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Ice Swarm
by Tatum Estel

Chapter One

“Over here!” cried Perfecta to her little friend on top of the crystalline hill shimmering with the colors of the rainbow. “This is one of the crystals my father was looking for.”

Jarbath slid down a well-worn path to the bottom. He crouched down with the girl of the long blond locks. They both peered at the one dark crystal growing among the spars radiating from a single root. Putting her tender hands at the base, she gripped the crystals gently and then firmly started rocking them back and forth until they broke from the root. She opened the fiberglass satchel she carried around her neck and gently placed the crystal in it.

Thunder crashed overhead. They looked up surprised to see something coming out of the heavens that looked like mountains falling downward. They shimmered like the mountains beyond the valley. Suddenly, there was an explosion of such magnitude that it hurt their ears and shook the ground.

“Jarbath!” Perfecta squealed as shivers ran up and down her spine. “Get back to the cave!”

Jarbath and Perfecta searched for their claws that helped them ascend the hill, but they were nowhere to be found. They looked around.

Another explosion! Something big hit the ground. Their world shook and knocked them off their feet.

“There they are,” pointed Jarbath. “Down by that rock. I’ll get them.”

Jarbath slid down further and grabbed the bag that contained the claw-like gloves. That was the last time Perfecta saw her friend.

Water roared over Jarbath, but it lifted Perfecta to the top of the hill where she could run to the cave as she cried, “Jarbath! Jarbath!” Inside, as the water rose to her ankles and then reached her knees, making it difficult to move, she reached the portal, touched the triangular key and slid through into the hands of her father, waiting on the other side. The portal closed as the water slopped through onto the floor of their dwelling.

“O Pa-pa, Pa-pa,” she wailed, tears streaming down her face and onto his shoulder. “Jarbath is gone!” She sobbed, and again, “Jarbath is gone.”

Her pa-pa called to his servant Chani.

“Do not worry Perfecta,” he said trying to comfort his daughter, stroking her hair, feeling the beginnings of the growth of the scales on her neck and shoulders. “Chani will

find your young friend.

Chani came into the room. He was the governor's head servant, and most trusted. He was only five feet tall, broad shouldered, barrel chested, balding up front, giving him a large forehead, not growing any weeds upon his head, and very strong. He had no thought of himself, completely satisfied with being a servant and looking after his master's interests. He said little, but what he did say was wise. There was a strong glow of intelligence in his eyes as though he were looking right through you to your Soul. They were blue, very striking compared to his ebony scales. "I am here governor," he replied to the call.

"Perfecta came back alone. I am afraid her friend Jarbath is missing. Make arrangements for a search. Go quickly. There was water that came through the portal. The cave must be flooded. A dam must be broken."

"It is the bombs, my lord," Chani said with trying to hide his emotions.

"It is the bombs," repeated the governor and father as he held his daughter tightly.

"Go with care, my friend."

"That I will do," Chani cried as he fled through another portal.

* * *

"Ice" was the name of the planet. It was called "Magrab" by the invaders. They came during the time of the Swarm. It changed the Swarm and made the Fish people worry. They came in great icebergs from the heavens. Their space ships carried guns and cannon and were heavily armed with missiles. Their missiles were made of ice. When

they hit the planet, they filled the valleys with water.

Ice was a silicon desert except for a band of green tropical forest around its equator. There lived the Soul of the planet, an elusive people who were swift at escaping detection. North of the tropics lay silicon mountains colored in differing pastel hues. These hills were occupied by the North people. They stood against the invaders because the water hurt the Soul of the planet. Below, in the South, the people welcomed the invaders. They considered themselves more civilized, and weren't as austere. They knew the planet needed the water to bring more life. Ice used to be filled with water before the Great Swarm.

People of the North knew that Ice already had water. There were the polar ice caps and the underground rivers that were full of fish. Before the Great Swarm, everyone had lived together, but then the Fish went underground and the people splintered.

Swarm had come every thousand years to keep things balanced. It was a restlessness that came into the minds of the people. New religions had popped up. New societies traveled from their homelands to set up colonies to try new ways of doing things. Old societies had died off. There had been rebellions everywhere in the past. Once the invaders came, the Swarm changed. The Swarm included invaders from Heaven.

The invaders cut into the Soul of Ice. They saw the natural resources that could be had in the rain forests around the equator. They chopped down the trees and built furniture and buildings from them. People lived in wooden buildings instead of the crystal caves. They lived by the light of the sun instead of from the light within. The invaders taught the people that they could get gain by buying and selling natural resources. There were not many minerals in veins as on other planets to mine, most of the minerals being

fused into the quartzite so prevalent. There were the trees, though, and they could be traded for many things the people didn't have. The southern people succumbed easily to these things, but the northern people resisted. They went to the Soul of Ice to stop the cutting of the trees.

Most of the southern people followed the invaders and approved of their ways, especially the leaders of the southern provinces. The Southerners that didn't agree started a rebellion. The rebellion spread to the the North. Only the most northern of the people resisted the invaders. They would talk to no delegates from the South , from the invaders or from the rebels. The invaders did not have a sufficient force yet to invade the North. They relied heavily upon the native forces, and they were not yet organized.

It was on the shoulders of the governor of the most northern province to bring this invasion to a halt. His name was Ibara, and he grieved that any lives should be shed, so he hesitated. He hoped things would settle down, and he and his people wouldn't have to deal with it.

His father had left the governor a box before he passed over into the Soul of Ice. It had been handed down from his ancestors. It had always been a mystery to find the key to the box. He hoped the contents of the box would help him solve the mystery of the Swarm and bring peace to his beloved planet, and get rid of the invaders. The key would be found in another box, a box of fish books, books that looked like fish, the scales to be read like music. He had hesitated in reading the books, had hesitated until his daughter had grown into a young woman.

Governor Ibara kept the large stone box brought in the central room of his dwelling. It looked like a large block of stone, the same orange crystalline substance that

their dwellings were carved from except that the box was ebony black with a few stray flaky gold and white veins running through it. There was not a seam or crack upon it, no markings except for the square notches along the edges, as though it fit into something. It came from such an ancient time that when he pondered about the Swarm and about the invaders, he felt deep down inside himself that it had something to do with the Swarm. He felt that it was the key to understanding the ways of his planet and why they had such trouble every thousand years. Between each Swarm, it was such a peaceful world, and everyone lived in harmony with the natural way. Then at the end of another thousand years, people would begin to be proud and start pushing at each other. Many seers would arise, each seeing in a different direction, each one fracturing society, pulling away many people after them. New colonies would arise, and then things settled down and everyone lived in peace for another thousand years. Maybe what was inside the box was the heart of the planet, or a giant clock ticking away to sound the next alarm, cycling around, marking the time of the orbit of the close sun around the far sun. To be sure, the ancient books would tell.

Chani found his master pondering the large box in the central room and suggested, “Master, why not look into the ancient books? Perhaps they contain the answer.”

It was wise suggestion indeed, even the ancient books called it wise to consult them. Everyone who was successful in life always consulted the ancient books. The wise men and spiritual leaders of Ice studied them continually. That was Chani. He was adept in searching these “books”. It was known by Governor Ibara that to consult these ancient books, but he was in the habit of consulting Chani instead. But it was not beneath him to consult the books directly.

Chani said, "I can tell you all that is within the books, but they cannot talk to you unless you consult them directly."

Governor Ibara trusted Chani, so he responded with, "Bring me the box containing the books."

Chani retrieved the books while the stately governor stood by the block of black stone, pondering, wondering about its contents. The governor wore armor now. He had not worn his robes since the invaders had come. The armor was designed to fit in with his scales, being the same silver color and sheen. His family crest, blazoned across his chest, consisted of two men grasping a central spear which had been stabbed through a fish. The mop of seaweed atop his head was cut short, a sign of statesmanship. The flesh around his eyes had wrinkled by worry and the weight of his office. The look in his eyes was that of concern. His stature was regal, in countenance, one which everyone sought to follow, that of a shepherd, one that led instead of commanded. He loved his people.

He glanced around at his ancient family seat. The room had been carved to resemble the inside hull of a ship of wood. Above the doorways were carved seaman's knots that melded into the planks along the walls and made the doorways appear as though the taut planks had been opened and curled upward and tied together so every plank that went through the home was all one piece. The walls glowed with a pale orange and gold light, the light from within. Running water could be heard coming from the well room where the well had been dug millennia ago to connect the home to the underground river and to the fish. There they caught the white underground fish which they ate along with the tropical Soul food of berries and leaves and stalks. The bedrooms with beds of soft spun rock lay beyond that.

Chani came from the library alcove several stories above carrying a box where the sides and lid were of thin slices of translucent rock with orange and white swirls held together by clasps and corners of gold. The lid had a medallion also made of the same rock showing the family crest as a bas relief. He lifted the lid to show several fish in a row, each one almost round with two beady eyes staring upward and placed above a very small mouth with thin sharp teeth. They weren't real fish, they were each made of an alloy similar to brass, a kind of brass that didn't corrode and was of ancient date.

“You have to sing a hymn, Master,” instructed Chani, knowing that when a person sang to the books, a psychic link was set up with the mind of the singer, so the books could project moving pictures into the mind. The pictures were actually more like dreams or live experiences with all the senses involved.

“I know that Chani,” the governor said.

He touched one, and like a blind person reading braille, passed his fingers over the scales while singing a hymn under his breath. The scales were like keys on a computer key board, but more like the keys on an organ sending commands to the books which were little computers. The commands were in the form of vibrations. Several scales turned black, responding to his touch. He touched each one of the black ones again with his forefinger and a vision opened to him. He saw the people of the forest. They spoke to him. He slowly closed the lid. He turned and viewed the stone block. He rested his eyes on it and then leaning over, rested his hands on it. He stood as if in a trance.

“What is it, my lord?” Chani exclaimed. “Did the books speak to you?”

“Never you mind Chani,” he said pensively. “We have a weapon.”

* * *

Lush green jungles covered a damp darkness as if the planet concealed a secret. And in that darkness it held its breath as if expecting the impossible. There were some places if you walked far enough or climbed high enough that you could see bright tears of azure through the canopy above. Still higher, you could see the sky. If you walked farther than you could ever want to walk, the silence disappeared, giving way to the roaring of the tree cutters and the whining of the saws of the invaders. One after another the great trees and the young ones, families of trees being slaughtered, fell, shattering the underbrush, thudding to the ground. For every one that fell to the ground, the Soul of the planet shed a tear. Light has come to the forest in patch after patch around the green belt of the planet. The wild ones slithered away into the ever-decreasing darkness.

Economic prosperity was promised by the invaders to the fish people, but the way they planned to accomplish it was by hiring the fish people as laborers to cut down the trees. Then they would be given credit to buy things in the stores set up by the invaders. The fish people were disappointed when they found that it wouldn't be they who would be in charge of things and gaining the profit. The invaders pointed out that they had to first show them how to do it and set up the business, and then the fish people would be able to take over as they climbed the ladder from workers to supervisors to owners of businesses. Meanwhile, the invaders sent all the profits back to their home world with a

lot of the lumber as well.

Smag Gorel was a silent little man, wiry and strong. Everyone wondered how such a short thin man could be so strong. He could out saw, out chop, out climb the best of men. He had this one talent in which he could lay between two chairs with his head on one chair and his feet on the other and someone sit on his stomach, and his body would stay as flat as a board. He could do push-ups with one arm. Like many of the Southerners, Smag wanted to be rich like the invaders. He saw all the things they had in their camps and listened to their sly promises that they could make it possible for him to own lots of things. When he owned lots of things he would be important. He went off with his big brother Cormeg to the logging camps to chop down the trees. He was thinking to make a big profit. He was given lots of credit in the Company store. He worked hard, bought a large amount of gifts and sent them back home to his precious girl. They would be married when he had accumulated enough to be important. Cormeg on the other hand, saved his credits. Cormeg was the opposite to his brother in stature as well as temperament. Smag was always the hot head, losing his temper at the slightest insult or oversight, but Cormeg was even tempered. He was always calm and unruffled. Yet, he worried about his little brother. Cormeg didn't want much, and it was the work that was important. But the longer they stayed in the logging camps, the prices of the things in the Company store went up. Gifts could no longer be afforded, and it became difficult to even buy new clothes and boots. Food was plentiful in the forest, so the invaders couldn't jack up the prices of food. The workers went into the forest to eat. Then the invaders got smart and started charging for anything that was killed within a certain perimeter. That perimeter got larger and larger as the months went by. It was like a noose tightening around the

necks of the workers. They became as hypnotized as they would by a serpent with its mouth wide open and its fangs ready to stab. The invaders wanted to have complete control over the Fish they caught. The Fish wanted the bait. Many fish people died in the camps and not one of the invaders cared, and the other workers didn't have time to care. They had to work or starve. They became slaves to debt. Smag and many like him became a slave to debt. How was he to become rich when the longer he worked the deeper in debt he became? He owed for his clothes, he owed for his tools, he owed for the tent he slept in at night, and he owed for his food. It wasn't like it started to be, and the invaders had the guns. If he and his fellows could get guns, they could also have the trees.

“That’s what we’ll do, Cor,” Smag said to his brother Cormeg. “We’ll get the guns. We’ll take them from them at night. Then we will see who is in charge.”

“Hey you!” a guard shouted at Smag. “Stop talking and get back to work. You can talk on your break.”

They went on talking anyway. They were still working. What was the guard so upset about? They had good clothes, had enough food to eat, lived in nice dwellings, even though they were made of the sacred wood. They had good lives, didn't have to work, just stand around, and all their needs were taken care of. They did look funny though with their black baggy pants and shirts and boots covering most of their body, and covering their heads with big black bubbles. It was a wonder they could see through such things. When they were on duty, each one wore a thick black vest for protection, but to protect them from what? No one had weapons but the guards.

“Smag,” Cormeg said. “All you will do is get yourself killed. You will have to live with the wild people in the forest. That’s where your Soul will go, with those howling

monkeys. And I told you not to buy all that stuff. Why, I still have some credit left with the Company. I'll soon be your supervisor. You got to play it smart. Don't be a dumb head like everybody else. Use your smarts and someday you will be the boss."

"Hey! I told you two to stop talking. Get back to work!" yelled the guard, pointing his gun at them.

"We're working! We're working!" Smag yelled back.

"You're slowing down! Speed it up!" the guard yelled louder, poking Smag with his gun.

Smag got so angry that he grabbed the gun, wrenching it away from the guard and shot him. He jumped back and began to panic, not knowing what to do now. He didn't mean to kill the guard, he was angry, angry at the whole business.

Cormeg cried, "Run, Smag! Run into the forest! They're coming for you. The other guards are coming for you!"

So Smag ran. He ran into the underbrush. He ran until he could only hear the guards and their barking animals faintly. He was going to stop and rest, but a voice whispered, "run, brother, run!" He panicked and kept running until it was quite dark, until he couldn't see where he was going any more. He would have to stop and catch his breath, and also, let his eyes adjust to the darkness. How could people live in total darkness as the wild people lived? He noticed that he was wading in water almost to his knees, but he had to stop and sit on that log he bumped into to catch his breath. His heart was still racing. He leaned over a little to breathe deeper, to slow down a bit. He yelled as something slimy slithered up his leg. He jumped onto the log and started dancing in a panic to get the creature off of him. As he got it off and started to relax again, a slimy hand placed it-

self on his shoulder and started slithering down onto his chest. He tried to scream! His air was cut off. It was around his throat. Suddenly another hand, a dry hand, grabbed him and hauled him into the air. He was flying through the trees with a sharp pain in his right shoulder, a shoulder that felt the full weight of his body. He could feel his shoulder being torn from his body. He knew he would be dinner for some large animal now. His shoulder and arm went numb, and his head reeled, and he lapsed into unconsciousness, back into excruciating consciousness and then back out again. He finally went into a state of euphoria as he glided through the air. The slapping branches in the face didn't bother him any more, and he felt his shoulder and arm no more.

Smag awoke on a bed of large smooth green leaves. It was light, and he could see sky through the canopy of trees above. He seemed to be in a hut with no roof. He saw a naked female looking at him with two little children staring cozily at him, hugging her legs. All three were naked even their heads where they had no seaweed. They also had no scales, and their heads were oblong, having much more room for a brain in the back, and their chins were a bit pointed, their faces being quite narrow. In school he had learned that the back of the brain had to do with sight. He looked at their eyes. They were large and black. Their pupils were much larger than one would expect. They were certainly built for seeing in the dark.

Suddenly a large male dropped down beside him and gave him a large piece of fruit that had obviously been peeled. He was also naked. Smag took the fruit and began to eat, thanking the skinny man. Yes, Smag observed, he was skinny but sinewy, muscular and agile. He quickly went over to the female, embraced her for a while and jumped into the trees and was gone. Everyone acted as though nothing had happened and continued staring at him with much curiosity in their large black eyes.

After he had eaten, the female gave him a gourd filled with water. It had a green taste to it as though she had put new leaves in with it, but it was only clear water. It was hard to sit up and drink. His whole right side was in pain. She smiled sympathetically looked up. Several men, if they could be called men, dropped in. The one who seemed to be her husband gave him a smaller gourd filled with a black syrup that tasted like liquorice or anise. He motioned to Smag that he should drink it, putting his hand to his mouth and tilting his head back. When Smag put the substance to his lips, the man nodded abruptly. After having drunk the substance, Smag's pain subsided within a couple of minutes. The men sat cross legged in an arch before him and stared at him. Smag soon felt drowsy and swooned. Things started going in circles. The circles grew wider and wider as he became aware of the jungle swirling around him. He saw bits of arid desert interspersed with the jungle. Then he saw smaller portions of the jungle interspersed with larger sections of desert and mountains. He saw a vision of the whole world of Ice swirling in the cosmos orbiting the sun, then the sun and the other planets swirling around a greater sun, but every time he saw a planet swirl by he caught a glimpse of everything living thereon. He saw all the planets and suns swirling around the center of the galaxy and then millions of galaxies and everything ebbing and flowing and turning into a single

light.

Smag awoke alone in the dark forest, and it was raining. He could smell everything, all the flowers, all the green growing things and animals. He could see a light coming from everything, every object, and this light guided his steps. He listened to all the little insects, to the movements of the beasts, their grunts and growls, their barking and mewing, the birds singing and calling, the swaying of the plants and trees by the breezes and winds, the silence that was filled with life. He listened to a purpose in his heart and a message he had to give the world. It was not to get riches and things. It was not to vanquish the invader. It was to bring peace and harmony to a world gone mad. He would go back to get his brother first.

Cormeg didn't know his little brother when he came back to camp.

"What happened to you out there?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing, and everything," he responded dreamily.

"Aren't you afraid the guards will notice you and arrest you, even shoot you?" His brother asked desperately.

"It isn't my time yet. They won't hurt me."

But that day went mad. Something happened. One of the guards, saw something. He yelled and started firing into the forest. There was an uproar, and all the guards pointed their weapons towards all the fish men and told them to get down on the ground. Work was held up for an hour. When headquarters heard of this, they sent down a man by the name of McDrew. He asked questions and tried to calm the guards, telling them they had no cause to get excited. They let the guard who did the firing go on leave. He had been out in the forest for months and had simply tipped. The official report said that he got

drunk and started firing into the air. The other guards complained but were told they could have their turn when replacements could come. Meanwhile, attention and pressure was taken off Smag. They couldn't tell one Fish from another anyway, so they said. Smag took leave of his brother, saying goodbye.

“Where you going?” Cormeg asked.

“Where ever I'm needed,” he responded. “Up north.”

“You can't go up north,” he said, being afraid for his brother. “You have a precious little girl down south, you know, and the Northerners don't like us Southerners.” “The Southerners won't like me either, but I'm thinking there will be friends, North and South. Remember. It's the time of the Swarm and all the world's in an upheaval. I'll get along. I have something more precious to me than what I'm leaving behind.” Smag looked back and smiled. He knew his big brother would follow.

As he walked off, Cormeg felt something of himself leave. He said, “I'll come with you.”

“You won't like it,” Smag warned.

“I can't stay here. I'll be all alone.”

“You won't be alone,” Smag said, placing his hand on his brother's chest. “That's right, because I'm coming with you.”

“All right,” Smag warned again. “But come as you are. You have to have faith in me and don't ever turn your eye from me or you will be killed.”

Corneg's throat constricted, but as he saw his brother turn and go out of the camp, he felt something drain from him. He felt a power in his little brother that he had to have for his own sustenance. "I'm coming with you."

Because of the commotion of that day the guards didn't miss the two brothers until roll call that night. They were more concerned with what they had seen peering out of the woods at them.

* * *

Chani was the governor's town crier and newspaper and informant. He was plugged into a network that covered the globe. All the outside world came to him through his faithful servant and secretary, his man. As soon as the word got to Chani he immediately let his master know. There was troubling news from the rain forests.

"The supply trucks coming into one of the logging camps found everyone killed, it appeared, from their own weapons," Chani reported as he placed the governor's breakfast before him.

Governor Ibara placed his hands on the table in contemplation. "Yes," he said. "The Soul are on the move. It's starting."

"You saw it in the books, my lord?"

"Yes," and he paused a moment in thought, "in the books," as if reliving the vision.

Chani didn't press the matter. Reading of the books was very personal. He wanted to know what was going on, but it wasn't his place. Besides, he would know eventually anyway as things unfolded.

“You know if many of our people were killed?” the governor asked, staring at his fruit plate.

“Most. There were a couple that were missing. Speculation, they were carried off.”

“They weren’t carried off, Chani,” the governor said staring straight forward. He then looked at Chani and said, “the books.”

“The books,” Chani repeated with understanding.

Governor Ibara kept staring at the fruit plate. “I don’t know whether to eat it or save it. There will be no more fruit. I will have to meet with the Council. Arrange that meeting for me?”

“I will, my lord.”

Chancellor Penu Mikola, ambassador from the priests, called on Chani. He wore the yellow robes of his class and was bald. There was not sign of scales. No one knew how the priests got rid of their scales unless they continually plucked them off, but there was not a single pock mark. He wore a white dagger-like exclamation mark on this forehead between his eyes. His mouth was drawn out in a continual smirk as though he knew something others didn't. He said that the priests needed audience with the governor.

“There is an urgent matter that can’t wait!” he said frantically.

“The governor knows all about it,” Chani said with an air of authority. “There will be a general assembly on the morrow.”

* * *

The General Assembly was noisy until Governor Ibara stepped into the chambers. He stepped up to his seat and into silence. He saw his daughter in the assembly and winked at her. She winked back. There were several who cleared their throat in disapproval. Chani, who had arrived before his master, said, "Meeting will come to order. We will have the first speaker."

Papers were handed to Chani who sat below the governor surrounded on both sides by his priests. He handed one paper to the governor and looked at the other. He announced, "The priests will speak first. Tomo Shok."

Tomo Shok stood up to the left of Governor Ibara. He looked like all the other priests who wore yellow robes and were bald but he was a little heavier. He always smiled as though he was happy, even though he was angry, sad or joking. He and the governor eyed each other. "Governor Ibara," he started, almost shaking, so important was his complaint, but still smiling, "the last consignment of fruit has not arrived. The harvesters went to the baskets and all the baskets were empty. We are sure that it is the cutting down of the trees that has done it. The South must stop this cutting into the Soul of our planet immediately!"

Governor Ibara stood and looked at the representatives and priests. He pulled his red robes back behind his waist revealing his armor plates, and then with the palms of his hands outstretched, he announced, "There will be no more fruit. We still have fish."

Assembly members murmured. It sounded like an ocean wave dashing upon ancient shores. Chani pounded his glass crystal on his desk in response, saying, "Order! Order! The Assembly will come to order!"

"The Soul are moved," Governor Ibara said with his hands on his hips. "We of the

North are now at war with both the invaders and the people of the South .”

“War!” cried one.

“Preposterous!” cried another. “We haven't fought a war in centuries.”

“Dear Governor,” cried another, raising his hand.

Chani repeatedly pounded his huge crystal onto his desk, calling everyone to order. When they calmed down, he announced, “Won Dor has the floor!” and everyone laughed because Won Dor always stole the floor. He looked like a rascal with his pointed nose and eyes close together. Seaweed made a crown about his brow showing a single bald spot on top of his head. It matched his rotund body which he tried to hide with robes that were too big, and he always talked fast with a small whiny voice as if in a hurry to go somewhere.

“My Dear Governor,” he started, rising to stand on his chair so he could be seen by everyone. “We do not know how to conduct a war. We have had peace for hundreds of years. We have a standing army, yes, but it is not for war. It is for parades and quakes and floods, for natural disasters, not to repel invaders! And certainly not to go against our own people. We have no weapons against these invaders from the skies. We buried our swords and spears long ago in a peace treaty with the South.”

“What do you suggest, Counselor Dor?” asked the governor.

“Send an ambassador to these invaders. Find out what they want. See if some compromise or agreement can be arranged so we can pacify the Soul.”

Counselor Pinoa raised his hand. Chani pronounced, "Trudevor Pinoa!"

Won Dor resumed his seat, and Trudevor Pinoa climbed atop his seat and spoke.

He was tall and stood like a statue, always at attention. His nose was long and straight like his body. His robe hung like a curtain hiding a window. No one could ever see the real man behind the mask of his expressionless face.

"Governor, we know what the invaders want, and they will take it."

"And," replied the governor, "what do you suppose we do, counselor?" "We use stealth," he replied. "We go among them and start a rebellion, steal their weapons for our army and fight them on their own ground. They cannot tell the difference between us and the Southerners. We can use sabotage."

"Yes, counselor," replied the governor, "but that is dishonest, and we shall not back the rebel cause that is already starting in the South."

There were more murmurings, more pounding of the crystal gavel, and then Chani recognized the speaker for the priests, Tomo Shok. He said, "We need to give peace offerings to the Soul. They may help us in this venture."

Governor Ibara turned to face the priests. He said, "Are you not priests? Do you not consult the ancient books? How do we appease the Soul? They do not eat fish. They do not take presents."

"They only take people, my Lord Governor," replied Tomo Shok, bowing toward the governor, showing off his bald head.

"And who do you suppose we send, Elder Shok?" asked the governor.

"Your daughter, most gracious Lord Governor," smiled Tomo Shok .

Knowing that in the past, human sacrifice was offered to appease the Soul, Chani craftily altered the subject. He said, “Maybe your daughter will go to our enemies as an ambassador, my lord.”

Perfecta Ibara stood and stepped upon her desk. She wore the armor of her house. The metal strips of her skirt barely covered her hips, touching her thighs. Seaweed sprawled from her head to touch her shoulders, and the ebony scales of her legs offset the sheen of her armor. She smiled.

Chani pronounced, “Captain Ibara has the floor if she would like to speak.”

“Dear Governor, counselors, elders, I will be glad to be your ambassador. Some of you remember that I, as a polliwog, had much intercourse with the Soul. I was one who escaped the floods. I was chosen by the Soul, and they comforted me in my anguish at losing my friend Jarbath when we were polliwogs. I would like to visit them again as well as the invaders. They will talk to me, I am sure. I may have some polliwog in me yet.”

Governor Ibara replied and agreed, “We should all be polliwogs.”

“Hear, hear!” cheered the assembly.

It was agreed by the entire assembly that Perfecta Ibara would be an ambassador to the South, and that she would visit the Soul of her planet on her way south. She was adorned with flowers, and then everyone turned to the governor to let him speak the final words.

When Governor Ibara announced “We have a weapon,” everyone became silent, most of them, having to rescue their jaw after its fall onto the floor. “We have a weapon, and we will use it if confronted. We use it only in defense. It will not work for aggression.

It is a defense weapon and has been in my family for centuries, unknown to only a handful of people. And as far as giving the Soul a peace offering, they have already taken it. There was a massacre in the forest.” The counselors gasped. “Two are missing. The prophecies of the ancient books talk of two who should stand in the midst. I am sure these are the two. The invaders have not interrupted the Swarm as some have imagined. They have joined it. It is itself a fulfillment of prophecy. We have all been taught as polliwogs of past Swarms. They have gone in a logical order. Past Swarms have been manipulated, even orchestrated. The Swarm that is now beginning is being orchestrated by Life itself. Life is in control. The outcome of this Swarm will be as Life has planned.”

Everyone picked up his walking stick, each having the symbol of the representative’s family, and struck the floor of the assembly room repeatedly as the governor and the priests left the room. Everyone left feeling hungry. There would be only fish to eat. There would be no more fruit.

Chapter Two

Carl McDrew stretched as he lay in bed, putting his hands behind his head, looking

at the first rays of sun coming through the window shades. He thought of how different the sun looked here on Magrab than back on his home planet of Earth. It seemed brighter one week and dimmer another week, and yet, there were no clouds to hide the sun. His fingers found a flat round smooth something on the back of his neck immediately below his hairline. Curiously, he put his finger underneath it. The top of it was attached to his neck! He jumped out of bed and pulled it off of his neck and threw it on the floor, grabbing his shoe and slapping it, thinking it to be a giant tick. He looked at it closely, kneeling down on his hands and knees. It had no legs. *What kind of bug has no legs*, he thought. He wrapped it in tissue paper, thinking to take it to a lab to identify it. Maybe his bed was infected. He yanked the covers back, looking very closely. He looked under his pillow. Nothing. He looked all around the room. More nothing. He must have brought it in from outside. He went into his bathroom and looked in the wall mirror. Using a hand held mirror, he looked at the back of his neck. There was a bloody spot there. Maybe it had laid eggs. He put a bandage spot on it that would kill anything. He would have it looked at by the Company physician, but first, he had to meet a woman with the strange name of Perfecta. *She must be a doll*, he thought.

