



LOST GENERATIONS

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Excerpt of three chapters

CHAPTER ONE

The wooden fort crouched on a hillside overlooking the snow covered valley could have been in the American Wild West in the nineteenth century rather than the twenty-third. It could have even have been Washington or perhaps north of the border in British Columbia, Canada with the towering mountains stretching across the horizon but was neither.

New Seattle, the fortified village of a little over a thousand humans was so far removed in distance and time. Except for Jordan Wittenburg and the handful of Generation 4 centenarians, the inhabitants had forgotten their ancestry. They didn't know the significance of the two flags that blew with equal prominence from the corners of the fort's four-meter high log walls. One was a light blue with white circle of symbols around the center, the long forgotten United Nations and the other was merely called The Stars and Stripes. The history of both had been purposely withheld from Generation 5 eighty years earlier by a unanimous vote in the Survival of Humanity Protocol.

But the two flags survived to represent the last bastion of humanity on the entire planet of Delpe, hundreds of light years from their ancestors' "home" of Earth, information also withheld from the younger generations.

On this 16th day of February 2248, True Time, the inhabitants had more pressing problems on their minds. A scout had returned with important information. The clickers were already across the international boundary at the New Colorado River. Over the summer and fall, the lower plains had been evacuated as the enemy had moved through the human state. Worse, though, were the creatures' new body suits equipped with thermal heating so their cold blood could remain functional in the winter climate that normally froze them into immobility. It was also believed twenty or more flying females were assembling behind the front line. This was unusual as these females were normally only used for reproduction of the species.

The native inhabitants of the planet were only slightly shorter than a human and stood on two legs with the other four limbs used like human arms. In intelligence, they were equal to the humans but lacked any kind of morality or conscience to go with it. Old Jordan Wittenburg called them giant ants, another word lost in antiquity, but to the succeeding generations they were simply clickers because of the sound they supposedly made when they were annoyed or surprised. Most Generations 6 and 7 could speak Crucnon but preferred to converse in English, the language of their ancestors. The alphabet the enemy used was identical to theirs but the theory was that clickers had stolen it more than a century earlier to replace a less functional hieroglyphics. Nobody, though, could give a reason why the structure of both languages were similar, in fact Crucnon was closer in syntax to English than Russian, an Earth language that had been phased out two generations earlier.

However, more practical problems were being discussed in the besieged village that day. Andrea Jurjevics, the Proctor, dressed in her usual blue jeans and red woolen pullover, sat in the underground council chambers and frowned.

"What else have you found out, Ron?" she asked.

The Generation 6 man wiped a somewhat dirty hand across his brow and grimaced. "They have mechanical vehicles on gigantic wheels that can travel up our highway from the river in a few hours. The ones we saw can hold twenty or more clickers and have reinforced bars at the front. I believe they intend to batter our walls down or perhaps surround New Seattle and starve us into surrender."

"Have they learned to manufacture gunpowder in sufficient quantities to make explosive weapons, yet?"

"I don't believe so," Ron Cotterell replied. "The mechanical vehicles have been seen pulling gigantic catapults on skids. I earnestly believe they are preparing for one last attack on our walls. By attacking in mid-winter they are hoping to catch us with our defenses down."

"I see," muttered Commander Toby Evans, the tall gray-headed officer who was head of the village's Defense and Police Force, colloquially called the DPF. "This supports other information I have gathered."

Andrea glanced up but refrained from inquiring how Commander Evans gained his information. It was believed he had contact with an underground clickers' movement that supported coexistence on the planet with humans. She, instead, glanced around at the members of the Inner Council and spoke in a hushed voice.

"It appears we have little time, Fellow Councilors," she said. "We may need to prepare to evacuate New Seattle and withdraw to the caves beneath the mountains."

"But how long will we last there?" grumbled Councilor Malone Davidson. "They merely have to wait and starve us out. Without access to our farms in spring we will be out of food before October."

"So what do we do?" snapped Andrea. This councilor was quick to criticize but never bothered to offer constructive help. "Become their slaves or be wiped out? We all know what happened whenever any of our ancestors attempted to reason with the clickers?"

"Yes," supported Ron solemnly. "Records show the few humans that ventured into their lands were never heard of again. That was eighty years back."

"That's my point," Malone added with her own voice raised in anger. "The clickers are a much more advanced society now. They may agree to speak to us."

"Only the Blue Watch will," Toby replied. "They're small in number, young and really just a student protest group with no power."

The Proctor sighed. They had survived four attacks over the last summer with their farms wiped out and domesticated animals slaughtered. Now there were barely enough cattle, dairy cows or sheep to supply the village, the conditions in these northern latitudes were too cold to grow wheat and even the native vegetables really needed a warmer climate. Each year became more desperate and, with the clickers now capable of mounting a winter offensive, it seemed their days were numbered.

The Inner Council discussed the situation throughout the day and into the evening without really solving the problem. Withdrawal to the underground tunnels seemed the only solution if clickers broke through the outer defenses.

"I'll consult with Jordan Wittenburg and the elders," Andrea finally suggested.

"Those stupid old fools who live in dream of a far world somewhere out there," Malone waved her hands out in exasperation, "and a great silver flying machine to take us away for ever to the heavens. It's all fantasy, I tell you!"

"We all know your opinions, Malone." Andrea replied in a caustic voice, "but there may be some fact behind the legends." She stood up and fixed the other woman with an icy glare. "I'll speak to Jordan. It will do no harm."

"Not much good, either," Melanie muttered as she gathered up her papers, nodded at the two flags attached to the front wall and strutted out of the chamber.

The attack on New Seattle came at dawn the following Monday, when, without warning, thirty flying female clickers appeared out of the predawn darkness to attack the outer walls of the village. Before the lookouts could even sound the siren they were overhead with huge canisters clasped in their four arms. These were dropped on the south wall and burst in thunderclaps of explosion after explosion. The wooden logs simply disintegrated in the onslaught and more than two dozen defenders were killed.

"My God, they do have explosives!" Commander Evans gasped as he stared out the smoking gap to where the field outside could be seen. Line after line of suited clickers marched towards the gap to the ominous beat of a drum.

But the chief of the DPF was not about to give up easily. "Right flank, form a semicircle outside the breach!" he roared above the roar of the flames. "Left flank. Fire duties."

Fifty young men and women, all with shields, swords and crossbows leapt through the flames and outside to meet the incoming foe while fifty more were already bathing the wood with high pressure water hoses.

"Flying clickers heading for the north wall," a lookout screamed through a loud speaker. "At least a dozen."

