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BASED ON AN ORIGINAL OUTLINE BY J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI

ERABBYLON™



DARK GENESIS
THE BIRTH OF THE
PSI CORPS

Book 1

Dark Genesis : Birth of Psi Corpus

by : Gregory Keyes

PROLOGUE

Alice Kimbrell pushed back from the screen angrily.

“Ridiculous!” she snapped, to no one. It was a word she would repeat, often. A word that would haunt her when the killing began. She went to the kitchen to make coffee, which she always needed midafternoon. She stopped, reaching for a cup. There sat Albert’s old mug, asking to be filled. Ridiculous. She should throw it away. The coffee teeming, she stepped out to her balcony and tried to take a moment to contemplate the sea. But the paper’s title glowed in her mind, and all the coffee did was brighten the glare. Investigations into Biochemical Sensory Transmission by Duffy and Philen June 2115. Ridiculous. She stared hard at the lavender sea, as if concentrating could make her appreciate it. “I love this view. It reminds me of Denmark,” Albert had once remarked. It had seemed a soulful thing to say at the time. As if Albert had more than the parody of a soul.

She wished she had an office. People who had offices could escape their homes. She stalked back to her workstation and looked at the abstract again. It hadn’t changed. A sample population of 1,000 volunteers was screened for metasensory abilities using standard set Zener cards, Black Box Randomizer, and blind curtain tests.

Two individuals demonstrated statistically improbable accuracy. HCl and Dao imaging demonstrated collateral brain cortex activity between senders and receivers in accurate tests. The sample population was increased to 5,000 individuals. Two members of the larger sample conclusively demonstrated metasensory abilities, with thirteen sets of statistically improbable results. Cortex imaging was consistent with the findings of the preliminary study. Okay, she thought. Prove it to me. Unfortunately, they did. She read it again, summoning even more skepticism. Of course, data could be faked, but as per usual, they had included a complete data set with verifying codes. Most damning of all, there was the cover letter signed by Drs. Jacqueline Wilson and John Yazhi. The authors might be graduate students, but two of the most prestigious neuropsychologists at the Harvard School of Medicine backed them up. That was probably what got the paper past her screeners to start with. Worse and worse. As editor of the New England Journal of Medicine, she could think of no good reason not to publish. Which was a shame, because then her career would join her personal life on the slag heap. She reached for the phone. By God, she would find a reason not to publish it.

“It’s not a joke,” Dr. Yazhi said, swaying his long physique up from behind his desk to shake her hand.

“Dr. Yazhi, you must understand-“

“Look, it started out that way. Ms. Duffy and Mr. Philen were writing a paper for the New Drinkland Journal of Medicine. You know it? It’s a sort of hazing ritual. The first year students are required to write at least two hundred pages of garbage on some nontopic, but they have to research it, give it a semblance of the good form of a journal article. It’s a student competition to see who can treat the most absurd subject in the most clinical fashion, using the most jargon and academic doublespeak. It’s a bonus if they can make it recognizably similar to something that has actually been published. “Philen and Duffy chose to research telepathy. They set up a study and-and, well, they began to get results. When they were sure they brought it to me, and I came on board as their adviser.”

“Yes, but Zener card readings-“

“Can be faked, yes. But we went on from there. In the end-you read the paper, I assume? In the end we did simultaneous pattern scans on the brains of the subjects, first with an HCI and then a Dao image. The results were what you saw in your data sets. Spontaneous-and I might add, impossible-cortical pattern similarities at the moment of transmission.” He paused, stroking his lean, dark face. “I’ve read your work, Dr. Kimbrell, and I think you’ve been a credit to the journal since you began editing it. I understand your reluctance, but I think the data behind this paper is quite solid. I’m certainly willing to say so.”

“It’s just that-” She paused, marshaling arguments. “All through the twentieth century they did the same tests, and nothing . Why?”

He shrugged.

“Maybe when they got results they didn’t like, they ignored them-that was pretty common in the nineteenth century. They didn’t have HCIs then, just EEGs and the like, nothing that could holistically image neuronal activity. That’s what convinced us, of course.” He pursed his lips. “Just ask yourself- if this paper were on any accepted subject, or even a marginal one, would you publish it? Is it well written? Is it evidenced? Is the data set verifiable? Are the experiments replicable?”

She met his eyes, wanting to challenge him further, finding she could not. She sighed.

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“My pleasure.”

She put it off. Albert called and she hung up on him. Her father called, and she pretended not to be home. Her stockbroker called, wanting to buy a thousand shares of something-or-other and she told him to buy Antarctica if he wanted, but to leave her alone. She went to a salon, had her hair cut into a short, blond bob. She picked away at her own research, wrote letters to some colleagues, went running and swimming, lost three pounds. In the end she returned , saw the submissions piling up, and sighed. She remembered how proud she had been-the youngest editor in chief of the oldest continuously published medical journal in history. Quite the coup. As she sat down at her workstation, she wondered if she would be able to get a teaching position somewhere , perhaps at a community college in the Yukon maybe. At least it would be easier to dodge Albert there.

Senator Lee Crawford sighed as he strode into the sunlight and saw the reporter. Was that all he rated these days, a single reporter from a minor newspaper? It seemed so. He put on his most genial smile.

“Senator Crawford,” the young woman began-in a rush, as if she feared he might brush past her-“I’m working with the Union Discoverer-“

He shoved his hands into his pockets and cocked his head slightly.

“Couldn’t find anyone more important to talk to, Ms. Hoijer?” He said it without accusation just a gentle self-deprecation. He let a little drawl through. They liked that. It got her. The Discoverer was

far from the most prestigious reporting syndicate around, and she must have had her own share snubs. And he had remembered her name from, what, three months ago. Her eyes softened a bit. She was a pretty thing, dark skin, green eyes, slim, perhaps thirty.