McDrew stood almost six feet with red hair, bright blue eyes, high cheek bones and a square chin with. His body, like any off worlder, had to be in top condition. His personality could persuade most men to do almost anything. His stare could hypnotize, and his sense of truth and fairness disturbed most people. His thin lipped smile pleased the women. He had one fault. In one to one relationships he was very girl shy, except during work hours as advocate general. McDrew was popular among the fish people. His red hair made them laugh.

McDrew went to the barracks and picked up his interpreter, Ogden, who had a talent. He spoke the major Earth languages and a few off world ones. He was a blond blue-eyed German of medium build in his late twenties. He wasn't quite as tall as McDrew. As a linguist, he had taught in a Munich college before he signed up with the Company. He said that he got bored easily and wanted some adventure, and the Company offered him some off world adventure. Shy, he kept mostly to himself. He was an avid reader and would have loved to live in a library.

McDrew drove his jeep to the barracks. He had contacted Ogden before he left, so the boy was outside waiting when he arrived. Ogden asked to drive the VIP, so he let him. They drove to the Hotel Cleric, leaving the car with the parking attendant and went in.

Perfecta Ibara was standing with her guards in a little group of friends jabbering away near the center of the lobby surrounded by a semi circle of lounge chairs. McDrew recognized the colors of their short skirts. Red and yellow were North, Green and gold was South. They were all wearing red with yellow trim. Their head bands were also red. McDrew had met the female of their species before. Their faces and hands had no scales and looked almost human, most with sharp features, but this one had more rounded nose and lips, something he thought beautiful in a woman, along with the softness of her what skin he could see. She didn't look hardened. She looked as though she had done nothing wrong in her whole life. She caught sight of him out of the corner of her eye and turned to greet him.

“McDrew, I presume?” she said in perfect English.

“I brought a translator,” he said.

McDrew jolted as they shook hands. His face went sullen. The scales on the back of her hand felt like that bug he had found on his neck! He quickly withdrew and smiled nervously, touching the back of his neck to feel the bandage.

“It’s the scales,” she said, unabashedly. “Southern women don’t have them on the backs of their hands. It is alarming to most off worlders.”

McDrew found the sound of her voice very cheerful and refreshing. “Sorry,” he said. “You startled me. And I am taken aback by your English. You must have been studying it since we arrived.”

“We Northerners learn fast,” she said, rolling her head toward her comrades. “Shall we go into the lounge? We can use your interpreter if you want.”

“He comes along only for protocol now. We can use him as a recorder. Come on Ogden,” McDrew motioned to his companion.

Protocol was a joke to the Company. They didn’t have any real ambassadors. They only had arbitrators like McDrew. He knew how to argue for the Company, but he weighed the needs of both the Company and its adversaries in the balance. He had the talent of making both parties at ease, but in Perfecta, he found someone more talented than himself. She made him at ease. She was so smooth in her language that everything she said seemed so logical. She could pull the wool over his eyes, and he would consent to it. Her face looked so soft.

After they were seated, Perfecta started in immediately.

“I hear that trees are hard to come by on Earth. Cutting them has been banned.

Laws weren't set up on Ice to protect the environment, so your company went ahead and started cutting. Law on Ice is loose and undefined, allowing for much interpretation. After hundreds of years of peace with no one making a disturbance, there was no need of law except for the law of conscience. We use the law of the Universe. Whatever you do to your neighbor is done to you. If you want a greater life, you simply serve in a greater capacity, giving more and receiving more. There has always been a continuous flow of goods and services from one person to another. And if you don't like the community, you simply get up and move to a more compatible one, which very few ever do. Only after about a thousand years do people get tired of one another and start moving all over the place, creating new communities and new ways of doing things, but all based upon democracy. It is what we call the Swarm."

McDrew made a proposal. He didn't know if the Company would support him, but he did it mostly to appease Perfecta, not necessarily her government. "We will be replanting, replacing the trees that are being cut down. We do this wherever we go. You should come with me to the nurseries someday where we have young trees already growing. Whatever planet we come to for trees, we immediately set up nurseries, taking samples of each kind. Instead of waiting for seeds, we begin cloning."

The meeting with Perfecta went well. McDrew assumed that the Company would support his proposal. They usually did. They would start a reforestation project sometime soon. He didn't tell her the nurseries didn't exist yet. He let the other side think they had won a prize. McDrew had also won a prize. He would have more meetings with Perfecta. She planned on talking about cessation of tree cutting. He planned to talk to her about he and her.

* * *

At the Company hospital, McDrew sat nervously in the waiting room. When the nurse called his name, he left somewhat relieved. He carried the bug wrapped in a tissue in his hand. He would show it to the doctor. He felt very confident that he could explain everything to the doctor, but after waiting about 20 minutes in the little cubicle, his confidence started to wane. Something like this shouldn't be happening. He unwrapped the bug and stared at it. He was relieved when the doctor came in. He hoped it would be nothing.

Doctor Landau came in wearing a white frock and an emotionless face.

"Doc," he said, standing, "I want you to take a look at this," and he handed the "bug" to him. "I found it attached to my neck this morning."

Doctor Landau was in the act of putting his latex gloves on when he spied the black thing sitting on the tissue paper in McDrew's hand. Not paying attention to it, he said, "Let me see the back of your neck. Turn around please."

McDrew turned and the doctor took the bandage off and examined the little hole. "Um huh," he said.

"Did it leave any eggs?" McDrew asked.

"It's only a big blackhead. Wash more often," he said. "Stop eating the garbage at the mess and eat the food from this planet. It's more healthy." He abruptly left.

When McDrew passed the nurse's station, she told him that the doctor wanted him to come back in a month to have another checkup.

McDrew was unnerved by the whole thing. He felt a deep sense of grief, for some-

thing about that bug terrified him. It couldn't be blackhead. He was sure that doctor had taken no action. Instead of giving it to the doctor, he should have taken it to the lab himself.

Dr. Landau made a call on his wrist phone as he entered his office. "I found another one, Jim. Same thing. It was on the back of the neck. It's the fifth one in ten days. These people are growing fish scales. It scares the heck out of me! There's something on this planet that's transferring DNA from the fish people to our people."

"Did you get a sample?" asked Jim.

"Yes," Dr. Landau answered. "I have it in my hand. It is a scale. It's like the ones previously. I also got his blood sample. He had a bandage on his neck. There was blood on it. You can test that too."

"Well, get it over here to the lab at once! We can't afford an epidemic. Call, no," Jim hesitated. "Call Sykes. Maybe it's the food. We have to stop our people from eating the food."

"Great!" Dr. Landau said, feeling flustered. "I told this guy McDrew to stop eating our food. Told him this planet's food was better."

"Well, call Sykes and tell him. I'll go to the market and get some food and have it examined. If it's not the food, we can't have any further contact with these fish people."

"Well, you tell me what you find and then I'll call Sykes." Dr. Landau paused. "He scares me."

"He barks all right. He doesn't bite, not much. Okay. Send me that bandage."

"You got it."

McDrew took Perfecta to one of the new restaurants that were popping up in Ibuta. This was something new to her. People didn't go to a separate place to eat. They ate at home. Although it was similar to the Great Hall for banquets on holy days and politics. It was remarkable to see people sitting at private tables. The lighting was as low as in the caves of the baths. It was romantic.

McDrew wanted to take her elbow as he would at home. The scales on her arms were strange and almost revolting, but he did it. He took her elbow to guide her into the table the waiter escorted them to. Perfecta was startled, not accustomed to being touched in this way, but she smiled. She actually found she enjoyed it. When he helped to seat her, she was again surprised. She thought, *how quaint*. She sat and the waiter handed her a menu. She didn't know what to do with it.

"Would you like something to drink while you wait?" asked the waiter in a heavy Southern accent.

"We will have the White Pleiads, please, in frosted goblets," McDrew said with authority.

"Excellent choice, Master," the waiter said backing up to leave.

Perfecta picked up the menu and looked at it. There were different foods described with numbers listed beside them. There were pictures of foods she had never seen. She hoped they would be compatible to her system.

"Where is your friendly interpreter tonight?" she asked.

"We need no protocol tonight, your excellency," he said. "May I suggest the ghal at ben? It is from your northern province."

Perfecta laughed gently. "Can you digest that, my friend? It is very grinding."

“I will have the fillet minon. I know about the spines you love,” he smiled.

She smiled back. He was quite handsome for a soft shell.

The waiter placed fruit on the table in an oblong dish and poured wine. McDrew gave their order to the waiter. They both sipped their wine and Perfecta tried not to choke on it. She could only stare at the fruit.

“You like the fruit?” McDrew asked, noticing she was staring at it.

“You have fruit?” she answered. It was hard to restrain her astonishment. “We don’t get fruit.”

“Sure! It’s free! It grows wild in the jungle. All you have to do is go into the forest and pick it.”

“We don’t get any more,” she said, gently caressing the fruit with her fingertips. “Does the Soul give you fruit here in the South? Why did they stop giving it to us of the North?”

“I have heard mention of the Soul, but no. It’s free,” he said again.

“The people who live in the jungles,” started Perfecta, “are the Soul of this planet. They pick the fruit and place it in baskets outside, on the edge of the jungle. It is their gift. It is their thanksgiving for what life has given them. We in turn do not go into the jungle. We leave them alone and let them live in peace.”

“What happens if they stop giving?” McDrew asked, sipping his wine.

“It has never happened ... until now. It has stopped. I think because we have gone into the jungle, they must think it very rude of us.”

“If you want the fruit, why don’t you go into the forest and gather it? It grows uncultivated and belongs to no one,” he said with the wave of his palm turning up. She no-

ticed he did a very Fish-like gesture, thinking he was being diplomatic.

“It belongs to the Soul,” Perfecta replied, troubled that anyone would steal. “We don’t go and take something that isn’t ours. You have very strange customs. Are all humans this way?”

“If I go walking and discover something lying on the ground, it's mine because I found it. I pick it up. If no one is around who dropped it, why not? It’s mine. It doesn’t belong to anyone else. Our economics are purely selfish. We want to make a profit. We want to be rich. Some of us are. In a free society, you can accumulate goods and services according to your education, and ambition. You get a job, you work, you get paid, you can live below your means. You save your money. You buy your own business. You buy and sell or you produce a service that others want to buy from you. People get rich that way. If you choose, you can work and spend your money.”

Perfecta sipped her wine, tried not to choke and asked, clearing her throat, “What is money?”

“Oh,” McDrew smiled. “You of the Far North haven’t been introduced to money, have you? Well, it’s what you work for.” McDrew pulled a card from his back pocket. It looked like spun glass pressed flat with embossed writing and numbers on it. “That’s money,” he said. “It is magnetic and carries a memory of how long you worked and at what. It tells a computer how to translate work hours into what you can buy or get at the store. There are ratings. The higher the rating on your card, the more you can buy for the time you worked. It’s very simple. You saw the numbers on the menu? That’s how much you pay for the food you eat. The waiter will take my card and take a certain amount from it, in effect, reducing the number of hours I have worked.”

Perfecta sat puzzled with a furrowed brow. She said, “You people are too complicated. We don’t work so we can eat. Our food is free. I guess you have to buy your living spaces?”

“Yes, buy or rent, that is, pay a certain amount every cycle, whatever that cycle is defined to be.”

“Our homes are free. Our food is free, and so is everything else. We work, but we don’t work for money to buy things. We live in a very simple society. We work so we can take care of each other, serve each other. We love to serve. We give everything we have to the community so there are no poor or rich among us.”

“Ho!” McDrew laughed delicately. “You have been doing your homework. You are learning about us. We have rich, and we have poor, but it’s usually the choice of the individual what he turns out to be.” He had to explain the word homework because it didn’t translate as finding out about other people. She exclaimed that she always worked at home.

“What is your job?,” McDrew asked.

“I presume you mean what I work at. I am a soldier. We have no wars, but it is a custom for us. We mostly work at municipal maintenance projects mostly.” She paused and looked sternly at her guest (she thought him to be the guest since she was the one who lived here) saying, “but now that you are here, we are at war, under a cease fire for now. I’m here on a mission of peace to see if we can have peace.”

“Ho, ho!” McDrew exclaimed, touching his mouth to his napkin. “Now comes the climax. The iceberg has struck the ship. Must we put up our defenses or abandon ship?”

“You are the invaders, not we,” she said without expression.

At that moment, their dishes came steaming from the kitchen on the arms of the dancing waiter. He placed them on the table and asked if they needed anything more. Was everything in order? McDrew replied that everything was fine. The waiter left.

“We were invited,” McDrew countered.

“Not by us,” she parried.

“The Northern Province never came to the meetings.”

“We have never known outsiders.”

“What do you have against outsiders?” he asked as she crunched on her spines.

After swallowing she said, “You have brought customs that disrupt our own. We knew you would do so. It was written in our ancient books long ago.” She took a sip of wine.

“If you knew that, why didn’t you try to stop us? Why didn’t you negotiate at the tables? Our sensors tell us you have no weapons, but we are not soldiers. We are businessmen. If you do not come to the negotiating table, we can only assume that you don’t care what we do, so we forge ahead on that assumption. What else can we do?” She took a few more bites before she would answer.

“We are negotiating,” she responded. “You must stay out of the forests. You can trade with the South. We do not care if they are corrupted. We will not be corrupted. It is not our way. You may continue to make it rain and fill our valleys with water, but if you do not get out of the forests, there will be devastation. We can’t stop what will happen.”

McDrew starting to feel a sense of anxiety in his gut but paid no attention to it.

“How can there be devastation with all that water? And remember, there are seeds that rain down with the water. There is life already growing around many of the lakes we have

formed. I think we have paid enough for the little wood that we take.”

“You will be cut off,” she said.

“What does that mean? Is that a threat?” he asked, thinking his command over women would win in the end. It was getting harder to ignore the increased pain in his gut. Maybe it was the food. He would get some antacid when he returned to the barracks.

“No sir,” she said with a dead-pan expression. “It is simply a fact. You will all leave or die or ...” She looked down at her plate and began to pick at her food with her fork. This was becoming harder than she thought. She didn’t want to go back to her father in disgrace having made a mess of things.

“Or what?” he asked.

She finished eating. “Oh, there are all kinds of alternatives. Things will adjust themselves and everything will go back to normal, I suppose.”

Feeling nervous, McDrew said, “There is nothing normal about this planet.”

“There is nothing more normal than the Swarm, Mr. McDrew,” she said, seeing him squirm in his seat. She smiled, his nervousness made her feel good. She had the upper hand in this debate. Nature was on her side. She was about to excuse herself, but she took a dulser fruit and put it into her bag. She would take it back to her father. He liked the red-green dulsers.

She was stopped by his question, “What is the Swarm?”

“Oh, you’ve had them on your planet. The great hordes of Asia. The dispersions of Israel. The migrations to America.”

“Homework again?” he asked, intrigued.

“Homework,” she repeated, then said, “I must go now. I will report to the

General Assembly of the Northern Clans.”

“But we haven’t worked out any agreements,” he prodded.

“Your company will do what it has to. We will do what we have to.” She stood. “I have the information that is needed.”

McDrew stood, wiping his mouth with his napkin. “And what is that, your Excellency?” he asked with great expectation.

“Tell your company that we are not without a weapon, Mr. McDrew. We have Nature on our side.”

“Is that all?” he asked with relief.

“What more can we ask for?” she smiled.

As they stood, the waiter handed them the bill within a leather folder. McDrew handed it back to him with his card in the folder. He said he must wait for the card to be returned. “We are used to manipulating Nature, your Excellency. We have millennia of experience with that.”

“I’m sure you do. And Nature must be very angry by now, Mr. McDrew.”

Dinner turned sour in McDrew’s stomach. He didn’t get to know Perfecta as he had expected, but he had gained some knowledge to send back to Governor Sykes. These fish people had no real defense. They had no technology that they could use against them, no weapons, only religion or ideology, and that was being corrupted very quickly.

Chapter Three

Ogden sat on his bunk in the barracks. He held a book in his hands, reading about ancient civilizations on Earth. It explained how the failure of big business created the first dictators, which in turn caused rebellions and new colonies to arise to save the big business. He compared this to the situation on Ice. A “Hmm” escaped his lips as he thought about it. Gomez, a tall, husky, bald mercenary, had been trying to get him into a conversation for several minutes. Ogden decided to close the book. He had lost his concentration trying to read and listen at the same time.

“These dummies don’t even have libraries!” Sitting on his bed, Gomez faced Ogden. “They don’t have books or schools as far as I can see.”

“Don’t call them dummies,” Ogden said with deep feeling. “I know a few, and they are highly educated.”

“Not the ones I know. They drink and fight all the time. They cuss with the best of us,” Gomez said, spitting on the floor.

“**Go**-mez! Don’t **do** that!” Ogden said in disgust. “You’re vile.”

Gomez laughed and lay down on his bunk.

“We’ve built several schools for them, and each one has a library,” Ogden explained.

“Yea,” Gomez said, “but they don’t have any that **they** built **themselves**. The only reason we gave them those schools is to teach them how to think the way **we** do.”

“That may be correct. They don’t need schools or libraries the way they live. I don’t know how they do it. Maybe they’re home taught, or maybe they have underground

schools we don't know about.”

“Or maybe they use mental telepathy,” Gomez said, imitating a mesmerist, waving his fingers at Ogden and laughing. “That’s my theory.”

“It may be. But I think their knowing is deeper than that. They seem to know things. Take this fellow that was here the other day. He was completely unimpressed with the schools and libraries we set up or my books I showed him. Wouldn't even look at them. He acted like he couldn't read, but he could explain all the technical details of the language translator I carry on my lapel.”

“As I said,” Gomez laughed. “It’s mental telepathy.”

At that moment someone came into the barracks and yelled, “all right men! Grab your gear. There’s trouble at the gate. A riot!” As all the mercenaries grabbed their weapons, Gomez included, the man was shouting, “Go! Go! Go!”

The Political Corp, what there was still in the barracks, sat on their bunks or milled around chatting with each other. Some wandered outside to see what was going on. Ogden followed.

McDrew drove up in a land rover. “You from the Polit Corp should have stayed inside. Ogden! Come with me!” He opened the door, Ogden hopped in, and they drove off.

“Let me guess,” Ogden said. “To the front gate, right?”

“Right,” McDrew answered curtly.

“So, what’s up?” Ogden smiled, happy to get out of the barracks and boredom.

“We’ve got to make sure things don’t get out of hand, that’s all,” McDrew said, as the land rover squealed around a corner. “Bad for business if anyone gets killed.”

“Are they armed?” Ogden wondered if he signed up for hazardous duty by mis-

take.

“We are,” McDrew said as he pulled up behind a barricade of other land rovers.

“And I have to calm both sides.”

* * *

Smag and his brother Cormeg had walked away from their work crew in the forest and away from the false promises of the invaders. Smag told his brother he had a message to give to the people of this planet which the Soul had given him, so he started going from village to village preaching the Word. His brother followed, listened and became converted. Smag found few people that listened to him. He preached to gathering crowds, but they lost interest and left. Cormeg stood on boxes or large stones and preached that he had seen a great light. When the crowds found that there were two witnesses to what the two called their crimes, some listened. It only took a few months before Smag and Cormeg began to gain a small following. They preached against the selfishness of the people wanting things and thus sacrificing the Soul of the planet. It wasn't the logic nor the rhetoric, but the Soul that radiated from Smag and his brother that rallied the people and caused some to leave their work or their families to follow. Some reported that Smag even healed a blind man.

No one had seen any Soul before. Smag said that if they came to Plnacnic on the rim of the forest, they would see the Soul, and know for themselves. They would know what their selfishness was doing. It was rumored that once there, one of the Soul came out of the forest. Everyone that was gathered there became astonished and drew back.

The Soul was naked. He had no scales. He took one of them and simply held the man's hand while looking at him. The man's scales fell from him. He walked as if mesmerized into the forest with the Soul. Another Soul came and took hold of others, and their scales fell off. Not all of the enlightened went into the forest, but some were left behind, and Smag had them speak. Then more understood. They were reborn and found the true path and left their selfishness behind. When they had turned back to the forest, they found fruit that the Soul had left for them to eat. It was a feast. But in each basket a fish lay. People were puzzled, but many others remembered what it meant. Two of the naked turned to the others and quoted from the ancient records, "And I will make you fish men." Then all who followed Smag remembered the ancient religion. The naked eventually regrew their scales, but the experience was not forgotten.

Smag's teachings spread from one village to another like the glimmer off the mountains that could be seen by all. It was the fire of the Soul. People felt at one again.

Governor Sykes interpreted it as rioting. He saw only the loss of consumers and laborers. He called out the riot squads in whichever village or town Earth governed. Smag and his disciples were not allowed to congregate except in the wilderness. People left their villages and went into the wilderness to see the strange thing. Many were converted, but it divided families. The followers of Smag were blamed for acting holy. People were leaving their ancestral homes to escape persecution. There were arguments in the town squares and the homes made with the illegal wood. People who wanted the things the invaders offered them started fist fights with the followers of Smag. Riot squads forced out many. Villages were split apart. Refugees were seen wandering along the roads looking for new places to live, somewhere to find peace. New villages were formed. It was the

Swarm, and Sykes with his invasion force was caught in it like a flood swooping up all his men. The Swarm thinned his forces, carrying them away from Ibuta into the outlying areas wherever the people gathered to riot or worship.

* * *

McDrew and Ogden watched as Smag marched to the gate with a horde. Sykes had called his full military force to protect the base. Most of the mercenaries were placed around the gate.

One of the fish people with long scraggly seaweed on his head and wearing what appeared to be a fiberglass sack climbed onto a land rover outside the gates and started preaching. It was Smag.

“What do I behold?” Smag called out. “I see our sons and daughters coming home drunk from an untold number of bars that now line the streets.

“What do I behold? I see men and women in bloody battles. In battlefields? No! But as if in a war, in the bars that now line our streets. I see fist fights and brawls and murders caused by drunken rows.

“What do I behold? I see children going hungry while their parents drink and gamble away the money they labored so hard to earn at the hands of the invaders. And why do they labor so hard in the labor camps of the invaders? To get the things the invaders have brought to sell in their stores. Those that labor more can supposedly get more.

“What do I see? Fathers and mothers leaving their children to be raised by others so they can have things. They leave the sacred halls of home and thereby destroy their

families.

“Behold! What do I see? I see people wearing expensive and elaborate clothing, setting themselves apart from each other.

“Behold! What do I see? People building large and spacious buildings to live in and trade, built from the wood of our life-giving forests.

“Behold! What do I see? Pointing fingers of those living in the large and spacious buildings, pointing at the poor and the hungry partaking of the words of Life.

“Behold! What do I see? I see greed taking hold of our people. Whereas, before the invaders all things were free. Everyone was equal. Everyone was counted the same. No one was more important than another. Everyone had a palatial home. Everyone had fruit given to them by the Soul of this planet. Everyone helped their neighbor in need.

“Behold! What do I see? Greed taking hold on the people of this world. They devise means where they can have more of the things of the invaders. Yes! But they also devise ways and means to steal from each other so they can have more land, more buildings, better clothing, more women, expensive art, beautiful cars and homes and all kinds of trinkets to adorn their homes and their bodies.

“Behold! What do I see? Bosses, supervisors, executives, hierarchies where the next higher person gets more money and more privileges than the one beneath him.

“Behold! What do I see? The grinding of the faces of the poor. The rich eating up the lands and houses of the poor!

“Behold! The invaders have come and stolen our lands so they can sell them back to us!

“Behold! The invaders have come and stolen our minerals so they can sell them

back to us!

“Behold! The invaders have come and stolen our trees so they can sell them back to us!

“Behold! The invaders have come and stolen our fish so they can sell them back to us!

“Behold! The invaders have come and stolen the fruit of the Soul of our planet and have invaded the privacy of our Soul!”

With each “Behold!” the horde roared louder.

“I don't think they want an arbitrator,” Ogden said to McDrew.

“Nope,” he responded, hypnotized by the yelling and chanting. “I think not.”

Ogden stared at McDrew. He looked at the Smag's horde and back at McDrew. He noticed that McDrew was wearing the kind of turban that covered a person's head and neck like those in the horde.

“You converted?” Ogden asked McDrew.

“Huh?” grunted McDrew, watching the crowd intently as they shook land rovers and the chain-link fence.

“Are you converted!” Ogden said with emphasis. “You’re wearing the same kind of turban they’re wearing.”

“Oh!,” he laughed. “It’s just for show.”

When the gate fell, the riot squad opened fire with rubber bullets and electro charges. They went in with clubs and quelled the riot, arresting the leaders and all they could grab. It was all over in ten minutes.

Within the hour, McDrew and Ogden found themselves in a meeting with the lead-

ers of the planet. McDrew noticed Perfecta, the emissary from the North, sitting on the council. *Ah*, he thought. The northern provinces have decided to join in on things. Someone was making progress. He patted himself on the back.

Two guards in bright blue dress uniforms brought Smag in, but not as a prisoner. Surprisingly, they let him sit on the council. The Earthlings complained and grumbled and jeered, but the speaker of the council, pounded his clear crystal gavel on the desk before him and silenced the crowd. He told them that it was their custom to let religious leaders sit on the council, and that they never accused a single man without accusing the council also.

After everyone was seated, the members of the council took turns speaking of his or her concern. The fish people didn't like the Earthlings hurting their brothers even though they may have been rowdy. The Earthlings explained they had the right to protect themselves. McDrew had to argue for both sides with Ogden interpreting for the fish people. He pointed out to each party the advantages of letting people choose their own destiny, of letting the cultures mingle, of everyone getting to know and understand the other.

Perfecta kept eying McDrew, who still wore his turban. She thought it was a sign of great respect. She would thank him afterwards for learning of their ways and doing **his** homework.

All through the meeting, McDrew ate antacids to calm the pain in his stomach. There were other Earthlings doing the same. He expected some ulcers, but he couldn't be sure this pain was job related. It had started the night before at supper. Maybe he should lay off the homemade sausages Ogden and Gomez had given him. They were probably made from off-world pigs. He didn't digest off-world foods well. He would visit the doc-

tor after the meeting. That was his intent, but when the meeting was over, Perfecta grabbed his arm, and whisked him away, of all places, to a restaurant.

McDrew was going through a lot of surprises lately. The last time with Perfecta he felt uneasy and agitated. Now, he felt calm. He forgot his antacids. He smiled. He forgot his urgent need to go to the doctor.

“How did the meeting go?” he asked Perfecta as they shared a sip of wine. Because she was so covered with scales, Perfecta reminded him of a mermaid trying to have legs. He was wondering if she had breasts like mammals. *It was only a scholastic thought*, he argued with himself.

“I think the meeting went well as far as helping you Earth people to understand us a little better,” she answered. “As far as getting you out of our forests, I don’t think so.” She paused and admired him, sending him a gaze that softened him all over. “I like the turban,” she said with the sound of a gentle fountain.

“It, it’s just for show,” he said, embarrassed.

“You speak like a snake,” she said. “You don’t tell the truth. And here I was admiring you for understanding our ways. I thought it was a compliment you paid us at the council meeting.”

“It wasn’t,” he said. “I just want to wear it.”

McDrew's gut started hurting again. He couldn't eat the food that set in front of him. She had turned off her charm, a power she had over him he didn't understand.

Perfecta didn't know why she liked him. Something made him seem attractive. His flesh was repugnant to her. He was a soft shell. Right now, she was angry. She felt confused, had mixed feelings, but, she thought, *I must work to break down this people who*

invaded our lives. Yet, there was an intuition that persisted and was growing. It told her that this man was important, not only to her, but to her people.

Perfecta remembered when she was little and her father only a counselor. Governorship still loomed ahead, and so too her schooling. He took her underneath the cave to the fish pool. It was dark down there, and she was frightened. She held onto her father's hand and followed. He made her feel safe. The green glowing of the pool and the luminescence of the crystalline walls frightened her. The pool, a bowl about 6 meters in diameter, protruded out of the floor. He lifted her to sit on the side of the pool. She could see the fish swimming in it.

"Put your hand in the water," her father instructed.

"No Daddy," she said, feeling afraid.

"Look. Daddy will put his hand in first."

He had done so, and his voice proved so soothing that she followed. She wanted to play in the water and splashed it with her hand laughing nervously.

"Calmly," he advised in a soft voice. It comforted her. "Now, still."

She calmed down and let her hand rest in the water.

"Now close your eyes and feel the fish with your heart. He will come to you," he assured her.

The fish came and rested in her hand. She opened her eyes, and with great pride, lifted the fish to show her father. That was the first time she had felt that inner feeling she could trust. He had called it her Soul. He taught her how to catch fish which gave of their lives and were thanked by those that caught them. It was simple, and the family was fed. It was like that with the Soul. They gave of their fruit. They were never seen, but they

thanked them in their hearts and communed with them through their Souls.

Perfecta glanced up from her plate at McDrew. She smiled. It was his Soul she felt.

McDrew was puzzled. She turned on the charm again. His stomach stopped hurting and he could finish his meal. They both smiled at each other. Something was happening that should not happen. His job had never gotten him involved with extra terrestrials before at such an intimate level. But she was extraordinary. She had Soul. He could live with that and ignore her scales.