This time, though, the humans were ready. Their own firearms came into action. Twenty mortars exploded and hurled a wall of stones at the incoming flight of female clickers. Five were hit and crashed to the ground to be killed by the explosives still held in their arms, another two dropped the bombs harmlessly beyond the outer perimeter. Four, however, reached the wall. Again, there was a discharge of explosions and a four-meter gap was blasted in the fence line.

"Lower and fire at will," Commander Evans ordered.

He smiled grimly as one clicker disintegrated in the air above him while a second tipped and plummeted to earth inside the compound.

She lay gasping on the ground with terrified eyes as a youth ran up with his sword drawn.

"Please!" she cried out in well-spoken English. "Please have mercy." Four three fingered hands covered her face in defense.

"Insect!" screamed the youth and was about to stab the clicker with his sword when a young woman rushed up and grabbed his arm.

"No, we do not kill in cold blood," she hissed and glowered at the youth.

"Why, Holly?" the youth replied but hesitated. After all, Holly Jurjevics was the Proctor's daughter and held considerable powers with humans as Generation 7 Leader.

The young woman swished a strand of red hair out of her eyes and stared down at the wounded clicker. Like the entire enemy, this female was dressed in a blue coverall; gloves, boots and Perspex like helmet that covered all except the yellow eyes and almost human shaped mouth. Her four wings were folded beneath her with the two left ones bleeding thick yellow blood.

The eyes, though, looked directly at Holly and tears of emotion appeared in their corners. "I had no choice," the creature gasped, again in English. "We must obey orders.

"Crap!" snarled the youth and lifted his sword again.

"You will withdraw, Hilton Foster," Holly said in a soft voice. "We are under military law today so that is an order."

Hilton stared at the angry face of his colleague but knew to disobey an order in an emergency was a serious offence. The young woman outranked him by three stripes.

"Watch her sting," he snorted but stood back.

"Crucnon do not have stings," the clicker gasped. Her eyes turned to Holly. "You must be Holly, Proctor Andrea Jurjevics' daughter," she continued. "Thank you for sparing my life Holly Jurjevics. I am your slave and will seek your permission to ritually assassinate myself so I am not a burden to the Vybber Nation nor the biped enemy." Tears once again appeared in the yellow eyes. "We have a poison capsule to bite on."

"I see," Holly replied and squatted beside the young female. She had never been this close to a clicker before but had studied numerous photographs of them. This one would be no older than her own twenty-three years. "What is your name and rank, crucial?"

She had studied clicker military law at college and knew this young female had failed in her duty and was expected to commit suicide in disgrace. She also knew, though, the ritual of becoming a slave. Any Crucnon, as the clickers' real name was, had the right to surrender as a slave to an enemy. This was usually to their kind and flying females would be sent to a concubine to reproduce the victor's offspring. Usually this amounted to a life of misery and death within months of the capture. In most cases suicide was the more pleasant alternative.

"Third Class Mother Jaddig Qarte, seconded to the First Fighting Wing of Northern Command's 27th Fighting Brigade as a Flying Bombardier." She spoke in her own language without removing her eyes from Holly.

"Have you any offspring?" Holly asked in the same language.

"I have not yet been prepared for mating," the creature replied and, for the first time diverted her eyes. "I was called up for military service instead."

"I see," Holly continued. "So under the protocols of war you are now under my orders?"

"That is correct. Shall I bite the poison capsule, Holly Jurjevics?" There was a tremble in the voice, which made the young human woman frown. Clickers were meant to be entirely devoid of emotions, totally regimented and also without pity. This wounded female was different

than she expected.

The eyes looking at her were pleading and full of emotion.

Before she could reply, a swordsman who walked up interrupted Holly. "The clickers have stopped advancing, Generation 7 Sergeant Major Jurjevics," he said and tried to ignore the clicker lying on the ground. "Your platoons are on stand down unless there is a rally call."

"Thank you Dean," Holly replied and gave the man a brief smile. The sudden attention to military rank annoyed her. She turned back to the clicker. "I order you to spit out the poison and surrender any weapons," she commanded.

"But you can't!" snapped Hilton Foster. "Let the creature kill herself."

Holly glowered at Foster but said nothing. Instead she turned to the wounded female and snapped. "Do it!"

Jaddig Qarte's mouth quivered but she nodded and spat a tiny red capsule out, reached to a small pocket inside of her body suit, removed a stiletto type knife and placed it on the ground beside her. "I have never had contact with humans," she trembled as her eyes switched to Hilton standing a meter behind Holly. "I have heard the males are particularly aggressive."

"They can be," Holly snapped, "but we are not barbarians." She next quoted a phrase learned at Military Academy. Its origin was, like many other things, unknown but the meaning was real. "Under the Geneva Convention, you are a prisoner of war and shall be treated for your wounds."

"I have heard of this convention," Jaddig Qarte muttered, still in her own language. "A cowardly protocol that our military forces do not recognize."

Holly looked into the yellow eyes. "Perhaps that is why we're human and you're crucnon." she whispered and looked up at Hilton. "Get a stretcher and take Jaddig Qarte to the infirmary," she ordered.

The youth was about to protest but saw the determined expression in Holly's eyes and decided to obey the command. "Yes, Generation 7 Sergeant Major Jurjevics," he muttered and walked away.

New Seattle was, in reality, a village built with defense and security utmost in the architects' minds. All security buildings were in four underground levels with dormitories and storage areas further down, still. When first started a generation earlier, a gigantic limestone cave had been used as the basis of the village. As well, entrance corridors had vacuum doors with a no-man's corridor between that could be filled with freezing carbon dioxide within seconds. Of course, the defenses could now be of little value when the clickers wore their thermal heated body suits.

The infirmary was off 2nd Avenue, the long walkway two levels below the surface reached by zigzag ramps. No elevators were installed as the small electrical generating plants only had the capacity to provide lighting and a few other essential services.

When Holly let the stretcher party through, citizens in the access route stood aside with varying expressions on their faces from curiosity to outright abhorrence. However, the young woman's standing in the small human outpost was high so, no comment was made as the wounded clicker was wheeled past.

The hospital was filled with burn victims and warriors suffering from cuts from the brief but ferocious fight before the humans drove the advancing enemy back by sending thousands of arrows into them. Dozens of young men and women were wounded but hundreds of the enemy lay dead around the village.

"We cannot give you blood as we have none of your type," Doctor Martin McLean stated in a quiet voice as he examined Jaddig. "We will, however, patch up your wings and stitch those nasty wounds in your shoulder and thorax. It is twenty degrees Celsius in here so you can remove your body suit without fear of losing mobility."

The young female paled, as her normally tanned face turned a dull gray. "Female crucnon do not undress in front of males," she replied in English and turned her pleading eyes to Holly. "Surely you understand that?"