“I ...” She paused and cleared her throat, and he revised her age downward to twenty-five. “Would you care to comment on the defeat of your latest bill?”

“Only that it’s a shame, a shortsighted shame,” he said, without heat. “In time, people’ll come to see that.” He relaxed his shoulders. “Tell me, what do you think?”

“Excuse me?”

“You asked what I think. What do you think?”

“Senator, that’s my job, asking you what you think.”

He shrugged.

“And what’s mine? I represent people, Ms. Hoi-ger. Aren’t you a person?”

“But I am not American, Senator-I don’t vote for you.”

“Details. C’mon, what do you think? Phrase it as a question, if you must, but tell me.

” If you insist,” she said, “I have to say I agree with your opponents. Our taxes have funded the DeepProbe project for twenty years, with no results. I don’t see why we should fund yet another-and more expensive-search for extraterrestrial life.”

“Intelligence,” he corrected gently. “Life we have found, and yet at one point it was far from clear that we would. And you answer your own question. The DeepProbe project uses technology twenty years out of date. It’s time to upgrade.”

“But why? The search for extraterrestrial intelligence began more than a hundred years ago. Don’t you think that if there were anything to find, we would have found it by now?”

He chuckled his patented chuckle and nodded as if in agreement.

“Do you know why the people at home voted for me? Do you know why I ran?”

“You ran on a Globalist platform. And you were the hero of Grissom colony-“

“There’s that-that’s how I got on the ticket, not why I ran, not why people voted for me. For almost two hundred years, change in science and technology has been the most important fact of life on the planet, and for two hundred years politicians have lagged so far behind the leading edge-well, it would be funny if it were a joke. People who don’t understand the first law of motion make decisions regardin’ the funding and disposition of space platforms. Doesn’t that strike you as even faintly ridiculous? I ran because I think at least one politician should have some conception of more than how to schmooze. “And to answer your question directly, no. With the technology available in the late

hundred years, we couldn't even find one of our own space probes without knowing exactly where it is, much less intelligent life among a trillion trillion worlds."

"Be that as it may, Senator, the polls would seem to indicate an erosion of your popular support. How do you respond to that?"

He shrugged.

"My opponents are very good at politics-I've never denied that. But politics-as you must know, being a reporter-is a world unto itself, and unfortunately has little to do with the world we live on. It's too bad my opponents are more concerned with that than the welfare of our race. I trust the voters, Ms. Hoijer. They have common sense. Never tell me what the polls say."

"You accuse your opponents of playing politics, and yet there are some who charge that your entire posture on extraterrestrial intelligence was a calculated response to the panic of '10. That you latched onto a popular sentiment, which has now begun to flag."

He chuckled again.

"Well, I can hardly blame you for saying that-after all, who can trust a politician to be sincere about anything? But the people who voted for me know better. I'm dead serious. Look at history. Robert Goddard invents the liquid-fueled rocket in North America, and yet there was no funding for rocket research there until after Nazi V1s and V2s had shown their usefulness by blowing things up. Underfunding the near-Earth asteroid search nearly got us all dinosaured in 2011-it was a miracle that got us through that, pure and simple. The political machine registers nothin' till it's already too late. "I'm still defined to change that, uphill battle though it may be. And, frankly, I hope to do so before it is too late. There's more than enough hints that there's somebody out there. They might be angels; they might be devils. Frankly, I think they'll be most dangerous if they're just folks like us. But this I know-we'll be a lot better off all around if we notice them before they notice us."

"Then you will continue to bring your bill before the Senate?"

"Damn right. And you can quote me on that."

"Even without the support of your party?"

"Ms. Hoijer, I'm only doing what I promised. That might be a bit of a shock to my colleagues-it might even be a shock to my party-but it's no shock to the voters. You'll see that come the election. Now it's been a real pleasure, and I thank you for your time, but I have an engagement across town."

He found Tom Nguyen waiting for him in his office.

"The party has withdrawn their support," Tom said, youthful face twitching with agitation. Reaching for the bottle of oude jenever, Lee froze momentarily. Then he finished his motion.

"Why, thanks, Tom, I'm doin' fine. Nice day to you, too. How about a drink?"

“No, no, Lord, that would kill my stomach right now.”

“You have t’ build up an immunity,” Lee said, pouring the shot and resting a bit of the of the potery stuff on his tongue. “They really did it, huh?”

“Lee, you had to know it was coming. That bill was dead when you wrote it. Face it The science thing got you elected, but people have forgotten it now. In their eyes, Senator Tokash made you look foolish. U.S. voters don’t like the U.S. to look foolish, and the party doesn’t like its golden boy to look foolish.”

“Pinheads. People are such idiots.”

“That may well be, but they pay your salary. Lee, this is serious.”

“No shit.” He downed the shot. “Anything else?”

“I think we should discuss strategy. You were offered the chair of the Committee on Technology and Privacy-“

“It’s just a bone they’re throwin’ me, Tom. A tired old bone. Pity won’t get me any votes. I can just see Hirosho’s campaign ads now. Me, on the do-nothing committee, with my head down and great big Zs comin’ up. What happened? Last year we were on top of the world!”

“Well, that was last year. Forty is too young to be living in the past, Lee.”

“Thirty-nine, damn your eyes.”

He leaned back in his chair and blew out, found a grin.

“Just hang in there, Tom, and let me know if you have any ideas. We aren’t licked yet. Now, go on, want to look at my news.”

“Ignoring it won’t make it go away.”

