She had not done anything about it. Maybe she should have talked to him about his outbursts with his co-workers. Perhaps he would never have come to her office in so angry a state if she had. Feeling the panic surge inside her, she sought her guide.

"Earthos, my father's been kidnapped for ransom. I don't have any money. Do you think SAG will help?"

She knew Earthos was aware of what was happening, but since it was personal would only give input if she asked.

"They may, but this is a personal problem and out of SAG's scope. Just because you are an alumni member does not mean they will step in to handle crises. Have you considered calling the police?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"No police, right; the required statement from all kidnappers seeking ransom."

“What if he really means he’ll kill Nolan if I don’t pay?”

“Do you know what this person is capable of doing?”

“Not really. You know about his past antics.”

“Yes, and based on millennia of observing humans, I would say he is very volatile and might possibly carry out his threat. This is a tough call, but I do not think you are in danger.”

“This is about my father. He could be on the edge of losing his life because of me” was her terse response. *“Arley must have him. He’s not answering his phone.”* After numerous tries, she had clicked off again.

“You can try to solve this on your own or you can contact the police, regardless of his threat.”

Her thoughts raced to the papers and files she had often brought home from the job when she was working as a project manager, especially when reviewing job applicants. Maybe she had an address.

Rushing to her closet, she flipped the light on, pushed the clothes aside, and opened the door to a storage area in the wall. She grasped a couple of corrugated boxes and brought them out. Sitting down beside them, she began to browse the contents. It occurred to her that some of the information in these boxes was confidential, and that she no longer had the right to it since she had given notice to leave the accounting firm. But this was an emergency, she told herself. She would destroy all the contents when the crisis was over.

Many of the documents were irrelevant and she wondered why she had kept them, but when she reached the bottom of the second box, she discovered a spiral tablet in which she had kept notes.

Flipping through the pages, she came upon a note title saying “hiring prospects.” There, Arley Hackett was listed with his phone number and address. With the notebook in hand, she got up and found the location on the map and noted the coordinates. Now what?

“That is exactly right, Corilan. Now what? What do you plan to do?”

“I’m not sure. I figured I could think it through on the way over there.”

“What if that is not enough time? Are you just going to sit there? What if this is more complex than just Arley? What if others are involved? What if he has moved?”

Admittedly, she hadn’t considered any of the possibilities Earthos mentioned. *“At a minimum I think I should confront him and ask for my father’s location and threaten to report him to the police if he doesn’t tell me. Anyway, at worst I can use my abilities to control him.”*

“You have a point. Your potential for powers has surpassed our expectations, and it is still not known what new abilities you may discover. But, you have to stay alert. One missed action could be lethal to you.”

* * * * *

About ninety minutes later, Corilan sat in the parking lot of the apartment complex where Arley Hackett lived. After rechecking the apartment number, she got out of her car and began scanning the buildings. She had already tried the phone number from her notebook without any luck. The number was now the property of some spacey teenager at the local high school.

Movement in the complex was minimal, with a couple of people walking about in the distance. Seeing the mailbox station, she checked for his name. The name slot for his apartment number was empty. What was she going to do? No time now to ponder, she thought, and found his apartment door. Without hesitation, she knocked on the door and stood to the side of the peephole.

While waiting, she considered her known abilities. There was the mind reading and . . . what? That was all she had. Okay, she would have to read his mind for indicators of harm to her, then run like fire was chasing her if he was about to attack.

No one came to the door, but she could hear movement inside. She knocked again.

“Who is it?” a woman yelled.

“I’m looking for Arley Hackett,” Corilan replied, wondering if this might be a friend. The feeling that this was running to shitland was covering her when the door flew open. A thirty-something woman appeared, her brunette hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was about five foot nine, in a jogging bra, running shorts, and athletic shoes. The woman stood watching her with a breathing filter on. “Arley Hackett?” the woman asked.

“Yes.”

“He was the previous tenant.”

“Oh. How long have you been here?”

“About a year now.”

“Do you know where Arley moved to?”

“No. Actually he still gets his mail here. Said he was traveling and asked me to hold it for him.”

“I see. Has he been by lately?”

“No. Not for a while.”

“Thank you,” Corilan said, and went back to her car. She knew the woman had been truthful. Nowhere to go from here, or was there?

Chapter 24

Ninety minutes later, Corilan was entering the SAG Alumni Organization headquarters in Baltimore. She'd called ahead and arranged a meeting with Gerald Swain. Approaching SAG for help was probably futile, as Earthos had said, but she had to try. Besides, even if they said no, they might have a helpful suggestion. At her first glimpse of Corilan coming out of the coatroom, the receptionist immediately got up and walked toward her.

"Mr. Swain can meet with you now. Please go right in," she said, gesturing toward his office door.

"Hello, Miss Troxler." Swain stood and came around his desk. "Have a seat." He motioned toward the sofa and chairs sitting near the opposite wall of his oversized desk. "You mentioned something about Nolan being kidnapped?" he asked, staring at her with . . . what, suspicion? Disbelief?

He didn't believe her, she detected and looked away from his gaze. Why would he think she was making this up? "Yes. I received a call from the kidnapper about five hours ago."

"Just a minute, I'd like to have our chief of security listen in on this, if that's all right with you?"

"Sure, that's fine." Was he being genuine, or was the security guy to sit in as a witness? Uneasiness was creeping into her thoughts; why, she wasn't sure. Maybe she was just paranoid since the kidnapping. Swain didn't believe her, and the security chief was his man, but what did she have to lose?