Holly smiled. This was another unexpected response from this creature. "We can get Doctor Sandy Boydell to examine you," she replied. "She is female."

"Thank you," replied Jaddig. "I know I am a non creature now with no rights but..."

"You have the same rights as everyone else here," Holly interjected, "and that includes the right to privacy." She turned to Doctor McLean. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not," he replied and nodded to a nurse "You can take Ms..." he looked at the card in his hand, "Qarte through to that side room and I'll get Sandy."

"You humans are kind," the clicker stuttered. "We were told..." she never completed the sentence but caught Holly's eyes. Even though the clicker had no eyebrows or eyelids she managed to show her innermost thoughts through a facial expression.

"I think both creatures on this world have been told untruths about each other," Holly replied and briskly added. "I know I was."

A short dumpy woman appeared and without even a moment's hesitation began examining her patient. "We will give you a penicillin injection," she said. "I know your species respond to this antibiotic."

The young Crucnon stared at the hypodermic needle but didn't object when the doctor injected her upper arm. The pale, almost human face relaxed and she lapsed into a peaceful sleep. "I forgot to tell her I added morphine," Sandra added. "She was in considerable pain but the species has some system of blocking off the signal. Unfortunately this does not cure the injury and often adds to the damage."

"You know about clicker anatomy?" Holly grimaced.

"Yes, like their language at school, it is a compulsory subject at our medical training center. I think everyone hopes that, one day, we can be allies," She nodded. "Perhaps this is a first step on a long journey."

"Could be," Holly replied. "I know I learned something today."

Jaddig awoke to the faint glare of an electric light bulb, stared around and sat up in alarm. Holly was sitting in the adjacent chair with a book in her hands.

"It's okay," Holly said quietly. "Nobody will hurt you."

"What time is it?" the clicker girl asked.

"Three hundred hours," Holly added.

"Thank Sun God!" Jaddig gasped. "Quick, you must raise the alarm!"

"Why?" replied Holly. "Your forces have retreated. The battle is over."

"No it isn't! You don't understand."

Holly frowned. "Understand what, Jaddig?" She bent forward and gazed into the yellow eyes. There was something this young female was worried about.

"You have two hours," gasped the clicker. "At five, our mechanical machines arrive. They have drilling equipment and tanks of testra."

"Testra. What's that?"

"A deadly nerve gas," Jaddig Qarte replied. Her eyes expanded perfectly round to over three centimeters in diameter, "They're going to pump it into here. One whiff is enough to kill a person. Within half an hour you'll all be dead. Our army has plans of your whole underground city. They know where the main ventilation pipes are. Everything!" She reached out with both right hands and gripped Holly. The grip was cold but the young human woman knew the warning was genuine.

"Right," Holly whispered and walked to the telephone on the wall. Four digits were punched in and she cursed as she waited for Commander Evans to answer.

"Commander. It's Holly," she said when his sleepy voice answered. "Code Red. We must evacuate everyone immediately and seal the city. This is not a bluff. My emergency authority number is Triple 8, 59, double 7."

"Explain!" Snapped Evans and listened as Holly repeated Jaddig's warning.

"Can you trust this crucnon?"

"I believe so. She has nothing to gain by lying."

"Okay. Evacuate the infirmary to Emergency Exit 76. Go into the maze. Left, straight then right. You'll find an airlock 774. Repeat please," he added in a crisp voice.

Holly did and Evans continued. "Through the airlock is a reception room. Wait there for further instructions. I'll do everything else."

"We're evacuating," Holly told her patient as a siren began to wail through out the room and a mechanical voice filled the air. "Condition Red. Emergency Evacuation. This is not a drill. Please proceed to your nearest Red Exit sign. Repeat. This is not a practice. Please proceed to your nearest Red Exit. All military personnel are ordered to find the children and Generation 4 citizens on your personal list and escort them to the exit doors. Condition Red..." the message was repeated.

Holly checked her electronic notepad and found it contained the names of ten hospital patients in her immediate vicinity.

"Can you walk?" she asked Jaddig and received a nod. "I can also push a bed." the clicker replied as she slipped out of bed, grabbed her body suit and proceeded to put it on.

"Come on," Holly said to a young soldier with multiple burns in the next room. "You heard the speaker. Do you mind if Jaddig pushes your bed?"

"No," the young man chuckled. "I often wondered what a female clicker looked like. Almost as beautiful as you, Holly."

"Watch it, Douglas," the woman replied with a tiny grin and moved to the next bed.

It took an hour but by four fifteen, New Seattle was like a ghost town, electronic detonations were set and the last troops turned off and isolated the main ventilation shafts, opened the top secret emergency ventilation. The entrances to the maze were electronically sealed behind them and citizens gathered in the reception room where a roll call was in operation.

At five, exactly as Jaddig Qarte had said, twenty mechanical vehicles rolled in through the gaps in the fence followed by hundreds of ground troops. There was no resistance. The mechanical monsters drove to pre-selected sites and raised steel drills similar to oilrigs. But they never began operating.

Hundreds of meters below the surface, Andrea Jurjevics gave the order and three councilors entered their codes into a computer, Toby Evans nodded and pulled the self-destruct lever down.

Above, New Seattle disappeared in high explosive, smoke, flames and debris as fifty charges detonated simultaneously. Five thousand living beings died that morning but one thousand three hundred and fifteen humans and one clicker survived the earthquake that shook their reinforced bomb shelter below. The emergency evacuation that had been built sixty years earlier worked perfectly. Now there was a ten-kilometer journey through underground tunnels to caves in the mountains, the last retreat for humankind on the planet of Delphe.

CHAPTER TWO

When the evacuation into the tunnels began, Andrea Jurjevics walked up and waited while her daughter she tended to Jaddig's wounds. She exchanged a few brief comments with the clicker and drew Holly aside.

"Jordan Wittenburg wishes to speak to you urgently, Holly, " she said. "He is quite depressed by the destruction of New Seattle but I believe he has more to say than just the ramblings of an elderly man."

Holly grimaced. She knew Jordan, of course, but had not really had a lot to do with him. "Okay, Mom," she sighed. "Where is he."

"Here My Child," a raspy voice interrupted and Holly glanced up to see the elder standing at the small side entrance. "I need to speak to you alone."

The young woman nodded, gave her mother a brief grimace and followed the old man through the crowded main auditorium until they came to another alcove lit by one weak light bulb.

"This is a poor substitute for my apartment but will have to do," Jordan began. "Please sit if you wish."

Holly smiled and sat on the dry ground with her back against the wall. Shadows from the one swinging bulb gave the cave a surreal appearance and the voices in the main cave became but a faint hum in the distance.