“I’m not ignoring it. Take the day off. Go see your kids.”

Tom hesitated.

“You’re okay?” he asked.

“Watch it, Tom, you’re lettin’ that all-business face slip off again. You might learn something from me yet, and that’d be a shame. Sure you won’t have that drink?”

Tom managed a little smile.

“Maybe just one,” he said. He talked Tom into two, before it was over, and told a few jokes that even got him to laugh. When the door was closed, he went to the window and looked out at the city of Geneva. The smile fell away, and he felt that old familiar hole opening under his feet.

“You’ve bitten off more than you can chew, this time, haven’t you, Lee?” He grunted. He could see his reflection against the glass. Close-cropped brown hair, fast going grey, the angular face that had been likened variously to Andrew Jackson, David Bowie, and Luis Espinosa “Enough,” he said, this time to the universe at large. “I’ll beat you, you bastard.” He went to his desk, sat down, and tapped his terminal on.

“Index,” he said. “Journal abstracts.” He began a slow scroll through the lists his computer had assembled. Four new planets that might be Earth-like, some interesting speculations about the self-replicating goo beneath Europa’s icy crust, a better fusion reactor, a new theory of language origin. All interesting, but useless. But then, toward the end, he came to the New England Journal of Medicine. A headline caught his eye, so he scanned the story. He stopped, read it again. And again. He printed the whole article and read that, too.

“Nguyen, Tom,” he said keying the phone link on the terminal. After a pause, the screen flickered and his aide appeared, leaning into his car. Behind him, the snowcapped Alps were etched against a very blue sky.

“Lee?”

“Sorry, Tom, I know I gave you the day off, but I need you on something right away. I’ve highlighted a journal article for you. I want to know who else in the Senate has read it, and I want to know who he selected to read. Their aides, too.”

“Lee, I’m not sure if the disclosure rule covers-“

“Then be discreet. But find out. I want to know in an hour. Just do it there and drop it back here. And Tom-I want on the Technology and Privacy Committee after all. Posthaste.”

He returned to his terminal, looking for other things, smiling grimly as they accumulated. Forty-five minutes later, the transfax beeped for his attention, and he stopped to watch a list of names appear. There were only five, and it took just an instant to choose. Lee found Senator Ledepa Koya standing outside of the Senate chamber, conferring with a handful of aides in rapid-fire Indonesian. When he noticed Lee, he waved them off and approached.

“Senator Crawford,” Koya said. “Ledepa. How are you today?”

“Very well, thanks. I’d like to congratulate you.”

“On the failure of my bill?”

“No, no. And I really hope you understand my position in that matter. I, personally, think you are right, but what am I to do?”

“It’s the name of the game, Ledepa. We all have to respond to our constituency. Now what can I do for you?”

“I understand you’ve just been appointed head of the Committee on Technology and Privacy.”

“News travels fast.”

“I have a particular interest in that committee. I would like to be on it.”

“It’s goin’ to be a yawner, Ledepa. I can’t think of any issue that hasn’t been addressed to death. It’s just nit-picking now.”

“Maybe not.”

“What do you mean?” Koya lowered his voice. “Have you seen the New England Journal of Medicine?”

“As a matter of fact, I have. Some mumbo jumbo about telepathy.”

“I don’t think it’s mumbo jumbo. Some in my government have had suspicions about this for years. And the study looks very solid to those whose opinions I trust.”

“I’d like to see it replicated,” Lee replied, allowing curiosity to creep into his voice. “But I’m starting to see your interest in this. You think this will be a privacy and technology issue?”

“Yes, of course. Haven’t you gotten any letters?”

“Since yesterday? I haven’t had time to check.”

“I have received many. The news of this is already spreading.”

“Really? Surprising. A journal article.” But inwardly he smiled. He had spent all night anonymously bringing the article to the attention of various Indonesians. Companies with much to hide. Reactionary but popular religious leaders. Anyone from whom he thought he could elicit a panicked response. He pretended to consider. “Okay, Ledepa, you’re on the committee. I need some opposition members anyway, and it seems like we’re of a mind about this—even if I’m a little slow on the uptake, today. The first order of business is to get copies—” His pocket tel-phone burred. “Wups. If you’ll excuse me, Ledepa?”

He pulled the featherlight tel-phone from his jacket and thumbed the channel open, then said, “Lee Crawford here.” He listened for a moment, nodded. “That sounds great. We’ll see you there.” He closed the link and turned to Koya.

“Well, I’m a popular man today,” he said. “That was Ramira Alejandro’s assistant. She wants me and someone from my committee to come on her show to discuss the telepath article.” He shook his head.

“Let’s you and I meet for lunch, see if we can come to some agreement about what we’ll say.” Koya nodded enthusiastically.

“It’s nonsense,” Crispin Dover said, “pure and simple. I find it unbelievable that Ms. Kimbre has published this tripe.” Dover looked, Lee thought, like a bulldog, but somehow his clipped, educated British enunciation worked against that to lend him a sort of credibility.

“And yet, our oldest legends speak of these powers,” commented Ramira Alejandro, a striking woman in late middle age, with classical Brahman features and a streak of pure silver through her otherwise midnight hair. She radiated a quiet smugness born of knowing she had a guaranteed audience of upward of two billion people.

“Yes, well, our oldest legends also speak of magical beanstalks, talking bears, and the birth of various gods from the armpits of other gods, and I quite agree, it’s among such peers that these so-called extrasensory powers belong. In the past two centuries, the scientific method has been repeatedly brought to bear on the myth of telepathy—and shown it to be just that. A myth. I don’t think I go too far in suggesting that Ms. Kimbrell should consider editing another journal altogether.” Kimbrell, a professional-looking woman with closely cropped blond hair, pursed her lips angrily.