When the security chief was seated, she continued. She told both of them everything about the kidnapper's call and who Arley Hackett was, including her vandalism suspicions. When she finished, she was near tears but managed to keep her composure.

"We're deeply sorry this has happened to you, but I don't see how the SAG organization can assist you," Swain said.

With her face twisting and her eyes watery, she explained. "But I don't have any money, and I don't have anyone. I'm sure my father will pay it back. Please, won't you consider paying the ransom?"

"In cases like this, it is never wise to pay a ransom. Since you know who this man is, I recommend that you contact the police and let them handle it," the chief of security said.

"But what if he kills my father?" She looked at Swain and then at the security chief. Both men were without readable expressions. To refrain from digging in their minds, she shifted her gaze. Coping with their thoughts at a time like this would likely not be helpful.

"If you do not report this to the police, SAG won't either. It's your decision, Corilan. This is a terrible situation, and a Wednesday-morning time limit does not help, but if you're going to get the police involved, you need to do it now—the sooner, the better," Swain advised.

Gazing around then at the men seated before her, she wondered why this was happening. Was this the price for ambition? It seemed like she was paying penance for Arley Hackett's

transgressions. Life was really kicking her in the ass right now. She wondered if getting involved with SAG and the ERS would cause even more oppressive problems. No. She couldn't think that way. This issue with Arley was totally his problem, and he wanted to place the blame on her. Nevertheless, it exasperated her.

"I understand. Our mission is only about planet Earth and what members can do for the cause. When a member needs support that's out of scope, it's not an option," she spat, her words filled with sarcasm. She knew she shouldn't have said them, yet she continued. Rigid and fuming inside, she was too desperate about her father's safety to care. "I'll definitely keep that in mind should something happen while I'm out on the road with the ERS. Thanks for putting things in perspective."

"That's not what I meant to imply. Please try and understand . . ." Swain responded.

"*Corilan, stop,*" Earthos demanded. "*You are wrong and you cannot let your emotions take over. Apologize right now. Do not leave under a dark cloud. Do it.*"

Corilan was glaring at Swain, and then a weak smile edged its way onto her face and finally covered it. "I understand, and I apologize for my offensive remarks. It's difficult to be in such a helpless state. Thank you for listening."

Walking to her car, she considered her situation. What other action could be taken? What she knew for sure was that the police would not be notified under any circumstances. This situation was not just about her this time. Her father's life was at stake. She couldn't just withdraw like nothing was happening.

While she sat in the car, an idea began to bud in her thoughts. What if she did absolutely nothing? What if she didn't answer Arley's calls? None of them. If she never responded to the ransom drop instructions or to tell him she didn't have the money, what would happen? Yes, he could hurt her either way by killing her father. Her body grew tense at the thought of her father being murdered. Surprised that she cared enough about him to take the actions had made her pause. Why was she so wound up? Would Arley be willing to put himself in jeopardy and commit murder? Kidnapping was serious, but murder?

Sweat began to run from her temples, bringing her mind to the immediate concern that she was sitting in a closed car and the heat was almost unbearable. Cranking the car, she recycled and cooled the air inside and turned on the windshield washer. Cleaning the windshield was necessary once every hour a vehicle was in use. Otherwise, particles in the air clung to the glass, forming brown and dark gray blotches, distorting visibility.

Corilan pulled out of the parking lot, resolved that she had to take the chance that Arley would not kill her father; she would wait out the deadline.

Chapter 25

Nearly twenty-two hours into Arley Hackett's twenty-four-hour ransom threat, Frank and Jack, on surveillance near his place, were baffled. The only new things that they learned were: one, they'd found where the kidnapper lived; two, he liked pizza; and three, his demand and threat were not working to his advantage.

"I think it's time we take this circus to another level," Frank said, entering a number, pressing Send, and putting his mobile to his ear. "Hello, sir," he said.

Jack's mouth dropped as he looked at him, a definite indication he knew the boss was on the phone.

"I have a proposal in conjunction with the Troxler focal point for our latest level update." "Like what?" his boss barked.

Frank explained about the current situation with Hackett and the stalemate that was occurring. "What I'd like to do is kidnap this Hackett fellow and make him the victim for the Troxler setup. I know it's a little over the top but it's the only way we can pull it off. Otherwise, our patsy would ruin the setup. Can I get approval, sir?"

"Absolutely, proceed. This is too sweet not to use. Follow the rules." The call closed.

"That's a great plan, I like it. So that's what you've been hatching?"

Frank nodded. "For the most part—I had to see what the outcome was going to be. I'm still not completely sure, but we do know he hasn't had any success getting back with Corilan for a drop or any other discussion. Looks like she's given Hackett the kiss-off and to hell with Daddy, unless she's betting he won't follow through."

"I think he mishandled the whole thing, but that's his problem," Jack commented. "So what's next?"

Asking Jack to elaborate on Hackett's mishandling of the kidnapping would be too much to think about now, so on to something more fruitful, Frank decided. "Let's get Hackett," he said, and got out of the vehicle.

Without a word, Jack followed his partner.

* * * * *

Jack entered the code on the keypad and drove through when the gate slid open. Frank smiled at the ease of entry. After Nolan had been placed in the storage unit, Frank had notified a team member to rent a unit at the facility and give him the access code. He figured the access could work for them whether Hackett killed Nolan or their setup plan was executed. Either way, they would need to get inside to confirm their focal point's status.