Scales. He touched the back of his neck, and all the charm of the moment was drowned in his worries. He needed desperately to see a doctor. He looked at Perfecta. His job had to come first. He had responsibilities. He had to woo this delegate from the North. He would kick himself later, but the Company needed concessions from these Northerners.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“Do you have time to visit one of the lakes we created?” he asked, desperate to be alone with her.

“All the time in the world.” She seemed wistful. “Time isn’t something we are afraid of. We don’t use it as a commodity.”

Perfecta and McDrew left the restaurant arm in arm, took a taxi, an item, previous to the invaders, unknown in Ibuta. They went to the airport where they hopped a hover craft. They went to one of the many lakes north of there. They didn’t talk much, mostly admiring the scenery below. They traveled over the mountains 'ooing and 'ahhing at the shimmer of the pastel crystal jags, as they caught the setting of the suns. The shuttle sat down near the edge of a lake surrounded by a surprising carpet of grass, small trees,

shrubs and other plants in abundance.

“There were seeds in those icebergs that splashed down,” he said as they strolled along the coast.

McDrew took off his shoes. They stepped into the water and let the waves lap against their feet. Perfecta wore no shoes. Her feet were at home on the ground. She waded by his side, looking down and then ahead. She wanted to see his hair. She had liked his hair. It didn't look like the seaweed of her people. She touched his turban, and he drew back with a shock.

“I want to see your hair,” she said with a puzzled smile.

“No!” he said, turning away, looking across the lake.

“Why?” she asked. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said.

“You're talking like a snake again,” she said, raising her voice in a threat.

“Just let it be!” he demanded. “You have to spoil things, don't you?”

“Why? What is it?” she said, raising her hand up to take the turban.

“No!” He jumped back into the lake up to his knees soaking his pants. He looked at her in disgust. “All right! If you have to see!” He yanked off the turban in anger. He turned his head to show the scales growing around his neck and down his back.

Perfecta laughed like a little girl. To her, this was wonderful!

“What are you laughing for?” he demanded.

She opened his shirt. He stood there in shame. She caressed his shoulders and let her hand slide down his arms. They were covered in scales.

“You are reborn!” she laughed for joy. “You are reborn. That's all. It is wonderful.

Look. When a baby is born here, it is completely naked as you are without your hair. But then scales begin growing on its neck, then down its shoulders and down its arms and back. Soon, its whole body is covered. Then it is no longer naked. It is clothed by life itself,” Perfecta giggled.

She embraced him and held him, placing her cheek on his chest.

“I’m frightened,” he sobbed. A grown man could bear anything except turning into a different species. Not many had to face xenophobia when it was their own skin they were afraid of.

“Don’t be.” she said, comfortingly.

“I’ve got to see a doctor,” he said, still sobbing.

“No, no. You mustn’t see a doctor. They mustn’t see this. You’re one of us now. You belong to us. You belong to ... me.”

Perfecta took off her armor and threw it down onto the shore. She hugged him. The lake splashed its waves about their legs. They kissed. *Hmm*, thought McDrew forgetting his fears. She does have breasts.

Chapter Four

“We have rioting in the streets. The mob is ransacking all our stores. The soldiers are spread all over the city. There are some still here on the base. We’re trying to protect our schools and factories. We’re doing fine, dear,” reported Governor Sykes to his wife over the ship to shore line. “So, what’s up with you?” He listened to the shrill voice on the other line and winced. He said, “We have our good days and bad.” He listened again and said, “It’s all a gamble. You know every place we go is a gamble. We have a great deal of lumber already transported. Good lumber too. Not for framing, but cabinets and furniture, you know. Some can be used for houses, fine for paneling, dark rich hardwoods. There’s also minerals, but it’s very expensive to extract.” He paused to listen more. “There’s also musical instruments. Fine workers here.” Pause. “Yes, it’s this Smag fellow. We can’t arrest him, Everyone gets upset.” Pause, more wincing. “Yes, Dear.” Pause. “I know Dear.” Pause. He reaches behind his neck and pulls out another scale that has grown there. “I will have to see, Dear.” Pause. “I don’t think that would be a good idea. We have a sickness here. The whole place is under quarantine.” Pause. “Yes Dear.” Pause “I will see, Dear.” Pause. “Goodbye, Dear.” Pause. “Wilson! Get in here now!”

Wilson ran in and left the door open. “Yes, sir!” he responded, thinking of his ulcers.

“Where is McDrew?” Sykes yelled.

“He has disappeared sir,” Wilson said, wondering if he would grow older than thirty three.

“What do you mean! He has disappeared?” Sykes yelled.

“He ... he can't be found. I've been looking for him for several days. He's no where to be found.”

“Then get me Norton!” he yelled.

“Yes, sir,” Wilson said, backing out of the door, almost bowing.

Mike Norton was stockier than McDrew and completely opposite in personality. He was Sykes' computer expert. He used to be a soldier and still kept in shape. He was very responsible and had four different teams working under him. Sykes needed someone to speak to the fish people. He knew he could trust Norton. Norton came in shortly and Sykes started getting information about the riots and what the hell the mercenaries were doing to shut things down.

“I want you to hack into all their computers. I need to know what they're **thinking!**” Sykes yelled.

“Sir, they don't have computers,” Norton said frankly.

“They're so backward! I can't believe it! Get me contacts. Get in there and find informers!” Sykes yelled.

“Okay, I'll work on that,” Norton promised.

“Okay, you'll **do** that!” Sykes yelled.

“Yes, sir!” Norton yelled back as he left.

“Wilson!” Sykes yelled, bypassing the intercom. “Get me that doctor!”

Dr. Landau grimaced when he heard he had been summoned. He hated Sykes because he ran this enterprise with his mismanagement. He gathered what papers his researchers at the lab had documented and headed for Sykes' office. He entered Sykes' office timidly.

“Well, get in here!” Sykes yelled. “Don’t just stand there!”

Dr. Landau approached his desk.

“Let’s see what you have,” Sykes said, decreasing the volume to a bellow.

Dr. Landau handed him the papers. He fiddled with them and handed them back.

“Well! What do they say?” he bellowed.

“It’s not in the food. We’ve checked everything the men have been eating, what you’ve been eating. We’ve checked all the air filters. We thought it might be an airborne virus. We found nothing. We’ve taken blood samples of the infected men and blood samples of the fish men in our employ. No difference at all. We found nothing in their blood that isn’t in ours. We have found a mosquito-like fly that has been biting everyone, but it has been a dead end. It doesn’t transfer the DNA. We find no transfer of DNA,” Dr. Landau gestured politely.

“Maybe it’s radiation!” Sykes bellowed. “Have you tried radian?”

“Radian can’t transfer DNA. We’ve been looking for a transfer of DNA,” the doctor said. “But radiation can **alter** DNA. Yes! We will look at a type of radiation altering the DNA. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome!” Sykes said joyfully. Someone had actually said “Thank you.”

“Now get back and go to it!” he said.

“I will, I will,” he said as he backed out the door.

Looking at the memos on his desk, Sykes came across one that mentioned that a lot of desertions had occurred.

“Wilson!” Sykes roared.

“Yes Sir!” cried Wilson running through the doorway. “Right here!”

“What do you mean there’s been a lot of desertions?”

“Sir, some of the mercenaries have disappeared, and most of the people who have contracted the disease. They're probably searching out the witch doctors hereabouts, since our doctors don't know what to do about it,” Wilson reported.

“What about the others?” Sykes shouted. “Probably want to colonize! We don't **care** if they colonize! I just wish they would ask per-**mission**! We **need** those guys.”

“Yes Sir.”

“And I guess we've lost McDrew as **well**!” Sykes fumed.

“Yes Sir.”

* * *

Ogden had gone to one of the schools set up by the Company because it contained a library. These schools were the only deposit of books on the planet. There were three schools in Ibuta. Each one had a library. He had been to the one in the Seku District. The architecture of this school struck his fancy with its large sky-lite areas and fusion of rock and wood which hadn't been tried on Magrab, or Ice as they call it. The library had a huge, elongated wooden dome with icy windows that dispersed the light. The shelves were pale Ootar wood polished to a sheen. The books, though, were even more beautiful. There were not many children's books. Most of the fish people started reading at an adult level. That disturbed the imported teachers from Earth.

Ogden was sitting in a lounge chair reading *A Tale of Two Cities* for the third time and thoroughly enjoying it when Gomez burst upon him.

“What the hell are you doing Og?” he demanded, submachine gun in hand and looking very dirty.

When Ogden looked up, his consciousness expanded to include the room, Gomez and by sound, the outside world. He started hearing gun fire and yelling. He looked around and found students huddled underneath desks, quivering. Some were crying.

“Og! Wake up! Come out o' your dream world and join the real world. There's a war going on out here. What are you doing here?” Gomez demanded again.

“Oh, Gomez,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “What's all the noise? I'm halfway through this book. *Tale of Two Cities*.”

“There's a rebellion going on outside, man! You got to get out of here!” He said, still in shock to see Ogden sitting there relaxed, reading, while everyone else in the library was cowering.

“I was reading about a rebellion. Takes place in France on Earth a millennia ago,” he said, looking up with his head slightly tilted, a little tired.

Teachers were gathering the children.

“Come on Og, we're going down into the basement to keep these children safe. You're coming too.” Gomez offered his left hand, holding his gun with his right.

“Can I take my book?” He said jokingly, but slightly serious. He didn’t want to put it down.

“Come on! Or do I have to carry you?” Gomez asked, ready to grab Ogden’s arm.

“I’m coming, but I’d rather stay right here.”

The school gathered in the basement along with a few of the mercenaries guarding them. The emergency flood lamps were lit in the corridors where the desks were placed along the walls. Some of the teachers tried continuing their classes, some played games. Ogden and Gomez sat talking about the mess outside.

“The whole town has gone nuts,” Gomez said. “Those that haven't left are looting the stores and the grand houses, and all others are having to run for their lives or get beaten to death. We really don’t have enough forces to handle such muck. I mean there are thousands out there. Rubber bullets don’t stop them. We’re having to kill the sons o’ bitches. And that doesn’t stop them. Most of us are at the base, defending it.”

“Sounds like the riots of the 1960's back on Earth.”

“Yeah? That happened back then too?” Gomez asked.

“Yes. That happened all over the place back then.”

Lights dimmed. Some went out. The colored quartz walls glowed. After they came back on, Ogden and Gomez thought it was a bit quieter. They looked around. They thought the children and teachers had stopped talking. Gomez announced that it was okay. They were safe.

“Cute kids,” Gomez said, “weird looking though.”

“Gomez,” Ogden said, looking a little worried. “Are some of the children missing?”

He shrugged. When the lights went out again he could see some swift movements by the strange eerie green glow shining through the walls.

“What was that?” he asked Ogden. “Don’t be alarmed kids, if the lights go out, we can still see a little.”

The lights snapped back on.

“I don’t know,” Ogden said.

“Look over there,” Gomez pointed to the empty desks. “Weren’t there kids over there?”

“Looks like one of the teachers is gone too,” Ogden said, looking puzzled.

When the third time lights went out and more children disappeared, Gomez and Ogden stood and started walking around. “How could they have run down the corridor so fast?” they asked each other.

“Hey,” Gomez called out. “There’s nothing to be frightened about. We’re safe down here. Kids! Don’t go topside, okay? Johnson! Packer! Go topside and steer those kids back down here. We don’t want them to get their heads blown off!”

Johnson and Packer climbed the stairs to form a search. After they left, the lights went out altogether, and a fish man who wasn’t part of the original group was seen near the end of the green glowing corridor, motioning that people should follow him. Gomez and Ogden went with the rest of the group. It was mostly out of a strong sense of curiosity. The corridor had opened where there was no door before. The guy wore armor. He led the way. Ogden kept looking at him. He seemed familiar somehow. He glanced back and

the corridor had closed behind them. He didn't feel panic, only of being led to safety. There was an aura of trust about this fish man. A weird sense of curiosity overwhelmed Ogden, and he followed the man as if in a dream. Ogden continued to stare at the fish man. The more he did, the more he realized the man didn't have seaweed hair. He had real human hair, only he was covered with fish scales except for his face and the palms of his hands.

Ogden and Gomez were led with the teachers and children to the outskirts of the city. There, they joined many of the refugees walking along the road going into the country. Most of them carried bundles on top of their heads, some carried back packs, and some pulled handcarts. Ogden expected them to appear ragged and dirty, but they didn't. They looked as though they had only now left their kitchens or their schools or their jobs, and were walking down a city street at rush hour, and the road was filled with them.

Ogden had given up on things. He had left his book on one of the desks in the basement of the school. He had read it before anyway. He felt like he was going on a picnic or some big celebration that was somewhere up the road. Back at the school library he had already designated himself as a deserter. He thought he might go somewhere on this world, settle down and leave his job, leave the Company. He felt like taking a vacation. He didn't know what he would do once he arrived at the end of the road. He didn't care.

Gomez thought he was coming along to protect the school group as per his assignment. He brought Sgt. Lance with him. He expected the others to follow, to catch up. He hadn't thought that they wouldn't know where he and the sergeant had disappeared to. So, he was along for the duration of the assignment. He tried calling to the others he left behind on an old army walkie-talkie. All he got was static.

Ogden kept staring at the fish man that led them. A female companion accompanied him. He didn't notice when she met up with them. She suddenly appeared. Maybe she had been in another part of the crowd. That didn't matter. He was overwhelmed with curiosity. He knew he had seen this guy before. *But he was a half-breed*, he thought. How could that happen? We haven't been here that long. If such a thing were possible, by this time, half-breeds would be young, only children. He lengthened his stride to get a better look at this fish man. The closer he got, the greater was the fear in his gut that something was wrong. When he got within arm's length, the man turned around to face him.

Ogden went white.

"Ogden?" the man asked.

"What the Hell!" Ogden cried. He stopped, cringed, grimaced and clenched his fists. Facing the female, he cried, "You filthy thing! What the Hell have you done to him?"

Adults and little children stopped and stared.

"McDrew! What filthy thing have they done to you?" Ogden screamed.

"Ogden!" McDrew cried. "Calm down. It's the planet, Ogden. It's the planet. They did nothing to me. But you have a right to be afraid. If you plan on staying here, the same thing might happen to you. I suggest you leave this planet as soon as you can and take everyone with you. Perfecta here says that the planet has to choose you. It chose me. I don't know why, but it did. It chose me. For what, I don't know. We're caught in a big movement of some kind. The fish people," he turned to Perfecta at his side, "I mean, we call it the Swarm. The planet goes through this cycle every thousand years."

"What?" Ogden cried. "The planet? What do you mean, the planet?"

“All planets are alive,” McDrew explained. “They have a Soul, and they have a mind and can communicate in different ways. This...”

“...is a way to communicate,” Perfecta interrupted. “Planets communicate mostly biologically, but they can speak in words to your mind if you listen.”

“Hogwash!” Gomez declared as he came from behind. “It’s a disease. Some of the guys got it. They’re working on it at the lab. It’s got around. They’ll find a cure for it. It doesn’t take scientists long nowadays.”

“A disease? Yes, a disease. I can handle that,” Ogden said, now relaxing from his initial shock. “I can handle that. Don’t get close to me. Don’t touch me. I don’t want to get it.”

“You won’t,” McDrew said, “ if the planet doesn’t want you to have it.”

“You’ve been *brainwashed*, McDrew,” exclaimed Ogden as everyone started moving forward again. “That’s what they’ve done to you. They’ve *brainwashed* you!”

McDrew ignored him as he took Perfecta’s hand and continued on. They were moving north toward the great forest.

Ogden’s anxiety got him to question why he was walking with these refugees. He was among men and women hauling their baggage in whatever way they could. The children played as they walked along, carefree and unconcerned with the war zone they were leaving. The massive and bare mountains of quartzite were like the waves of the Red Sea standing on end as the children of Israel passed through on dry ground. He saw Earthlings and fish people. He noticed that some of the Earthmen had fish scales on their necks or some on both their necks and arms. He had only followed Gomez to go to the safety of the underground tunnels. Then he was offhandedly invited to go with the children and

teachers by accident on this trek to an unknown destination.

He had already decided to leave the Earth base. But now it was getting scary. There was this disease spreading to the humans. It looked like they were turning into the fish people. He didn't want to turn into a Fish. Yes, he thought of wanting to stay on this beautiful planet of crystal mountains, but he didn't want to become part of this community. He didn't mind them before this dreadful discovery. Now they might be a threat. Yet, he was curious, but in a morbid sort of way. It was a curiosity filled with fear, the same as how a drowning man speculates what kind of fish he sees as he spirals downward under the sea. He would go along as a reporter and would discover something of their culture and what was happening to cause such social upheaval. He would learn about this disease.

Ogden knew that this road cut through the forest, and it would take them to the northern provinces if they were to walk for the next couple of years. *That must not be the destination*, he thought. Maybe it was the forest. That would only take a couple of weeks. He was not about to walk into the forest without provisions, though there would be plenty of food when they got there. Everyone would starve by then.

After walking all afternoon, Ogden heard the lapping of water. He could smell it in the air. *Ah*, he thought. *One of the lakes we created*. After another hour, they were walking on grass and passing through bushes and young trees. There were plenty of warts, mallows, and tubers for the people to eat, and they did so lavishly, and everyone waded into the water and had a good long drink. The children played in the water and among the reeds. Ogden was surprised to see some pick fish out of the water and eat them raw, crunching down on them with their horse like-teeth. He saw most of the people settle

down on the grass and rest. He also settled down on the grass and took a snooze after eating a salad of the surrounding plants.

Gomez awoke Ogden with, "Hey, buddy, we're on the move again."

Ogden was surprised that it was morning. The sun was rising over the eastern mountains, and he ached all over. He rose and searched for something to eat. A child offered him a tuber. He took it and thanked her. He ate it and was refreshed. It gave him more vitality than he had expected. It must have contained a lot of caffeine. He waded to the water's edge, took a drink, and was off to catch up with the others. They weren't following the road, though. They had veered off and were heading toward the eastern mountains. He followed anxiously behind, hoping to find something of the culture of these weird people, something unobserved in the city.

Two hours went by while they crossed the valley. He could see people entering into the caves as if it were an everyday experience. He had heard no one announce, "Now we are entering the caves." They went in as though they were back home. Some of the entrances reached were a hundred feet high. Some were twenty feet. When he followed the people inside, he found that the light didn't fade away. It was as light inside as outside. The walls were a light coral, almost white, and ornately carved with animal and fish figurines stretched and twisted together. Some looked like whales and dolphins spouting water. It was remarkable because there were no oceans on the planet. There were not even lakes until Earth sent them icebergs.

He noticed that some people veered off into other tunnels inside the cave. When he investigated, he found that the tunnels led into rooms carved out of the rock. The rooms had no doors, but when he went to enter one, following a family which had left the main body, a sudden wall of white light stopped him. It hummed when he touched it. It was warm but not hot, and it wasn't bright enough to hurt the eyes.

Ogden went back to the main body. He expected to find a large central room in which they were all congregated, but instead, he found groups of them going through a wall of white light, seemingly the same that the doors were made of. He looked around for McDrew, or the fish man that used to be McDrew. He saw him standing to one side of the wall of light. The female McDrew called Perfecta stood on the opposite side. He approached after winding his way through the crowd, keeping his hands in the air, trying not to touch anyone.

“McDrew!” he called. “I can still call you McDrew?”

“You can,” McDrew said, “even though I have a new name now.”

Ogden bombarded McDrew with questions as he approached. “Well, what’s happening? What is this place? Why can these people go through when I can’t?”

“Ogden,” McDrew said with enthusiasm, “this is the real Ibuta. This is the real city here under the mountain. The city of wooden buildings? That’s not the real city. That was built by the Company. This is the real city. These people are coming home. Some of these people here are going north. Ogden! It’s fantastic! The technology is way beyond what we’ve ever experienced. We thought these people were uneducated and backward. They are an advanced civilization. You won’t believe it!”

“But what are these people doing?” Ogden asked perplexed. “They’re going through a wall. I tried to go through one awhile ago. It wouldn’t let me through. I saw a family go into a room and then a wall of white light like this one came down, and it was like a door slamming in front of me. Now I see these people walking through like it was nothing. There must be a secret password. Sesame or something like that.”

Gomez was right behind Ogden. He put his hand through and brought it out. He felt nothing, only a little tingling sensation. He grunted.

“Ogden,” McDrew said. “This is a portal to the northern provinces. It will save a whole year traveling by foot. This planet is riddled with them. That’s how these people travel. It has been a secret the people didn’t bother to tell us about. Perfecta told me that it’s only a natural phenomenon that exists throughout the universe, and she was surprised that we haven’t found them on Earth. By all the natural laws she knows, they should exist.”

Gomez went through and came back. “Hey!” he said. “It’s just like going through a door, but you can get dizzy.” He rested his hand on the wall to get his senses back.

Ogden remembered having read a book about a shaman on earth, centuries ago, that got a young graduate student to go through a portal like this by slapping him on the back. “I remember reading something about that,” Ogden said. “I think they must exist on Earth too.”

“Their technology works *with* Nature,” McDrew said, “not trying to control it. They communicate with the planet, and this is one of the results. They use the technology that Nature uses, which is far advanced, more than ours.”

Ogden tried to assimilate everything that was happening as he watched Gomez

come and go and return. He thought a while and said, "The planet lets them."

"Yes," McDrew said. "The planet lets them."

"The planet is alive," Ogden said.

"Yes," McDrew said. "The planet is alive. It can communicate."

"But you have to know the language, I'll bet," Ogden said contemplatively.

"Yes," McDrew said.

"What a paradigm!" Ogden said, a light coming on inside his head. "I can talk to a planet." He pondered that and said, "I'm a student of language. I can speak several human languages. I started learning to speak to dolphins before I left Earth. I know sign language. I can speak to apes that know sign language. I can speak to these fish people. Well, why not a planet?"

"Yes!" Gomez cried. "Why not a planet! My God, why not a planet! This is beyond the boundaries of my imagination! Let's get going. I want to see where this leads."

"Well, I want to learn this new language," Ogden addressed the air, turning around with the wave of his hand. "Where do I go?"

McDrew motioned with the wave of *his* hand, "Well, follow me."

With that, they all three crossed through the portal. Perfecta joined them as the last of the refugees passed through.

They entered a carved canyon with pebble walkways going off in different directions. Buildings and houses were made from the same glassy, orange-colored quartzite with black streaks of obsidian in the walls were carved out of the cliffs. There were the same dolphins carved over the doorways, the same sinewy animals over the walls, and there were spiraled columns carved into the spaces inside and outside around the door-

ways. The refugees followed the differing paths as if they knew where to go. Some were embracing loved ones who had waited for them. Some went into the open air markets with great stone arches covering them. The people dispersed as if they had simply gone home.

Ogden felt out of place. He didn't know who to follow. He looked at McDrew and Perfecta. They motioned him to follow. Gomez acted as though he was in enemy territory. He turned back and headed for the portal.

"Hey," Ogden called to Gomez. "Where are you going?"

"My work's done," he said. "Got to get back to my men. They'll think I've deserted."

"They're not going to miss you," McDrew said.

"Naw," Gomez said. "This isn't my place. Got to get back." He looked at Ogden. "You comin' back, Og?"

"No," he said. "I think I'll stick around. There's a story here that someone is going to have to write down. I think I'll do that."

"All right. See ya then." Gomez waved as he went back through the portal. The other three waved goodbye.

Ogden walked up to McDrew and Perfecta and said, "All right, lets get on with this. I have a recorder going and we're going to talk. Now what has happened to you McDrew to make you a Fish?"

"Let's go to report to my father, the governor," Perfecta requested. "We can give you your story on the way."

"Okay," Ogden said, "I'll go for that. Lead on, as they say."

Ogden looked around as they traveled along the street, saying “hi” to passersby. He didn’t see any stores beyond the open market place, nor did he see any hotels. He saw no vehicles, either. Not even a bicycle! And of course, no one wore shoes.

“Perfecta,” started McDrew, “convinced me to come here to Occa. I was devastated at finding scales growing on my neck and shoulders. But I had this strange attraction to Perfecta. The more I was with her, the more my stomach pains went away. I could relax. I felt at home.”

“You two fell in love, then?” asked Ogden.

“It isn’t like a romance,” continued McDrew. “It’s more like coming home. It’s like remembering after having been gone for a long time, and now I’m back home with my family.

“Perfecta took me to see her father. He took me on a tour of their home. He introduced me to his staff and showed me pictures of his wife and their children. His wife, Orman, is not alive as we know it. They don’t say she is dead, but that she has become one with the Soul of the planet, or she has gone to live with the Soul in the forest. His sons each have their own families and industries. One of them, Trudevon, is a general in their army. You should see their mansion. It has a huge family room with a large ornate fire place, as though they burn wood in it, which they don’t. Perfecta said that a hearth to them is where the family gathers, not where they burn the forest. The hearth, she said, did not evolve by burning wood, but by piling warming rocks together. They give off radiation at the infrared range instead of being radioactive. She said that the planet gives them according to their needs because they don’t fight with it or try to control it.”

“Okay,” Ogden said, “but let’s talk about this disease you have. Is that why you have become buddy-buddies with these fish people?”

“It isn’t a disease, Ogden.” McDrew looked him squarely in the face. “It is an adaptation. It was explained as they showed me their history. They are not indigenous to this planet. They came here as colonizers millennia ago. It was a harsh climate. They all got what they thought was a disease. They were frightened like I was, but they adapted. There was no other solution to the problem. There is a certain type of radiation that comes from their double sun. They call it a communication between the suns and the planet. That same kind of communication comes from the planet to our bodies to protect the people from high doses of radiation found in the atmosphere. It’s Nature’s way of protecting us. It isn’t a disease, but a gift of life.”

McDrew went on talking about meeting Perfecta’s father and his household and then meeting her brothers and their families. He described how he found how much they loved each other and the caring attitude they had towards each other. He had gone to a banquet, and everyone was talking and laughing, but no one was making jokes or saying negative comments about anyone. There were some discussions of problems getting food or building dams and canals, but everything was on the upbeat. Everyone raised ideas to be considered, but no one got upset when his or her idea wasn’t accepted. They weren’t anxious. They joyfully looked for other ideas and other solutions.”

Ogden didn’t notice the time going by so fast. He thought it would take a great deal of walking to get to where they were going. He didn’t even feel fatigued when they arrived at the governor’s house (or cave). He asked if they had unknowingly gone through one of those portals. Perfecta and McDrew shook their heads. Now the mansion of carved

red rock was before him. There were two flights of steps up to an open portico. He looked up at the spiraling columns and open spaces, windows and porches carved out in intricate patterns above that made the side of the mountain look organic, like some kind of giant red bone with all its filaments exposed. After climbing the stairs and going inside, he imagined it was a giant cathedral or temple, a sacred edifice, and Ogden felt uneasy. He didn't belong here. He was intruding.

He made his way up some elaborately carved spiral stairways to a balcony where he could look onto the surrounding city. The lovers went into a palatial garden. What Ogden saw was not the city, but snow capped mountains. What he could see of the city was canyons and rivulets among the hills below a vast mountain range. The air was cool and refreshing, the mountains majestic, calming his nerves as he took in deep breaths of the fresh air. He fancied he had hit upon Shangri-la. Looking to the south he could see an impassable desert with a glint of a lake on the horizon. One of theirs, one of the melted icebergs. It puzzled him that he felt a bit anguished at the interference of the Company. Why hadn't they left the planet alone and let the people evolve unmolested? Trade was alright, but they had claimed the planet as though the aborigines were completely uncivilized and helpless. After going on a trek with them, he started feeling a fondness for these natives. But of course, they were colonists after all, and they might have been human at one time. McDrew seems to have adapted nicely.

Chapter Five

Sykes' office was in a state of confusion until Norton arrived. He reorganized the research groups and the trade heads and even the secretaries, beginning with the security's office. He made sure there was communications between the office and the soldiers. He tightened security and made everyone feel good. Organization seemed to spread by example until the whole city was nearly back to normal except for martial law extending to the perimeter. Troops were called back from outlying areas. With Ibuta secure, the plan was to secure the other cities one by one, until a state could be organized for the Company. There would be no more free territory. The Company would look upon the planet as hostile from now on. That was Norton's view of things, but it made sense to Sykes also.

Five years on this planet and they had gotten a good foothold, but they also became careless. Security had become lax. Smag happened, and a disease appeared; some kind of contamination was suspected. The Southern provinces blamed the North, and the Company believed them. The South had a different tradition. They blamed the North for bringing them here as slaves at one time. Yes, they came here as colonizers, but the fish people were taken from their home planet of Hacktool, a water world, as slaves for the plantations. The colonizers wasted their resources and reduced the planet to a desert except for the equatorial rain forests. Too many weird things happened there, so they left the place alone. People never returned once they went in, or they came back crazy. The slaves revolted and set up the Southern Kingdom which eventually evolved into a democracy. The aristocratic colonizers wound up in the North where they kept to themselves. Some slaves escaped into the jungles, but they never came out. It wasn't known if the

Soul were aboriginal to this planet or if they were ancient colonizers possessed by the spirits of the jungle.