“What about it, Dr. Ortiz?” Ramira asked.

“We’ve heard what a neurochemist has to say about it, but what does psychology have to offer as an opinion on this matter?” Ortiz clasped his seamed fingers together. At eighty, his skin rather resembled leather. Lee found himself a bit impressed, despite himself. Ortiz had been a prominent voice in commentary since before he was born, a real celebrity.

“Well, Ms. Alejandro, I have read the paper, which I can’t tell for certain that our friend Dr. Dover has—” Dover sputtered, “I read the abstract. That was quite enough. I -

Ramira silenced him with a small, cool smile.

“You’ll have another say, Dr. Dover.”

“Nevertheless,” Ortiz went on, “I must to some extent agree with him. The methodology looks fine and the results seem conclusive. And yet, how do we explain the lack of similar results in every prior study—some of which, I might add, used the same methodology? And so I must doubt the conclusions as some kind of statistical fluke, until we see them replicated.”

“What do you think, Mr. Philen? Will they be replicated?”

Philen, a pale, nervous fellow who couldn’t be more than twenty-four, raised his hands defensively.

“Look, we didn’t expect these results. It started out as a lark, a joke really—”

“And yet you published it.”

“Well-yes, because the hypothesis was supported. Look, I was there, I saw it. It was uncanny. I have the greatest respect for Dr. Ortiz, of course. Who wouldn’t? But this was no statistical fluke. There were people in our test groups who were telepaths. No doubt about that at all.”

There certainly wasn’t any doubt in his young, earnest, and distinctly untrained voice. In contrast, Dover suddenly sounded like what he was—a pompous ass.

“Well, then, you would seem to have been duped by a stage magician. Why not have one of these

subjects come on this show, under controlled conditions, so that we can see this ability demonstrated?"

"I -of course I can't disclose their names," Philen said.

"Of course," Dover replied sarcastically.

Ramira turned her attention to the editor.

"Ms. Kimbrell, you've borne the brunt of much criticism for publishing this article."

Kimbrell frowned thoughtfully.

"It's right to be skeptical. It should be hard to prove something new-it should require rigor. I checked the facts and sources very carefully before publishing. Dr. Ortiz may be right this may represent some impossible statistical fluke. But the research is not fraudulent, and it is not sloppy, as Dr. Dover implies. I am perfectly aware that I have staked my reputation on on this, and I feel secure doing so.

" Funny, Lee thought. You don't look secure.

"Well," Ramira continued, turning toward the camera, "we also have with us Senator Lee B. Crawford of the United States, and Senator Ledepa Koya of the Indonesian Consortium. Senator Crawford well known as the hero of Grissom, and as an advocate for good science in government-that was your campaign slogan, I believe?"

"I'm guilty of that one," Lee drawled. "My campaign manager wanted 'no new taxes,' but I overruled him."

Ramira smiled.

"Senator Crawford also comes to us with a degree in astrophysics. Senator Koya has a master's degree in socioserniotics . Both of these gentleman serve on the Committee on Technology and Privacy. Tell me, gentlemen. Let us assume for a moment that this report is true-that there are among us those who can 'read minds.' What are the social-and political-implications of this? Senator Crawford?"

"I'm still digesting this a bit, Ramira. And although I'm now the head of the committee, Dr. Koya has seniority in the Senate. My daddy always told me to let my elders speak first anyhow." He sent Koya a conspiratorial wink.

Ramira turned toward Koya.

"Senator?"

Koya cleared his throat.

"Well, obviously, if this study is valid, it reveals a serious situation. Our daily lives, our respective cultures , our political systems, our legal systems-all are intrinsically dependent on privacy to ensure their very existence. The Earth Alliance mandates rights of privacy at the level of the nation-state, and

at the individual level. This has been worked out in great detail, over the years, particularly technology has made intrusions into privacy potentially deeper and easier. “I’m afraid if there are, in fact, telepaths, that we’re right back to square one. What technology can protect us against them? How can we detect them? How can we stop them? For that matter, how long have they been around? Imagine, each of you, the damage to your private lives if someone were to read your every thought, your wish, your notion. Now imagine governments and corporations hiring telepaths as spies. Or criminals who can easily stay one step ahead of the authorities. It could undermine the entire fabric of our global society. Yes, I think the Senate has many important questions to ask, if these findings are true.”

“Senator Crawford? Comment? Or are you still digesting?”

Lee scratched his chin.

“Tryin’ to avoid heartburn. I think my colleague is being a bit alarmist. Ledepa, it almost sounds like you’re suggestin’ witch-hunts.” From the corner of his eye, he caught the flash of betrayal on Koya’s face.

“First of all,” he continued, “their special abilities aside, telepaths are just going to be people. You know, your schoolteacher, your boss, your mother”—he smiled—“maybe even your senator. Just people like you and me. Not monsters. And they have the same rights and freedoms as everybody else. That said, telepaths don’t have special rights either—like the right to poke around in our heads. Still, let’s all just take a deep breath. I intend to start hearings on this as early as next week, beginning with a select panel of scientists whom we will recruit to see if these results can be replicated. I would be honored if Dr. Lee, Dr. Dover and Dr. Ortiz would agree to be a part of that panel, and to act as advisers to this committee along with Mr. Philen and his research associate, Ms. Duffy, who could not be with us today.”

Lee loosened his collar and sprawled his lanky frame on the couch. Tom Nguyen took a seat, and the two of them both watched the vidscreen as it ran through channels, following the search menu.

“How did you know he would fall that way? Koya?” Tom asked.