When they arrived at the unit where Nolan had been placed, they stopped and removed Hackett from the rear.

"Here," Frank said, and gave Jack the key to the lock on the overhead door, which they had found on Hackett.

The door to the twelve-by-twenty-foot storage unit was rolled open, revealing a stack of boxes within a foot of the door, with about a three-foot-wide path leading to the back on the left side. They took Hackett to the back of the unit. When the three men reached the space at the rear, they found an empty chair with ropes lying near it on the floor. Nolan was gone.

Frank looked toward the boxes at the entrance and listened. He raced back down the side path to the front. Nolan was exiting as he arrived. Rushing forward, Frank grabbed him around the midsection, pulled him back, and brought him down to the ground.

“Surely you didn’t think it would be that easy,” Frank scoffed. He pulled Nolan up and forced him back into the unit.

“Why are you doing this?” Nolan asked.

“You think you’re above the industry traditions? That you can do as you please?” Frank knew he was not supposed to talk, but his frustrations had gotten the best of him.

On their return to the back of the unit, Jack had Hackett secured and lying on the floor. In his gloved hand he held a gun with a silencer attached.

Frank taped Nolan’s hands in front of him, took the gun from Jack and placed it in Nolan’s right hand, and positioned the weapon toward Hackett. Nolan struggled and fought against him. Grabbing him from behind, Frank put Nolan in a sleeper hold until his body went limp. His sagging body was dragged to the chair, tied, and secured. His left hand was re-taped to the chair and his right hand left outside the ropes.

“All right, Hackett,” Frank said, his breath coming in great gasps. “It’s time for this to end.”

Hackett’s eyes widened and muffled noises came from his covered mouth. He tried to get up, but the duct tape bindings around his chest and legs were too tight. Jack pulled out his medusa and stun-gunned Hackett’s chest.

Frank pushed Nolan’s chair closer to Hackett. Nolan’s head lolled back on the chair. Placing Nolan’s hand on the gun, his finger on the trigger, he helped him fire the gun twice into Hackett’s chest.

“Let’s go,” Jack motioned, and moved quickly toward the exit. Frank followed.

They secured the overhead door and left.

“Mission accomplished,” Jack said, getting in their vehicle.

“Yeah,” Frank agreed. “The fallout should be real interesting.”

Chapter 26

Gerald Swain was preparing for an early lunch break when he noticed an image of Nolan Troxler on the news channel. Having the news on the television in the background was a habit he had kept up since becoming SAG president ten years ago. According to Corilan, this morning had been the ransom deadline. He wondered if this was related and immediately raised the volume.

“Earlier today, renowned technology and ecological inventor Nolan Troxler was arrested for the alleged murder of Arley Hackett. The police have released no additional information at this time . . .”

What the devil was this about? First Nolan was kidnapped, now the culprit was dead? Had Nolan killed Hackett in an attempt to get away? Based on what Corilan had said about Hackett, he considered the possibility that Nolan may have argued with him about harassing his daughter and it went bad. Neither scenario was good.

Recalling his decision to not report the crime, to stay out of it and leave any action to be taken up to her, he realized it had been a terrible mistake. The minute he had been informed he should have been adamant that the authorities be contacted. But he was suspicious initially and didn’t believe what she was telling him; it had seemed so far-fetched. In the end, he had realized it was possible that Nolan really had been kidnapped. Regardless, SAG could not possibly have paid the ransom.

So now what? Maybe Hackett’s phone had been checked and Corilan’s number discovered. Corilan could be questioned. SAG might be dragged into this, if the kidnapping and ransom came out. Blast!

Swain was standing now, lunch completely forgotten, deeper in thought as he contemplated the broader spectrum of what he had been told versus what he was hearing in the news.

After more reflection on the ordeal regarding Nolan’s kidnapping, he was sure that this was not Hackett getting back at Corilan through Nolan. At first, maybe, but something had happened. Someone, another entity, had taken over Hackett’s scheme for their own purposes since Hackett had been killed and he was fairly sure Nolan had not done it. He knew about Nolan’s history of stubbornness in his opinions but it did not convince him of anything more. From the beginning to the present, there had never been a murder at the hands of one of their members. Someone else was involved.

His thoughts drifted to another growing concern. In the last twelve months, more than fifteen thousand SAG members had been laid off or fired from their jobs. The action was not unique to a specific area of the economy and included those in both white-collar and blue-collar jobs.

Still, even more interesting was that no one else was being laid off—this had been the response from all those questioned about being terminated. The national economy was not as healthy as it could be and had begun to falter, but the landslide in layoffs that SAG members were experiencing was by no means occurring for everyone else throughout the nation. Due to

the huge volume of SAG layoffs, Swain had asked the personnel staff to investigate. A cross-section of commonalities had revealed that more than half the people in question worked for the largest trade corporations.

He had always known that the industry businesses did not support SAG's view on Earth conservation and green living. Yet he found it difficult to accept what appeared to be the case, based on the documented findings on his desk.

In the past, the industrial corporations had been curious about SAG members' advancement in their workplaces, along with their achievements in independent technology over the years. SAG had been under surveillance for a very long time, but no one was ever harmed or confronted in any way. Although, in the past ten years, SAG members had achieved the invention of products and materials that were several decades advanced beyond those made by other corporations, and were marketing their wares. These activities had cut deeply into the existing industry revenues.