Jacob took a small bottle and two shiny mugs from his jacket pocket, poured a small amount of liquid in each and handed one to Holly.

"A little wine?" he asked.

"Thank you," the red haired girl replied and politely sipped the drink. It tasted tart but was relaxing on the lips.

"I noticed what you did for the crucnon," The centenarian began with a crinkled smile and wave of a shaky hand. "Somehow, it reflects everything we stand for."

"And what is that, Jordan?"

"Humanity, Child. Compassion? That young crucnon was dropping death and devastation on our village but you did not rush in with a sword and pierce the creature's heart, like that youth wanted to do, but instead offered her help. " His watery eyes found hers, " You turned an enemy into a possible friend."

"I could not leave her to die," Holly replied in a soft voice. "As it worked out I found she was forced into fighting us. She had no choice."

"Exactly," the old man continued, " and human history is filled with accounts of behavior no different than that of the ruling crucnon. Historically, our kind are no better than hers."

"How do you know, Jordan?" Holly replied. Her eyes lit up in interest.

Jordan Wittenburg sighed. "Have you heard of the Survival of Humanity Protocol?"

"Yes," Holly replied. "It was a course our ancestors set out for us to follow eighty years ago."

"When it was discussed I was your age, Holly and the junior representative on the committee that proposed it." He sighed, sat down beside the girl, lifted his knees and folded his arms around them. There seemed to be a glow in his eyes and his old body appeared to shed the years. "It was more than a vision of the future. It was a decision to hide the past from future generations."

"But why?" Holly whispered.

"So we would not cling to a faint hope of something that might never happen."

"And what was that?"

The old man's eyes moved across to the attractive woman with shoulder length red hair and warm blue eyes. "We are not of this world, Holly. Our ancestors came here in a mighty starship but were stranded on this planet. The first generations thought they would be rescued but the years went by until we realized there would be not be one. We wanted our children and

children's children to be free of this faint hope of rescue hence the Survival of Humanity Protocol. There it was agreed to withhold information about our past from our children and up until this day, it has worked."

"So why are you telling me, Jacob? Surely this knowledge will only depress our people?"

"True," Jordan sighed. "Except for one last sub-clause in the Protocol which I am now invoking."

Holly bit on her lip waited but said nothing.

"Like it or not, Young Lady, you are, through your age and democratic choice, leader of the Generation 7 that goes from your 23 years down to John Garret born but three weeks ago. Your child, when you chose to have one, will be one of the first of Generation 8, but I digress." He stopped and sipped his wine before continuing. "Subclause 63.7 of the Survival of Humanity Protocol gives me the right; no commands me to hand to the leader of the last adult generation the final orders. That, Holly Jurjevics is you." His old leathery face twisted into a thin smile. "Thank God it is you and not that whippersnapper hothead Hilton Foster."

"He almost beat me in the election for Generation 7 Leader," Holly replied modestly.

"If you can call ninety percent of the female vote and sixty of the male vote close," Jordan chortled. "I've followed you closely, My Dear, and are proud you are my great grand daughter."

"Am I?" Holly gasped. "I didn't know."

The old man shrugged. "Another Survival of Humanity Protocol," he added. "We wanted to stop any inter-family rivalry so from that date, all children were given their mother's surname; saved trying to trace the father and inter-sibling rivalry between half brothers and sisters." He grunted. "It worked well, too."

Holly frowned. "What happened before that?" she asked.

"Children took the fathers surname."

"How stupid!" she snorted.

"Yes, it does seem so now, I agree but eighty years ago attitudes were different. Many wanted to cling to the old ways." He stopped again and gave a nostalgic sigh. "My wife, Christina had your red hair, Holly. Her Irish ancestry, she used to say."

Holly frowned again. Irish! She'd never heard the word. All she knew was that she was one of very few red haired humans and had often wished she had no freckles but blonde hair like her friends or even dark hair of many of the people. She thought of her fellow humans. Even in her generation they were often very different with different skin color, eyes, as well as size and weight.

She was slim, a meter eighty-three tall, weighed seventy odd kilogram and took pride in her fitness, but most males towered above her. Every generation, it seemed, was taller than the one before it.

"Anyway," Jordan continued and took a crumpled yellowing document out of his pocket. "This is the Survival of Humanity Protocol in its entirety. I now officially hand it on to you to care for and preserve for future generations. You are our leader, Holly."

"What about Mom?" the girl protested.

"She is the present. You are the future. Do you understand the difference?"

Holly hesitated for a moment before nodding. "I think so," she added in a whisper.

"Good. Now the information." Jordan smiled.

The elder spoke in a clear voice for an hour with frequent references to the old document. Holly's eyes opened wide in astonishment at the knowledge being passed onto her. She felt proud and humble, if it was possible to be both at the same time, as she listened, asked a few questions or read extracts from the typewritten document.

"Does Mom know this information?" she finally asked.

"Yes," Jordan replied, along with Commander Evans and two members of the Inner Council. They have all taken the vow of secrecy, something you will not have to do."

"Why?" the young woman asked again.

"The time has come to tell our peoples about their past, Holly. That will be your job; not mine or Andrea's but yours, as shall be the decision as what to do with the information you now

know. Discuss it with your mother, the Inner Council but the final decision is yours."

"Yea I know," Holly grunted. "It's what the Survival of Humanity Protocol directs."

"True," smiled the old man. "Your ancestors as well as living compatriots depend on you. As I said at the beginning of our conversation; like it or not, you're it, Holly."

Holly's body shook as Jordan Wittenburg reached out and gave her a brief hug. Her mind was in a spin. Information she received was almost too much to comprehend. Their ancestors did come from another world and, perhaps even more important, the space craft was still out there orbiting Planet Delpe. All they had to do was to get to it.

That evening the Inner Council had a special meeting to discuss the fate of the their kind and, as well as the usual members, Holly and Jordan were in attendance.

Andrea stood, nodded gravely at the members and glanced across the small table that almost filled the side cave.

"Today, we reached a turning point in our society," she stated. "We are here deep under the ground, our homes have gone, our supplies are finite and we are at war. War with an enemy who wants to exterminate us but why?" She paused. "We are no threat to them, a little over a thousand soles compared with hundreds of thousands, if not millions of the crucnon on this planet. In 2098, ninety-eight Earthlings, fifty women and forty-eight men landed on Delpe due to an emergency deep in space.

It is now 2248, True Time. Due to the orbit of this planet we have thirty one years for every thirty two on Earth," She grinned. "On Earth I'd be almost two years older. We have been here one hundred and fifty years, Fellow Councilors; seven generations and we are still the aliens. We are still no accepted. We are still hunted down like animals and killed." Andrea's voice became louder before she stopped and continued in a whisper. "That's the trouble, I guess. We are animals, mammals to be precise, whereas the crucnon are insects..." Andrea hesitated when she heard a faint cough and saw Holly's eyes attracting her attention.