“Simple. We all know Indonesia has a lot to hide after the transcom affair. Some don’t think the Indonesians should be allowed membership in the Alliance, and it wouldn’t take much to get them out. So as a nation, they can’t like the idea of telepaths who might ferret out where the bodies are buried. But it’s more basic than that—I checked Koya out. He’s a believer.”

“Believer?”

“Yup. Ever read much anthropology? As late as the twenty-first century, people were still massacred over witchcraft scares. At one time or the other, belief in malicious sorcery existed among every people on Earth. There’ve been lots of studies of it—anthropological, psychological—but in the end, it all boils down to one thing. People don’t like to think bad things happen to them for no reason. Somebody has to be responsible. God. The devil. A witch. Hell, in my home state, Mississippi, there was still talk about juju and such in some places. “I checked out Ledepa’s hometown—only ten years ago, I think, when somebody was arrested for beatin’ up a man he thought had hexed him. So I figured the belief is still hangin’ around there, and that Ledepa might have grown up with it. It’s hard for the intellect to

entirely reject something it learned when it was young.” He poured a tumbler of scotch. “That, and played him. Made it seem I felt the same way, and would back him up all the way.” He lifted his drink as the screen settled on a scene. “It’s startin’,” Lee said.

He turned up the sound.

” ... shot in Jakarta today. The suspect claimed that the victim was a telepath who had cheated him at poker. Several unsubstantiated reports of similar attacks have surfaced in the last hour.” The view switched. He recognized a street in Paris. “ ... only hours after a vidcast on the new report in the New England Journal of Medicine. He claimed his lover was a telepath who drove him insane...” And from a town in Mexico: “ ... apparently in response to the alarmist reaction of Senator Ledepa Koya to a recent journal article alleging proof of extrasensory perception. No deaths are reported, though one man was critically wounded...”

The screen began splitting, then recording what it couldn’t show. The reports increased, ten, thirty—less than an hour it was over a hundred.

“Oh, my God,” Tom whispered.

“Yep. Now people have a whole new thing to blame their problems on, something real, something tangible.”

“But you—“

“Me? Listen to the ‘casts. It’s Koya that’s gettin’ the credit for this. This is going to get worse, and he’s gonna be the guy who started it. Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy, the little two-faced sumovabitch. One of Tokash’s toadies.” He smiled. “So Koya gets credit for starting the killings, and the worse stuff that’ll come later. Me-people will remember I was cautious, tried to talk sense. They’ll see me as the one to pick up the pieces, and the guy who’ll protect them from the big bad telepaths, and at the same time.”

“But Lee, those people are dying.”

“Tom, this was going to break, and they were going to die. That’s life. Hell, this is nothin’. These are the lunatics, the ones who were already closest to the edge. Most of these murders and what have you would have happened anyway, but under a variety of justifications. The real mess is coming if the results are replicated and even the skeptics give the whole thing the nod. When the sane people believe it, the implications will really sink in. It’s our job to handle the damage, and we’ve got a jump on it. We can make it better. Now, are you gonna mope, or are we gonna get to work?”

Tom nodded, though his face was still troubled.

“Work,” he said.

CHAPTER I

Earth & Moon Today, 3 October 2115

A team at Johns Hopkins University Medical School today joined the ranks of those who confirm the findings of the Philen-Duffy study. Dr. Richard Stepp, chair of the Experimental Psychology Department, announced the conclusions today at a press conference.

“I was as skeptical as anyone,” Dr. Stepp told the audience, “but I really don’t see any room for doubt now. Extrasensory perception is no longer a fantasy or a possibility-it is a fact.”

The Miami Herald, English edition, 5 December 2115 Pope Pius XV disclosed today that a number of as-yet-unnamed priests have voluntarily come forward to be tested as telepaths.

“It should be clear to us all,” the Pope said at his address in Caracas, “that the sudden appearance of these people among us constitutes a miracle-the scientific community has no explanation for them. God has given us men and women who can see into our souls, and this is a blessing we must embrace. They are God’s gifts to us, a reminder of His love, a way to true confession and salvation.” His Holiness went on to decry the violence and suspicion surrounding the discovery of telepaths, and called for the world to join in “peacefully embracing our new brethren.”

The snow wasn’t pretty anymore, it was just cold. His pants were frozen and they chafed hard against his legs.

“It hurts, Mama. I want to stop.”

She squeezed his hand tighter.

Not yet, she said, in their secret voice. We have to finish our game.

I don’t want to finish it. I want to go home.

Things tumbled out of Mama, then, a whole lot of things he didn’t understand. Some were shiny and made him want to cry, others just scared him. Gripping her hand, he felt tall and sick, an itchy wetness in his side, sharp pain when he took a breath. It started snowing harder, so hard he could barely see the red cliffs all around them. And he heard something else. Little voices that talked only of hunger and need, bigger ones that were angry and hard. Too far away to hear words, but he didn’t like them.

Don’t like what? his mother asked.

The men and the dogs. He sulked. I don’t like this game.

A feeling from Mama, like when he woke up dreaming of falling. Her heart was beating hard, like someone was pounding on her chest. She stopped and hugged him to her. Her clothes were cold and stiff like his, but her cheek turned warm after only a second. Then she led him over to one of the cliffs.

“Let’s climb up here,” she said aloud.

The rock was smooth and hard to climb, even though it wasn't very steep. In the steeper parts, Mama pushed him from behind and showed him the handholds. Someone made those handholds a very long time ago, she told him. Your great-great-many-greats-grandfather, maybe.

Did you know that? Why? Were they playing hide-and-seek, too?

He thought she laughed inside, the laugh that didn't really mean she was happy or that she thought something was funny.