Now, it appeared that corporate businesses had had their employee rolls inspected. All individuals who listed the School of Ancestral Guidance as an educational source or organization membership on their applications had been cleared from their rosters, except for a few remaining in management and executive-level positions. It was a bold statement, with a subtle and cunning action. No one would notice. Only SAG would see the connection, and even that would depend on how much the members shared their personal lives with the SAG Alumni Organization.

He wondered what might be in store for the remaining members. What could SAG do? Should they gather and confer with the fired members regarding support in filing class action lawsuits? How would that affect SAG and the ERS? How would that play out in the public view and the media?

SAG's reputation in the public's eye needed to remain positive. They wanted the citizens' ears, not their indignation. Complaints against the trades would not be purposeful. He was confident the industrial corporations would destroy themselves in time, but what would happen in the short term?

Swain returned to his chair, more dismal than when he had gotten up. He was sure that something was brewing, not just against SAG schools but the entire organization. Trade corporations terminating the employment of SAG alumni members were just the beginning. If only he knew what was really going on. He would have SAG headquarters do further analyses.

Chapter 27

Nolan shook hands with his attorney, then exited the courthouse without any protective wear and hailed a cab. Hopefully he could get home before any permanent damage was done, he thought. It was mid-afternoon and hot as he looked at all the now-common sights around him: the gray-brown haze of the atmosphere, people walking about in siecs, and the homeless swathed in rags or plastic garbage bags, begging. So many homeless had suffocated from their makeshift protective wear that it no longer made the media news reports. With a sigh, he got in the cab, exasperated from the memories that occurred between Tuesday and Wednesday. Once more, they were playing out in his head.

The entire kidnapping ordeal had been senseless from his perspective, but he knew, obviously, someone out there thought it was a must-do. Corilan was probably aware by now that he had been charged but was out on bail. He would call her and explain what had happened as soon as he got home.

Nagging him most was the sequence of events. First, this guy came to his house before daylight, desperate to talk to him about his daughter. As soon as he let the man in, his wrists were taped and he was taken to his own storage unit, where he was injected with a sedative and locked inside, no dialogue, no food or water. Sometime before what he assumed was daylight the following day, he woke up and was able to free himself from the chair he was tied to and found his way in the dark to the front of the unit. Not long after, he heard a commotion outside and had quietly found a hidden spot within the stacked boxes near the overhead door.

Soon, the door opened and two men he'd never seen before stood holding his kidnapper like he was their prisoner. They'd gone to the back of the storage unit. Nolan tried to get away but was caught and dragged back inside by one of the two men. The man babbled something at him about industrial corporations, but he couldn't remember the specifics. Returned by a new captor to the back of the unit, Nolan had seen his initial kidnapper lying on the floor, duct-taped up like a Christmas package. One of the men grabbed him, and after some scuffling, he'd been put in a sleeper hold. Based on the charges, he assumed they had used his hand to shoot and kill the kidnapper. After, he had again been left tied in the chair, locked inside the storage unit.

Around seven thirty the next morning, he had heard a car engine and started yelling for help. It turned out to be the storage facility manager. The manager's dog heard him and began barking, which led the manager to the unit. He'd told the owner he'd been framed and to call the police.

Based on the police investigation at the scene, he'd been arrested, though he had attempted to explain what had happened. And now, he was supposed to have all the answers. He didn't have a clue why any of this had happened, except that someone wanted him in jail for a very long time.

Exiting the cab, it all seemed surreal, like he'd been in a time warp and was returning to reality.

* * * * *

When he got inside his home and looked around, everything was as he had left it. The front door had been closed but was unlocked. The rear door, kitchen, bedrooms, and other areas were undisturbed. Martha, the housekeeper, had taken off a few days to stay with her mother, who was having more frequent attacks of COPD or, clinically speaking, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

He went to his study and sat in his lounger away from his desk, near the window on the far side of the room. After plugging the charger into his mobile, Nolan called Corilan.

"Hello," she said. "I heard what happened. Are you all right?"

"Hi. Shook up, but okay. I see you've been trying to contact me." His mobile had been taken, but he had been able to access his messages and was surprised to find twenty-three calls from her.

Corilan took a deep breath and exhaled. "Well, Arley Hackett called me and wanted five hundred thousand dollars ransom for your return, and I had no way of getting that kind of money. I was wondering if he was bluffing about kidnapping you."

"No, it was true. He did kidnap me, but I'm glad you couldn't get the money. You should never pay a ransom. You did the right thing."

"What happened? The news reports say you were arrested for the alleged murder of Arley Hackett."

"I don't know the whole story. Actually, this is the first I'm hearing about a ransom. All I know is a man took me from my home and locked me in *my* storage unit, then two other men brought the man who put me inside initially, who I found out later was Arley Hackett. In the storage unit, the two other men used my hand to shoot a gun and make it look like I killed the guy who kidnapped me. How about you tell me who Arley Hackett is and why he wanted ransom for me?"

And so she did, just as she had told Gerald Swain and the SAG chief of security. "I had no idea the extremes that Arley would go to. I'm sorry. I don't know how he made the connection between us," she finished.

"I wish you had trusted me enough to share that information. I might not have been able to do anything, but I might have been more apprehensive about letting him in my home."

"I'm so sorry," she reiterated.

"I'm fine. Don't worry. I believe this can eventually get straightened out." He hoped that was true, and anyway, she didn't need to be worried about him with her ERS work coming up soon. "Listen, I need to make another call, but I wanted you to know that I'm fine. I'll be over to see you soon."