"Can I speak, please Mother," the younger Jurjevics asked. Her light green frock shone in the artificial light. She stood, acknowledged her mother's slight nod and began to speak.

"It is not the crucnon who are the ruthless killers," she began and hoped her nervousness did not show. "It is their government. I learned a lot in the last two days. I met my first crucnon yesterday, a woman my age. Sure she has no hair or warm blood. She has four arms and four wings but she also has intelligence and compassion." Holly stopped and glanced at each councilor in turn." She also saved our lives, every one of us. She could have remained silent and let her army pump nerve gas into our shelter, but she didn't Ladies and Gentlemen..." Holly's voice continued and grew in confidence as she told the small elite group everything about Jaddig Qarte.

"But how does it help us?" muttered Malone Davidson. "Her kind have us trapped. All they need to do is wait. We have food for three months then we starve or surrender. It's as simple as that."

"Or we find the shuttle craft our ancestors used," Jordan Wittenburg interjected. "It is sitting four hundred kilometers from here, secure and safe, ready to rise to the heavens to the mother craft in orbit."

"A fantasy," scoffed Davidson.

"No," said the old man. "It has been waiting while breeder cells slowly replenished the oxygen supply in the Mother Craft and solar energy replenished battery power. This took a hundred and twenty five years. The space ship has been is ready to receive us for eighty years, now."

"Rubbish!" shouted an elderly man to the right of Andrea.

Jordan Wittenburg smiled. "I have proof," he said and placed a small television receiver on the table. "An old VCR," he said and clicked a tape in the flap at the bottom. "I got this one working." He grinned at Holly. "Plug it in My Girl."

Holly took the cord, reached up with a handkerchief in her hand, took out the light bulb and plunged the room into reflected light from the main cave around a half corner. She screwed

in the plug and watched the monitor light up. "We're ready, Jordan," she said.

"The old man thanked her, pressed a button and the screen lit up to show a line of people dressed in silver suits waving at the audience. Behind was a gigantic rocket with a shuttlecraft perched on top. "The journey to the stars is about to begin..." the commentary started.

For two hours the tape continued and traced the story of Inter-galactical Starship 7. It showed the one hundred and five astronauts entering deep freeze chambers where they were put in suspended animation before the starship switched to light speed. There was a brief display of static until the next scenes came into view. A planet, all blue, green and white dangled in the black sky. This was Delpa where the computers had brought them after Inter-galactical Starship 7 had been hit by a rogue meteorite no bigger than a pea. An external view showed astronauts repairing Star Ship 7's fractured outer hull as a stream of white condensation poured out. The commentary noted that ninety percent of the craft's oxygen was lost. Finally a spherical shuttlecraft shuttled the ninety-eight survivors of the deep space journey to the planet below.

"It is Wednesday, the 17th of August 2098 and we are stranded," an astronaut spoke to the screen. "We cannot leave but perhaps, one day, our ancestors will. Our signals will take seventy years or more to reach Earth at light speed so there is no hope of rescue. May God bless you all. This is Admiral Leonard Jurjevics, leader of this fated expedition signing off."

The screen turned to static again, Holly replaced the light bulb and strained faces stared, speechless, at each other.

"My ancestor," Jordan muttered, "Andrea and young Holly's, too. They landed in a temperate zone believing it was the best place but were driven further and further north by the crucnon. New Seattle was once a hundred kilometers north of the nearest clicker outpost as the winter weather was too sever for their metabolism, so for two generations our peoples lived in peace." The old man shrugged. "I think the clickers chose to ignore us as long as we never moved south of the river we call New Columbia."

"Why did it change?" Holly broke the silence that followed.

"They were invaded by another clicker nation," Jordan continued. "The invaders had a program of mass annihilation but were beaten back. Afterwards the crucnon had a surplus of weapons and turned their attention to us. We could fend for ourselves until they began to use these modern weapons. You all know the rest of the story." He shrugged. "I am too old to leave this world but you people here, our leaders, are not."

Suddenly everyone began speaking at once as they grasp at the truth and tried to comprehend how the lives of the thousand settlers in the outside cave would be affected.

Holly glanced at her mother and found tears in her eyes as they reached out and hugged each other. "You knew all along, didn't you Mom?" Holly sniffed.

"I did Sweetheart," Andrea replied and hugged her daughter again.

An air of despondency hung over the community as the settlers attempted to sleep in the tunnels and natural caves beyond. Grieving relations reflected on the seven warriors killed in the battle while nurses and doctors cared for the two dozen more wounded survivors. Stretchers and bunks were allocated to elderly citizens and children and blankets distributed to everyone else who had to sleep wherever space was available.

The small but dedicated police force remained vigilant and arguments or fights were stopped before they could become a problem. An attack on two teenage girls by five youths was interrupted when the girls' screams from a remote corner brought their plight to attention.

After almost forcing her daughter to lie down and rest, Andrea made no attempt to sleep herself but walked through the crowded tunnels, talking to settlers, offering to feed a crying baby, consoling a grieved parent over a lost son, and generally helping anyone and everyone in need.

By four hundred hours, the tunnels were almost quiet and the Proctor made her way back to the small area allocated to her immediate family. This was now only Holly; her husband had died five years previously and her parents before that. She was about to slip into a sleeping

bag when a man in dressed in a white jacket approached.

"Proctor Jurjevics," he said in a serious voice. "I am afraid I have some bad news."

Andrea's heart raced and her face drained of color. Visions of the enemy rushing into their retreat and slaughtering humans rushed into her mind. "Tell me, Martin!" she gasped and fixed the doctor with an apprehensive stare.

Doctor Martin McLean placed a hand on Andrea's shoulder. "It's Jordan Wittenburg," he stated in a hushed voice. "I am afraid he hasn't made it."

"What do you mean?" snapped the Proctor.

"I checked on him a few minutes ago and found he had died in his sleep. Two hours ago he was speaking to me and he dropped off to sleep and, this morning just didn't wake up. There was no pain. His old heart just stopped. It was as if he had done his duty and was confident in your ability to carry on to lead our people. I am sorry, Andrea. We all loved him." His eyes dropped.

"I see," Andrea replied. "Thank you, Martin. Does anyone else know?"

The doctor shook his head. "I came straight to you," he whispered.

"Have there been any other deaths over the night?"

"No," the man replied. "Only our warriors killed in battle after the initial attack. All the wounded are responding to treatment and are out of danger."

"Have you had any sleep?"