Sykes was happy that his office was no longer a shambles. His attitude improved. He turned from a mad man to a happy one, but he was still a tyrant. He yelled ecstatically at Dr. Landau and slapped him on the back for several minutes congratulating him when Sykes was told he had found that the scales growing on people were due to the radiation of the two suns. They were apparently altering the genetic code. He yelled at the doctor, demanding a fix. They had to find a way to stop the radiation that seemed to be penetrating their thickest walls. When the good doctor left Sykes, he felt totally shaken. By the time he got back to the laboratory, he had a collapse and had to be taken to the hospital. He couldn't work. His lab assistants had to carry on the work without him.

Sykes fumed when he received a report several days after the fact that Dr. Landau was in the hospital. But the same report gave him a formula of certain minerals that could be sprayed onto plastic sheets that would protect them from the radiation. It would be 97% effective. He smiled, knowing he would have the upper hand after all. Sykes lost no time communicating to the Company and to the factories in Ibuta. Bedroom suites would be made for everyone. At the same time he decided that all diplomatic communication with the North was unresponsive. They flatly denied that they were radiating their invaders in any way. Protective measures had to include an invasion of the North.

More ships carrying armies arrived in Ibuta. The Council complained against the Company in vain. Anyone of the council that attempted to organize resistance was shot. One by one, the armies of the Company occupied the Southern cities. Fish people started disappearing. Someone wouldn't show up for work at a shop, a factory or the hospital. It

was known where the people of Ibuta went. They had been followed, rounded up, and sent back to the “wooden city” as they called it. Yet, no one had discovered the portal under the mountain. Gomez had reported it. He took a team to try to find it again, but it was gone. Only a blank rock wall remained. The fish people laughed when Gomez said that they walked through a solid wall. Yet, they kept disappearing without a trace. No one could find them. The population slowly dwindled. The report came back to Sykes. He blew up, ranted and raved, commanded that they be found and their hiding place destroyed.

* * *

Ogden heard excitement and murmuring downstairs. He noticed that there were more people than usual. There was a crowd gathering on the steps of the entrance. He went down to investigate.

Governor Ibara was called to the gate. He saw Southerners standing on his steps. He recognized Dunas Alloco, a counselor from the Southern Council. He welcomed him.

“Counselor Alloco!” he cried, slapping the man’s right hand. “What brings you and all these people from your province? What an honor! I am surprised.”

“We come for your pardon, great governor.” the counselor said, bowing his head. “We come to be your humble servants. We would rather be your servants than slaves to the invaders.”

Governor Ibara didn't say "I told you so" or "so you got tired of the invaders," or shame them in any way, but was the magnificent host.

"Come. Come," the governor said, pulling his cloak over the shoulders of the Southern councilor. "You shall not be our servants, but will share our homes and feast."

And what a feast we have!, he thought.

He motioned to all on the steps and the streets, and the crowd walked by Ogden, who stood at the door, recording the whole thing. Chani was there also. He went over to Ogden to invite him to continue his observations.

"Would you come with me?" Chani asked, "and you can observe everything. The governor will now go to the Council Hall where he will introduce these Southerners."

Chani took Ogden up some other stairs farther down the hall and to a room with open windows that was part of the webbing of the carved rock where they could look down into the Council Hall and listen.

Ogden was impressed. The desks were made of white alabaster in ever widening semi circles from the podium directly underneath him. White stalactites glistened with a white light. Even the walls which were immaculately carved with interwoven lines and spirals, knots and sea animals threw off a white light. Most of the desks were attended by men or women in white flowing robes, all standing. The delegates of the South were brought in. Governor Ibara introduced them and started a ceremony.

"What's happening?" Ogden whispered.

"The Grand Council always starts with the sacred," Chani explained.

Food trays were carried in and he noticed what looked like wine goblets and wine bottles. He heard the governor say, "As the Great Creator was swallowed by a great fish

to give all of us life, so we partake of the flesh and blood of the Great Creator and Life Giver as we are Fish. In the olfa, we remember his flesh. In the libha, we remember his blood.”

“What are they passing around?” Ogden asked, almost reverently.

“The best little fish cakes on Ice,” Chani said, “and the wine is superb. These are saved for such an occasion.”

Those in yellow robes passed the trays of olfa or fish cakes to those who were in the white robes. Then they passed goblets of wine around, everyone taking a sip.

“I guess the ones in the yellow robes are the priests?” Ogden asked.

“Yes,” Chani said. “A most honored position. One that has too many responsibilities for me.”

“Each man to his own?” Ogden remarked.

“Yes, the very thing,” Chani said.

After the sacred ceremony, Chani’s secretary, Olong Glob preceded with the agenda.

“I’m supposed to be down there, but my secretary is doing fine,” Chani said. “The Southern delegates don’t know it is not me. The governor told me to take care of your needs while you are here.”

There was a small agenda which went quickly, then everyone wanted to hear the Southern councilor explain why they had come, and so late in the game. With very little ceremony and a small introduction, the podium was given to Dunas Alloco. He addressed the Council with a wave of his arm.

“My brothers and brethren, on behalf of the people you have welcomed within

your borders whose homes have been blasted and destroyed, wanderers, having no other place to abide, and having given us a safe haven, I thank you. It will ease your minds when I tell you that we are not your enemy. We have ever welcomed you to our councils. I am sorry for those things which separated us in the past. I praise you for your generous hearts, and ask you to forgive our waywardness. For the blindness of our eyes and the greediness of our hands, we have been recompensed. We have again become slaves, not only to the invaders, but to our own appetites. The Southern Council has been dissolved by the invaders.”

There was an audible gasp of surprise throughout the room and then a rapping on the tables and desks.

“Why are they doing that?” asked Ogden.

“It is an expression of sympathy,” Chani said.

“Greater invasion forces,” continued Dunas Alloco, “arrived only days ago. We had suspected that would happen, so we were telling our people to flee. We were not without a plan and organization, so we were doing it slowly, one person here, another person there, so as not to bring suspicion upon us. Then came the ships from the heavens filled with thousands of soldiers. I had dismissed myself early. It was my turn to disappear. But before I got to the portal, I heard the guns firing in the Council Hall. I ran back. They had all been killed, even Governor Wareck.”

More rapping, then Dunas Alloco again spoke, “I ran back to the portal, getting through in time to close it down. If those soldiers had been better shots, I wouldn’t be here talking to you. I came close to joining the Soul but escaped with others outside the city. We went to the Val Doggon and there found the portal unassailed. We got as many

people through as we could before the soldiers found us and started attacking. We closed the portal so they could not follow. They know not where we go.”

Dunas Alloco paused to wipe sweat from his brow before continuing his tale. “Ibubta and all the cities round about have been taken by the invaders. Martial law reigns. The people are rounded up and put into camps. The fences are barbed. Guards stand in towers with large spot lamps that light up the night. The animals they call dogs patrol with the guards around the perimeters. In those conditions, it is hard to open any portal. Only small ones have been successfully opened. Medical supplies and letters can be sent through, but all these have to be hidden. Sometimes we can send children through.

“The forests are still being slaughtered. It will take five years to denude our forests, but they can do it.”

At that moment, a man recognized by Ogden, stood up next to Perfecta Ibara, one of the counselors. He raised his hand to speak. Dunas Alloco clammed up with much visible agitation. “What is this!” he asked, trembling. “I see before me a **deformity!** A man of our own kind with the hair of an **invader!** Why is **this** allowed in this council room?”

Governor Ibara stepped forward. He put his hand on the shoulder of Dunas Alloco and pleaded, “Let us pardon this intrusion and be men and hear what he has to say.” He then waved his other arm towards McDrew. McDrew then stood on Perfecta’s desk and spoke.

“My dear sir. Even though the invaders are cutting down the forests, there are many many nurseries to replace the trees and rebuild the forests. Replanting has actually already begun.” He got down and sat in his seat.

“Replace! Replace? Who can replace the ancient ones taken and split apart and

sent off-world? It is the Soul that is being attacked. Work crews are taken from the camps to cut down the trees under armed guards. You can't replace the Soul. Work crews are taken to the factories and are forced to work under threat of death, where before, they went willingly. It is the Soul that is being attacked. Other provinces around the globe are also being assailed. It is only a small amount of time until they point their guns at you, my brethren and my brothers."

Rapping on the desks went on for a long time, and McDrew felt fear and wonder and held onto Perfecta's arm. He looked into her eyes then scanned the council. He wondered if he belonged anywhere now. He wasn't a human anymore, and he wasn't quite Fish. But he loved Perfecta. Fascinated by her, he would do whatever she would ask.

Chani remarked about the Swarm to Ogden. "Never in the history of Ice has the Swarm been precipitated by outsiders. For millennia Ice has had the Swarm in which chaos rules for several years, but we have always handled it ourselves. We knew not that people could come from the heavens and take part in this embarrassment of civilized society."

Ogden responded by saying, "I understand that the people that live in the equatorial region have a lot to do in determining the outcome of this Swarm."

"You have been doing your homework." Chani chuckled and added, "Something I picked up from Perfecta." He paused. "Yes. It is called by us the Chastening, or Himalta, in our language. We don't recognize the Soul as people. They are what you call spirit. They are not flesh and blood like you. They are the Soul of each of us."

"Do the people, I mean the Soul... is there one for each person in the provinces? We believe that each person has a Soul," Ogden asked, thanking whoever was in charge

of the Universe to be having this conversation.

“No. They are the Soul. There is only one,” Chani explained. “We all have the same Soul.”

“What part does the Soul play in Himalta?” Ogden queried.

“I like your use of the wordplay. Because it is what they do. They play, and stability is brought back to Ice.”

Ogden listened with interest from his covert. The politics of this planet seemed ancient. It was like looking at a video documentary of ancient Earth. He could almost call it quaint, but that would be putting himself above the others. He was literally above the others here, but he would sit in silence, keeping his feelings to himself. What he heard was a description of governments all over Ice failing, people splitting off from their provinces to set up colonies elsewhere and a dictatorship spreading by using Earth mercenaries to try to stop the commotion and chaos which the fish people called the Swarm.

Without warning, Governor Ibara, Perfecta, and McDrew were standing on one side of Ogden with Chani and Dunas Alloco on the other side. Chani waited his master's command.

“Take our guests to the waiting chamber, Chani,” the governor said, “I will be with you shortly.”

With that, the governor left everyone with Chani who was to provide for their every need while they waited for the governor to come back.

“This way, please,” Chani motioned with the wave of his hand.

A servant rushed into the waiting room and whispered to Chani. Both of them raced out. Perfecta ran after Chani and asked, "What is it Chani?"

He called back without turning to stop, "There's been an accident!"

Perfecta caught up to him. "Who is it?"

As they turned into another corridor, Chani said with a grave face, "It's your father."

Perfecta followed Chani and the servant into the infirmary where they saw the doctor leaning over a man covered with blood. The doctor's white smock was also smeared with blood.

"Pa-pa!" wailed Perfecta. In moments of distress and utter hopelessness, the tongue turns to its ancient roots. Some words are common to all children's tongues no matter what the language is.

Chani grabbed Perfecta and turned her away from the bloody scene. "You shouldn't see this!" he warned.

"He's my father!" she yelled, struggling away from his grip. She fled to her father's side and knelt beside him, sobbing in her heart. Her mouth was silent. *Who hath done this!* was her only thought, a thought of revenge. She clenched her teeth, but her hands touched her father's arm gently. She watched the doctor sew the wounds closed. He soothed her with the words, "He will be all right. He missed the heart."

Chani consulted with the servant. "What happened?" he asked.

"You know he had secret talks with the South," responded the servant.

"Yes," Chani said. "We left him so he could. He wanted me to keep an eye on the

consulate. There is a faction down there that is loyal to us or have the same feelings we have about the invaders.”

“It was the consulate. One of Dunas Alloco’s servants that was with him when he came through the portal. He was at the meeting.”

“Call the guards and arrest Dunas Alloco!” Chani said bitterly.

“Yes Sir!” replied the servant, leaving swiftly.

Chani ran after him, grabbing his arm. “Have them arrest all within that chamber ... until we know what is going on.”

“Yes sir.”

Ogden was surprised when four armed guards wearing helmets and breast plates burst into the room and surrounded the three. McDrew immediately asked, “What is it? What’s happened? Is Perfecta all right?”

They said, “Come with us, quickly!”

Ogden thought they would be taken to Perfecta. Dunas Alloco thought they had come to protect him, but McDrew knew he and the other two were being arrested. He didn’t say anything. He knew these people were more civilized than where he came from. They weren’t money mad. They were only trying to protect themselves. He knew they were just and would not harm them.

Ogden, McDrew and Dunas Alloco were taken down a long corridor and asked to wait in a small white room. There were no furnishings. They stood, expecting something to happen. The guards left, and a white light filled the doorway. Ogden tried to touch it.

“I wouldn’t do that,” called Dunas. “It may scorch your hand. You won’t be able to thrust your hand through it. It is a lock.”

Ogden touched it slightly and it buzzed. “It must be a force field,” he said.

McDrew stood there a bit numbed at the experience of his friends locking him up. Sensitive about being locked up with someone who thought he was a freak, he tried to speak to the ambassador to explain things, but when the man gasped and jumped away as though he had been accosted by a monster, McDrew went deeper into his reverie. Ogden was the only one Dunas Alloco would talk to, and after the initial shock of being incarcerated, they began a conversation.

Back in the infirmary, the governor whispered to Perfecta and Chani.

“We have a weapon. We have a weapon, and we must find how to turn it on.”

“You don’t know how to turn it on?” Chani asked.

“I was betrayed. I was betrayed.” the governor continued, slightly hysterical. “The South has no interest in hospitalities, only hostilities.”

Perfecta and Chani both grunted, knowing the governor still had a sense of humor in his rhyming.

“About the weapon?” Chani queried.

“He must rest now,” the doctor interrupted, and he led the two to the doorway. They left reluctantly.

“He will be all right. The guards are here. They will protect him.”

Perfecta kissed the doctor, her cousin Blandik. “He is in your hands.”

* * *

Chani walked downstairs to the Great Hall. Apartments surrounded the hall, and there the refugees could rest, but most of them sat at the long tables talking or playing games. A lot of people milled around, forming clicks. Shafts of blinding light shone down

into the hall looking like giant white cross bars. When people walked through them, it produced an illusion of people appearing and disappearing. Chani could see several people he recognized mingling among the others. Chani had come in disguise, dressed as one of the Southerners, wearing the appropriate clothes and bands on his arms and head, dressed in human clothes of shirt and trousers. He looked around and saw some of his servants. One eyed him and motioned for him to come over.

Chom Omo introduced him to the group as Lob No. “We are having a meeting, cousin,” he said. “We have been waiting for your report as to the condition of the tyrant.”

“He is still alive. The fool missed his heart,” Chani reported.

“Damnation!” whispered one of the group. “We will have a hard time if we try again. He will be doubly guarded.”

“You are using a human word,” Chani expressed his surprise.

“What’s it to you!” the one replied. “The humans have given us great power and much wealth. They keep their promises to those who side with them. It is the new order of things. We welcome them into the Swarm.”

“I am among the servants of the house. I come and go as I please. No one watches me. I will need an assistant if we are to be successful,” Chani said, unperturbed.

“I will go with you to see that you do the job,” another one said.

“What is your name?” asked Chani.

“Ogbo Bet,” he said. “What sign do you give me so that I will recognize you when we meet?”

Chani took his hand in an unfamiliar configuration.

“This is the sign,” he said. “It is of ancient date. Now swear by your head that you

will tell no one.”

He took his finger and said, “I swear,” as he traced a line across his throat.

“Good. We will meet tonight when the moons conjoin.”

Chani left.

“Can we trust this one?” Ogbo Bet asked Chom Omo.

“Yes. My house is with you.”

Chani had never confided his set of spies to the governor. He was sure the governor would only approve of using his spies, but Chani didn't trust anyone but his own house. The governor's intelligence gathering had only led him into danger and had almost cost him his life. He was sure that some of the governor's servants were allied with the houses of the South and had led him into the ambush. He now made his way back to Perfecta. He would have to rely upon her now and let the governor rest.

Chani located Perfecta in her own rooms. Her eyes were red and had been recently wiped dry, but she had missed a tear.

“Perfecta,” Chani said softly, “I am sorry for interrupting you. I will have to confide in you to save your father.”

“Anything, Chani,” she said, wiping her cheek. “Please, come in.”

He told of his plan, how he was investigating a secret society, and had discovered a plot against her father's life. “I'm sorry I was too late to save your father. I will not fail to protect him a second time. We are ready to round up that group as soon as we gather a little more information, and proof that will hold in court.”

“Are you playing with my father's life?” Perfecta asked, grabbing Chani's arm. Her woman's intuition proved true.

“I only hope to succeed where your father has failed, little one. I hope you can trust my loyalty. It was your father’s instructions that he go alone to that meeting. If he hadn’t, he wouldn’t have been trusted. One piece of information was needed to change the course of history and save our world from these invaders.” He looked sympathetically into her eyes. “I have one more meeting with this group tonight. Be ready with guards at the infirmary and stay hidden. I am sure there will be another attempt on his life. Get there an hour before midnight. I will meet you there. Trust me to do this, little one.”

“I will.”

Chani met with one man that night. His name was Thanhor Anni. He shook hands with Chani in a secret way. By this he knew he could trust Chani.

Chani asked, “What is it that you desire?”

“To be led in safety to the chamber where the governor is kept,” he said. “We have been interrupted and we must finish our meeting with him.”

By this, Chani knew he would try to end the governor’s life. He said, “Come this way. We will meet him together. You will be safe in my hands.”

Chani and Thanhor Anni strode down the corridor that led to the secret chamber where they had moved him. There was no sign of any guards, but Chani’s inner sense told him they were watching as part of the molding or part of the lighting fixtures overhead or part of the large potted plants in the corners.

Chani and the assassin turned a corner and touched a naked wall. His hand went through it.

“This way,” he said.

They both went through the wall. There was no one in the room except a person

that stirred upon his bed at the end.

As they approached the bed, Chani took out a long curved knife and shoved it between the sixth and seventh ribs of the assassin who fell dead without a groan. Chani then ran to the bedside of his master and explained what he had done and all the meetings he had been attending saying that they would be waiting for his and the assassin's return.

Governor Ibara groaned, "Go quickly and round them up!"

Perfecta and her guards started entering the room.

"Two of you take his body and dispose of it," Chani ordered. "The rest come with me, quickly!"

Perfecta went to her father, and the rest of them fled out the door. They ran out into the night to the house of a friend of a friend. They found no one. They had fled, Chani feared, back into the South. They had evidence of a portal, but it was closed from the other side.

"Come," ordered Chani. "We will go to the South while the trail is fresh, but we must be in disguise. Back to the palace. There is a portal there."

So eleven of them went in disguise into Ibuta to search for this secret society of assassins.

* * *

Ogden was exhausted with waiting. He felt they were indeed being kept prisoner. He had tried chatting with McDrew, but all he could talk about was Perfecta and then fall back into talking to himself in a low guttural voice. Dunas Alloco froze, thinking he was talking too much and remembering that the room might have listening devices hidden in

it.

Ogden tried sleeping on the floor. He thought he got about three or four hours of sleep trying different positions, and as the night wore on (his body clock said it was night, but he couldn't be sure), he became sore all over. He finally wound up leaning against the wall and dozing. He must have gone into a deep sleep, for when he awoke the last time, he had been drooling. Quickly wiping his mouth off with his shirt sleeve, he rubbed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. He looked at McDrew and the ambassador. They were still pacing the floor. He couldn't see the doorway anywhere. It had taken on the color of its surroundings. There were no fixtures or furniture of any kind, yet, there was plenty of light in the room. Suddenly an iris opened with a face in it on the wall to his right. It had not been perceptible before. The image being larger than it should have been, Ogden knew it was a transmission. It turned out to be a news cast.

“This morning we received news that at midnight last night there was another attempt on the life of Governor Ibara. The would-be assassin was identified as Thanhor Anni, the personal servant of Dunas Alloco, the ambassador from one of the southern districts. Ambassador Alloco was recently welcomed with great hospitality by the governor, but disappeared after the first attempt on Governor Ibara's life. It is believed he is being held by the government.”

“The fool!” breathed the ambassador.

“What do you mean?” asked Ogden.

“He wouldn't listen! I told him to stay clear of the governor. He said he only wanted to talk to him. Now he's been arrested. But when they talk to him, he will know I had nothing to do with it.”

“He won’t be saying anything,” came Perfecta’s voice as she passed through the wall.

So that’s where the door is, thought Ogden.

“Why?” asked Ambassador Alloco. “What has happened?”

“Perfecta!” called McDrew. The two of them embraced, rubbing noses. He smiled and hung on.

Perfecta turned to the ambassador. “He was killed in the attempt, Ambassador. You are lucky. He can’t implicate you.”

“I resent any implication,” he said, spreading his hands. “My hands are clean!” He folded his arms again and demanded, “Release me at once. I have diplomatic immunity.”

“Something no doubt introduced by the invaders,” she said. “You are free to go. We have all the information we want.”

McDrew pulled out a flat oblong crystalline pebble from his inside vest pocket. “It’s all recorded in here,” he said, giving it to Perfecta.

The ambassador stopped short of the door and asked, “A brainwave detector?”

“A brainwave recorder,” Perfecta said.

The ambassador fumed and stamped out.

“How’s Ogden?” asked Perfecta.

McDrew giggled. “A little worn out,” he said.

“So what’s happening?” asked Odgen, scratching his head.

McDrew answered, “Did I make a good Hamlet? You have studied the ancient plays?”

“Yes, I know what you mean,” Ogden said, yawning. “You did very well, all that

mumbling to yourself.” He turned to Perfecta. “I couldn’t sleep all night because of all that mumbling and pacing. Both of them.”

“Well,” Perfecta said. “We have a nice room for you. I’m sorry we used you like that. You made the perfect catalyst.”

“Well,” Ogden responded. “I am rather enjoying being in the middle of all this. You let me know if I can help out in any other way. As long as I get a little nap now and then.”

“Come this way,” Perfecta said, walking through the wall that opened like a rectangular iris.

Chapter Six

Ibuta was a city of sticks. Building homes in the open or making them by killing the homes of the Soul, that is, cutting trees into thin sticks and nailing them onto frames was never heard of ... had never been heard of, until the invaders came.

A lot of things changed. Homes, water and Fish were always within the embrace of the Great Mother Goddess Ice. It was she that fed, clothed and protected them. Now, homes were in the open, not in the caves. Water was in the open like a level plane that gave no support except for the water bugs that had appeared.

The idea of support changed. It was no longer the ground. The invaders could support themselves on the waters by means of boats. They could support themselves in the

air by means of machines that buzzed around like giant insects, the kind that buzzed around the surface of the newly made lakes. It changed their faith. The Great Mother gave way to a new technology, a new philosophy. They saw the ground they walked upon cease to be sturdy. The doubt was that it could be a trick of technology.

Then came the idea of working for a living. People had to prove themselves worthy to live. In order to get food and shelter, men had to have a job provided by the invaders. It was not free anymore. But they were free to accumulate items imported by the invaders and sold in their stores. They were free to drink anything or eat anything they wanted and were free to express their emotions in public. There were no limitations except to please the boss on the job and to leave the neighbor alone. Again, they were free to cut down the trees or take what food they could find in the forests or take anything from the Soul of Ice. It was a new kind of freedom.

Freedom had to be protected now. Before, freedom was a way of life. Everything was free and people served their neighbor in gratitude. Now they had to protect their job and their property or they were liable to lose them.

If someone proved to be better at your job than you were, you were out on your heels looking for work. Sometimes you would be demoted as someone took your place.

There were laws to protect their new freedom. They had to live within their own dwelling. They couldn't live with someone else unless they were their own immediate family. They couldn't do someone else's job or help someone. They had to do their own work. They couldn't go to the store anymore and pick up what they needed or wanted. If they did that, they would find themselves on the street or locked in the stockade.

Someone had to protect these laws, and that is what the invaders did. They had sol-

diers and policemen. Hugh Roughsheock was one of these policemen. He came from New Germany, one of the Albright colonies. His associates called him Sheock. He was of moderate height, blond hair cut immediately below his earlobes, large broad nose, full lips. His eyes were gray, blank and matched his armor, exhibiting no intelligence. People didn't know if he was mean or dumb until he moved. Then the fear of being in the presence of a wild animal prevailed.

He was without emotion and quick to act, to see any motion, and to see anything out of place. On his world with its vast plains, those eyes could see an antelope at 20 to 30 kilometers away. In the mountains of Ice he felt hemmed in and became depressed. If he tried to relax, his heart would race, so he always volunteered for extra duty. He only showed his emotions within his house of sticks where he tried to drown them with alcohol.

Most of the houses were two stories, covered stairs on the outside, two rooms wide having a steep sloping roof. Basements had to be cut from the icy quartz rock which would be shipped out for electronics. It was especially pure, but with only a small amount of impurities with the correct distribution to be used in chips. Most of the stoves in the homes were made of the heating stones aided by electronics. Heat was also naturally provided from the bedrock of basements.

Sheock inherited a maid, Thmala, from the previous owner, so he didn't lack for home cooked meals and fresh clean laundry. She often wondered why he preferred off-world electronics instead of the more advanced technology found on Ice. It was so natural and supplied by the Great Mother. She joked about a television that sat outside the wall and laughed every time she saw it. But of course, the higher technology of Ice required

cave dwellings, so Thmala dug herself a dwelling in the basement. Unknown to the stick dwellers (as she called them) who lived upstairs, many maids and servants did the same thing.

Each basement was connected to other basements, making a network of underground dwellings throughout Ibuta. Thmala's dwelling was connected to the basement to the north and the basement in the back of the house to the east.

Stick dwellings were made for most of the workers imported into Ibuta by the invaders. The government did not know that most of them lived in their basements, sleeping and eating down there in the womb of the Great Mother. They had communications and transportation of a higher and natural quality provided by the planet which was quite alive from their point of view.

They worked for the invaders and were accumulating a lot of material wealth from their stores, were being corrupted by their alcohol and the new morality (or lack of it), but they, for the most part slept and moved underground. The government had a suspicion about this movement. They knew that people kept disappearing and appearing again. They knew of the portals, but were unable to find the locking or unlocking of these doors. When they tried, they received very strong doses of radiation.

Thmala, a short and stocky fish woman, kept everyone happy with her jovial Soul. Sheock's irritability, depression and love affair with the bottle became a challenge to her. No matter how she tried to tease or joke, he looked at her with blank eyes as if he were blind. It would make her very uneasy. But in some ways, she enjoyed his feral nature.

Sheock walked the streets among the stick houses. He loved the smell of newness the resin put into the air. There was no paint on the houses. They didn't need any. The

resin preserved the wood in its natural state. Most of the yards were covered with pebbles and sands of differing colors, containing large boulders or rocks that looked like islands in the oceans that didn't exist on Ice, like the old Japanese gardens he had read about. As he walked, he often meditated on the culture of sea life here when there were no observable oceans on the planet. In the gardens there were mosses or moss-like plants with leaves no larger than two centimeters flowing out of holes in the rocks or hanging from large arching rocks. There were no trees except around the equator. There were some in pots in and around headquarters buildings, but they looked completely out of place. Many were not healthy.

Sidewalks were also new to the natives, as new as the stick houses. Everything was in the open. Their emotions and morals reflected this openness as a culture shock. There was constant fighting in the streets, and sex orgies in the back rooms. Sheock had to continually break up fights or arrest people for brutally robbing others of their property. Since he had come to Ice, murder had been introduced. People copied what they saw. Because of martial law, the invaders killed the fish people and the fish people killed each other. It was that universal psychology in which the kid kicks the younger sibling and the younger sibling kicks the dog. They, not having any dogs, kicked each other.

On his patrols, Sheock would have his roommates, Shyum and Twit, with him. They dealt with gangs of robbers who roamed the streets. These mobs would rob the stores and banks as well as anyone who happened to be on the sidewalks in front of them. It was war every day. Only one Sheock and his buddies were overwhelmed and had to be rescued by the storm troopers who had come to put down the rebellion. They also roamed the streets, but there were certain sections of town they were not allowed by the fish peo-

ple to go to. Every one in those sections would take anything they could pick up, mostly rocks, and throw at the storm troopers. The government found that the mobs would allow policemen in small numbers into those areas. So it was a compromise. The main reason being that the storm troopers could be completely immobilized by the shrill yell of the Fish. It would make the soldier's ears bleed. Sheock would keep wax in his ears at all times because of this. Maybe that helped to give the illusion of him being a wild animal. He didn't react because he couldn't hear.

* * *

Sheock came in late one night and Thmala had a nice fish dinner fixed for him waiting hot on the table.

“Where the other two?” asked Thmala.

“They went down to the station,” he replied, peeling off his armor and throwing it into a corner.

He approached the table, but Thmala insisted that he wash first. He made a detour to the bathroom and took a quick shower. He came out with nothing but a towel around him. Thmala had his clothes in hand and helped dress him. She was used to this from past masters. Then she allowed him to approach the table.

“How do you ever know when I will be home, you rascal!” he said as he sat down.
“I love it!”

“You had a good day today,” she commented, standing slightly to his right as servants were accustomed to do.

“Fighting makes me hungry, Thelma,” he said.

“It’s Thmala!” she said indignantly.

“Okay, Thmala,” he said, and then repeated, “Thmala” meditatively. “I like Thelma better.” He piled the food onto his plate.

“You not thankful for your food?” she asked like a mother training her child.