"Okay. Be safe," she responded.

Nolan smiled in spite of his situation. Corilan sounded like she really cared.

Putting his lounger in the reclined position, he flipped through the contacts index on the mobile he kept at home. One more call and he could take a nice warm shower and get some rest. He pressed Send for Gerald Swain.

"Hello, Nolan?" Swain queried.

“Hey, I just wanted to let you know that I had no desire for you to be involved in this ransom business. I just talked with Corilan and she told me what she had done. I’ll be at home if you need me.”

“Thanks for the call, Nolan. They’ve charged you with murder, haven’t they?”

“They wanted to, but the crime scene and background don’t exactly support that. They’re still digging, but for the moment, they think it’s manslaughter. Just so you know, I did not kill anyone. It was a setup. I wasn’t even conscious when the man was killed.”

“But wouldn’t the fact that you were kidnapped change things?”

“I suppose it might, if they knew about it. I don’t intend to bring it up. It would pull Corilan into this, and I don’t want her involved. It may have started that way, but for what went down, that doesn’t have anything to do with the charge.”

“I was thinking if they knew about the ransom, it might help. Possibly cast suspicion that others were involved.”

“The idea that others were involved is a fact. Surprisingly, I saw the others. Even so, I don’t know if I’d recognize them if I saw them again. Besides, I was locked inside the unit. Things were just too crazy. One thing’s certain. They wanted Hackett dead and me set up for it.”

“Did they find a mobile for Arley Hackett?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Just wondering, since he called Corilan. That could be a trackback to question her.”

“Nothing’s been mentioned and I’m not going to bring up anything, either. The police are doing their own investigation, and I’m good with that. I think this event has enough facts as it currently stands. At least my lawyer thinks that’s the case.”

“Good. Glad to hear that.”

His attorney had made it sound like a meticulous game of moves that could be won. Hopefully that was true, but if his adversaries didn’t get him this time, he wondered what they would do next.

“The idea that others might be involved brings to mind something that has been happening in the last few months that I consider suspicious,” Swain said.

“What’s that?”

“For one thing, SAG has begun to have a high volume of members fired or laid off from their jobs. Then there was the attempt to infiltrate SAG with a disingenuous member, and now this, setting you up for murder. Something’s afoot here, and SAG needs to take an even closer look.”

“You could be right. If I can help in any way, let me know.”

“I’ll definitely do that,” Swain said.

“GOWAG,” Nolan said, and clicked off.

Chapter 28

Corilan would be on her way to a new experience soon, one that frightened her—partially, anyway. She anxiously anticipated most of it, but the keynote addresses were the problem. Lydia and Suzanne had agreed to help, and even get someone from the school to assist. Could it be that Lydia had not really intended to help her, since she wanted to be the speaker? Why Suzanne put her off, other than she was a newbie, she didn't know. Regardless of the reason, none of their support had materialized. Whenever she suggested a time for practice or asked them for an alternative choice, they offered up excuses and pretended to have too much work to do. Their message had clearly been received. They were not going to help her.

Considering the members she was familiar with, albeit board members, she had decided who might help her with her speaking concerns. Her most preferred candidate was Charlton Chadwick. He was the SAG schools' superintendent, and from the few times she had observed him speaking in his other position as parliamentarian of the SAG Alumni Organization Board, he was great. The command with which he spoke and the sound of his melodious voice kept his audience attentive. He was born and raised in the Dupont Circle area of the District of Columbia, and was still living there, which was a plus if she needed to visit him. How he managed two positions so well was amazing. Then again, he was single, per the receptionist, Veronica Simons. Corilan and Veronica had become acquainted, and she soon discovered Veronica had a wealth of information to share. Perhaps Chadwick's passion was his work. Maybe one day she would find out, she speculated.

After failing to get an appointment on his calendar, she watched for him every evening and finally, during the second week of watching, caught him on a Friday when he was about to enter the coatroom.

"Mr. Chadwick," she called.

He stopped and turned. His clothing looked as if he had just stepped off a fashion show runway.

She hurried toward him, not taking her eyes off his sleek pompadour, fine-lined mustache, and neatly trimmed soul patch. The rest of him was just as exquisite, she thought. The man was her father's age but rendered a much younger look. Standing about three feet from him now, she scanned the rest of him. His midnight blue suit, conservative plaid shirt with a citrine and blue-colored tie, and complementing navy socks and loafers all had to be tailor-made. She didn't know much about rack versus tailored clothing, but he looked too lavish for anything else.

"Hello, Miss Troxler, how can I help you?"

A smile spread across her face as she thought to herself, *I hope you mean that.* "I was wondering if you would assist me in practicing my keynote speeches. I could really use a good mentor like yourself."

He seemed surprised by her request. "You did quite well with your presentation to the board. Granted, your topic was not the easiest one for an audience to accept, but by the time you wrapped up the questions with plausible answers, you had turned the crowd in your favor."

"Thank you. But that was different. I could talk one-on-one and that wasn't really a lot of people."

"Even if there are fifty thousand or more people before you, it's the same as a hundred."

She acknowledged his comment with a smile.

"I will be happy to listen to your presentations and give you some pointers," Chadwick said, "but the best speakers have their own style, and I see that in you. You're committed and believe in what you're saying, which your audience will sense. That in itself is colossal."

"Mr. Swain said something similar. I hope you both are right. I just need to get control of this stage fright."

Chadwick smiled. "From what I've observed, you're more than halfway there."