"No less than you, Andrea," the man sighed. "There are too few doctors or medics left now." He shrugged. "Mind you, the youngsters of Holly's generation are very willing and capable. Within a few years they'll more than replace the Generation 5 and 6s who are reaching retirement."

"If we have a few years," Andrea added sadly. She stood up. "I shall come and see Jordan for one last time. I appreciate you coming straight to me. He would have liked it that way. He was my grandfather, you know."

"Yes, and mine," the doctor gave a tiny smile. "I guess we're all related by now."

"Probably," Andrea replied, "but I'm glad the Survival of Humanity Protocol attempted to stop fragmentation of our society into family units."

She placed a coat over her crumpled clothes and followed the doctor through the dim tunnel lit by an occasional orange security light. Everywhere was the sounds of close packed humanity as the refugees had finally succumbed to the sanctuary of sleep.

Customs steeped in antiquity from before the Survival of Humanity Protocol were used in the funerals for the swordsmen, warriors and Elder Jordan Wittenburg. Fifteen wooden coffins draped in flags of both the United Nations and Stars and Stripes were carried by DPF officers of both genders to a corner of the underground cave beside where a small underground stream.

Proctor Andrea Jurjevics and Commander Toby Evans spoke briefly on the lives of the deceased and a bugle played the haunting "Last Post". Citizens filed by, dropped a symbolic handful of soil into the graves and stood in silence as the leaders of each generation, including Holly, said a few brief words. The graves were covered and topped with small semicircular stones on which their names were carved.

Amazingly, it was Jaddig Qarte who was one of the most moved. The crucnon stood at the rear of the humans trying to remain inconspicuous but everyone knew she was there and most appreciated it.

"What are the colored pieces of cloth?" she asked Holly.

"Flags," Holly replied. "They represent our community; our humanity but why they are designed as they are, I do not know."

"And the name stones?"

"They are a symbol of remembrance. Before the Survival of Humanity Protocol there were different symbols but it was decided the stone best represents our life on Delpe." Holly noticed the young insect creature was almost in tears. "What do your people do to when someone dies? Is there a special ceremony?"

"No," answered Jaddig in her precise English. "When a crucnon dies the body is cremated and they are forgotten as if they never were. It is a law that they are never mentioned again."

"Oh how awful!" Holly gasped.

"I know," Jaddig continued, "but we can still remember in our minds. I had a brother called Glyka who was killed in a training exercise." Tears appeared in her eyes as she remembered.

"How were you told of his death then?" Holly asked in a quiet tone.

"We were visited by an officer who said, "There is no Glyka Qarte. His brain does not function" That meant he was dead." Jaddig sighed. "I like your system better. Glyka and I were from the same batch, had the same mother, and were very close" Her yellow eyes turned to Holly. "Even to cry is considered a weakness but I do; all the time."

"And so you should," Holly answered. "We do not consider it a weakness. My Mom had tears rolling down her face a few moments ago and she is one of the strongest people here and I am proud of her."

"I noticed both her tears and your pride," the young crucnon answered. She took a handkerchief from her body suit wiped her eyes and blew her nose, smaller in size than human noses but also just above the mouth. "Thank you for letting me attend this moving ceremony for your deceased but I must return to the infirmary. I promised the nurse I'd help wash some bloodstained sheets in the underground stream."

Holly was deep in thought as she studied her companion. "I'll walk back with you, Jaddig," she stated quietly.

The tall human girl was a head taller than the crucnon and perhaps for the first time on that planet, the two intelligent species walked and chatted as friends. Stranger still, though, was that not one human near them showed any objection but, of course four teenage youths nearby were probably more interested in watching Holly in her graceful gown that emphasized her firm figure than Jaddig beside her.

Commander Evans, though, noticed the youths. "If you have nothing better to do except goggle at your leader with eyes of lust, I would recommend three hours of heavy chores," he snapped. "We need the water containers filled from the stream and distributed. If you hurry you may get it done in two hours."

"Yes, Sir," the youths trembled, glanced at each other and headed for a pile of jerrycans nearby. When you are fourteen; to be reprimanded by the Commander can be quite scary.

CHAPTER THREE

While Proctor Jurjevics and the other councilors watched with pursed lips and heavy frowns, Commander Toby Evans leaned over the table and ran his finger over the map unrolled in front of the Inner Circle. "The river valley to the west where we used to have our farms is annexed by the enemy," he said. "Clicker settlers are moving in and using our ranch houses to live in..."

Andrea frowned. Once again she had no idea how Toby gathered his information but had no doubt what so ever as to its authenticity.

"... New Seattle has gone," Evans continued, "and New London is occupied by clickers." His finger pointed to the only other human village, a hundred and fifty kilometers to the south on the banks of the New Columbia, the former boundary between human and clicker territories. "The Landing Shuttle landed four hundred kilometers south of Vyber, as the

clickers call their land. Ancient records say it is hidden in a cave similar to this one and protected by a force field."

"What's that?" Ron Cotterell asked, his face wrinkled in concentration

"An invisible wall of electricity nothing can get through. This one also hides the craft from view. Anyone walking in the cave would merely see a clay wall."

"Of course," muttered Malone Davidson with sarcasm in her voice.

"Hush up, Malone," Andrea snapped.

"Our maps of Vybber are very basic and, I'm afraid, not very helpful," the commander continued, "but we know the area is heavily populated with really one metropolis leading into another."

"Why don't we ask Jaddig Qarte to bring us up to date?" Andrea suggested.

"The enemy!" Malone Davidson snorted. "Why don't we just walk out and surrender and save all the fuss. That insect should be immediately executed."

"That's it!" Andrea Jurjevics' anger showed as she stood and leaned forward on her hands so knuckles showed white. "You are totally negative, Councilor Davidson. Every day we tolerate your innuendoes and sarcasm. Not once, though, have you offered a constructive solution to our problems," Her ice blue eyes bore into the other woman. "As Proctor of New Washington I invoke Clause 473 of the Survival of Humanity Protocol. You are hereby dismissed as representative of New London. An election for your successor shall be called within the statutory thirty days. You do have the right to seek re-election, if you so desire."

"You can't do that!" the woman snorted but looked a shade paler.

"She can, I'm afraid," Ron Cotterell, the lawyer of the Inner Council stroked his black beard and replied in a firm voice. "Under the present emergency conditions, it is completely within her rights."

"Thank you, Ron," Andrea said quietly. "The former councilor will please leave our chambers."

"Dictator!" the woman's face contorted in fury. She stood, flung her head back in disgust, glared around the alcove and stalked out.

Andrea flushed and, for a moment, hesitated. Toby, though, gave her a slight grin. "If you didn't do it, Andrea," he said. "I would have."