Sheock bowed his head, said, “Thank you,” and began gorging himself, fish in both hands.” He followed that by guzzling down some beer from his large glass stein he had found at one of the Company stores.

“You lay off that booze tonight, okay?” she asked as politely as she could.

He looked at her with that blank expression that sent chills down her back.

“I ain’t no afraid of you, mister smarty pants,” she said with her hands on her hips.

He continued eating and drinking. She changed the subject. “Where are the boys?” she asked.

“I told you they are down at the station,” he said a little annoyed.

“Why you not with them?”

“Didn’t want to go,” he replied, not looking at her, but taking another guzzle of beer.

“Why not?” she replied. “Safety in numbers, you know.”

“Don’t bother me,” he said, starting to get upset.

“Why you so unhappy?” she asked sincerely.

“None of your business,” he said, getting up, taking the jug of beer with him. “Do the dishes or something.”

“I know a man who can make you happy. You too old. Too much fighting. He can

make you happy,” Thmala said matter-of-factly.

Being a policeman, always aware of drug problems and drug peddling and wanting to enforce the law, his ears pricked up like a dog turning to its master’s whistle. Sitting on the sofa in the living room, he said, “Tell me about this man. Does he sell you drugs?”

“No drugs, master. Him alright. You see him. He make you happy,” she said, seeming very concerned with his welfare.

“Who is he? Where do I meet him?” he said, not knowing why. Maybe it was the mysterious air about Thmala and how she knew all about him and his whereabouts, how she always had dinner waiting for him and the guys no matter when they came in. She was psychic. That intrigued him.

“You come to Thmala’s bedroom in the basement. I show you him.” She walked towards the stairwell.

“Oh, I get it,” he said laughing. “It’s the old ‘you need a girl’ routine.”

“Don’t make fun of Thmala. I a decent girl. You come and see.” And she turned into the stairwell and went downstairs.

Sheock followed her. He felt like a little kid again, with all the tender feelings he thought he had successfully hidden. Maybe that’s why he drank himself to sleep every night. He did have tender feelings. When he reached the basement, he saw Thmala vanish into the wall.

“Thelma? I mean Thmala!” he called.

Her hand appeared through the wall, and she motioned to him with her index finger to follow her. He looked around. He could see the door to her bedroom which was separated by a wooden wall from the rest of the basement. *I should have known*, he thought.

These Fish are tricky. He passed through the wall timidly to the real bedroom. He could have kicked himself for not believing all the reports that these people were a cave dwelling people. It was hard for him to believe their culture to be so different.

“Now you know,” Thmala said curtly.

Sheock looked at the crystalline furniture and bed covered with fiberglass webbing.

“You come this way,” she said, waving her hand over the empty wall on the other side.

A white light appeared, defining a doorway. It was a portal, one of the advances of the people of Ice that the Company had not yet duplicated fully. She went through it, and Sheock followed, feeling some sort of boyish thrill.

Sheock found himself in an underground cavern with someone speaking to a crowd of both Fish and whites. There were a lot of mixes, people who had caught “the disease” and become Fish. Sheock had thought they were all locked up in the compound.

He turned to Thmala and asked, “Who is this guy?”

“He is Smag, the Prophet. Everyone comes to listen to him,” she said with a thrill in her voice, clasping her hands together across her heart.

Sheock thought, *so here he is.* The Company has been looking for this guy. I could arrest him, but for the people. He thought he would wait there for a time then find a way to grab him. He thought about a scripture he had read when he was young. It was something about arresting some big guy for treason.

Knowing who the guy was now, he listened to him to judge him, to try to catch something he could use for the prosecutor. He could pretend to be interested, keep coming to these meetings and set a trap for this guy.

A month went by. Sheock went to each meeting twice a week. Then there was a day in which Sheock came home walking on air. He went upstairs in slow motion where his friends Shyum and Twit were waiting for him.

“Where’ve you been!” cried Twit. “You know you’re in trouble with the capain!”

“Huh?” Sheock said as he lay on his bed, crossed his legs and propping his head up with his crossed arms.

“You on drugs again?” squealed Twit. “Boy, the captain is mad!”

“No,” Sheock said staring at the ceiling.

“Look at him,” Shyum said. “He’s in love.”

The two of them laughed.

“Who you in love with, Sheock?” asked Twit, laughing, sitting on the edge of his bed. “Thmala? She’s the one you came in with.”

“No. I’ve found the truth,” he said dreamily.

Twit laughed again. He didn’t hear right and teased Sheock for being in love with a Fish named Tooth.

Sheock ignored them until they calmed down and finally went to bed and shut the light out.

Sometime in the night Sheock undressed and went to bed. When he got up in the morning, he was still walking on air. His companions found it useless to get him to go to work. They called him in sick. When they came home they found him sitting cross-legged, meditating.

After the third day of this, Shyum came to him and told him that they couldn’t keep covering for him.

“Look Sheock,” he said. “We’ve been friends for a long time here. What’s going on? You’d better straighten up. Friendship has its limits in this business. You’re already in trouble with the boss. The captain had to report you. You can’t drop out like this. You’re cuttin’ yourself off from the spoon that feeds you, you know. You’ll wind up in the compound. I’m warning you for your own good.”

“You want to leave, leave,” is all that Shyum could get out of him.

“Okay. Okay!” was Shyum’s last words. He and Twit were moved out the next day.

“That’s good your friends are gone,” Thmala said after the two left. “They were a bad influence on you.”

“There will be other friends, Thmala. I know that.”

* * *

Sheock advertized for another roommate. He didn’t care who, and when a Fish showed up, he asked nothing, only introduced himself and told the boy where he could lay his gear. His name was Plap.

He sent in his resignation, and when asked if he wanted to be included the next ship home, he declined. He was told that he couldn’t stay on Magrab unless he had a job. He was also told that no jobs of any consequence would be open to him. He said he would work as a laborer. All the off-worlders hated anyone who stayed on this barren planet, and when Sheock accepted work below his class, he was hated by those who hired him. He chose to work in the jungles cutting down trees, but after a month they found that he used to be a policeman and was promoted to, or badgered into being, a guard. Sometimes people won't let things be. His buddies from his previous job showed up and

persuaded his boss. He was only allowed to go home every couple of weeks to look after his affairs. Once a month he would go to one of the underground meetings of the prophet Smag. It kept him enthralled and on his toes. But after a year, he was led to another job, that of guard at one of the compounds where the mixes were kept.

There were a finite amount of mixes now. The number of off-worlders who were getting the disease topped off at about 10,000 and was now diminishing with fewer and fewer off-worlders getting it. A serum had been found that fought against the harsh radiation that was coming from the sun. Scientists discovered that it was only a preservative and not a restorative. None of the mixes could get rid of their scales. So the compound became a place of separation and containment and not a hospital as it was built for.

Sheock roamed the perimeter of the compound at night and slept during the day. He allowed Thmala to persuade him to sleep in the basement. She told him he would be safer and more comfortable and would sleep better than in a room in which the sun would be peeping through. Her rationale was that he would be cradled by the Great Mother. He did find that he slept better. He had stopped drinking due to the meditation and was getting a some good sleep, but he found a profound sleep in the basement that he had never experienced upstairs. He only needed four hours. The rest of the time he meditated and studied.

All of this new experience opened Sheock's eyes to something he had been ignoring. The people in the compound were not the freaks he had first supposed. He saw them now as people. He saw the truth that Smag had been talking about. He also faced that there was a big injustice they suffered that was gnawing at his guts. He had to do something about it. He could no longer ignore it, and he failed in getting any sympathy from

the Company. They were out for money only, and they had put the mixes in the compound simply because they didn't know what else to do with them. Why they couldn't go free was beyond Sheock. The Company said it was trying to care for them.

Sheock made his decision while in meditation one afternoon before work. How to do it would be difficult. He couldn't take on the other guards. There were too many of them, and besides, they were his friends and buddies. He could sneak one or two of the mixes out each night, but that would take all year and would eventually arouse too much suspicion. No, it had to be all of them at once. They would have to fight their way out. Or, maybe, he could dig a tunnel or send a portal in to them.

Every night it was hard to hear these mixes plead with him with arms stretched out through the wire fence. He didn't understand. He was the only one they pleaded with. How did they know what his feelings were or what he was thinking? He would not come to work one night soon, and he'd go to the armory, load up one of the trucks with guns and ammo and drive it over to the compound, burst in through the fence, arm everyone and let them break themselves out. No, there had to be a better way. He would consult Thmala. She seemed to be wiser than she let on.

"You want to bust everybody out?" she asked with her hands on her hips when he told her. "This is a one man job? You better think again!"

"My friends aren't of the same opinion. They call them freaks or gooks or mixes. They make fun of them. I can't rely on my friends."

"Then are they your friends? I think not. You better think again. You got friends, but you never invite them. Look at Plap. You took him in, but you never talk to him. He your friend. Talk to him," she said with an pretended pompousness.

“I don’t know him,” he said.

“He know you. You like him. You go talk. He up there right now.”

Sheock took her advice and went upstairs to the landing where Plap was sitting on a couch reading one of Sheock’s books, which surprised him. He had never really paid attention to the guy. He didn’t know he could read German. He didn’t consider Fish as educated, even though their technology was way far in advance of his own civilization.

“What ya doing, Plap?” he spoke up trying to sound nice as he strolled towards the couch. He sat against the wall in his lounge chair opposite the couch, not that he didn’t want to be near him, but he wanted to see him better.

Thmala had followed Sheock and sat down beside him.

“I’m reading one of your books,” he said, putting it on the coffee table in front of him. “It’s a good treatise on Einstein verses Smalec.”

“Yes, I thought it interesting,” Sheock said, trying to get the conversation going. He paused and then said, with a worried expression on his face, “ I was wondering...” and then he hesitated.

“Yes,” Plap said emphatically.

“Yes, what?” Sheock asked surprised.

“Help you release the mixes,” Plap said.

“What! How did you know!” Sheock said exasperated, surprised and confused as he half raised himself off the couch.

Thmala took him gently by the arm and pulled him back down. And she said as gently, “Listen to him, please.” He looked at Thmala and then back at Plap.

“That’s why we came here. To help you rescue the mixes,” Plap replied.

Sheock's forehead felt a pressure which reminded him that he was getting emotional and that he needed to be more objective. He calmed down and started to laugh a little bit. "You'll have to forgive me, but you are doing something way out of my experience," he said. "How did you know months ahead of time that I was going to try to free the mixes when I myself didn't know it?"

"We know. It is the Mother. We also know that you are one of us now," Plap said. "When you first came to our meetings, I knew you were the one. Thmala knew it before I did, but I didn't believe until I saw you. Then I knew. We are both here to help you, you see. We are your new friends. Didn't Smag say you would get new friends?"

Sheock felt light headed and laughed in embarrassment. Then he apologized. "I'm sorry, but we Earthlings are more subtle when it comes to making friends."

"I have been waiting a long time for you to speak to me," Plap said. "Is not that subtle enough?"

Sheock laughed again. "I guess so." He sighed and paused. Then he took both their hands, one in each of his and said, "Thank you both. I see the Soul in this matter. I feel I have found both home and friends."

* * *

Plap contacted workers in the armory while Thmala researched how to create an opening into the compound by way of a portal. It would be difficult because there were no basements. Everything was built above ground. All the bunkhouses were built on stilts. The Company people were smart. They knew that only people who had access to an underground passage could disappear. No one in the compound had ever escaped. They didn't know portal technology, and when explained to them it seemed like magic incantations, and so they attributed it to magic and not science. But they did find how to prevent portals from appearing. This was a challenge to Thmala, and she was quite willing to meditate on it for a long time to get the answer. Then it came to her. Burrow. Burrow from outside the compound. Horizontal portals were unknown. She would have to think outside the lines. It would have to be a horizontal portal underneath one of the bunk houses. They could drop in.

Sheock spent his time trying to get to know some of the mixes at night on his strolls around the compound. He would talk to them as he walked, he on the outside, and they on the inside of the fence. One of them he got to know pretty well. Her name was Tammy Albrecht. She had been a secretary in the main office and had worked closely with Norton in organizing the new regime, all the people that had replaced the mixes, and that had included herself. Then there were Jerry Spankerhoft and Gomez who had been mercenaries but had been replaced by the reinforcements from New Germany. From them he found out that most of the mixes were old mercenaries, some of the first to have landed on Magrab. These three had become the spokesmen for all the other mixes.

Tammy told Sheock “ We thought this was going to be an emergency hospital for

the epidemic. It turned out to be nothing but a concentration camp for the undesirables.”

Gomez shook the fence, grabbing it like a crazed monkey and crying out in a hoarse voice, “I’ll kill the beast that put me in here! There was no medicine! There wasn’t any kind of treatment. They can’t kill us. They don’t know what to do with us. The Southern Council doesn’t want to have anything to do with us. We’re stuck if you can’t get us out.”

Jerry said, “We could make a break for it if you can get us some weapons.”

“I’ve got some people working on that,” Sheock said. “There is a faction among the Fish that wants to help you guys. We may not be able to arm everyone, but enough to take out the guards. Not me of course,” and they laughed a little.

Gomez held onto the fence as they walked along, grabbing hand over hand, shaking it a little as they went along. “When is it going to be?” he asked.

“It may take another week,” Sheock said. “We were going to get a truck and bust down the gate or ram the fence, but decided that would be too risky. We’re going to dig a tunnel into the compound. The opening will be under one of the bunk houses.”

“That will take some big equipment,” Jerry said, rubbing his hair which had been cut quite close. He liked to feel the stubble. It helped to comfort him.

“The Fish have a different way,” Sheock said as he turned the corner. “My maid can get a melter from the underground. It will take about a week and we can get everyone out of here.”

Every day that went by was painful to those who knew they were to be released. Larger and larger groups of the mixes would follow Sheock around the fence as he took his nightly strolls. Paying off the other guards didn’t work after the third day of tunneling.

They became very agitated. One of the guards named Cruseom came up to Sheock around midnight.

“The others are getting jittery, Sheock,” he said, “and the boss is starting to ask questions. You know we can’t back you up under any investigation. What’s going to happen Sheock? All these mixes following you around like this?”

“You know what’s going to happen, Cruesom. Why do you think you're getting paid to keep quiet? These guys are going to disappear,” Sheock said as a matter of fact.

“You can’t do that, Sheock,” he said. “You can get fired!”

“I quit!” Sheock snarled, shoving his gun into Cruesom’s chest. Cruesom grabbed it. Sheock let go of it and walked away.

“You can get arrested!”

“I got friends!” Sheock snarled again.

“You can get us arrested!”

“Who cares?” Sheock yelled back.

Sheock walked off the job. A report was made and investigators were at his house the next day. They both wore battle fatigues. Each had a gun strapped to their backs.

“Hugh Roughsheock?” one of them asked as Sheock answered the door. Thmala had run down to the basement to be on the other side of the portal to shut it off.

“Yes,” he said unemotionally, staring at them with his steel blue eyes. “Come in.”

They stood there. The other one said, “We have reports from the guards at the compound where you work that you left the job last night.”

“Yes,” he said calmly. The two investigators tried not to show emotion, but inside, they flinched, and Sheock noticed.

“Why did you leave?” the first one asked.

“I didn’t like the Company,” he answered.

“You’ll have to come downtown,” the second one said.

“Just a minute,” he said, backing up, “I’ll get my coat.”

“Freeze!” They both cried out, drawing their guns.

Two gun blasts fired through the doorway. Sheock simply wasn’t there. He moved so fast, the gunfire was too late.

The two investigators ran into the house blasting their way through, not waiting to see who was there. Sheock had jumped down the laundry chute. He was already down into the basement. He went through the portal, and Thmala closed it leaving the investigators blasting their way through the house and finding it empty.

Fearing a breakout, the compound was surrounded by a whole squad of mercenaries. With their fire power it might as well have been a battalion.

It was that night that the tunnel was finished. Thmala created a portal or, according to her, found a portal. She opened it under one of the center bunk houses on the east side. Those in the bunk dropped through, and then, one by one, each of the prisoners went to that bunk to drop down into the hole they had ripped open earlier in the floor.

Gomez knew that the guards would get suspicious, so he wanted to give them what they had been looking for, a diversion, so that stragglers could make it through. Gomez left the tunnel and adjoining cavern where the meetings had been taking place underneath Ibuta. With the help of Plap he went to the armory with a few other mercenary mixes and acquired a truck and some guns that had been waiting for them.

Gomez, Jerry and Plap got in the front of the truck. Each had a heavy gun in their

laps. There were 10 other mercenaries in the back, each one with two guns each. When they plowed through the main gate, they scrambled from the truck and deployed themselves under gun fire. Only two of them were hit, but not mortally. They took out twenty guards as they moved towards the bunk house. The last of the prisoners scrambled to that location under light gunfire, most of the fire being concentrated on the diversion. Even though some were hit, not a Soul was lost. Thmala sealed up the portal and everyone was taken to the main room under Ibuta where the wounded received attention.

Several of the mixes started asking Sheock, “What are we to do now? Where are we going to get out of harm’s way?”

Gomez answered. “I know the way,” he said, so all the mixes started following him. Gomez led his group to a school house. He showed them the tunnel in the basement. He had marked the tunnel so he could find his way back from the North when he had gone with the refugees. The tunnel led to the lake where the refugees had taken refreshment. When they got there, they relaxed a while and ate their fill of the tubers and other plants that grew along the lake. That’s when the fly boys showed up. The mixes scrambled under heavy fire from the sky. The Company had found them.

There was no cover. They could only run for the mountain on the other side of the valley while the two aircraft turned for another strafe. Most of the mixes made it in. It took three strafes for them to reach the opening of the cave. There were casualties, but they were left behind until the men with the guns gathered at the mouth of the cave and took out the aircraft. Then the bodies and the wounded were gathered in.

Gomez let Thmala and Plap take over the leadership. Only they knew how to work the portal. Those that didn’t make it were sealed up in one of the many rooms in the

mountain, the original Ibuta.

As they gathered at the portal, Thmala said to them, “You will have to leave your weapons here. No weapons are allowed in the Northern provinces.”

“What if the Company follows us there? We need to protect ourselves,” Gomez retorted.

“We have a weapon,” Thmala answered.

“One weapon?” Jerry asked.

“We don’t need any other,” Plap said. “So they tell us.”

“What?” asked Sheock who wondered why Plap and Thmala were saying “We.”
“Some super bomb? That would be unwise unless all the troops somehow were in the same place.”

“That won’t matter, Gomez,” Plap said. “It will work.”

“You should know, Gomez,” Thmala said, “with our technology. Behold the door.”

And with the sweep of her hand, the portal opened and the mixes dropped their weapons and started moving through the sheet of light. On the other side, they found themselves in a city in front of a great palace carved out of a mountainous cliff.

Chapter Seven

Ogden was looking down on the streets from a balcony five stories up when he saw the white light spread over the side of the opposite cliff that announced a portal was opening up. He saw a multitude of McDrews coming through. They were once white men who had developed scales like the Fish. To his mind, they were only more McDrews. All of them congregated at the steps of the Governor's Mansion. Ogden turned in and went down the wide spiral staircase to see what was happening. *They finally escaped*, he thought. He had heard of the compound and what it meant. *I want to see the person who pulled this off*. He had noticed one white man amongst them. *That must be him*, he thought.

By the time Ogden reached the bottom of the stairs he saw Perfecta and McDrew stroll through the front doors as though they were expecting the new arrivals. Thmala had contacted Perfecta through the underground communication links and told her who was coming. Perfecta said they would be welcome.

Ogden went to the door and followed them and went over to one of the bunched columns near the side of the doorway. He had his recorder with him at all times in his shirt pocket. Turning it on, he stared at the white man in armor among the mixes.

Thmala ascended the stairs alone and embraced Perfecta announcing, "Sister! I'm glad to see you again. So happy am I returning home."

"Precious Thmala!" proclaimed Perfecta. "How good it is to see my sister again." Tears ran down her cheeks.

McDrew's face showed surprise. He had never known Perfecta to have a sister.

Finally, Perfecta introduced McDrew.

“You’re one of them,” Thmala said, reaching up and touching McDrew’s hair and ruffling it.

“Yes,” he said, I’m afraid I am.”

“Now isn’t that a shame,” Thmala said. “You shouldn’t be afraid of who you are. No matter. You’re one of us now.” With that, she reached her arms up and grabbed his neck and gave him a great big kiss. Perfecta laughed with glee and turned to the outcasts.

Perfecta saw many that were wounded. She called to them and invited them in. Chani had come to see the spectacle as did many of the other servants and people on the streets. They went among the crowd and helped carry the wounded into the grand hall. It was the only hospital in town. There were not many doctors because disease was rare and Fish healed quickly. These mixes didn’t. And they hadn’t had war in a thousand years, so there were few hospitals. People grew many medicinal herbs on their own rooftops, that is, on the tops of the mountains, and so, they had plenty in store, especially in the grand hall, now that refugees were a common sight.

Ogden was afraid to approach Sheock, so he only watched him from the sidelines. When Sheock saw another white man among all these Fish, he got curious and went over to him. Ogden suddenly had to take a deep breath and felt, looking at Sheock face to face, that he was standing on a great precipice looking down. Perhaps this man was a holy man, converted to the ways of the Fish.

“Do you take the serum?” Sheock asked Ogden.

“No, no” he stuttered. “No, I don’t take the serum. Do you?” he asked, not knowing what the serum was.

Sheock looked at him for a couple of seconds and then understood. “The serum protects us from getting fish scales,” he said. “You must be immune.” He looked around at all the mixes and the Fish and then back to Ogden.

“Left it all behind,” Sheock said, referring to his life with the company. “In a couple of years, I will look like them. The Company would sure like to get hold of your blood.”

“I’m sure they would,” Ogden replied.

“Of course, any one who leaves the Company is an enemy of the Company. They don’t like quitters.” He went back to where his friend Jerry was being tended to.

There was another mix there with Sheock and his friend. Sheock pointed to Ogden and Gomez turned around. Ogden almost fainted.

“Ogden!” Gomez cried as he ran over to him. “You still here?”

“Gomez!” Ogden cried, nonplussed.

They hugged each other, and Ogden commented, as Gomez pounded on his back, “It got you too.”

“Yeah,” he said, with not much disappointment, “I’m afraid it did, but no matter. There are a lot worse things. I could have been shot up like my friend Jerry over there.”

Gomez looked back at Jerry and looked at Ogden. “Sheock said you were someone special. You on the gov payroll or something? You have a supply of the serum? He said you were immune. You never picked up the scales.”

“I’m no one special. Gomez,” Ogden said with a shrug of his shoulders. “You saw me come here with the refugees. I guess I have no desire to go anywhere else. I’ve been recording all the things going on here at the palace. I guess I’ll write about it. I roam the

palace looking at things that happen, making notes. They take care of me here.”

“Roving reporter type of guy?” asked Gomez.

“Yes, I guess so.”

“You recording our conversation?” asked Gomez.

“Yes,” Ogden said, wondering what it was like having all those scales.

“Well, see ya chum. I got to go see about my friends.” Gomez started walking away, and turned, walking backwards and said, “Hey. You wanna job, come see me. We’re organized. We may need you.”

“Okay. I’ll be here. Not going anywhere.”

Gomez turned around and started bandaging some of his guys.

Dunnas Alloco was in Chani’s office complaining about the new refugees. They were mixes. It was an embarrassment to the planet, he said. What he meant was that it was an embarrassment to the southern provinces.

“These creatures are an abomination!” Dunnas Alloco exclaimed. “They shouldn’t be allowed!”

“But they have been allowed,” commented Chani.

“They are an abomination, I tell you, and keeping them here in this palace makes relations with the southern provinces next to impossible. You can’t hold an abomination and expect to be accepted by anyone!” Dunnas Alloco cried, as he bent over Chani’s desk. He then got up and started pacing back and forth between the desk and opposite wall.

Chani rose and said, “Illustrious Minister, where do you think we can put these ... these abominations, as you put them?”

“Not here!” he exclaimed with the wave of his hand.

“Why not in the desert?” Chani suggested.

“Yes, yes, that would be perfect. They should be banished. Not allowed to mingle with the rest of us with pure blood.”

“Pure blood?” asked Chani.

“Yes! Pure Blood!” Dunnas Alloco stamped his foot and folded his arms.

“Come over here,” Chani motioned to a table where there were micro viewers. “I have some blood samples. I would like you to look and see what pure blood looks like.”

“What do you think I am? An imbecile? I have studied. I have several degrees. I know what pure blood looks like!”

Dunnas Alloco acted indignant, but Chani finally persuaded him to look into the viewers.

“In this viewer you will see the pure blood of the people of this planet, the original inhabitants.”

Dunnas Alloco looked into the viewer that projected out from the wall. He turned to Chani.

“Yes, yess. What is your point?” he said.

“Now look into the second one,” Chani asked.

He looked.

“It is the blood of the Soul of this planet,” Chani said.

“Sacrilege!” boasted Dunnas Alloco. “Yet, to be expected. They are the same.”

“Now,” persuaded Chani, “look into the third one. It is the blood of an Earthling. Ogden’s, in fact.”

He looked, but saw no change.

“What do you mean?” Dunnas Alloco complained. “This is of the pure blood. You make a joke! Ha? You make a joke!”

“Now look into the fourth one. It is one of the mixes. McDrew’s blood.”

“It is the same. You make a joke. What do you think I am?” Dunnas Alloco put his hands on his hips and stuck out his long tongue to cover his chin.

“It is true,” Chani said with a wave of his hand. “They are all the same.” Chani paused. “Do you think that our science and technology, which is given to us by the Great Mother lies?”

“It is not the Great Mother that lies,” Dunnas Alloco laughed. “It is you, Chani. You are the liar. Do you think you can take your own blood, show it to me four times and think to blind me with your wit? Come, come, now. What do you think to gain by all this game playing?”

“An unbeliever never believes,” Chani said. “Make your own collection of blood. You will see no difference.”

“Still,” Dunnas Alloco said, gently turning towards the door. “You will have a war at your hand if you do not get rid of those mixes.”

Chani growled. *War on your hands*, he thought. *You try to copy the Earthlings.*

Dunnas Alloco left Chani alone with his specimens. He knew the man to be honest and no fool. He would report back to Ibuta about the mixes. They would be missed and the Company would want to know where they showed up. He would not report about the blood samples. That would be a threat to trade. And if there was a war, he was in a position to profit. For the Company to find out what he had discovered would prevent that.

This information shouldn't leave Chani's office. He knew someone who could take care of Chani.

* * *

Smag sat on his stalagmite chair and meditated. He had seen the ways of the Soul. It was in him and he could see into the future of this planet and its demise, but a few would be left. They would live as kings and queens off the fat of the land as the forest grew and encompassed the whole planet. It would be the culmination of several more Swarms, but a core people must be brought into the forest, people who would protect the forest from the invaders. A war must be fought, an exchange take place.

Though his circle grew and expanded to fill the whole world, he was preaching to the wrong people. The Soul wanted people from the Northern provinces. There he wouldn't be an evangelist, but would chose one out of a family and two out of a household. He would appear to them individually and lead them to the forest.

There had to be a sacrifice. One person would have to spill his blood on the altar for all mankind. It was in the books. It was in the Soul. He had known it from the beginning. The books told that even though many should shed blood, only one would shed his blood for the whole.

Cormeg came to him. "You need anything, Brother?" he asked.

"More of the juice the Soul left for me," Smag answered meditatively, not looking at his brother. Instead, he peered at his reflection in the pool at his feet.

"That stuff has changed you, you know," Cormeg said.

“It is enough that it shows me the future and nourishes me,” he answered.

Cormeg went into the next room and came back with a cup full of the liquid of the Soul.

“You might as well take your clothes off. You look enough like one of them,” Cormeg said despondently.

“Yes,” he said, taking the juice. He poured it down his throat, gave the cup back to Cormeg and stood. “It is cold down here, yet I must divest myself of all worldly things. It is time to go abroad. My work now lies elsewhere.”

Smag took off his cloak and gown and gave them to his brother.

“I will go with you,” Cormeg said. “You will need a servant there, too.”

Smag was walking away, but he turned to his brother and said, “You will go back home to your family and provide for them. What I do now, I must do alone.”

“Though you look like one of the Soul, you are still my brother.”

“When you arrive home, if anyone asks for Smag, tell them he is dead. Smag is no more.” With that, he passed into the wall of the cave and was seen no more.

“But...” Cormeg said. He dropped the things onto the floor and jumped to the wall of the cave, but was unable to follow. The wall was solid.

* * *

Ogden sat in his study, poring over the history books. Chani had shown him how to use the books. As he pushed the buttons on the fish in the box, it was like watching a video without a screen, but more like being there in real life, experiencing the whole

thing. He saw thousands of years of war and turmoil where whole populations were shifted around the planet. After each period of war a millennium of peace and prosperity would follow.

Hair stood up on the back of Ogden's neck. He felt someone was watching him. He lost concentration and lost the picture. It was an eerie feeling. He looked around the study. The walls had protruding veins of minerals in the red rock as though he were inside a living creature. Multiple alcoves of books lined the walls. There was one dark hollow in front of him which was a place to sit. A stalagmite and stalactite had grown together between floor and ceiling and had been hollowed out. Something moved into that dark space in a flash. Ogden let out a little yelp.

“Who's there?” he demanded.