"I would really appreciate your time if you could fit me in," she pleaded.

Though he said he had a full schedule, he found a way to squeeze her in. From that discussion to the present, he had spent time working with her on several speeches. Practice locations varied from his SAG office to his home basement after hours.

Not a word had been shared with her would-be helpers, and they never asked if she had found assistance. As far as her other preliminary tasks, she had completed her job descriptions early on and obtained support resources for allegiant services.

Planning and preparations for the ERS tour still gave her stomach butterflies, especially when she thought about the mass of people that would be present, but she pressed forward. Maybe she would never get over this feeling. Although, she wondered, would this nervousness prevent her from speaking in the manner that she wanted to, or worse, would she just choke?

Chapter 29

Staying away from her and out of the public view had apparently been Nolan's intention since his arrest, Corilan thought. It had been six weeks since she had spoken with him after he'd been released on bail, until three days ago. Frustration over Nolan's ordeal was an understatement from her perspective. December eleventh, her birthday, had come and gone without her usual out-to-dinner flourish. Still beating herself up about what Arley had done, she vowed to overcome her shortcomings of the past. It was very near to the holidays, and Nolan had expressed his desire to spend some time with her. He also brought up the fact that her ERS tour would soon be starting. He wanted her to come to visit him, but thought it safer for him to visit with her. Then, at the last minute, she had received a call from Gerald Swain, wanting to talk with her, so she had invited him, too. Presently the three of them were settled in her living room, swirling cinnamon sticks in apple cider, petting Sir Henry, and chatting.

Something was up. They knew it and she did, too. Why couldn't they just get on with it? Reading their thoughts was very tempting, but she didn't want to intrude. She preferred to hear what they had to tell her. Admittedly, after that happened, she might read for confirmation if she suspected they weren't being truthful.

After a brief lull in the conversation, Swain cleared his throat. Corilan and Nolan looked in his direction. "Corilan, I need to speak with you regarding the ERS tour." He looked at her. "I know you've been working directly with the ERS people the last few months, but I would feel remiss in my duties if I did not share a few things with you in particular, since this will be your first time on tour."

"Is there some special concern?" she asked.

"My concern is about safety. After many reports from members about job losses, I had the membership and records people do some research. More than five thousand members have lost their jobs within the last six months, and a total of about twenty thousand in the last eighteen months. It was determined that most of these people worked for industrial corporations and they're cleaning their rosters."

"Sounds like they're taking physical action now. Evidently SAG must have and is continuing to take a chunk out of their bottom line," Nolan commented.

"There have been a few scandals, too, like accusations of shoplifting, infidelity, thefts, and so on. These types of incidents have never been a problem among our members. Never. That is why it is a no-brainer when the accused declare their innocence. Whoever is doing these setups doesn't know that our members are beyond reproach. We haven't had very many incidents reported, only twenty-five or so; could be they're testing for a larger execution. I don't know."

"Based on these incidents, including my setup, it sounds like we're targets in a smear campaign," Nolan concluded.

"Exactly," Swain agreed.

"So you think we may have problems on the ERS tour?" Corilan asked, wondering what Swain's point was.

"I think the potential for foul play is very high."

"We'll have security, so that should help a great deal," she commented.

Swain stroked his chin. "True, but those who choose to attack will be looking for gaps and opportunities to inflict harm."

Uneasiness swept over her as she considered the ramifications of what Swain was saying.

"I don't want to frighten you," he continued, "but you need to understand how important it is for you to be aware of your surroundings at all times. I don't expect that you will see any industrial corporation representatives directly involved in setting you up like the activity just mentioned, but their underlings will be busy; in what ways, I do not know. You must stay alert for safety's sake." He looked at her, his face stern. "Don't let this upset you, just be careful," he added.

"I understand. However, the thought that there are people who would try to sabotage what we are doing because they're losing money just seems so, so ridiculous." Shaking her head, she pursed her lips. "Especially since they are a huge factor in what is wrong."

"And they would never blatantly admit that loss of revenue is the reason for their action. Likely, there'd be at least ten 'more important' reasons than revenue," Swain speculated.

"Yeah, like leveling the competition, otherwise we will never catch up. Or 'we have been the leaders for over a century, our methods and products are the best,'" Nolan inserted and chuckled.

"I expected to have some clashes with the media, but I hadn't considered these other possibilities," Corilan admitted. She wasn't sure what she would do if something happened.

"As you already know, you'll have twenty-four-hour security. And if we need to make changes, we will," Swain assured her.

"Thank you; I feel confident I will be in good hands." The gaps in security would keep her tense, but nothing was perfect.

"That was all. I need to get along now. Thanks for the hospitality. I look forward to seeing you in Miami," Swain said.

"Oh, you're going to come?" she asked.

"Absolutely. I always go to the first tour stop." He smiled. "That's my hometown area and I have a few relatives still there. We get together after going to the ERS."

"Sounds like fun," she responded.

"Yes, it is. Take care, Nolan," he said, then got up and put on his outer gear.

She followed him to the door. "Thanks for stopping by," she said, and watched him go to his car. When he opened the car door, she yelled and waved. "See you soon." He hadn't really needed to come over; a call would have sufficed. A sense of loneliness seemed to be about him. She was glad he would be seeing his relatives soon. Lydia Solomon had told her Swain's wife had died early in their marriage from complications with childbirth. Some people only connected once, she reflected.

Returning to her chair, she looked at her father.