The other members all nodded and broke into spontaneous applause.

"We're with you, Andrea," William Van Schaik, the normally dour old Generation 5 representative, added and reached across to shake her hand. "I place the proposal on the table that we consult Jaddig Qarte so the map of Vybber can be updated"

"I'll second that," Toby said.

The result was unanimous so within five minutes Jaddig was standing before them with a nervous twitch of her lips.

Andrea discretely studied the native of their planet who had removed her body suit. Instead, the clicker wore clothes borrowed from Holly; jeans that covered the minute abdomen her species had and a woolen jersey with holes cut for her lower arms and wings folded, almost invisible across her back. With no breasts, her body appeared masculine but the face was very feminine. Except for being hairless and with tiny centimeter high hearing antennae replacing a human's eyebrows, the face was remarkably human looking with eyes, tiny nose and lips painted with a shade of lipstick.

"The cave is a constant twenty five degrees Celsius so I can function outside my thermal body suit," Jaddig apologized in a shy voice. "Holly was kind enough to loan me some of her clothes and make up. I would have changed back if I had time but was told it was urgent to be here." Like a human she sucked on an upper lip to try to cover her nervousness. "I hope you don't think I look stupid."

"Not at all," Andrea remarked and grinned to herself. It seemed this young woman and her daughter had much in common. She coughed and returned to the matter in hand.

Jaddig nodded and, within moments, was bending over the map sketching in details with a pencil.

"There is a highway that bisects the city of Gygnony, travels to the river you call the New Columbia," she said and drew a line across the map. "It follows the river and..." her voice

continued on with a detailed description of her homeland.

Andrea grinned and gave Tory a dig on the leg. He nodded and followed the proctor's eyes. Jaddig was right handed but used both right hands with equal dexterity. At one point, her upper hand was sketching in a city boundary while her lower one was writing words in neat English block capitals.

The crucnon looked up, saw their expressions and stopped. Her face drained white in embarrassment. "Have I done something wrong?" she stuttered.

"No, far from it," Andrea commented with a warm smile. "We're impressed with your neat penmanship and ability to write two things at once, That's all."

"I learned English at school and Double Write at University," the Crucnon explained. "It is difficult at first but speeds our work up. Most of our kind only use one hand."

"We are amazed, actually," Ron added, "But please continue, Jaddig. Your information is vital."

Jaddig smiled in return and glanced back at the map. "The safest way through our land is via the outer lands here..." she pointed to the left of the map. "The east is high country, cold for our peoples and lightly populated. The journey would be longer by about twenty weddens, That's a hundred of your kilometers, but far safer." Once again the young woman and the councilors began to see her as that; not an alien insect creature, sketched detail after detail on the map.

In an hour the paper was covered in her neat printing and sketches. "I took typography, too," Jaddig added modestly. "That was before I was ordered into motherhood and my studies cancelled."

"What's that?" Andrea asked in a quiet voice.

The clicker flushed again. "Most females are neuters, proper females but ones that cannot reproduce offspring. If selected for motherhood we undergo," she shrugged, "how would you say it in English, hormonal treatment, our wings develop and we can fly. It is considered an honor," she added doubtfully. "In our land we are not given a choice. If told to do something, one does it." She shrugged. "My female friends and I did not know it at the time but we were really wanted as flying warriors, not mothers. By the time I found out, it was too late."

"I'm sorry," Toby added. "You are obviously a very intelligent young crucnon. "May I thank you for all your help here. "

"I want to be of assistance," Jaddig answered in a whisper. "In my homeland I am already classified as dead and would be executed for failing in my duty, if I returned." Her eyes found Andrea's. "I've also found I like you humans." She gave a tiny giggle. "Do you know what the crucnon call you?"

Commander Evans raised an eyebrow. "Biped-rats, I believe. Rats that walk on two legs."

"Why yes! Jaddig seemed surprised at the commander's knowledge. "Rats are one of the few mammals we have. It is believed you humans brought them to Delpe. They are considered a pest and a menace in our cities, something to be exterminated without mercy."

"Like us," Andrea replied.

"I'm afraid so," Jaddig replied. She looked up. "But our people are wrong. I realize that, now."

"...And perhaps always surmised," Andrea added.

Yes," whispered the clicker, "but there are too few of us freedom thinkers; far too few."

It was late the settlers' second evening in the caves and Holly was losing her third game of chess against Jaddig.

"Oh Holly," said the clicker girl as she moved her Bishop. "You do leave yourself wide open. Check!"

"What?" gasped the human with a slight twinge of anger. "How can it be?"

She did check but every possible move was covered. The game had been going only forty minutes. She looked across at the intense yellow eyes and slight smile. "Okay, I resign,"

she gave a laugh. "I reached our inter-generation quarter finals but admit, you're too good for me."

"I believe the game was brought here by your ancestors," Jaddig added. "You did have me worried four moves back."

"Yea," Holly grinned. "I bet." She glanced up as her mother entered their section of the tunnel "Hi Mom, care to challenge Jaddig, here at chess? She is one mean competitor."

"I can't even beat you Holly," Andrea said in an attempt to keep her voice light but she looked worried. "Can I speak to you a moment, Sweetheart?"

"Sure Mom," the young woman replied.

"I'll slip away and see if there is a shower available," Jaddig stood, smiled and walked out.

"Mom," retorted Holly. "You didn't have to be rude to her."

"Sweetheart, listen please," her mother replied with a frown. "We have some grave news that concerns Jaddig."

Holly nodded and saw that Commander Evans had appeared. He sat down and cast sad eyes across to her. "Would you call Jaddig a friend?" he asked in a harsh whisper.

"I guess," the young woman replied with a frown. "I never really thought about it that way. Why?"

"Jaddig will need a friend right now." He sighed and glanced at Andrea who continued.

"The crucion found out Jaddig surrendered to us instead of committing suicide as she was obliged to do, if captured, Sweetheart," she began. "We believe there is a spy amongst us who passed the information back to them."

"So?" Holly gasped but knew something more serious was still to be told.

"It concerns her life brothers and sisters," Toby continued. "The crucion are hatched in batches of thirty or more but are adopted out at birth into families of non egg bearing females and males to be raised.

"Yes, Jaddig told me..." Holly studied the commander.

"Her mother and the other four children in her family were executed and their family home in Gygnonypy burnt to the ground. Two servants and a family pet were also killed."

"Oh My God!" Holly gasped. She blinked back tears forming in her wide eyes. "Because she is with us?"

"That's right," Andrea replied. "They are a ruthless race."

"How do you know?" the younger woman asked. She swung around and grabbed the commander's arms. "It could be just a story!"