He got up and looked for something to defend himself with, but found only a metal jug of water on the table. Grabbing it by its narrow neck, he poured the water on the floor and held it over his head like a club. Something flickered. Moving around to the front of the desk, he peered into empty space. He gasped as he saw what he thought was a giant insect crawling along the wall. It was almost as huge as himself, though quite skinny. He backed up towards the door. It leaped on top of him. He cried out as it bit his neck. Then it stood before him.

Ogden swung wildly at the air but became unruffled by the calm inquisitive look of a gentle, skinny man that stood in front of him naked and innocent. He stopped, overcome with curiosity himself. Then he recognized the little man from the books. It was what the natives referred to as the Soul of the planet. They were never referred to as individuals. Always as a group. But here was one standing in front of him, licking its lips.

“You are the one,” it said.

Ogden clasped the side of his neck with his left hand and asked very angrily, “Why did you do that?”

“Blood sample,” it said. “You are the one.”

“I’m the one?” Ogden felt puzzled. “One what?”

“You are the one. You will save this people.” Smag turned and ran through the wall.

Ogden yelled into the intercom for an attendant. Someone came in and took him to the infirmary.

“It was this giant insect, Doc,” Ogden complained as the doctor looked at his neck.

“This is a man’s bite,” the doctor said. “Did you get in a fight with someone?”

He cleaned the wound and applied a salve and bandage.

“Do you guys have vampires around here?” Ogden asked. He couldn’t keep a serious thought in his head. “It was weird, man,” he said.

“It was a weird man?” asked the doctor.

“A skinny little naked man that came right through the walls,” he said.

The doctor drew back as if Ogden were poison. Ogden thought the doctor was a little frightened by the whole thing. He laughed at the doctor’s expression. His face was wrinkled.

“You’d better have something to calm your nerves,” the doctor said as he walked over and poured a red drink from a brass flask into a whisky glass.

He gave it to Ogden, and Ogden threw the liquid down his throat and coughed. He reeled back and said, “That was pretty strong.”

“I keep it for special occasions,” the doctor said. “You lie down here on this bed. You need to heal from this wound. It may be venomous.”

Ogden fell onto the bed in slow motion and in a moment was fast asleep.

The doctor located Chani on the intercom and went out. They met on the third mezzanine overlooking the Grand Hall filled with a menagerie of wounded and dying refugees.

“What’s the emergency?” asked Chani a little out of breath after having run down the hall.

“We have an unexpected ambassador,” the doctor said.

“Well, show him in by all means,” Chani said, smiling.

“That is difficult,” the doctor said. “He left as soon as he came.”

“Then he left a message? Who is he?”

“It is the Soul. And he didn’t visit me. He visited Ogden.”

They both rushed back to the infirmary.

“But we are the representatives,” Chani said. “Why would they visit Ogden?”

“They took a blood sample,” the doctor said, being in a hurry to nowhere.

Chani stopped. He understood. The doctor stopped and turned around to Chani.

“They know,” Chani said.

“Know what?” asked the doctor.

“Come with me,” Chani said, taking the doctor by the arm. “You won’t believe it unless you see it for yourself.”

Chani took the doctor to his office and showed him the blood samples. The doctor was stunned. He scratched his head, feeling the hair, what he considered the last vestiges

of his humanity, and then feeling the scales on his neck. He was a mix.

“Before I came here,” the doctor said, “I used to think I knew everything. Working in Ibuta at the clinic, I thought we were having an epidemic. I thought you people had somehow infected us with a virus. Then I found that it was the radiation from the two suns. I was too late for the serum we discovered. Then, being afraid of the Company, I mean, I found that we were all going to be corralled, so I came here to work. My house keeper, you see.”

“Yes,” Chani said. “Those house keepers. We sent out a lot of agents to get hired as house keepers, factory workers, etc.”

“I had suspected the infection changed the DNA somewhat, but Ogden.”

“Yes, our famous Ogden,” Chani said. “He never got the scales, and yet, his blood and DNA are the same as yours, and the same as mine, that is, the part showing we have common origins.”

“It was an Earth colony, then,” the doctor said.

“I’m afraid you have it backwards, Doctor,” Chani said. “Our civilization is thousands of years older than yours on Earth.”

“Oh, I see. Before the scales showed up,” the doctor said rubbing his chin.

“Perhaps,” Chani said.

* * *

Sykes hadn’t been able to hide the fact that he had the disease. Scales had formed over his whole body. It had been too late for the serum to take effect. He had tried wearing a scarf around his neck and a robe that covered his wrists and ankles, but that was a

flashing sign to the commander of the armed forces who was rounding up all the mixes. There had been no defender in the office when Commander Torge came and dragged him out. Everyone was glad to see him go. When asked his name in the compound, he gave Smith which sounded like Smythe, so everyone called him Smythe. He had told them he was a secretary in the main office and that he hated the boss Sykes. In the compound, no one was recognizable. No one could see beyond the scales of the next person, and Sykes quickly become anonymous.

Ambassador Alloco, looking over the balcony into the Grand Hall, spotted Sykes. He had many dealings with the old man in the past and recognized him immediately. Sykes had no friends and was always alone. Alloco knew he could turn the bitterness he observed into something useful. Sykes was in his territory, and now he could be the boss instead of that infamous invader. The tables had been turned. He needed a new right hand man. Maybe this was the one to fill the place of Thanho Anni.

Dunas Alloco sent his spies among the mixes quartered in the Grand Hall to win over Sykes' sympathies. They invited him into the ambassador's employ. He accepted. Getting him out of the Grand Hall without anyone noticing was a different thing. The ambassador had to pull some strings. There was a program to repopulate the mixes into society, but government red tape was making it a slow process, but Dunas Alloco got Sykes into a home quickly with his political pull. All he had to do was ask.

This rang an alarm bell with Chani. He had his spies also watching the ambassador's spies. He knew of Alloco's movements. He looked into this Smythe's background and found none. He got some DNA from Smythe and found that he was or had been Sykes. That alarm that he had felt became louder. An alliance between Alloco and Sykes

could be bad. An agent of Chani's reported that the ambassador wanted Sykes to replace his last assassin, but he was an office man and did not have the experience or the guts for it. Instead, he became a source of information, a thief, and a spy. Being a mix, he would have to wear a wig to go unnoticed. Chani also knew one thing about the humans, anyone of low character could be turned into an assassin.

Governor Ibara's personal guard became more alert. He was never left alone. Even Chani who worked better alone had to have a body guard. Each one of the Governor's children and their family members were carefully escorted everywhere they went. Dunas Alloco, watching this take place, decided he had to be more subtle to know when and where to strike. Meanwhile, he began replacing some of the smaller judges in other provinces and replacing them with his own.

Civil war taking place underground alarmed Chan. He had not dealt with this before on such a wide scale. Yet, he had his forces looking out constantly for Ambassador Alloco's men, and when they were found, they were killed, but Sykes always alluded them. He had become a master of trickery. Whenever they thought they had him, he would disappear as though he could walk through walls. Had he discovered the quickening way that was the secret of the Soul? Was there a dark side to the Soul? Chani wondered. There was one event that convinced him that indeed there was.

Chani had gone into his office and had dismissed his body guard to wait outside. He could think better alone and had a lot of paperwork to do. As he sat down at his desk, his scales bristled. His skin became warm. He sensed someone in the shadows of his room. He slowly rose from his chair, grabbing the knife he kept at his side. Chani approached the dark corner where the stranger lay concealed.

“Don’t make a sound,” the person spoke with a human accent. “If you do, we will not have this conversation.”

Chani sat down. “Who are you? How did you get here? I alone have the signature to get into this room.”

“You know very little, Chani,” the voice in the shadows said. “With all your learning and experience, you have not been converted.”

“Converted?” asked Chani, raising his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“I come as an emissary from the Soul.”

“Why come to me in the dark? Why come to me at all,” he asked very irritated at having to stare into a dark corner. He wondered how it appeared dark when it was always lighted.

“You are an important figure in the management of this planet. We are in Swarm. You are an irritant to the Soul. You need to know what you are supposed to be doing and not what you alone think is right. Yes, you are very smart and responsible and loyal to your governor, but you do not know what is to take place in the near future or the distant future,” the dark figure said.

“I leave that to my illustrious master,” Chani said, excusing himself. “I have faith in him as he is also the leader of our religion as well as governor. He is our prophet and judge.”

“Yet,” the shadowy figure in the dark corner said, “you have taken it upon yourself to be the power behind your master, taking care of all his affairs.”

“That is my duty,” Chani said, defending himself.

“Your duty is to be converted,” the shadow said.

Chani sighed deeply. “What does the Soul want of me?”

“You are only to listen and let the Swarm take place and learn. You will be visited by the Soul shortly. Stay here and listen and learn.”

The thing shifted, and Chani could see that it had scales, not naked as was the Soul.

Chani likewise shifted to see more of the person in the corner.

“You may draw near if you let go of your knife and leave it on that desk,” the dark man said pointing a finger to the desk and revealing his scaled arm. “Draw your chair closer.”

Chani placed his knife on the desk.

The stranger continued, “I once thought I had great power. I gave orders and men followed them. My wife gave orders and I learned to become devious to keep my manhood. I became a leader among my peers. I made a lot of money People followed my way of making money and managing their time and resources. I taught many in the Company to make the Company richer with more assets than they dreamed was possible. We didn’t care about the little man who worked for us. I came here to harvest your planet as I had harvested other planets.”

Chani at once recognized the Sykes he had been looking for. He raised from his chair in the excitement.

“Sit down!” commanded Sykes in a bellowing voice that made Chani tremble. “I have not finished the message of your Soul.

“I went into shock when I found that I had caught the disease, and the serum couldn’t work for me. It prevented others from getting it, but I had no help. Thrown from my seat, they put in a compound with the lower classes, but I soon found that we were all the

same. I had become one of them, one of the mixes. We were despised! Then I found myself here in your palace being cared for by people who took pity on us. I loathed their pity. I found friends who got me out of this pitiable place. I found people who were strong and free and could do anything they wanted. They could murder and get gain. They could have anything or anybody they wanted. They returned me to a seat of power. I felt at home again, yet, there's a bitterness in it. No longer human, I lived like an animal, always being chased and hunted. And then it happened.

“Hiding in a hole in the ground like some animal that hides from predators or to act as a predator ready to strike the next victim that comes along, I met this Smag fellow. He looked like some giant insect crawling along the wall of the cave. He grabbed my head and stuck it into the wall. Stuck it into the wall! It changed me. I became converted, what we called on earth in some of the religions, baptized, buried in the earth or in Ice. I became one with the planet. I knew all things then. I understood all about life. No longer alone, I became acquainted with the planet and all its powers. Smag saved my life that day. Now I have become an emissary of the Soul. Dunas Alloco thinks I work for him, but I don't. And you must not waste your time looking for me. You will not find me for all your looking.

“Wait and you will be visited. You are no longer to be the governor's lackey. The Soul want you in their service. It is your duty to Life itself. You are called. Let the Swarm move into its rightful place and you will be in your rightful place.”

Sykes moved back into the shadows and disappeared. The corner lit up again. Chani moved into the corner and touched the wall. *From now on*, he thought, *I cannot be alone*. “Tori!” he called. His body guard ran into the room and looked around.

“I am here, but I do not see danger.”

“Your presence is enough,” explained Chani. “You cannot leave my side again. You will go to the toilet when I go to the toilet and eat when I eat. When I sleep, you will sleep when you have called your replacement Dorth-i.”

“Yes, sir.”

* * *

Perfecta had volunteered to look for the people who had been disappearing. Thmala had been one of those. After Thmala had brought the mixes to be received at the Governor’s Palace, she had dined with Perfecta and McDrew. Perfecta had gone to see her the day after. Thmala's servants hadn't seen her. Perfecta had gone to the palace to see if she been taking care of the mixes. When she asked around, they said they hadn't noticed her either. That’s why Perfecta volunteered for the search. She took McDrew with her.

They began by interrogating the families of those who were sending in the reports. They went house to house. McDrew hadn’t been out and about in the city before, and he didn’t know whether it looked like going into a shopping mall or a bee hive. The mountains were full of apartments set among vast parks with lawns and trees with bright lights channeled through huge lenses in the tops of the mountains. Transportation proved easy, walking and going through portals. This planet hadn’t invented cars or planes or trains or any type of vehicle except for construction purposes. Even shipping went through portals.

In their interviewing it became quite clear what took place. One thread became common to a lot of the stories being told. Spouses or their children were seen walking

through walls, not uncommon on Ice. But these people were not seen to open portals, but walking through the wall and never returning. No one could open a portal where they had disappeared. In some interviews it was told that the children who had disappeared had reported having nightmares. Adults didn't report that sort of thing, but it was seen in a lot of cases that they had been very disturbed before disappearing. Those who had seen their loved ones disappear had done so by accident while entering their room or seeing them out of the corner of their eye or while looking in a mirror, turning around and they were gone. The Soul could appear or disappear suddenly and without notice, presumably by walking through the planet without opening portals. Ice was transparent to the Soul.

“There is only one place,” Perfecta said after a tiring day of interviews, “our people would congregate.”

“In caves,” McDrew volunteered. “How many caves on Ice?”

“Millions,” Perfecta said, sighing at the thought of investigating all those caves.

“There must be an easier way.”

“You know your people better than I do,” McDrew took her hand. “What are the more popular places?”

“If someone wanted to hide,” she said in response, “they surely wouldn't go to a popular place.”

“What about an ancient place?” McDrew asked, having a light go off in his head.

“A place that used to be popular but is now forgotten?”

“Come on. We're going to the books.”

She walked briskly toward the nearest shrine. After a block or two they came to one that looked like a pagoda inside. The ceiling had been shaped into a cone and elabo-

rately carved with seascapes and figures of sea life. McDrew's eyes were overwhelmed by all the detail, but if he stared, he could make out individual figures. They had to leave their sandals outside. The floor was made of beach sand, and the place had the smell of sea water. The echoes sounded like the crash of waves at the beach, yet, in the center of the shrine the pool of water reflected light like a mirror that tricked the eye into thinking it was looking down into an elaborately carved hole.

They were met by a priest who bowed to them. They bowed in return. He asked how he could be of service, and Perfecta asked if she could read the books. He asked her, "Can you read the books?"

"I need," she said, bowing.

He brought a carved box which looked like onyx stone, and along the edges, crimson blood stone. Perfecta kneeled as he opened the box from which one lonely fish stared at her. She clasped her hands together and put them to her mouth and closed her eyes. After about a minute she opened her eyes, put one hand on her chest and played the scales of the fish. A vision opened within her mind. One of the Soul came to her and opened a book with these words,

"28. And it came to pass that Awktoo led the people in the days of the great drought and he led them to the place called by the Hassadoo, Takmall. There, they laid down their burdens and drank from the waters of Thomall."

The Soul led Perfecta to Takmall. It was an underground city of ancient date. There were no carvings of sea life, but full of columns and arches that were of simple line and form. The beauty reflected the being of Ice itself. She saw a lot of people gathered in a vast courtyard listening to a speaker that looked like the Soul. One of the people walked

over to her. It was Thamala. She gasped and the vision was over.

Chills ran over Perfecta's face and torso. She stood and bowed to the priest. He closed the box. She said her thank-you's and walked out faster than reverence would allow. Her face filled with tears.

"What's wrong?" McDrew asked. "What did you see?"

She put her shoes on and hurried down the street. McDrew hurried after her. She passed half a city block before McDrew could catch her. She turned around and embraced him.

"I have found my sister, Thmala," she cried.

She told McDrew all that had been revealed in the book and where the people were that had been disappearing. They made their way back to the palace to consult with Chani. He knew all the old ways and might have knowledge of how to get to the place called Takmall.

* * *

Ambassador Alloco consulted with Sykes about Chani. Alloco desired to do away with Chani to bring Governor Ibara under the influence of the invaders and the Southern Council. He feared that the Northern Council prevented trade and commerce and kept society in a backward state, preventing the spread of civilization itself. Sykes thought more about the Swarm and people preventing it.

"Chani," Alloco said, "is never alone. He has his guard with him day and night, and when one guard sleeps, another guard is with him. What is he afraid of? What set off

his alarm?”

“He prevents the Swarm,” muttered Sykes to himself.

“What?” asked Alloco.

“He needs to be converted,” Sykes said aloud.

“There is no time for that.” Alloco rose from his chair. “If we take the time to convert him, moneys will have been lost, opportunities lost. No, he has to be eliminated.” He paced the floor and then turned to Sykes and grabbed him by the shoulder. “Sykes, you have to do this.”

“We have to get rid of that guard first,” Sykes said, tapping his chin with his finger.

“One guard sleeps while the other one stays by his bed,” the ambassador said, gritting his teeth.

“That’s right!” Sykes said with much enlightenment. “No need to get rid of the guard. We take the one that is sleeping and make him to our will.”

“How do we do that?” Alloco said in anger, gipping Sykes' shoulder.

“Leave that to me,” Sykes said, with a wide smile. “We in the Company have ways of dealing with obstacles.”

Sykes also knew about Perfecta and McDrew going about trying to find the converted ones, which would do no good. Chani would surely help them do that.

Sykes found, with the aid of the illustrious ambassador’s spies, where to find the guard of Chani’s that sleeps at night. He passed through walls to get to the sleeping guard, the walls of the palace being the veins of Ice herself. Sykes stuck his head out of the wall into the guard’s room. The guard slept soundly. Sykes grabbed the man by his shoulders and stuck his head into the wall. The sleeper dreamed of Eternity, beholding the

whole universe. He was converted in an instant.

“Chani prevents the Swarm,” he told the guard. “He is an obstacle to the free flow of life’s blood. He would not be converted. He would make peace and stop the shaking up of this planet. He would make it stagnant and die. He must be stopped. It is the will of the Soul.”

The guard understood. For the first time in his life he understood his purpose. Ice itself had spoken to him. He had to kill his master Chani.

The guard's name was Tori. Chani trusted him. He had known him as a boy working with his father in the kitchens. Tori had been a happy child and had grown up well-educated and well-liked. Tori had been like Chani as to his loyalties. He loved serving his fellow man and entered into the army with that objective. He also loved Chani and admired the man for his knowledge and skills. Now he knew his higher duty to the planet. He would kill his master.

After the change of the guard, Tori made sure Chani had his breakfast of garr fish, there being no fruit, along with fish bread and the sacred well water. After they had eaten, Chani rose from the table. Sykes appeared coming out of the wall. Chani cried, “Tori,” and Tori rushed to his side as if to aid him, taking his knife in hand. Then he thrust it into Chani’s side and up into his heart. Chani looked at Tori in surprise, as if to say, “Tori, I trusted you.” He fell dead on the floor. Sykes motioned to Tori, who went over to him. Sykes took Tori by the hand and they both fled through the wall.

McDrew and Perfecta arrived at Chani's quarters after Tori left. They had been up all night walking the city streets, making their way slowly back toward the palace. The lights of the city, the glow of the mountain, soothed Perfecta. They arrived at the palace an hour before sunrise. They knew Chani would be up by now. When they passed his office they looked in and didn't see him. They became anxious to tell him what they had found and went right to his quarters. The white light from his doorway showed that he had not yet come out. Perfecta called him. She thought she heard an answer, but when he hadn't come, she thought him to be in the bathroom. They waited. Perfecta became uneasy. She felt something must be wrong. She placed her hand on the plaque by the door and lay her head on the edge of the carved door jam. The white light disappeared, and they went in.

"Chani?" Perfecta called as they passed through the front room.

Looking into the anteroom, Perfecta screamed. She covered her mouth with her fists and ran over to the body of Chani lying on the floor in a pool of blood, his Soul ebbing out like a mist.

"Oh, my Soul!" she cried, lifting his head onto her lap.

McDrew bent down and checked for a pulse in Chani's neck. He bowed his head and sat on his haunches wondering what had taken place.

"He's dead," he announced.

"Where's his guard?" Perfecta moaned, hugging Chani's head. She remembered all the fun times they had together in her growing up years. One time, she remembered, her little cobba bear ran off with Chani's robe, and he came running out of the shower chasing the bear down the hallway where she played. It dropped the robe in her lap and start-

ed barking and running around. Chani ran to her in the nude and she started laughing wildly. She had never seen anything so funny. He grabbed the robe and dressed himself. He started laughing too. His jolly chuckle comforted her. He had never been upset at her when she played jokes on him. He laughed and took her in his arms and gave her a hug. Now, he would laugh no more. He had gone into the ring forest. All Souls depart to live among the trees. She had heard the legend all her life. But somehow, seeing his body like this, it all seemed trivial. His death added horror to her memories.

McDrew strode to the wall phone and, placing his hand on its flat surface, called the guards and the doctor. Governor Ibara received notification. Ambassador Alloco, when he heard, rubbed his hands together repeating “Yesss! Yesss!” through his teeth and “I knew I could depend upon Sykes!” But the guards arrested the ambassador and put him into that same white cubical he had been in before. His protests were useless.

The day lingered slowly as McDrew and Perfecta waited while reports were filled out, and Chani’s family prepared his body for burial. Perfecta did a lot of crying into McDrew’s shoulders. McDrew grew accustomed to having Perfecta’s warm, moist body next to him for much of the day. He even kissed the seaweed hair on top of her head, and he didn’t mind. Before the evening came and Chani’s family encased his body in Ice, sleep had overcome the two. They slept wrapped in each other’s arms on Chani’s bed. Chani’s family had come and taken most everything away, but when they saw the couple together on the bed, they left them, promising to come back the next day for the bed.

Morning came and Perfecta and McDrew opened their eyes to see Thmala staring at them, sitting on the floor with her head resting in her hands.

“Good morning, you two lovers,” she said, smiling.

Perfecta sat up slowly, yawning. “Thmala!” she cried sleepily. She rose from the bed and went over to her.

Thmala stood and they both hugged each other.

“Where,” Perfecta asked between yawns, “have you been?”

“You know, the Takmall,” Thmala said slowly and quietly. “You have seen me there. The Soul showed you.”

“Of course,” she said a little confused. “Of course. That was yesterday, wasn’t it? Yes. Oh, Thmala,” she said, holding on a little longer, making the hug last, her visit last. “I need you so much to stay in one place. You’re my family. You’re always going off somewhere.” She paused and started crying. “Oh, Thmala! Chani is dead! We found him lying there on the floor. Why would someone kill Chani? He had been such a kind and gentle man! Why would someone kill him?”

“Steady, Sister,” Thmala demanded gently. She let go of the hug and took Perfecta by the arms, looking into her eyes with a smile that smote Perfecta, telling her she had to leave again. “We won’t be apart anymore unless you choose wrongly. You must get a bath and come have breakfast with me.”

“Chani,” Perfecta remembered. It all came back to her like a blow to the head. She stumbled. Thmala had to hold her up.

“I know,” Thmala said. “He became an enemy of the Soul. It is better that one man should die than a whole nation tumble to the dust.”

“Enemy!” Perfecta demanded. “He was my friend!”

Thmala hugged her sister. “It will be all right when you see how things are. I promise.”

Thmala had a Soul in her that Perfecta couldn’t resist. She calmed down and said, “Okay, okay.”

Perfecta lapsed into the little sister mode, wanting to do anything to get her big sister’s attention. “I’ll go do that.” She called McDrew “Drew,” and he followed her.

He said “Thmala!” acknowledging her. She nodded to him, and he went to bathe with Perfecta. They dove into the pool in the next room and swam a few minutes, dressed and rejoined Thmala.

She took their hands. They felt like little kids in her presence. They didn’t know what to expect.

“Hold each others' hands,” Thmala said gently, “and follow me.”

She took them to the west red wall full of veins of gold and blue maukite and white calcite. They hesitated.

“Follow me,” Thmala smiled.

In they went, walking through the wall like a portal, but without the flash of light they expected. *The Soul can walk through walls*, thought Perfecta, *without a portal. How is Thmala doing this?* McDrew thought they had made a jump in their technology.

Thmala pulled Perfecta and McDrew into a cavern underneath Ice full of fluorescent light. There were hundreds of people looking at them. Perfecta saw that these were the people they had set out to find. She recognized many of them from the images shown them by their families. She went to one little girl, bent down, took her by the arms and said, “Darling, don’t you know your mother has been looking for you, worried sick? Did

someone force you to come here? Are you homesick?"

"No ma'am," she said. "I don't want to go back home. I like it here. We all like it here."

Thmala gently raised Perfecta by the arm and said, "We don't want to go back home, Percy." Perfecta had the childhood nickname of Percy. "This is our home now. Above ground has become corrupted. The Soul brought us here to prepare for the culmination of Swarm. It is understood now. We have never known what it meant. It is the regeneration of the Soul. Come," she said, taking Perfecta by the hand. "Let's go have breakfast. I want you to meet some people."

Perfecta couldn't help staring at the people. They all smiled at her as if they were hypnotized, like they were under some horrible spell. They seemed spooky. They didn't look real.

"It's your paradigm," Thmala said. "It's how you perceive things. They see things with a wider view or from a higher point of view. They have Soul."

Thmala took the two to a place where there were a lot of tables made of stone like huge mushrooms, each table surrounded by dark wooden chairs. Perfecta gasped. She had seen wooden chairs in the Southern Provinces, but she hadn't expected the sacrilege here. Most of the tables were occupied like the restaurant she had been to with McDrew. She glanced around. It did look like an open restaurant. Thmala led them to a table where three people waited for them. Perfecta gasped and McDrew almost laughed. She saw Dunas Alloco. McDrew saw a mix that looked like Sykes. The third was obviously one of the Soul, a thin naked little man with deathly white skin, a head too large for his body and large black eyes. The three stood there staring at the new arrivals until they were inter-

rupted by the ambassador.

“Come, come, sit and eat,” he said with the wave of his hand, so all six of them sat down, Perfecta, carefully and respectfully, honoring the wood with a religious grace.

Each table had a large tray of fruit at the center and water gourds with straws coming out the top at each place setting. The plates were of maugo wood, a dark hardwood with lighter swirls through it.

The newcomers sat down. McDrew had to cover his face trying not to laugh when he discovered his old boss standing there also covered with scales.

Sykes gave a great belly laugh and said, “McDrew! You old son of a gun! It’s all right. Laugh!”

McDrew did. He let out a belly laugh and felt a great release of pressure. “You too Brute’?” He said, referring to the scales.

“Me too, McDrew, heh, heh, heh.”

They both drew a deep breath and smiled. Sykes appeared dethroned. He didn’t look like an enemy any more, but more normal and without a care in the world.

Dunas Alloco, always the gracious host, somehow innocent, as if he had been pretending before, and now off stage, became a normal day to day man. It astounded Perfecta, the change she saw in him.

The Soul sat there silent and still, watching.

Thmala said, “You both know Dunas Alloco.”

He said “How do you do?”

“McDrew has met Sykes, but you, Perfecta, haven’t had the honor. This is Sykes, former director of the ‘invasion’.”

Sykes smiled and said, "It's an honor to meet you, Perfecta."

It confused Perfecta. It appeared that the Soul was choosing sides. "What's going on?" she asked.

"One man can have a great influence on Magrab politics." The Soul spoke. Everyone turned to look at him. They didn't know it was Smag, but they felt in their hearts it might be. "Chani could have brought peace to the whole of Magrab. He had the talent and the influence. He would have stopped the Swarm. Without the Swarm, the Soul dies. It is all the Soul can do to breathe every thousand years. Ice dies without Swarm. It is the time of Restoration. It is the time of the Exchange, the divisions that multiply that causes us to replenish the magrab."

Perfecta explained to McDrew that in the beginning, the Soul divided into opposites, and among those opposites were male and female. They populated the magrab or the planet.

"But in the books I have read," Perfecta pleaded, "never has the Soul interfered with the Swarm. Why now? Why kill Chani?"

Sykes answered. "The children of Ice have come home. Eons before, Ice became overpopulated and its people reached out to the stars and planted the seed of Ice into the heavens. Now, we have returned."

Dunas Alloco said, "You will tell no one, or you will not leave here."

"We will be found!" Perfecta said rashly. "My father will come when he finds I am missing."

"He will find no one," Thmala said. "You will return and tell Father that we do not wish to come home. He is a wise man. He will listen to you."

With the quickness of a dream, Perfecta and McDrew were back in bed in Chani's chambers. Was it a dream? They looked at each other, and both simultaneously said, "I just had a dream." Then they both said, "You know ..." and looked at each other and laughed. They didn't need to say anything else. The differences in personality chose Perfecta to do the talking. She started describing the dream and McDrew confirmed every word she said.

They remembered it as though it were yesterday that they had visited Takmall, the underground refuge of those who left and didn't want to come home. They would get up and tell their father. They would look no more for the missing.

Chapter Eight

Ambassador Dunas Alloco turned up missing. They had put him under guard, and yet he had disappeared. They put every instrument they had to use to find the portal in that empty room, but none could be found. It was concluded that the Soul had taken him and good riddance.

Chani was gone. Most of the city came out for his funeral. The whole nation mourned. They had one day of sadness, and then everything went back to near normal.

They appointed Katro, Chani's son, to take his stead and stewardship. He was the image of his father, short and stocky with a wry personality. Katro would walk in Chani's path. He headed his father's spy ring and knew his father's business. He also knew it was Ambassador Alloco who had killed him. He couldn't arrest anyone because they had all disappeared. But having spoken to Perfecta and McDrew and consulting his father's maps, he knew where to find them. Takmall was located deep under the ring forest, the perfect world of the Soul. He would take his journey there to find the killers and take them back to have them arraigned, tried and hanged.