A curious expression covered his face.

"What?" she asked.

Nolan reacted by shuffling about then said, "Just thinking about what Swain said and the presentation you gave to the board and the EFL. You and I haven't talked in a while."

"I've been totally engrossed in the ERS preparations." She sat, then reached down and rubbed Sir Henry's back.

"Yes. We've both been busy, in one way or another." He looked at her, and then looked away. "It appears that I am definitely being charged with manslaughter."

This was her fault, she thought. Maybe his decision to stay away from her had been best. They were hardly on good terms, and his life was already screwed because of her. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause trouble for you."

"I'll get through this. You can't take the blame for what other people do. You've already been a victim of Hackett's rage. I was merely another tool to get at you. Stop blaming yourself. That guy was watching your place and decided to go after someone you knew. He probably took my vehicle tag and discovered who I was or followed me home. Who knows? It's not like you sent him to attack me."

She knew he was right but an awkward feeling still clung to her. "What's your lawyer saying?"

"My lawyer's preparing for litigation. He's concerned that the police have glossed over the evidence that is contrary to the charge and are insisting on moving forward with the trial."

"Sounds like someone there is in on the frame-up."

"Yes, that may well be the case. Maybe they want to tie me up in the legal process of exonerating myself."

"Why? To bankrupt you? Because a legal battle won't stop the work you've done."

"True, but it would prevent me from working and supporting others in technology. Since Earth's devastation is so close, I don't know if it matters. After all, for this year's tour, our movement for eco-friendly products and green living is to give citizens the opportunity to pledge Earth guardianship."

"True, but only for the short term."

"What do you mean?"

"You and numerous other people have invented lots of things. All of your inventions and methods will need to be documented and archived," Corilan said, but wondered how the data would be retrieved later.

"And where would that be done?"

"I'm not sure at the moment, but I'll find out." She needed more information from Earthos. "When Earth is reclaimed, we should be able to recover the archived information to assist with living on natural Earth."

"Tell Swain, too, so that the SAG archives can be preserved as well."

She stroked Sir Henry's head and mimped Earthos. "*Since SAG members have done all these things, they are still viable, right?*"

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Where can they be placed for future access?”

“The Lumenian swits will ensure they are safe from life extinction for now. All documents and methodologies should be stored with or in proximity of the SAG archives.”

“Lumenian swits. What are swits?”

“Swit literally means ‘stare with intense scrutiny.’ Swits are Lumenian resources that observe all major events and actions that damage Earth naturally and man-made. They also perform special tasks when directed to do so—for example, protecting the archives.”

“I’ll e-mail Mr. Swain and he can contact the EFL and others.”

“Since time is short and our work for the com-link has been completed, I’m going to have a final physical meeting and that will be it for us. What I see is the EFL supporting SAG and ERS necessities from here on out,” Nolan said.

She nodded. “I just wish we could handle the reclamation in a different way, but our current plan is the only way to give people the opportunity to live in a natural environment.”

She looked at Nolan, slumped down on the couch. He looked weary. “Why don’t you stay over tonight?” It was the least she could do after almost getting him killed.

Already nodding, he said, “Yes. I think I will. I’ll be fine where I am.” And he let his head fall to the side on the sofa pillows.

She picked up the custom-encrypted mobile he had given her and went to her bedroom.

Lying down in bed, she thought of countless things that could go wrong on the tour, and then it occurred to her that they didn’t have contingencies in place if allegiants needed help. Could the EFL step in and provide support? That must have been what her dad was thinking.

Realization of the magnitude of her position as chief of allegiants was beginning to intimidate her. She had told herself the work was simply project management, something she already knew how to do, no problem. Now that she was progressing toward the thick of it, she wondered if that was true. Could she really manage this position? Insight on that question would soon be forthcoming. The day after Christmas, she would be leaving for the ERS Saturday kickoff in Miami, the first stop of the annual tour.

Chapter 30

Corilan's luggage sat near the front door. Sir Henry seemed to sense something was about to happen, and he followed at her heels wherever she went. He pranced around her when she gathered his things and placed them in a nylon zip bag near her luggage. To make sure she had all of Sir Henry's stuff, she circled through the rooms and kitchen once more. After putting on her outer gear, she reached down, put on Sir Henry's air filter muzzle, dog siec, and pawtreads, and then clipped his leash on. She picked up his bag and proceeded outside. Today she would be leaving for Miami.

The dog romped with excitement.

Corilan followed the walkway to AJ and Della Mae Hill's house and knocked on the door. She had told the Hills about her new position and made arrangements for Sir Henry to stay with them. Being on the road for nearly a year would be too much for him and taking care of him would likely require more time from her than she could spare.

The door was immediately opened. "Hey! Come on in," AJ said. Reaching down, he scratched Sir Henry behind his ears. "Hey, little fella." The dog wagged his tail and inspected the room, sniffing about. "Looks like he's already on to the cat," AJ laughed, taking Sir Henry's bag of things and his leash, leading the dog with him to store its contents and remove his outer gear.

AJ's wife walked in from the kitchen, eyeballing Corilan's appearance.

"Hi, Della Mae."

"Hey there. Looks like you're just about ready to take off."

"Yes. I'll be leaving in about an hour or so," Corilan said, pulling up her mask from her face.

"Well, don't worry. Sir Henry is in good hands. AJ is excited about having a dog to hang out with. He always says dogs can do things and like to be out and about with people. I know he's trying to tell me what Stanley can't do." She smiled. "I think we'll all get along just fine."