Yes, she said.

Did they win?

No.

The last part was the steepest, but then they were inside the cave. It was pretty big, but not too high. Mama could only stand up in a few places. There was some kind of old house in the cave, made out of lots of flat rocks. Mama took him behind one of the walls and sat down there.

"Come here," she said, in sound words, very softly. Her lips had little spots of red on them. He came up under her arm. "Now we have to be very quiet," she said. "And when they come, you have to play your very best. You have to think about this cave being very empty-think about you and me just being rocks. Can you do that? Like when you play this with the other kids?"

Yes.

"Use sound words," she gasped. "And remember, only use your quiet words with me. No one else. Ever. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mama."

"Good." They sat that way for a long time, and Mama fell asleep. Outside, he knew the men and dogs were getting closer. He felt them looking hard at the cave, but he did as he was told, and pretended that he and Mama were just rocks, just part of the old house. After a while, they went on. He noticed Mama's voice was getting smaller. He held both her hands-that usually helped-but it just kept getting smaller. He shouted at her, in the quiet way, but nothing she said made much sense, and so he listened as hard as he could, harder, straining. Goodbye. I love you, he finally heard. And then something else, something like rushing water, not just a sound but something sucking all around him. Someone singing, and maybe a drum beating, like at the Shalako dances. And then it was like a hole under his feet, and he was falling, falling through a thunderstorm, lightning and black clouds all around him, down and down, and something seemed to tear out of his chest, and he heard his mother's voice, but not saying anything he understood, and then nothing, nothing. Except he was still falling, and he saw himself from inside out, like a sock turned inside out, except it was everything he thought and felt and knew, and there was a Shalako there, shining brighter than the Sun, telling him something. And Mama was with the Shalako, and they were all going down, down into the dance hall of the dead, and he was getting cold, and he didn't care anymore.

Then Mama gave him something. The Shalako gave him something . And it hurt. He screarried and l
pushed, like he was swimming, and he swam and beat and pulled at something. Or maybe he four
handholds like his mother had shown him, but not rock, and he climbed, and then he was out of th
cloud, out of the water, the thunder and lighting getting smaller behind him, and a different kind
darkness came, one that wasn't as scary.

He woke up in his mother's arms. She was holding him tight, and he couldn't make her let go. H
finally had to wriggle away, and she kept her arms there, like he was still in them. He wanted to cr
but there was nothing to cry. He had left his tears back in the storm, with his mother.

Slowly Marvin raised his head and spit out a tooth. Liang-that giant son of a bitch-reached down f
another piece of him. The most horrible thing was, he could feel nothing from Liang-not anger, n
fear, nothing. Liang was stone cold. Not so the others. Even from across the room he could sense the
disgust.

"Liang, man, what'd I do?"

Liang shrugged.

"The boss knows, man. He knows what you are. He's been watchin' you at the poker tables."

"So I'm good at poker. What's the beef?"

Liang smiled indulgently, picked him up, and hit him again.

"Yer one a them mind readers, ain'tcha?"

"What the hell are you=" This time he felt ribs crack.

"Ain'tcha?" Liang repeated, pulling a pistol.

"Okay, okay, yeah. Maybe a little bit."

"Good enough to cheat at poker. Good enough to cheat the boss."

"Yeah."

"And what happens to them that cheats the boss?"

"Oh, God, Liang, come on-"

Liang pumped a round into the chamber and placed the cold muzzle of the weapon under Marvin
chin.

"C'mon, man-" He waited Liang tousled his hair.

"Here's the deal, Marvin. The boss is a good Catholic, so yer gonna live, if that's what you want. B
you're his bitch from now on, deng? We're gonna fit you out with a 'sponder, and yer gonna work f

him.”

“Yeah, yeah, I can do that. Help him out. Find feds-anything. Just don’t kill me, man.”

Liang smiled toothily.

“Well, I’ll tell the boss we have an agreement , then. But Marvin-“

“Yeah?”

“I ain’t a good Catholic. You shine the boss, and you’ll wish I’d shot you.”

They threw her in a pit, and she landed on a bed of corpses. She couldn’t even see the ground. Other people fell all around her. Up above, she heard the trilling of birds, the chug of a bulldozer. It began to rain.

“Marta?”

“Boselee!” They found each other and clung together, as if the familiar touch and smell of each other could take them away somewhere else, somewhere safe. Don’t look, don’t look, he told her, told her words that sank through her skin and bones, soaked in like the monsoon rain. But some were shouting angrily, now, and she did look. Joe, the old man, fixed each soldier with his gaze.

“Your heart will rot in you!” he shouted. “We will live on, but you will rot. Repent of this. These people have done nothing.”

A man with reddish hair and a lieutenant’s uniform peered into the pit and frowned. He pulled an evil-looking pistol and shot Joe in the head. The old man gurgled and pitched back.

“You are all cursed by the devil,” the lieutenant replied. “I merely send you home to hell.”

He motioned to the soldiers, and the rain changed to hail.

The Night, the Wind, the Sorcerer, our Lord. Blood’s thoughts drifted in the halls of the temple and brought them all running. She had brief fragments of herself from each of them-her hair was black and each, her eyes almond. But her height varied-Smoke looked down on her, Mercy was almost level with herself in a kaleidoscope, refracted by love, jealousy, lust, fear.

“They’re here.” She spoke aloud for Mercy’s benefit. Mercy wasn’t strong enough to follow the conversations unless their hands were touching.

“How far?” Teal asked, fingering his milk-white beard.

“On the bridge, six miles up where we put the alarm. Looks like a couple of truckloads. Heavily armed.”

Images of men with guns, of men with comically thick limbs dragging the ground That last had to be from Monkey.