Katro took two strong and durable men, Gomez and Sheock, with him in an air craft to the forest. Its wings buzzed like an insect as they descended into an area cleared by the invaders and ravagers of their forests. Katro made arrangements with the pilot to be back there at a preset time to pick them up. The pilot refused to stay. He said that he had other appointments, but Katro thought it might be out of superstition.

Chani's map viewer led the three through dense underbrush and swamp. They had to wear head lamps to see. The air was filled with bird calls and the cries of the wild. Many of the cries chilled their hearts because of the high pitch. It sounded like human

screams. A superstitious person would say it was the cry of the Soul. There were many trees with burls on them looking like sleepy, grumpy, human faces that would cry if awakened.

People who were brave enough to enter into the forests often reported of hearing voices. Katro thought it to be caused by the weakness of men's minds. He didn't believe in it. For several kilometers he ignored what might be interpreted as someone calling his name. He could interpret it as the Soul calling him, but he didn't want anything to do with them. He came into this forest for one purpose, and as taught by his father Chani, he would look for nothing else. But when the other men heard it also, the voice could not be ignored.

"Katro," Shoeck said. "Someone is calling your name."

"Yeah," Gomez said, "I heard it too. There goes again. Didn't you hear it?"

"It is of no consequence, gentlemen," Katro said whacking his way through the underbrush with his long, vibrating blade. "If it was of any consequence, my name would come up on my communicator, not by some wild man repeating, like a gonog bird, something he once heard."

They went on another kilometer. The map viewer of Chani's seemed to be leading them right to the voice which became louder and more clear.

"I don't think this should be ignored, Katro," Shoeck said.

"Yeah," Gomez said.

"It may not be avoidable, gentlemen," Katro said. "It seems to be right in our path."

Indeed it was. As they approached an outcropping of quartzite where the entrance

to Takmall was supposed to be, there seemed to be a large gourd or pod growing from the trunk of a thick hardwood as if the burl had grown away from the tree. The end of the pod was open. A head of a person peeked out with a shoulder and a skinny arm like some branch that had sprouted from the burl was swinging in the breeze. Or was it trying to catch the edge of the pod to open it further? The three stared at it, trying to figure what they were looking at.

“Katro!” the thing demanded. “Don’t stand there staring at me. Help me out of this thing. How did I get in here? The last thing I remember was lying on the floor of my apartment in my gore, trying to keep awake. I was unable to. I think the Soul must have put me in this tree to heal my body. They do things like that, you know.”

Katro drew back as he looked at the thing trying to get out of the pod. It looked like one of the Soul with large black eyes, a large head and long skinny body with limbs like a tree. Its fingers were long and skinny bones.

“Don’t pretend to be my father!” demanded Katro. “My father is dead and buried.”

“No I’m not,” the thing said. “And I’m hungry. Give me food!”

Gomez said, “Isn’t it part of your mythology or religion that when a person dies he goes to live with the Soul in this forest?”

“Yes,” Katro said, “but this looks nothing like my father.”

“Maybe these forest people,” Shoeck said, “steal the Souls of people right before they die and put them into these trees. You saw all those burls on those trees; they have faces on them.”

“You superstitious?” asked Gomez.

“No,” Shoeck said. “I had a maid that talked about these things. Thmala.”

“Thmala?” asked Katro. “That’s Perfecta’s sister’s name. Daughter of the Governor.”

“No governor’s daughter would need to be working as a maid, but, yeah,” Shoeck remembered. “She and this Perfecta hugged each other when we first came to the governor’s palace.”

“Hey!” screamed the thing trying to get out of the pod, panting now and then for lack of strength. “I’m hungry. I need some energy. Help me out of this thing.”

Shoeck, tired of listening to the thing, tore open the pod and helped it out and sat it on a log. He then gave him some yellow hagmar fruit he had picked along the way. It ate ravenously. When it finished eating, it asked for “More!” Shoeck gave it some ket berries. After eating those, it wiped his mouth, took a few deep breaths and stood, holding onto the pod until it got its balance.

“Come on,” Katro said, “we have place to reach with little time.”

As they trudged off, the thing said, “I’m coming too. You won’t get very far without me. That map viewer is a degree or two off. Besides, if you don’t have a Soul guide, you won’t get into Takmall.”

That statement stopped the three. They turned around.

“How did you know where we were going?” Katro asked.

“The Soul knows everything,” Shoeck said.

“Takmall,” the thing said, “is open only to someone like me. You won’t be able to get through. There is no door, no portal.”

“Then why is it on the map?” asked Katro.

“A quake covered the entrance centuries ago,” it said.

All three men gave an audible sigh.

“You know,” the thing said, “This is the after life. This is where you wind up when you die. This is the resurrection the holy books talk about. You come, are reborn, and live in this forest. Hmmm.”

“And,” asked Gomez, “is your name Chani? The governor’s secretary?”

“Yes, yes,” it said. “That was my name. But we don’t use names now. Names are useless to us. We already know each other. It’s all one mind and one heart. I will eventually lose this memory of Chani. But right now, I’m Chani.”

“I doubt it,” Katro said, as he trudged off into the forest.

“Heh, heh,” Chani chuckled. “It’s this way. Remember, that map viewer is a bit off.”

Katro sighed. He bowed his head, took a deep breath on raising his head again and then followed the other two who followed the thing.

On the way, Katro questioned the Chani thing until he was satisfied that at least he was speaking to the memory of his father. How it got into that Soul thing, he didn’t know.

Katro followed the three quite reluctantly, thinking this thing that thought it was his father could be misleading them, either into a trap or away from Takmall. Shoeck and Gomez followed this thing as though they were hypnotized.

What if it were true that when men die their Souls are reborn into this rain forest and live on in eternal darkness? It didn’t make any sense. If that were true, there would be billions upon billions of Soul living in the forest. There wouldn’t be any room for trees and the other plants. But what if it were only a myth? *And then there is this thing that purports to be my father’s Soul*, thought Katro. *How would my father’s memory get into*

that thing? Then there were the human computers. They had memory transference. With the biological technology on Ice, memory transference from a dying person into one of the Soul, which, apparently grows on trees, a complicated biological computing system, seemed plausible.

He would honor the memory of his father at least for a while, but there would be no loyalty to that thing.

Chani led the three to a higher outcropping where there was a hole down into a cave.

“This way, gentlemen,” Chani said as he pushed back some brush, showing the gaping hole that was big enough to let a husky man like Gomez slide through.

Gomez and Shoeck led the way. Katro hesitated. Chani waved his arm to point to the entrance and smiled.

“You will see that all is right,” he said.

“How do we know this isn’t a trap?” Katro asked, screwing up his face.

“You know the truth, Katro,” Chani said, “when you look in its direction.”

“That’s something my father would have said,” Katro said wistfully. “But you’re only a recording. You’re not the real him.”

“You can’t see what’s on the right side of you when you are looking on your left,” he said, smiling still. “Look at your map viewer.”

Katro looked.

“Now adjust that dial there to read zero.”

Katro did so and the map adjusted to show that they were right on top of Takmall.

“Okay,” Katro said, “You may be speaking the truth, but that doesn’t prove you’re

my father.”

“Shall we?” the Chani thing asked with a wave of his hand.

Katro slipped into the hole and Chani followed.

It was all belly crawling for a quarter of a kilometer. Then the passage opened and gradually became a tunnel winding through glowing quartzite crystal. When they came to a small room, they could tell they had entered into an ancient sea, as there were sea shells in black limestone. There were veins of white calcite and then layers of the orange quartzite of ancient beaches. Old movements had folded beaches and sea bed into holiday candy.

Katro motioned to everyone that they should halt their progress and take a rest.

“Wait here,” he said. “Someone will come shortly to show you the way. This place is securely guarded.”

“You going someplace?” asked Gomez.

“I will leave you now,” Chani said.

“So,” Katro said. “You’re leaving us. Will we see you again?”

“Maybe,” Chani said. “You never know.”

With that, Chani slipped into the wall. Shoeck inspected the it. There was not the usual flash of light expected with a portal.

“Yes,” Katro said, “Soul can walk through walls. I’m sure it’s a more advanced type of technology. It’s still based upon portals.”

“There’s no way through here,” Shoeck said. “The only way out is the way we came.”

“Maybe if we followed the map viewer in the first place,” Katro said , “we would

have found the main entrance.”

“This is the main entrance,” a voice said behind them.

All three turned around. They saw Dunas Alloco standing there against the wall.

Shoeck and Gomez each grabbed an arm. Dunas Alloco writhed his arms loose and said, “That won’t do, my dear fellows. Do you want to see Takmall or not?”

Katro walked up to him and demanded, “Yes, we do. We want the killer of my father, and we want our children back.”

“Then your trip was for nothing,” he said. “But if you are seeking for wisdom and answers to your questions, then you will be allowed in.”

Shoeck and Gomez grabbed his arms again and Dunas Alloco disappeared.

Katro ran to the wall, and putting both hands and forehead on it, he yelled “Yes, please, we want answers!”

For a moment, they were left alone and then Dunas Alloco appeared to the side of them and motioned to them. “This way then,” he said with the wave of his hand.

Suddenly the wall gave way to a wide elaborately carved doorway with writhing animals all tied into knots making up the door columns. Surprisingly, there were no fish in the carvings as there were on most buildings.

“Okay,” Gomez said, “now we’re getting somewhere.”

As soon as Dunas Alloco and Katro went through the doorway it solidified into a wall again. Katro turned around and demanded, “Hey! What’s going on?”

“They will be taken to a different Takmall where the demons will torture them,” he smiled. “No, really, they will be taken to a room where they will be given refreshments and rest. They will be well looked after.”

“Yes,” Katro said with a snarl. “I’m sure they will be well looked after.”

“They can’t be trusted. But you can come and ask all the questions you want.”

Katro was led to the same cavern Perfecta and McDrew had visited. He was met by a crowd of children who stared and smiled at him. He asked them the same question Perfecta asked and got the same answer. They didn’t want to go home. Katro couldn’t believe it, saying that they had been brain washed or hypnotized.

“This way please,” Dunas said. “You see, they don’t want to leave. All of us here are the children of Wisdom. We know what we are doing even if you on the outside don’t. We have been given the plan, the big picture, and we understand what Ice is up to.”

Dunas led Katro to that same restaurant-like atmosphere that Perfecta and McDrew had visited.

“We are all here awaiting the final movement of Swarm,” Dunas added.

Katro approached a table where a Soul sat. He was alone, and Katro thought it was his father again. He motioned to the young man to take a seat. He did and felt to say, “Father, I am sorry for my belligerence.”

“The Swarm is all important for this planet to survive,” the Soul figure said at the table. Dunas had departed. “Peace will be the death throes of this planet. You must do nothing but let it take place. It is the natural thing, and the natural thing is the source of our culture and our religion.”

“Father,” Katro said extending an arm and hand out to the Soul. “I grieve for having lost you in such an awful manner.”

Katro’s hand went through the Soul’s arm. The Soul disappeared, and Katro dropped his head and wept. *It wasn’t even real*, he thought. *It was only a hologram.*

Katro felt a sharp pain in the pit of his stomach. The cavern surrounding him faded, and he found himself lying on the floor of a room. The walls, ceiling and floor glowed with a white light. A black plastic tube encased within a thin wire mesh extended from his naval to one of the walls. There appeared a red flashing light somewhere on one of the walls and a buzz that went on and off with the blinking of the light.

In another room a man in a white smock peered through a monitor at Katro.

“He’s waking,” he said.

“What went wrong?” asked another.

“Here it is,” another said as he pointed to a little red blinking bulb.

“Replace that board,” the second man said.

“It’s done,” the third man said.

Katro was back at the table. His stomach pain had receded. He saw the Soul thing, and it was talking to him, but he put his head down on the table and cried like a baby. The cavern disappeared again and he was sure he was on a floor bent over with a tube extending from his naval.

“He’s found us out,” the man at the monitor said.

* * *

Shoock and Gomez had been drugged and put into a holding cell. When they awoke, both had a hangover.

“What the hell hit me?” asked Gomez.

“The secret service,” Shoock said.

“They got you for sure now,” Gomez said, referring to when Shoeck told him of his narrow escape to the North.

“Never underestimate your enemy,” Shoeck said, rubbing his head.

They looked around. The walls, ceiling and floor glowed with a white light. There was nothing else in the cell except themselves.

“How are we going to get out of this place?” asked Gomez. “I can’t even see a door.”

“We have to find the technology,” Shoeck said. “There’s always a way out.”

Shoeck roamed around the room feeling every inch of the walls with his hands. He couldn’t find anything except that he knew it wasn’t Ice technology.

“We’re in human hands,” he said to Gomez.

“That might be a greater danger than being in Fish hands,” Gomez responded.

Shoeck kept feeling around where a door should be.

“You don’t give up,” Gomez remarked.

“Never give up,” he said with a grunt. “Here’s something. I know humans have this thing for putting the door right in the middle of the wall. There. I’ve found a panel.”

In another minute, he had the panel off and was working with the electronics within it.

“How’d you do that?” asked Gomez.

“Stickiness,” he said, still studying the wires and cards. “It’s all in the feel and directing the chi.”

“Oh,” Gomez said. “You’re one of *those* guys.”

“One of what guys?” Shoeck threw back the idea.

“You know, Chinese.”

“It’s only knowledge,” Sheock said. “I like to learn things.”

“Oh,” Gomez said, “one of *those* guys.”

They laughed.

A red light came on near the ceiling, buzzing as it blinked.

“Well, they know what we’re doing,” Shoeck said finishing some rewiring. “There, now to put the panel back on.”

It looked like a hole in the wall revealing the corridor.

“What did you do?” Gomez asked.

“It’s a viewing panel. Thought it might be the door lock. I simply switched the in-coming to the out-coming and vica versa. What luck. I see guards coming this way. You’d better hide.”

Gomez glanced around the room. He couldn’t see anywhere to hide. The room was empty. He didn’t even see Shoeck.

“Shoeck?” he asked.

“Let them take you. Hands over your head. I’ll jump them.”

He still couldn’t see Shoeck as he let his eyes wonder about on each side of him. The door slid open. Five guards held their guns an inch away from Gomez’s face. They looked around the room.

“Where’s the other one?” one of them said.

“Ice technology, I guess,” Gomez said coolly.

They grabbed Gomez to take him through the door. As they got half way through, Shoeck was on top of three of them, throwing them to the ground. He knocked out one of

them with his foot. The other two grabbed his legs, but Sheock grabbed them, their arms swinging, and threw them against the wall. The other two had grabbed Gomez but Sheock grabbed one and started knocking him around. After a three second fist fight, Gomez and Sheock took their weapons and shoved their bodies back through the door that had been stuck open by Gomez's body. They slipped through and the door closed. Sheock and Gomez ran down the corridor, followed by a screeching alarm. At several turns of the corridor they had to fight their way through, firing at the guards. They also shot every surveillance camera they saw. They came to a group of columns near a main entrance. It looked like the main office was immediately to their left. They stopped to catch their breath.

“Where did you go?” Gomez whispered loudly.

“What do you mean?” Sheock asked. “I went with you.”

“No. I mean,” Gomez insisted, “where were you in the room?”

“I hid in the corner near the ceiling,” he said.

“How come I couldn't see you?” Gomez panted.

“You didn't think to look up. I counted on that.”

“Listen!” warned Gomez. “I hear voices.”

It was a woman's voice. “What do you mean you can't find them? You must find them at once! At once I tell you!”

“Sykes' wife,” Sheock said.

“How do you know?” Gomez asked.

“I met her before when I was stationed on the moon of Inez.”

“Get off!” Gomez whispered loudly, surprised at the connection.

“Okay.” With that, Shoeck disappeared.

“Shoeck!” called Gomez in a loud whisper.

“Over here.”

Shoeck had moved closer to the voices. Gomez weaved through the columns and found him.

“They will ruin the invasion,” Sykes’ wife said.

“I’m sorry, Shahalez,” a man’s voice responded. “We underestimated the drug’s effect. It should have made them weak. My men were overwhelmed.”

“To say the least,” she replied. “You bungled it. Come on. Take me out of here. It’s not safe with them around.”

Shoeck’s hunter instinct kicked in. “Let’s follow them.”

“What about Katro?” asked Gomez. “We can’t leave a fellow soldier behind.”

“He’s no soldier,” Shoeck said. “He’s a rich man’s kid.”

“We can’t leave him!” demanded Gomez.

“He may not even be here.” Shoeck felt disappointed at losing his prey. He saw them prepare to walk out the office door. Shahalez was grabbing her coat and a briefcase.

“They will know,” Gomez said as he cocked his head towards the people in the office.

“Okay, let’s do it,” Shoeck said.

Shoeck and Gomez rushed the office, shooting the guards as they went. It was like robbing a bank.

“All right!” they yelled, “Everybody drop! To the floor! To the floor!”

“You fool!” Shahalez cried. “It’s all your fault! You should have made this place

secure! You will feel the wrath of the Company!”

She directed her wrath at a young blond army officer wearing the grey blue uniform of the Company, shouldering a lot of gold braid. He lay prostrate beside her with his face towards the invaders.

Everyone in the office lay on the floor, and Gomez and Shoeck looked them over to see who was at the security monitor. They needed to search each of the rooms to find Katro. They spotted a monitor showing views of different rooms. Katro flashed onto the screen and then off again.

Gomez kicked the man nearest the monitor.

“You!” he said in his guttural voice. “Get up there and find Katro.”

The man obeyed. He typed something on the keyboard in front of the monitor and Katro’s room popped onto the screen.

“What room number is that?” Gomez ordered.

“203D” he answered obediently.

“Show me a map!”

A map appeared on the monitor.

“Do these guns have a stun setting?” Gomez asked Shoeck.

“Never mind,” Shoeck said. “We take a hostage.”

He grabbed Shahalez off the floor and stood her on her feet. She screamed, “How dare you!” repeating every cuss word she had heard in the barracks during her younger years.

“Come on, lady!” Shoeck ordered. “Now if anyone follows us, she gets her head blown off.”

“Captain!” she pleaded to her flunky on the floor. He proved to be a shaking coward, doing nothing as she was dragged out of the office and down the corridor.

Running down the corridors they passed several guards pointing their guns at them. The guards held their fire, seeing their governor was a hostage. When they got to the room she utterly refused to open the door, so Shoeck blasted the controls and slid the door open manually. What they saw made them extremely angry. Katro lay on the floor unconscious with a cable coming out of his navel and passing through the wall. When Shahalez refused to tell him where the control room or the monitor room was Shoeck blasted the walls. One blast resulted in a hole with a console behind it and three men in white smocks lying on the floor, their bodies smoking.

“Damn!” Shoeck said through his teeth. “Hey you!” he said to the one guy still standing. “Get that thing out of him. Now!”

“It will take at least an hour,” he said, trembling.

“By then the shock troopers will have been here and gone,” Gomez said. “And us with them.”

Shahalez laughed, her poofy gray hair shaking back and forth like a bush as though a large wild animal walked through it.

“Shut up old woman,” Shoeck said, knocking her against the wall with his arm braced against her chest. Shoeck asked the scientist, “Can you cut this cable off him?”

“It would kill him,” he said to stall.

Shoeck shoved his gun toward the scientist. “Can you cut this thing off him?” he asked again.

“I can turn it off,” the scientist said, “then you can cut it.”

“You have a saw?”

“No, but that blaster will melt it.”

“Okay, do it,” Shoeck ordered.

The scientist turned off the cable and Gomez cut it with a blast of his gun. When they went to pick Katro up, he cried, “Don’t touch me!”

Shoeck looked at the scientist and asked, “You got a sedative?”

“No,” the scientist said as he spied Shahalez slip out.

Gomez saw her go also and moved to go after her, but Shoeck said, “Let her go.”

“How are we going to get him out with in that condition?” Gomez asked.

“Thmala,” Shoeck said. “I can feel her.”

At that moment, a portal opened in the wall to the right of the blast hole. Thmala appeared with two other Fish.

“He’s in a lot of pain,” Shoeck said to Thmala.

Thmala knelt down beside Katro and motioned to Shoeck. He came and knelt down beside her. She nodded her head, and they placed their hands on him. Katro went into a deep sleep. Shoeck picked him up. As they headed towards the portal, blasting came from the hole in the wall and the door. Shoeck and Gomez spread a cover of fire as Thmala and the two Fish carrying Katro went through the portal. Then they backed into it, firing at the troopers that sailed into the room. Thmala closed the portal as Shoeck and Gomez entered, keeping the troopers from following.

“You took your time,” Shoeck spoke to Thmala as they entered a room inside a cavern where they lay Katro on a bed.

“It took us a long time to track you.”

“You wonder what's real any more,” Gomez said.

“They used the moleta bush on you. It sprays a highly hallucinogenic mist from its flowers. Undoubtedly, they were able to control the hallucinations.”

“How are we going to get that thing out of him?” Gomez asked.

“Gomez,” Thmala commanded, “when I say, you pull it out. Balba, Comcik, come over here. Shoeck, you stand over there. ”

Gomez watched the others put their hands on Katro's stomach. His body seemed to glow. The light around their hands grew until his stomach seemed to become as bright as a welder's arc.

"Now," commanded Thmala.

Gomez grabbed the cable sticking out of Katro's naval and slipped it out. Everyone was sweating. He looked at the cable. It was frayed with dozens of wires going in every direction. Gomez looked back at Katro. He awoke slowly and sat on the edge of the bed, rubbed his his eyes and blinked.

"My," he said. "What a nightmare. Did we find Takmall? Or was that only a dream?"

Katro looked around. He saw an ordinary looking cavern. Some furniture, as though a small family had lived there a long time ago, sat in disarray. The chairs, table and beds were wooden and worn smooth from use.

"Yes, darling Katro," Thmala said caressing his head, "you have found Takmall. There's not much to it, and there's nobody here. You were overcome by a moleta bush."

"We all were," Shoeck said. "It was my fault. I should have been more careful. I was enjoying the walk in the woods too much."

"No," Katro yawned. "I 'v always known about the moleta. You're not used to those forests. I grew up in them. I was careless, too much in a hurry. Funny side effect of that bush. You lose all desire for revenge."

"Something ordered by the Soul, I suspect," Shoeck said.

"Let's get back to the capitol," Gomez said. "We've got to warn the governor about the Company's plan to attack."

"Oh, yes," Shoeck looked at Thmala. "The Company and all the Southern troops are preparing a major assault on the Northern territories."

"All the behind-the-scenes negotiations have fallen apart, I see," Thmala said.

"Let's go. My father won't be pleased."

They walked towards an elaborately carved portal.

"Where did you get the information?" she asked.

"From the demon herself," Gomez said.

"We overheard Governor Sykes's wife Shahalez talking to her commander," Shoeck said. "He seems like some scared little kid who thinks he could win another medal in her service."

They walked through the portal to the steps of the governor's mansion. Katro said, "If only my father hadn't been killed. The negotiations wouldn't have been decimated."

"Don't kid yourself," Thmala said. "The Company wants to own all of Ice. Negotiations only stalled the inevitable. Besides, my sister fell in love and ruined everything."

Thmala laughed as she greeted her sister Perfecta who, with McDrew at her side, came down the stairs of the mansion.

Chapter Nine

Maygrab was the ancient name. When the ice came from the heavens, people referred to their world as the World of Ice. It was an ever present reminder that invaders occupied their world and raped it, stealing its resources. Half the population was losing their connection with Life, or fleeing to where the old ways were still cherished. Yet, the old ways of peace, forged in the halls of ancient Takmall, were losing hold. The armies of the Company and the allies of the southern provinces offered the northern provinces unconditional surrender to the villages and cities who were caught and unable to flee. The villagers didn't believe in resistance. If they couldn't flee, they stood there and didn't say or do anything. This angered the armies, so they set upon their prisoners, raping the women in front of their husbands, shooting the husbands in front of their wives and children, and taking their babies and dashing them against the walls of the cities. Many became angry and resentful and thus lost contact with Life and Nature. The Great Mother no longer worked for them, and thus they lost their higher technology. They resorted to the technology of the invaders. Thus came the ever spreading corruption.

Those who escaped overcrowded the capitol and surrounding villages. There was no more fruit from the Soul, and the Fish population dwindled. Governor Ibera was worried as was the High Council. Complaints came up through the ranks to the governor's ears. A lot of the people wanted to fight back, especially the mixes. After much thought and prayer and fasting, Governor Ibera brought the High Council and General Assembly together and addressed them.

1. "I have called this meeting of the High Council and the General Assembly

together today because of the grave danger our people are in. I have nothing to say about the invading armies. I perceive they are not the danger. Instead, I see a lack of faith; a lack of sticking to the old ways given to us by our forefathers. The Way has always been clear. No matter what disruptions have occurred in the past, we have arighted ourselves. There have been dissensions and quarreling and all manner of disputations, yet, we have always called upon the Soul of this planet and the Soul have responded. It happens every thousand years, and we call it the Swarm.

But never in written history have we had to deal with invaders from another world.

“It came as a shock to our people when the ice came. Then the space ships came.

Then came the Company with their armed forces. Our armies have been created for rescuing the inhabitants from natural disasters and for the building of our cities and civilization. Their armies are used for forcing the indoctrination into a foreign way of thought. They have beaten down many of our people to make them accept the invader's way of thought. Our people are slowly being lost to the way of the invader.

“I don't blame anyone. Many are beginning to say that we should retaliate and drive the invader from our borders. What will that accomplish but accepting their indoctrination? No, I say do not resist. That is not our Way. Some say that we should be indoctrinating them. That is not our Way. Our Way is the middle path, the balance of opposites. To be is to be at peace, even at the time of death. We know there is no true death. The Great Mother has provided that we be restored into the Soul of this planet. It has been that way since the beginning of our existence. Some say that the ice has changed everything. I say that it has not. There used to be oceans on this planet. They dried up. The water went underground. We have lived in this crystalline setting for thousands of years. It

has become our way of Life. Now our planet is wet again. We are coming into a new period of Life. That is allowed. We must embrace our enemy, then we will have no more enemy.

“We have been appealing to the Soul of Ice, of Maygrab, if you please, yet, the Soul acts independently of us to protect and feed us. The Soul knows our need before we ask. Already, as you have noticed, many have disappeared from our view. They are not gone from us in a destructive way. They are simply being saved by the Soul as a seed to be planted against the time when the destruction of our Way seems eminent. We are in no danger of losing that. What we are in danger of losing is our faith, of losing ourselves to that corruption that has been loosed upon our planet.

“You may say that is fine, let the Soul fix things and all will be well with us. The fight is to keep our integrity and our objectivity and our peace. Even in persecution and death, we need to keep our integrity and objectivity. If we lose that, we lose our Soul. We carry corruption or integrity into our regeneration. We cannot afford to corrupt the Soul nor to have the Soul divided. It is this, and only this, that will save us from the invader. So go back to your people and tell them this is our only salvation!”

Governor Ibera went on for another hour, pleading the cause of their faith and the cause of the Soul and of Ice herself. There was a general knocking on desks and the saying of "Hear! Hear!" Those complaining of the rape of their wives and the murder of their children were comforted by those surrounding them in the assembly. Many tears shed as they embraced.

They returned home with a renewed effort at faith and exhorted others to faith. Many went back home to be martyred by those of the Company who didn't want such in-

fluence in their new society. Wherever the Company made a foothold it became against the law to speak openly of the old ways; the authorities said it was disturbing the peace.

On the other hand, Smag, Sykes, Dunas Alloco and others traveled the country converting more recruits for the Soul, but the time for preaching had ended. Ice herself reached out to individuals and embraced them. All a person needed was contact with Ice, such as having his head immersed in solid rock, and he was converted. When they were converted, people disappeared into Takmall, and no one knew where that was.

* * *

"It is madness!" Gomez complained to Katro. "Why doesn't the governor send us out? We could be fighting, doing something. We can't let the Company take over the whole world! They have to be stopped!"

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," Katro said, "that is not our Way. The Governor has spoken." He waved the palm of his hand in a wide sweeping arc.

"You were all gung ho when you left," McKay, one of Gomez's army buddies said. "Now you come back a coward? What's gotten into you? If you people would give us the arms and ammunition, we could stop their advance."

"Sure as Hell!" exclaimed Gomez. "Most of us are seasoned fighters. We know our job, even if we are mixes. Just because we gained a few scales doesn't mean we forgot how to fight. We don't ascribe to your mamby pamby way of sittin' around and being slaughtered. Man, give us the word and we'll stop those S.O.B.s!"

"You yourselves will be slaughtered," Katro said coolly, raising his eyebrow. "It will be for nothing."

"Look!" McKay said, shoving his face into Katro's. "We have a duty, and we are loyal to our tradition and ourselves. We are fighting men. If you don't give us the word from the governor we'll march out there ourselves and become the heroes we are, whether we come back or not. Is that clear?"

"Look to yourselves," Katro said. "But I would rather you have the governor's blessing. I'm tired of all your words. I'll go to him tonight and try to persuade him."

"Why not now?" Gomez said, roughly, putting a hand on Katro's shoulder, a clear act of aggression.

Katro spent a long hour with the governor. It seemed like three hours, as he argued for the mixes. At the end of that hour, Governor Ibera's face softened. He seemed tired. His eyes sagged. "Katro," he said, "forgive me. It is not our way to argue like this. I expected more support from you, but you are not your father. I miss your father, and I expected you to act like him. He was my right hand. You must learn to be also. I need you.