AJ returned with Sir Henry, sat down on the couch, and began rubbing the dog's back. "I suppose you're excited about your new position?"

"Yes, I am. Though this is a bittersweet time for me."

"I can imagine," he responded.

"Here's a list of contacts," Corilan said, handing over a sheet of paper. "Veterinarian information, and mobile and e-mail for me. Please don't hesitate to call me at any time. I will send expense funds for him every month. If he gets sick, let me know, and I'll take care of his expenses." She sat on the floor beside Sir Henry, struggling to keep from crying but losing the battle. Tears streamed as she rubbed and stroked his body then hugged him. "Let me know if there're any problems at the house and I'll see about getting things taken care of," she added.

Sir Henry licked her cheeks, catching the streams of tears flowing down them. "You have my numbers, feel free to call me at any time," she repeated. "Thank you both so much." She got up and began walking toward the door.

Why did she feel like this was good-bye forever? Certainly she would see Sir Henry when she returned, wouldn't she? She tried not to think about the atmosphere and the risks it held for animals, but she had gotten him a dog siec, muzzle filter, and pawtreads. Hell, planet Earth was in such a mess. Now it was time to buck up and carry out her obligation.

Chapter 31

Thomas Hunter, CEO of Assurance Incorporated, referred to as ASINC by its clients, looked pleased with the attendees as he entered the huge conference room. He was in the office of Byron Steele, CEO of one of the largest crude oil refining corporations. The conference table was quickly filling up with other CEOs from the top corporations of industry in the United States, the true sovereigns. Other corporate leaders, along with supporting staff, sat in surrounding chairs.

Standing at the side of the table for a few moments, Hunter took in what the presence of the top echelons of trades meeting with the ASINC CEO meant. He was five foot five and almost skeletal in appearance. His gaunt, pale face with clear black eyes that matched his jet-black hair seemed to have a hypnotic effect when he looked at you—everyone said so. No one was sure whether he dyed his hair or if he was just odd. At fifty-five, he still looked to be between thirty-five and forty. He scanned the faces at the table, taking an extra moment to scrutinize the CEOs who were present. They represented the trades for chemicals, textiles, computers, energy, transportation, waste management, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, petroleum refining, metals, mining, crude oil production, and some he could not presently recall.

The hosting CEO looked in his direction and motioned toward the seat at the opposite end of the table. After Hunter sat down, Byron Steele lifted his fingers about three inches off the table. Everyone stopped whatever they were doing and gave Steele their full attention.

“We’re meeting here today to discuss augmenting our current contract services with ASINC to ensure and maximize our business protective services. The amended contract will include a list of all collaborating industries.

“We’ve begun to experience substantial reductions in revenue, and have seen declining revenue on our products that have been redesigned and produced by the corporations and companies of SAG members, created using patents to which we are not privy.” Steele paused and sipped water from his glass on the table.

Hunter scoffed at this statement in his mind. The patents were public and could be used by anyone who chose to follow the stipulations stated by the patents. However, most of the industries impacted had refused to do so and would not do the research for viable competitive alternatives.

Steele continued. “We have already taken action to curtail our losses by the downsizing of any employees, management or laypersons, within our ranks who were SAG-educated. Some of this has resulted in suits and court proceedings, but we are moving forward.

“Currently, we have contracted actions in place to handle our more troublesome staff—setting up ethical issues or misdemeanor charges and so forth that would force these individuals out.” Hunter’s eyes met Steele’s. “By the way, the situation executed on Nolan Troxler was excellent; a tad more aggressive, but on track.” Steele gave a modest laugh and shook his head. Several others grunted their approval as well. “More of this type of work product is exactly what needs to happen,” he added.

“SAG’s ERS tour is now going to start conducting training seminars at their shows. That may be a real problem for us and we cannot ‘wait and see.’ As it stands, an individual can obtain all the basics—a home, automobile, furniture, household necessities, even communities with completely recyclable waste management and energy sources—all through eco-friendly products produced by SAG members’ companies. That is not a good scenario for our products and materials. Imagine the impact of an annual tour to most states, touting these products *and* giving seminars.

“People are sick, the air is insufferable, and they’re collapsing like victims of a bug bomb. Citizens want someone to blame, and in comes the ERS with all their messages, tidings, and seminars. We need to be preparing for this year’s ERS kickoff. This will be a make-or-break year for most of the industries among you that are already having financial problems.”

Steele looked around the room at all those present, then back at Hunter. “For everyone on the list of names for our contract services, there are two new actions: for now, felonious entrapment resulting in successful prosecution; the second one is permanent termination, to begin when the final notice of approval is given. Both will follow the standard guidelines for focal point actions.”

The primary guideline was ASINC’s motto: “Project actions executed in the field must never be tracked back to ASINC.” Hunter knew this without the words being said.

“So you are aware”—Hunter’s eyes zoomed in on Steele, who was focused on him—“one of the industrial corporations had a special job contracted with another source that occurred independently. We’re quite concerned about the action, but I don’t expect there to be any blowback.”

Hunter nodded, but did not speak. Who was this source? Why had they gone outside of ASINC? There wasn’t any need that ASINC couldn’t handle. Their record of service had received five-star ratings from all their clients. No known competition for their type of services had been visible or available for more than a decade. Hunter had displayed expressions of disdain on being informed of the special job service outside ASINC, but the annoyance passed when the CEOs signed the revised contract.