“Monkey, can you try to be serious?” Blood sighed. “At best, these men are coming to kill us. A worst-“

“They’ll have to cut through our loving followers, first,” Monkey said, grinning his narrow grin, tossing his long copper hair nonchalantly over his shoulder. Blood returned a crooked smile.

“How could this happen?” Teal murmured. “Why do they want to kill us?”

Monkey hooted at that, sounding not unlike his chosen namesake .

“They’ve wanted to kill us ever since we got here. You don’t plop a bunch of mindless zombies and a Mayan temple out in the middle of bumpkinland without creatin’ a few hard feelings.”

“We shouldn’t have used our powers so freely,” Teal complained . “We shouldn’t-“

“Come on. How could we have known science was going to all of a sudden discover us? Hell, we thought we were the only ones. We ran across one another in the space of two years, and then nothing, no matter how we looked. Up until now, the believers thought we got our powers from the ancestors and everybody else assumed we were frauds. Fair enough, and it got us some good times. Now the rules have changed, and our kind are takin’ it in the butt. The sooner we learn to live with that, the better.”

Smoke, who had been customarily silent, unknotted his massive jaw long enough to say,

“We go.”

“Yeah, big fellah, we go. Do you think the followers need to be pumped up a little bit more, Blood?”

She nodded.

“Sound the drums. It’s show time.”

Her pain spattered out into the congregation like her blood onto the paper, as the others picked it up and threw it out as far as they could. She pulled the string of thorns through her tongue, grateful that was the last time. It was fine being the dark goddess, waited on hand and foot, sucking the last drink out of the fools in their congregation, watching their herd of normals grow, but maybe it wasn’t worth this. Of course, it was moot now. She felt a little dizzy as Monkey lit the paper and started his speech. She looked out over the glazed eyes of two hundred people and wanted to laugh at them.

Pitiful sheep.

“The time has come, the Katun-ending draws nigh, the cycle begins again,” he intoned. “The maggots of the world are coming to eat its meat. As they came to the prairies to slay the buffalo, as they came to the Amazon to strip our mother bare, now they come here. But though the wheel of time turns, it is yet never the same. It can be changed. The buffalo can come back. The redwoods can return. The Amazon can be green as once it was. The ancestors are watching, who fought and died for you. You can see their eyes, in the night sky. Will you shame them, when the enemy comes? Will you do less

for them?”

The sound of the crowd was inarticulate, but all of their minds screamed No.

“We go inside to gird ourselves. We will emerge at the last, when you have proven yourselves.”

You okay, Blood? Dizzy. I’m okay.

It was Monkey, naturally, who had insisted on the escape tunnel . Once again he was proved right.

Well, you got your wish, Monkey told her, as they moved down the tunnel. For a while, anyway. The Man Who Would Be King was always your favorite book. Uh-huh. Fm just remembering how the ended. Not this time, Monkey promised.

After ten or fifteen minutes they came up in the deep Alaskan woods, cautiously. In the distance Blood heard the familiar tearing sound of automatic gunfire, something she hadn’t heard since they had been mercenaries in Kamchatka. She found she almost welcomed it. It was a somehow home sound. Mercy was pale, though. She had not been one of them, back then, and probably had never heard gunfire. She took Mercy’s hand.

Don’t worry, she told her. We’ll be okay. But we have to run silent now. Mercy nodded, and took hold of Smoke’s hand. Blood raised her pistol, checked to make certain it was loaded. She knew the mercenaries were ahead, waiting for them, and when she could see them through the trees, she tasted them. The bloodletting sometimes made her like this, as if she were evaporating, thin but large, a mist hearing and feeling all within her. Spreading over them she felt their angry, stupid, piggy little minds. The one was mean because he had nothing else to be; that one wasn’t mean but did what he was told. She suddenly felt a cold, hard anger. Normals. She had watched the news reports, those smug bastards on the news shows, the yapping pundits. Look what they had done. People were dying all over the world because normals were stupid and afraid. She would give them something to be afraid of.

The anger gave her strength, so when she stepped into the clearing , they saw more than a slightly built woman. They were standing around a Cortez four-wheel drive, drinking beer. Three of them. As they were hunting deer. Their faces changed as they saw her, Kali, Gabriel, the skull and the sickle, the wings of the stooping hawk. They fumbled at their rifles as she calmly shot each of them in the head, delighting in feeling their dirty little minds wink out, vanish down the rabbit hole. Only the last one managed to fire, but he missed and she spattered him against the truck. Then it all sucked back in, she blew the fire out, and she was hollow , without even enough muscle or tendon in her legs to stand. But she felt the ground shake as she collapsed to it.

“Nice shootin’,” Monkey allowed.

“What was the explosion?” Mercy asked.

“That would be our temple,” Monkey said. “Sixty kilos of plastique.”

“Oh, my God,” Mercy said. “Our followers ...” She started to cry, and for once she was strong, her tears washing over them all.

“Not anymore,” Monkey said, putting his arm under Blood’s and lifting her up. “That game’s over. It’s time to move on.”

CHAPTER 2

Lee cheered along with everyone else when the actinic glare of a small, new star appeared above the Lunar horizon. The probe had actually been launched half an hour before, of course, from the ugly snout of the mass driver he could barely see poking up from the Von Braun Shipyard a kilometer away. While cost-efficient, a mass-driver launch offered no sound and fury, no glare of rockets. For a long tradition, it was the first flash of the engines that signaled a successful launch. Still clapping and grinning, he turned to face the reporters.