"I am afraid not," Toby replied. He took a hexagonal shaped piece of cardboard out of his pocket and Holly recognized the crucion printing.

"This is a message written by a young crucion called Birobi Osyjil. We believe he was Jaddig's partner or mate before she became a fertile female."

"But not now?"

"The mothers are fertilized by the ruling class, usually older males high in the military or government. The fertile females are virtual prisoners who are expected to service dozens of males and expected to lay eggs by the hundred for up to five years. After that, if they survive the ordeal they lose their wings and can become ordinary neuters again. Most die of exhaustion and deprivation. Ordinary males are not permitted to mate with the winged females but lives with other females are carried on in much the same way as we live except there are no offspring." He grimaced. "Jaddig was lucky in one way. She was wanted to fly bombs in the war and had not been placed in a concubine."

"How terrible!" Holly gasped. "But she is so intelligent. My God she slaughters me at chess, she went to university. She has feelings, compassion, and honesty. Everything! How can she be like this and the rest so cruel?"

"They all aren't," Toby continued "There are many like her and, from what I found out, this Birobi is one. They are the ones I have contact with." He gave a slight smile. "They are my spies in their world."

"Will you tell Jaddig the tragic news, Sweetheart?" Andrea asked, "or would you like us to?"

"I will," Holly whispered.

"One thing," Toby said. "Tell her before you bring the hexagonal letter into view. The hexagon has special significance to the Crucnon. As soon as she sees it she will realize something tragic has happened."

"I see," Holly bit on her lip and wiped her eyes. She tucked the strange shaped cardboard in her jacket pocket and stood up. "I might as well get it over with. Thanks for asking me Mom, Toby. Jaddig is a friend, you know. Strange isn't it?"

"No Sweetheart, I don't think so," Andrea replied.

The clicker girl had just changed into another set of clothes provided for her when Holly walked in.

"At least I don't have hair to wash," Jaddig chatted away, turned and saw her friend's ashen face. "What is it, Holly?" she whispered. "It's my family, isn't it?"

Holly had prepared everything to say but was unnerved by the remark. "Yes," she whispered. "I told Mom I was your friend and would tell you."

"Go on..." the voice was soft and choked with emotion. "Tell me everything, Holly. Don't hold anything back."

"It's just that . . ." began the young human woman. She swallowed and repeated everything her mother and Commander Evans had told her.

Jaddig stood like a ghostly statue and just stared at Holly for two or more minutes before two massive tears rolled out the corners of her eyes and plopped into the wooden floor of the shower block. The two turned to four; eight and the slim body shuddered into emotional howls of anguish.

Holly stepped forward and wrapped her warm arms around the four cold ones of her friend and pulled her in close while Jaddig buried her head in the nap of Holly's neck and cried.

"How did the Commander know?" she finally sobbed.

"He has contact with The Blue Watch. I have news from Birobi."

"What!" screamed the crucnon. "How do you know about him?"

"He's your partner, isn't he?" Holly asked in an empathic voice.

"Was!" Jaddig cried. "If he ever came near me now, he'd be killed. And that was even before I surrendered to you humans! Breeding females are reserved for the dirty old males who run the place." She stared up at Holly again. "I would not have survived, Holly. I never wanted to become a winged female. They actually arrested me and forced me to take the hormones. I only bombed of your village as I thought it might keep me out of the concubine and perhaps back to Birobi." She sniffed back the last tears and stopped short. "You said you had news of him! Has he been executed, too!" she howled.

"No," Holly smiled for the first time. He wrote you a letter.

"What!" screamed the almost hysterical clicker.

Holly took the hexagonal note from her pocket and handed it to Jaddig. She sat down with an arm still around her companion and watched as the woman read the letter.

"He's all right," sobbed Jaddig. "Birobi told me about my family just as you said but he is alive and safe. He's back in the reserves so is not even having to fight," She shrugged. "Not that there is anything to fight against now. Your lands have been annexed. He's back at university and says that if I write back, Commander Evans will get the letter to him."

"And the hexagon shape? Toby said it had a meaning."

"Our eggs are laid in hexagon shaped cells. The hexagon stands for life and death. If you had shown it to me, I would have realized something tragic had happened to my family." She signed. "It was expected, I guess."

"But someone here told them," Holly cried. "A human here is a spy. We don't know who it is."

"Then we'll have to be extremely careful," Jaddig said with her tears replaced by determination. "But with Birobi and the Blue Watch out there, we are not alone, Holly. I have a strange premonition we are going to survive." She blinked and smiled. "I'm talking like a

human, aren't I?"

"Yes," Holly replied, "an honorary human and I'm proud to call you my friend."

"And one day you might even beat me at chess," Jaddig gave the slightest of smiles before the tears began again. "Would your mother and the Inner Council object if I had a stone carved with the names of my family and placed next to Jordan Wittenburg's one?"

"We'd be proud, Jaddig." Holly whispered. "You write their names down and I'll get it done."

Later, back in their sleeping area, Jaddig talked about her family. It was alien in many ways to Holly while in others it appeared similar. Her mother had adopted her as an infant and she never knew the flying female who had laid the egg she was hatched from. Jaddig remembered her father as an elderly civil servant who worshipped her mother. He died when she was ten.

"My mother was still living in the same house where we were brought up," Jaddig sighed. "The boys had left home but Silaw and Trief, my sisters were still at home. They were all neuters." She sniffed away another tear.

"I think I understand," Holly replied in a quiet voice.

"What, Holly?"

"Your society is so regimented and ruthless with little or no individual rights, yet you have families and are so, oh I don't know... human."

"A human with four arms, cold blood, wings and no hair."

Holly pouted. "I guess I sound arrogant but I didn't mean it that way."

"I know you didn't Holly," Jaddig answered softly. "Thank you. I know what you mean." She broke into a smile. "Do you want to hear about Birobi?"

"You know, I think I do," smiled Holly. She tucked her knees up under her blanket and listened to Jaddig's story.

The memorial service the following evening was attended by hundreds of settlers who had heard of the tragedy. Two flags flew at half-mast; another custom steeped in antiquity, as the Commander and Proctor both spoke while Jaddig Qarte stood at rigid attention in her neatly pressed body suit. It was only when Andrea switched to the crucnon native language and the bugle played that the tears began to roll down her face.

It was a time when that lonely figure shared her grief for her family in that alien city across the New Columbia River, in a way perhaps never done by her species before.

"I shall remember this outpouring of friendship for ever. Thank you all." Jaddig's dozen trembling words were heard and believed by the hushed people at the conclusion of the service.

As the young Crucnon with one hand gripping Holly's walked back to her quarters, the crowd parted and hundreds of hands reached out and touched her in affection. A member of the hated species they shared the planet with had become a friend.

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