"Go with your men and escort those silly mixes out to the battlefield and send me word. I'll be waiting for the outcome. Don't get yourself killed. I need you at my side. We have troubled days ahead." Then in a wispy voice he added, "I hate to lose her. I've already lost one daughter."

"Sir?" asked Katro, not hearing those last words.

"Go, go!" Governor Ibera commanded. "Leave me."

"Yes, sir," Katro bowed and left his master.

Commando troops surrounded the capitol. Katro escorted Gomez and his mixes out

of the city. Gomez asked Katro to come along and be his guide because too many weird things had been happening, and the mixes didn't know whether they would fall into a portal somewhere and vanish and believed Katro could steer them away from such dangers. There weren't many weapons or ammunition among them, only what was left over when they escaped from the compound. So on their first day, their main objective was to secure more weapons and ammo. This they did with very little loss of life, and only a few wounded. That's what Katro heard, but it was actually fifty out of three hundred that they lost. Fifteen of that fifty were bodies left on the battlefield. The others were in no condition to go back and fight.

Gomez led his army back into battle the next day. Yelling, bleeding, and dying, they cut their way through the circle coming in from behind, but the Company still surrounded them. Only a hundred and seventy five were able to cut their way back into the city. Angry at their loss, they went back the next day and found the ranks of the Company had been filled in with fresh replacements and heavier guns. The fire power was too much. Only fifty came back. Gomez was riddled with bullets. McKay, his buddy, was dead. Most of the stragglers were wounded.

Katro wanted to say, "I told you so," but refrained. No one else had enough anger left in them to go out again. The citizens of the capitol came to gather the heroes and tend to their wounds and give them as much comfort as they could spare. The soldiers received love and care in the homes of the families. That was enough for most of them. They found the peace they needed to calm their anger.

Shelling of the city came next. Counselors and priests called upon the governor.

"You must use the weapon at once!"

But the weapon required a sacrifice of blood. Governor Ibera was heart-broken. At the beginning of this crisis, he had consulted the holy books. In them, he found that Perfecta would have to give her blood in sacrifice to make the weapon work. Was he being selfish by not sacrificing his daughter? Was he out of touch with the situation? It was totally against his nature to make such a sacrifice. He continued to pray, but the answer was always the same. Only the blood of a pure and virtuous servant of the House of Mulgare, his family, could turn on the weapon. The time was now, or the city would be destroyed.

* * *

McDrew found Perfecta in the garden surrounded by twisting columns forming a square atrium. She sat on a stone bench of clear quartz crystal that glowed from a sunbeam shining down to form a translucent altar. Her outline glowed from the background of sunshine. He understood that they would kneel at such an altar in one of their temples when they were married. Even though she glowed with a white halo, her countenance sagged like melting wax. Her meditation interrupted, she smiled a sad smile, turning her head towards the man she loved. He sat beside her, taking her chin in his hand to lift her face to his.

"You look lovely," he said, "but why the sadness in your eyes?"

She glanced at him and then turned away. She thought if she said what was in her heart she would burst. McDrew threw his arm around her and drew her to him. She rested her head on his shoulder, smelling of fresh ocean breezes. He had experienced the smell

of the ocean when he was a little child visiting an uncle on Earth. He had wanted to stay near the ocean and be drowned in the music of the roaring of the waves beating against the shore, but his mother came and stole him away from all that. They had to leave or they would miss their flight back to New Germany in Alpha Centauri. On board ship high above the earth, he had stared at the oceans and watched the blue globe grow smaller and smaller until it became a dim point of light. Something inside him said that's what was happening now. He felt he was losing her as he had lost those wonderful oceans.

"Has someone influenced you against me?" he asked her. "Have I offended you? What is it?"

She turned around with tears streaming down her face. "I love you," she said. "And I'll never have your children. I wanted to."

"You'll have lots of children. Our genes aren't incompatible. We come from the same species."

"That's not it," she sobbed. "I can't be with you. It's over."

"What is this?" McDrew felt astonished. "Is this some cultural thing that I didn't know of? Is it your father? What is it?"

"Oh, McDrew!" She embraced him. "I'm as shocked and puzzled as you. But my father says I must be sacrificed on the blood altar like our ancient fathers used to do."

"I won't have it!" McDrew bolted straight up, stood, and pulled her to his breast. "Come on! We've got to get out of here! We can't let this turn into a nightmare!"

He pulled her hands as he went to leave, but she stood like a heavy stone. "I've agreed to let him do it," she cried. "Oh, don't you see? I've agreed. I can't back down now! I can't break my word."

"Why?"

"He consulted the holy books. They told him that he must sacrifice someone in his own family, someone close to him. And I'm the one closest to him. He chose me. I accepted."

"Why?" demanded McDrew. "What requires a sacrifice? And where is civilized man? Neither my people nor your people! Come with me. We will leave all this behind. We will go to Earth where there is no war!"

Perfecta yanked away from McDrew and ran in the opposite direction. He ran after, but lost her in a labyrinth of corridors.

* * *

It was time. The Soul left their tree-top forest homes and headed north to the capitol. Smag announced to his army in Takmall to begin the march. Leaving their underground hideout, they marched north. The Soul trickled into the ranks of Smag's army. Halfway, more Soul than Fish marched towards the Company's forces. A lot of ground was covered by jumping between portals. Sometimes they marched past villages and towns to rouse the spirits of the people. Many of them joined the march. The people cheered much and wept for joy because they knew that the Soul was on the march.

Most of the occupation forces had been called to the front, and those that were left behind did not keep order. Their efforts were focused on robbing the people, getting as much treasure as they could accumulate, and cheating one another out of each other's treasures by gambling, arguing and stealing.

Marching to the capitol, the combined forces of Smag, Soul and the town's people became almost as large as the Company's forces. They came upon their rear and the Company turned their guns around to face them. The Soul didn't advance any farther. The two camps sat staring at each other with no hostilities. The Soul seemed to be completely unarmed. They were looked upon more as a curiosity.

* * *

Katro ran to the governor's state room all excited. "The shelling has stopped, Sir."

"Good," the governor replied. "That gives us a reprieve. We may not need to use that monster of a weapon."

At that moment, Tomo Shok ran into the room, holding up his crimson robes, and cried, "Governor, Governor, look on your monitor! Quickly!"

Governor Ibera turned on his overhead monitor. It showed a large army of men and of Soul behind the army of the Company. Chills ran up and down his spine. He thought, *We have been saved! We won't have to use the weapon, and we won't have to lose my daughter.*

"Katro," he cried, "send an embassy out to those invaders. Ask them if we can come to a peaceful settlement. Tell them we want to be friends, not enemies. Tell them we will welcome them as our guests. Otherwise, we will wait."

"Should I send Perfecta and McDrew?" Katro asked, knowing that they would be able to handle the situation. They were more experienced in being ambassadors.

"No," the governor said. "Send the priests. They will look more impressive."

Katro went over to Tomo Shok who had been standing by and bowed to him.

“Honorable Shok,” he said, “will you take the initiative?”

“I will honor you both,” he said with the wave of his palm. He bowed, turned and left.

* * *

General Seamore was sitting down to lunch when his adjutant came into the tent.

“General, Sir.” He gave a snappy salute. “You should come and see. They are trying to surround us with priests now.”

“My god! Not now, Pershing! Can’t you see I’m right in the middle of a cultured Rigal steak?” the general grumbled.

“You should see the sight, Sir,” Pershing smiled. “It is quite the spectacle.”

General Seamore sighed, grabbed the bone of the steak, stood and started chewing on it.

“Alright, by god, we will see this spectacle!” he said with a mouthful of meat.

Twenty four crimson robed bald headed priests stood before the entrance to the city bowing and putting their hands together as if in prayer.

“Why,” the general said on seeing them, “these Fish are terrified of us.”

He peered at them through squinting eyes, concentrating his anger.

“Round up those buggers,” he said, “and bring them into the camp. There are not enough of them to do any damage. Still, have them stripped and searched.”

Tomo Shok could be heard saying, "This is an outrage!" and several more explicatives.

The priests were brought before the general. They had been allowed to dress, and their crimson robes fluttered in the ever present wind. Tomo Shok gave the governor's message and bowed. The general laughed.

"We have the upper hand here, Mr. Priest," the general said. "Tell your governor that we will except his unconditional surrender. The rest of the planet is ours anyway. This one small fortress will not stand up to our big guns. Tell him we will expect his answer within the hour. And what is that crowd to the south of us doing? Did they come here for a picnic to watch what happens to their capitol?"

"Oh, no Sir," Tomo Shok said. "They are not here for you. They are here for us. To save us. When you are done with us, we will go with them. They are the Soul of this planet. They have come for us."

"Now isn't that something," the general said, finishing off his cultured Rigal steak, gnawing on the bone. "Your own people have turned against you. Now you have two armies against you. It's about time you surrender. But don't worry. They won't get you. We will take care of you first."

"I don't think you understand," Tomo Shok said, bowing with the palms of his hands together. "They have come to save us from you."

The general laughed, spitting meat onto Tomo Shok's robe. "They have no guns," he said. "and we have our guns trained on both you and them. It's surrender or we will eat you like I have eaten this rare and fine steak! Now go and tell that to your people!"

He turned and went back to his tent. "I'm through talking."

Tomo Shok and his priests marched back towards the mountain. They turned around to have one last look at the invaders, turned again and disappeared into the rock face.

One hour passed with no word from the governor. General Seamore gave the order. "Start blasting that mountain down!" When asked about the camp to the south, he replied, "Them too."

* * *

Ogden had come from New Germany on assignment. He had been attached to the embassy to act as a translator. It was his gift. Of course, he had to train with fourteen years of hard study to become a linguist. The Company looked for young men with talent. He had been only eight years old when they found him. He spoke four languages. He had been brought up bilingual. When he got older he had to learn the street language. When he entered school, he quickly picked up the New German spoken there. His teacher had reported him to the Company. They watched him a couple of years and decided to pay his way to higher education. He entered the Company school at ten. It had not been hard to leave a family of thirteen children. He never did have the time to form attachments. That doesn't mean he didn't look for friends. He had many in school, but still, only shallow acquaintances. Even with girls there were no lasting commitments.

Ogden was always looking for something or someone to fill a void left by the early death of his birth parents, although not quite conscious of the reason. He had tried differing religions. Some were based simply on psychology. Some were based upon some

messiah that people were waiting on to come and save them. Some worshiped a great Soul. All of them differed in their morality and mysteries. None of them filled his yearning and hungry heart. This caused him to read and study, and he learned to read in over a hundred languages. He put most of his trust in science. He read about linguistics and the mythologies of differing cultures. He wrote about the parallels and symbologies of these cultures, although he only published on the Internet, which contained a complete library created by all known sentient beings and was connected to all the worlds owned by the Company.

Coming to Ice in another boring assignment, it was his sixth one in the four years he had worked as a translator. He never stayed in one place for very long. And every time he went to another world he found their libraries. Usually, he would get on the Universal Internet and download anything he wanted to read. On Ice, though, it was different. All the computers were in headquarters, and the only libraries were in the schools set up by the Company. If a Fish wanted to read a book, he had to go to one of the temples, but he wasn't allowed in any of them unless he went through a year or two of cleansing and meditating. Ogden wasn't there to make that kind of commitment. So what books were available to him were at children's schools, and he had read most of them already. Still, he visited the schools, browsed their libraries and talked to the students. He didn't associate with the teachers, they were off-worlders who knew very little about the Fish culture.

Ogden learned a lot from the children and roaming the streets. At first the Fish seemed very ignorant. They couldn't read or write. They had no written history. Everything was by word of mouth. That's one of the reasons the Company sought to

“educate” them. But the knowledge these children had of their history, of mathematics, geometry, physics, biology, economics, astronomy, electronics, mechanics, and all sorts of things that didn’t fit into any category, to him was astounding. These children were then being told they didn’t know anything and that they had to re-learn everything their parents had taught them. What Ogden saw the Company doing was not only re-culturing them but making them lose their higher technology on purpose, out of egotism. We are right and you are wrong. We are your gods and you will obey us. They called the science of the Fish a pseudo-science, and their literature nothing but mythology, and not to be taken seriously as well as anything that was not written.

Fish were not allowed to live in caves. The Company could not keep them under surveillance unless they lived in something permeable to radio and microwaves. A new economy was forced upon them in which nothing was free anymore. Fear of repression, fear of being arrested by the secret police, fear of losing their jobs, their homes and families, or their lives if they didn’t obey, riddled the new society imposed upon them by the Company. It was after the uprising, in which the Company imposed martial law to keep the Fish from walking off into the country, that Ogden began to be enlightened. He had an epiphany. It was then that he wanted to study the mythology of the fish people.

Ogden had been visiting a school in Ibuta. He had been observing one of the boys whom the teachers had labeled a dunce. Whatever he wrote or drew or painted in the class was about the mythology of Ice. He was used to seeing Ogden there and would often bring him a picture he had painted depicting the Soul and spaceships, planetary maps, Fish being bombarded with ice and families fleeing into caves for various reasons. Sometimes they would be chased by soldiers, and sometimes by the Soul. One

day the boy, whose name Ogden learned was Uun, brought him a picture of a Fish wearing Ogden's clothes. The boy said "This is you." It was Ogden with fish scales. Somehow, and he didn't understand why, Ogden wanted to cry. He felt an overwhelming empathy for the fish people. It was a spiritual awakening.

Ogden grew listless and began leaving the compound more often. When McDrew disappeared, he fell apart. He didn't go back to work. He spent his days walking the streets and visiting the schools to read in their libraries. He wound up living in an abandoned apartment house, where, oddly enough, he found a pool of water in the basement that was full of fish. A current rippled the water. He assumed it to be an underground river. Later, he found it common among cave homes on Ice. The fish people didn't bother him. Everyone assumed that he rented. He felt like a loophole in some law book or awfully lucky. He had dropped out of society, and if the Company had a warrant for his arrest, all he could think of was that the Universe gave him a day of grace.

When Ogden arrived at the capitol city, people accepted him as though he had always lived there. Left to himself, he roamed the palace at liberty going wherever he pleased. He traveled from place to place, acting like a roving reporter recording conversations and interviews. He became well acquainted with the governor's state room in which the weapon was the central piece of furniture. It appeared like an ominous altar in an ancient temple. Several stories above that was the library. He had stumbled upon that room the night before Chani had been murdered. It had been set up like a little chapel with fish on slanted shelves lining the walls. He saw no indications of what book was what. They all looked alike. Central to the back wall was a shrine with an elaborately carved box on a pedestal. A canopy of red stone held up by two twisted columns en-

closed it.

Ogden went around the room touching all the books he could reach. He didn't understand how to open them or how to run them until Tomo Shok came into the room one day and found him sitting on one of the lounge chairs poring over one of the fish books. He was turning it over and over, touching the scales and getting nothing. The priest took pity on him. Feeling that he was sincere in wanting to know about his people, he went over to one of the shelves, took down a fish book and gave it to Ogden. It was beyond him how the priest could tell what it was about.

Tomo Shok said, "Here, start with this one. It will teach you how to read all the rest." He handed it to Ogden, took the other book and replaced it. He then showed Ogden which scales to push.

Ogden began having visions of music. Ideas came into his mind that taught him the laws of vibration and harmony. He learned how to play the fish books as he would a musical instrument. It was like playing organ music on a flute. When he found that he had a knack for it, he read one book after another throughout the library. It was like playing all the instruments in an orchestra singlehanded. Understanding the Fish culture was dawning upon his consciousness. He barely ate or slept. Tomo Shok would bring him fish on a tray with wine, but to eat added too much labor to the processes of study.

What Ogden learned of the culture of the people of Ice made him feel at home. He finally found something that was in tune with the feelings of his own heart. He felt cradled in the arms of the Great Mother and inspired by a Father in Heaven. Though they didn't speak much of it, only in the most sacred chambers of their temples did they mention his name, the Great White Brother, the Father in Heaven, as he translated it. He

was beginning to believe that his life was a plan of God, that his life had meaning. It was peculiar to their inner religion, which they didn't talk about to strangers (invaders), that God was literally their father and had visited them in the past. Their books were rich in past experiences of these visitations. He began to believe that he had a father and a mother at last and that they had embraced him. He found that the culture he was studying was based on the fact that, as the visions had shown him, he was a spiritual being inhabiting a tabernacle of clay, that he had lived in a world of light, what people would call a sun or star, before he was born into the flesh. This culture was based upon that point of view, not to build up the body, but to build upon the spiritual, and that all men were brothers. All women were sisters. They all had the same father. They attempted to live by the words he taught them during his visits.

A synopsis of his words began, "Blessed are the poor in spirit who come unto me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are all they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

"Blessed are all they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled with the Holy Ghost.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

"And blessed are all the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

A warm feeling grew in Ogden's heart like a tree of life. He started understanding that his ego or thinking mind was only an instrument, that his real self was that which was conscious of his thoughts. He understood that he was pure consciousness. Peace and joy came with that warm comforting feeling in his heart. He stayed and lived in that

libraryhen the governor asked him what ever happened to Ogden, Tomo Shok reported that Ogden was becoming a priest.

* * *

General Seamore had started the bombardment of the city and the camp of the Soul behind him. Although he saw no weapons in the camp below him, there seemed to be return fire from them and they were quite accurate in hitting their targets. Yet, he saw no hits, no destruction happening to their camp.

“They must be throwing up some sort of smoke screen that’s messing up our instruments,” he told his adjutant. “Our gunners show direct hits. They cannot be wrong. We need to find where that screen is coming from. Don’t waste your ammo. Go find that screen. Continue with the city bombardment.”

“Hold your fire to the south!” screamed the adjutant. “Lieutenant Jason! Bring me some of your best men. We need to spy out the camp below.”

Lieutenant Jason and his men went to the camp of the Soul. They came back and reported they couldn’t find any weapons of any kind. They saw no damage to the camp, but what they did see frightened them. They saw strange creatures not like the Fish. They were gaunt and naked and slant-eyed, and they were all holding up their hands.

* * *

Governor Ibera took Perfecta to his stateroom when the bombardment started up

again. Tears rushed down his cheeks. Perfecta's face was also drenched. McDrew found them before they arrived and went with them. Katro was also there along with a few guards and priests.

"Is there no other way?" McDrew pleaded, holding onto the governor's arm.

One of the sentries pulled McDrew off of him, and the governor said, "Carl McDrew! My city is being demolished! My people have nowhere else to go but into the hands of the invaders. They will be treated as slaves. I must use the weapon to save my people! There is no other way!"

Ogden, up in the library, heard a deafening boom. The building shook. Rocks and dirt fell down into the governor's stateroom. Everyone jumped towards the walls to get out of the way. Some were hit but were dragged to safety. Perfecta and McDrew were in a last embrace when it happened. A giant rock fell onto the weapon.

"Get that rock off the weapon!" the governor commanded.

"Goodbye my love," Perfecta cried.

Governor Ibera grabbed his daughter and hugged her. McDrew cried, "Perfecta!" through his tears.

"Goodbye my father," Perfecta sobbed.

"My child!" the governor moaned.

He placed her onto the weapon. Tomo Shok gave him the ceremonial knife from an elaborately carved box. He took the knife and raised it above his head. Tears from his face washed over the sacrifice. The building shook as another explosion hit and Perfecta bounced off the weapon onto the floor. The governor was knocked off his feet. It seemed as though the whole world was reeling to and fro.

Hitting the library above, a blast tore the whole building apart, raining rocks and dirt into the stateroom. The floor was knocked out from under Ogden, and he fell down through the many floors. Huge rocks fell beside each person, not hitting anyone. Ogden fell with a big splat onto the weapon, blood shooting on everyone around him. Perfecta and the governor were getting to their knees but had been knocked down again.

Outside the city, huge explosions went off inside the camp of the Company's army. Every time they fired a shot at the city, the big guns exploded killing the soldiers around them. General Seamore and his general staff tore their uniforms open in anger. When they did, they found their chests filled with black scales. These officers screamed! The remaining soldiers were so angry that they ran towards the city, assailed its walls.

Governor Ibera knelt beside Perfecta and held her in his arms. He bawled like a baby. McDrew knelt down beside them both and embraced them.

"Listen," he said through his sobs. "The shelling has stopped. You can hear far-away explosions like an army being destroyed."

After a moment, everyone listened, got to their feet, and seeing each other alive, started cheering, and then became silent again as their eyes fell on the bloody form atop the weapon. They saw it was Ogden. Chills ran up and down their spines.

"God hath given us a sacrifice," quoted Tomo Shok from an old and ancient text.

Everyone surrounded the altar. Perfecta reached out and touched Ogden's hand. It was like reading. She beheld all the things he had been learning.

"He was becoming a priest," she said.

"He was pure in heart," the governor said.

A scale fell from Perfecta's neck as she turned her head to lay it on McDrew's

breast. It fell onto the floor unnoticed.

Ogden's body was taken into the lower chambers for burial, but before they could say any words over him, a messenger came and said that the mercenaries were storming the city, and the people were fleeing.

Thmala arrived, walking through the wall. She looked more like one of the Soul. Her scales were falling off.

"Thmala!" cried the governor. "You have returned. Our city is being raped. The people are in distress."

He went to hug her, but she said, "Touch me not, for I am in hrogh-theg. I am losing my scales. I am becoming a book. To touch me now is to go mad." She smiled. "Do not worry about the people. We have come to rescue them. They are being taken to Tak-mall where they will be safe. Goodbye my father. We will be united, all of us. Right now, you must come with me. I will guide you to your destiny." With that, she opened a portal in the wall and they went through.

General Seamore occupied the capitol city Ibera. It was an empty victory for the city had been emptied of its people. The soldiers looked everywhere, but they found no one hiding in any corner or closet or basement and they cursed the technology they couldn't understand. What made them more furious was that the serum had failed to work, and they had all grown those black scales. They had become the people they had most wanted to conquer. They set up camp in the city, taking whatever houses they desired. General Seamore and his entourage took up headquarters in the famous capitol building which they had almost demolished. More than a third of the city had no roof and was open to the sky, which was starting to cloud over. After a few hours of occupy-

ing the city it started to rain.

Ogden's blood was washed off the weapon, off the altar.

Chapter Ten

Serums are not supposed to break down. One would expect a medicine given by a doctor to work. That would be a reasonable assumption. Yet, the serum given to the Company employees on Ice suddenly quit working. Everyone who was white turned into mixes. Everyone was getting scales. It was too late to leave the planet to avoid the strenuous radiation from the twin suns. Many became depressed, even paranoid. Those who had vanished into Takmall had their scales fall off, making them white and fleshy.

As soon as the soldiers under General Seamore stormed Ibera, Smag's group went into the city by portals which opened up beneath their feet. They went from house to house to lead the people out, amazed at how the Soul guided them. They walked right through walls, grabbing people by their arms and pulling them through to safety. So the people of Ibera fled and came upon the open plain to the south of the city where they were met by the Soul. Smag was spokesman.

"Listen, all you who have escaped this day," cried Smag. The air carried his voice to everyone in the camp. "Today is the day of your freedom. This is the day of your baptism." The clouds overhead thundered, and the rain carried Smag's voice to them. "Today your scales have fallen." People removed their clothes, and sure enough, their scales fell as they disrobed. Their voices rang with the thunder to create a new song. "Today, you march south to Takmall and to the forest, your new home. You are the Soul! Today is the last march of Swarm, the end of Swarm!"

The people shouted with joy and marched south, singing a song of rejoicing and of creation. As they went from portal to portal and from village to village, they were

joined by many people. Of those who joined them, their scales fell off into a new vision and a new life. They became the Soul of Ice.

Among the throng, happily marching to Takmall, were Perfecta and McDrew. They marched along the coasts of lakes and saw forests beginning to grow around the lakes.

“McDrew,” Perfecta asked. “What are these plants? They’re growing taller than we.”

“My dear,” he said, “behold the new forests of Ice. Though the mountains are crystalline, the whole of Ice will be thick with trees. The Soul will cover the planet. We will spread from the equatorial regions and own the whole world. In the next Swarm we will go into a new world.”

* * *

Most of the soldiers, in abandoning the army camp, tore their clothes from their bodies as they stormed the city. They left their clothes lying on the ground as their ancestors of Earth did thousands of years before, yelling as they raised a battle axe to terrify their victims. They raised the Rebel Yell to scare the Fish whom they didn't find because they had disappeared through the portals. Their victory seemed empty.

The Soul remained as the people marched south taking up the clothes left by the soldiers. They dressed themselves for the first time in thousands of years and traveled south also, but not for the forests. They headed for Ibuta, for the launching pads and the space ships that brought the Company. When they arrived, they found the compound

abandoned. In fact, most of Ibuta had been abandoned except for looters and thieves. Bodies littered the compound as though it had been invaded by the local peoples. General Seamore had not left enough soldiers to keep the compound or the city safe. He had spread his forces too thin. The corruption brought by the invaders had been turned back upon their own heads.

The Soul left Ice. No one knows why they left. It was the Swarm. The Swarm left with them. They spread it to other planets, leaving as it had come, in the space ships of the Company.

* * *

General Seamore sent a squad in a couple of air ships down to Ibuta when he couldn't contact headquarters by radio. They found the compound destroyed, all the electronics melted and fused together, the ships gone. They were stranded, left there to fend for themselves. Using the radios, they could hear nothing from the heavens. But they had hope the Company would eventually send another ship, for they would likely conduct an investigation when they found no more timber arriving. The squad leader reported back and said that he had found the body of Shahalez, but she had become a mix like everyone else. There were no whites to be seen. The squad leader ordered all the medical supplies be taken back with them. They gathered that and what food they could find and headed north. That would be their new headquarters until help arrived.

* * *

Perfecta and McDrew made love in the forest, enjoying the soft pleasures of their new bodies. McDrew found her seaweed hair had been a dressing she applied. Without the dressing, her hair became as soft as his. He discovered this when they swam in a small lagoon fed by waterfalls coming down a lush green mountainside. They never thought of clothes. Nether did anyone else. They danced and played and dined on free food. Everyone took a holiday and enjoyed the Garden of Eden life they had inherited. After a few days, they made baskets and gathered fruit, laying it on the ground outside the boundaries of the forest. They did this at night, and on the next day, people of the planet again had fruit which they picked up and shipped everywhere to provide for the whole of Ice.

In one of their gathering soirées, Perfecta and McDrew came upon a face sticking out of a burl in a tree. The face looked familiar. They stayed, staring at the face, watching it grow a neck and shoulders. In time, the body grew longer and longer looking more like a seed pod. When arms appeared, the figure awoke. By that time another person had joined in the watching. It was Chani, but a skinnier version of himself. To these three, time went unmeasured. It may have taken nine months or several years of growth, no one knows for sure.

Ogden's last memory was of being blown away while reading one of the books in the governor's library, aware of falling and then experienced a sickening, sudden, hard numbness like being shot with thousands of nails from several nail guns. Then he dreamed of forest, aware that he had thousands of eyes and breathed through billions

upon billions of leaves. His lungs seemed to spread over the whole girth of Ice. It was ecstasy. He opened his mouth and sang and called and chirped and cried through countless mouths and beaks. He saw thousands of naked people coming into the forest and taking their place as the Soul of Ice. He made love thousands of times simultaneously and born in countless wombs as the Soul expanded throughout the forest. As his consciousness began to shrink, he became aware of one particular body stuck in a tree and three people looking at him, but he didn't know if he was looking out their eyes, out of his eyes or out of the eyes of a little bug looking up at him. In a timeless moment, he began to focus. As he studied, he learned how to concentrate on the three beings looking at him.

“How do you feel, Ogden?” asked Perfecta, smiling.

“A little stuck, I think,” he responded.

“You will be fine,” Chani said. “Just rest and finish growing. We are right here. We are your welcoming committee, you see.”

Another timeless moment passed. Ogden said, “I was reading in the library. I must be dreaming or reading another book. It's a wonderful dream or book.” He dropped one hand to the ground and touched the grass.

“You're about done,” McDrew said.

“You would think I was a cake the way you said that,” Ogden commented.

“I wonder if I will ever remember what cake tastes like,” McDrew pondered.

Both Perfecta and Chani asked, “What's cake?”

McDrew and Ogden both said, “Well...” Then they said it was like a sweet bread.

“What’s bread?” asked Chani.

“It’s like Pahaha fruit,” Perfecta said. “I had some down in Ibuta.”

Ogden’s other hand dropped to the ground. He started slanting a bit. Then he slid into Perfecta and McDrew's hands as they reached out to catch him.

“He’s done,” McDrew said.

“Ahhh!” cried Ogden as he slid out of the cocoon.

Perfecta, McDrew and Chani laughed. Very gooey, sticky and slimy, Ogden came out. They placed him on the soft grass and let him sit up.

“Ugh!” complained Ogden. “I need a bath!”

They all laughed again, even Ogden as they helped him up and guided him to a fountain of water with a nice big pool to bathe in.

“No one caught me,” Chani said, “when I was reborn. I was all alone. Things were happening. Everybody was rushing around.”

“We love you Chani,” Perfecta and McDrew said.

“I know you dooo.” Chani smiled.

The End

List of Names on Ice

Soul – can be used as plural when used to refer to the people who live in the equatorial forests. When used in the singular, represents the soul of a single person, which, in this story is not separate from the Soul living in the forests or the soul of the planet, so it is always capitalized.