“I’d just like to say how gratified I am to be here,” he began, as the ruckus calmed to a general murmur. “I feel greatly privileged and enormously excited. There were those who said that the moment would never come that the curiosity that carried humanity from continent to continent and from world to world had begun to dwindle. Here is proof that they were wrong.”

Hands shot up everywhere as he paused.

“Well,” he said, “I had a longer speech planned, but you folks seem pretty eager.”

He selected Robert Tanaka, one of the front row of reporters.

“Bob? What can I do for you?”

“I’d just like to know how it feels, Senator, to be vindicated. And what do you think the aliens will be like?”

“Well, Bob, in keeping with the dignity being a senator of the Earth Alliance carries-ah, hell, it feels damn good.” He waited for the chuckles to float around. “But let’s keep this all in perspective. Our experience with tachyon emissions is mighty limited, and for all we know that signal the DeepProbe detected could have come from a natural source. But still, this is what I-and many others-have wanted for a long time. The DeepProbe network was put in place four years after tachyons were proven to exist. The Heimdal probe will upgrade the system at a bargain price, and I think one day-maybe sooner than you think-she’ll answer your second question.”

“Thank you, Senator.”

“Very welcome. What about you-Ms. Bochs, isn’t it?”

“Yes sir, with Izvestia International. I was wondering how you respond to Senator Tokash’s recent statement that you have mishandled the telepath problem.”

He felt the smile freeze on his face.

“Well, I was hoping we could chat a bit more about the hope and future of humanity before we retreated back to the Neanderthal cave of politics. But if we have to go there, let’s carry at least some of what we’ve seen today with us-some hope and faith in ourselves as a race. Senator Tokash has his own point of view, to be sure. He and I have differed about many things-the Heimdal project itself, for instance, which many of you may remember he opposed not long ago. As for the telepath `problem

we're dealing with the issue as sensitively as we can."

"Some charge that you would make telepaths second-class citizens."

"Yes, on the one hand-and on the other I'm criticized for not rounding them all up and throwing them into death camps. It's easy to make sweeping and extreme statements. It's harder to deal with complex reality. The truth is that we have to regulate telepaths, and at the same time we must respect their rights as citizens. I wish we could have avoided the regrettable incidents of the past few months, and pray we've seen the end of them."

"Senator, regarding your proposal for a specific committee on telepaths--"

"Yes. The Privacy and Technology Committee was a good stopgap, but telepathy is not technology. This is a special problem that needs special attention. I've proposed a Committee on Metasensor Regulation."

"Can you respond to the rumors that Senator Tokash has been appointed head of that committee instead of you?"

Lee was proud of himself-he kept his smile in place.

"I'm sure that the president will appoint whoever she feels will do the best job. If that's Tokash, then trust her judgment."

*None**

Alone, he wasn't so cool, as the shards of an empty decanter settled to the floor of his room with the patience of snowflakes. Breaking things on the Moon lacked a certain satisfaction, but the moment of rupture, when even the smallest fragments ballooned outward like a dust cloud, made up for the lack of calamity. He had to retreat into the small washroom until the air filters took care of the danger the fragments posed to his lungs. It had been too long since he had been off planet, way too long. His instincts were betraying him like those of a rookie. When he reemerged and finished cleaning up the room, he felt calmer. He checked his messages and found among them a discouraging note from Tokash. Tokash would almost certainly get the committee. That wasn't right-it was his hearings that had begun it all, his voice the world had clung to. Now Tokash wanted to take that away from him. But what could he do? Nothing, not on the Moon, and he was stuck here for several more days, at least. By the time he returned to Earth, the decision would be made. He put on his weights and began calisthenics, working his muscles savagely. Whether people knew it or not, they responded better to a man who looked capable than one who did not. Sweat was just beginning to collect in improbable large droplets when the room link warbled.

"Sound only," he told it. "Yes? Senator Lee Crawford here."

There was a small pause, and then, "Senator Crawford? This is Alice Kimbrell. Dr. Kimbrell, how nice to hear from you. To what do I owe the pleasure?" "I'd like to talk to you, as soon as is convenient."

That raised his brows. No three-second delay-Alice Kimbrell was on the Moon.

“What does this regard?”

“Something very important.”

“Very well. How about the Ix Chet, in one hour?”

“I would prefer somewhere less public.”

“Indulge me, if you don’t mind. It’s almost lunchtime anyway.”

The Ix Chel was, like everything on the Moon, small, but made up for that in elegance. Dug into hillside, it featured a thick dome that filtered gentle blue Earthlight into the room. The light was picked up by the water rushing from behind one curved wall. Water on the Moon was a precious thing mined from brittle, powdery seas—the corpses of long-dead comets. The colony had tons of it, but to see more than a cupful at a time was rare. To be all but surrounded by it was a miracle, and he silently toasted the owner’s enterprise in having the restaurant butted up against one of the nodes of the colony’s cooling/water-processing torus. The place was packed to capacity when Alice Kimbrell walked in, but she had no trouble spotting him when he stood. He admired her as she approached. He liked something about her eyes, and the crisp wear of her modest grey suit, almost like a uniform.

“Dr. Kimbrell,” he said, extending his hand.

She took it, stiffly.

“Senator.”

“Please, have a seat.” Once she had done so, he flashed her a smile. “Quite a coincidence, both of us being on the Moon right now. Did you come to see Heimdal launched? I could’ve gotten you front-row seats.”

“I came to see you.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I’m flattered. That’s an expensive jaunt for a private citizen.”

She acknowledged that with a curt nod.

“I heard you were here.”

“I’ll be in Geneva in six days. Or you could have called me.”

“It’s too important to wait-or to trust to the cornlinks.”

“Really.”

“Yes. And I still wish we had gone somewhere more-private.”

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