

Visitor

Wayne Meyers

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PROLOGUE: VEERA

Veera's secret headquarters

Veera was old. Far older than society permitted most of her people to grow. She glared at the server trembling before her desk, his knees threatening to buckle at any moment.

The over-inquisitive fool had dared to wonder about her age while delivering her midday meal. It mattered not he had tried to shield himself from her superior brain, for Veera forcibly mindswept his thoughts from his head. She required followers who supported her without question, especially here, in her secret lair, where the future of the galaxy tipped in her favor. Veera never took chances with such things and monitored their thoughts regularly.

“Do you know how I lived to be this age?” Veera asked. She ignored the widening stain on his pants as he wet himself.

“N-n-no my queen,” the server said. He kept his face pointed toward the ground, the chattering of his teeth amusing her.

Veera stepped out from behind her desk and strolled toward the groveling server. “I’ve spent many fortunes on the black market having my internal organs replaced with more efficient, artificial creations. Our people possess the technology to live forever, but the fools waste it over ancient idealistic principles.” Backward thinking Purist fools!

The server dropped his face to the plush flooring. “Yes, my queen.”

Veera placed her foot on top of his head and pushed his face deeper into the carpet. “You wanted to know how old I am. I will grace you with the answer: I have lived for four hundred and fifty cycles through my own resources, ingenuity, and tenacious resolve to expand beyond the limitations imposed upon me by those who failed to value their own self-worth!”

A muffled groan was all she could make out. She reached down and yanked the server’s face up by his hair, leaving her shoe firmly across the back of his neck. Hovering close to his face, her voice trickled venom. “Do I not look beautiful for my age, oh curious lump of excrement? Is not my face young and flawless in appearance? Do you not find each and every lock of my hair lustrous and appealing?”

The server whimpered in her grasp, his neck threatening to break. Veera removed her foot and wrenched him up by his hair until his face was level with hers, his body dangling above the floor.

She stood tall and straight while staring deep into his eyes, enjoying the squirming helplessness and fear. The mangled black glow emanating from his body, indicating his extreme distress, excited her further. She held his face so close to hers she could taste his breath. She chilled her harsh, cold voice further.

“My eyes may be new, but you do see the ancient wisdom residing within, do you not?”

The server, trembling in her grasp, did his best to nod.

Veera chuckled as she dropped the wretch, who collapsed at her feet, sobbing.

Knowledge seeped into her brain, reports from her assistants of the revolution she’d engineered. Her glow of exultation burst from every pore in strands of brilliant green, projecting outward like spines. Her plans had succeeded. She laughed, throwing her arms up in the air and twirling about her office. The server crawled toward the doorway, hoping to escape.

She stepped in front of the exit, looking down at him with her hands on her hips. “Do you know why I always obtain my desires, excrement? It’s because I never leave anything to chance, not even the most minute possibility.”

She knelt down and grasped the server’s chin to hold his face steady, forcing him to look at her. “My revolution is now underway, from the largest system to the smallest asteroid. I’ve disabled every Purist spaceship and broken their communications, isolating each planet to their own leadership. Yornacut itself is now under siege by my strongest attack force, and once they crumble, every other system in our galaxy shall follow suit. I will be the only voice any Quenterian heeds for the next million cycles, or longer if I so desire.”

The server attempted a smile that came off crooked and mocking, displeasing her. She took his face in both hands and touched her forehead to his, her face hardening. “When the interstellar dust settles and my Society of Progressives are in power, we shall experience great changes, and the defeated Purists shall beg me for crumbs of glory.”

She waited for his accolades, but realized he was unconscious. Her hands had squeezed his head too tightly.

She laughed, standing up and letting him fall in a heap. “Oops.”

It was a masterstroke plan that the overconfident Purist simpletons had never anticipated. She had effectively cleared the path to conquer Yornacut, home planet to the Purist government’s offices and legislators who ultimately ruled her people—the center of the Center. Her loyal governmental agents and followers in other systems would smooth over the transition of power once her modest fleet crushed Yornacut’s substantial planetary defenses. The masses would have no understanding what this meant until far too late for their whiny voices to make any difference. All computational models indicated that in order for Veera’s plan to succeed, she had to seat herself on Yornacut before communications and space travel resumed, enabling reinforcements to chase off her fleet.

Of course, she had an alternative plan in place, though it was riskier and would require a tactical demonstration. Veera preferred certainty to

theatrics.

The server retched, struggling to his hands and knees. Veera sat on top of her desk and watched, curious if he would achieve his footing. He did not, but collapsed panting instead.

“My age is what it is because I refused to die. Three-hundred-fifty cycles ago, simply because I had supposedly lived what they deemed an acceptable life span, the Purist laws would have condemned my brilliance to death. I defied them!

“When the chest pains became unbearable, I visited the private lab of a sympathetic surgeon with a minor financial problem. He operated on me with stolen instruments to repair the blockages in my natural heart. I lived.

“The Purists held their iron grip so long they’d forgotten to explain why they mattered. The masses were ready for something different. Like a flame to tinder my vision spread, while the Purist leaders watched in dismay how their people embraced me.

“Thanks to further clandestine surgeries, my body remained youthfully vibrant. The Purist leaders noticed my failure to age and ruled my existence a gross violation of their antiquated codes and rules. I was sentenced to be executed, the first such case of its kind in the history of our people. Murdered! They hoped to end this threat to their way of life with my death, then dismantle the vast organization I’d spent a lifetime assembling.”

Veera paced back and forth across the office floor, caught up in her memories. Reliving the indignities of that time maintained her resolve. “I allowed everything to proceed as they had planned, but at the last minute, substituted a fresh corpse while my trusted followers secreted me away. In this manner, the Purists believed they had disposed of me while I became a martyr to billions of people—a victim of harsh, unreasonable, antiquated rules that violated an individual’s right to life. My followers tripled, but without a leader to manipulate and channel their aggression, the flame threatened to consume itself. They needed me to guide them.

“After another specialized surgery that altered my appearance and voice, I emerged as a young but enthusiastic champion against governmental tyranny, founded the formal Society of Progressive Thinking, and utilized my previous identity to recruit sympathetic followers in swelling numbers.”

Veera folded her arms and stared at her view screen, scrutinizing the local news reports. The commentator expressed confusion and concern that their ships would no longer fly, and their long-range communications systems no longer functioned. Was it a mass technological failure? Solar flare? Were the Radicals or some other disgruntled organization behind it? “No you fools, not disgruntled, but unblinded!”

Veera smiled. The Society had flourished beneath her watchful eyes as she waited patiently for the proper moment to strike. In the meantime, she used her skills of manipulation and coercion to place people into crucial

positions of government, military, and scientific endeavors. She also made certain they properly groomed their replacements, to perpetuate her grip on the strings of society indefinitely. Veera didn't plan on dying again, but knew that others would before everything was ready.

Once again, the dismayed government noticed a person had aged beyond the permitted life span, but rather than repeat the error of their predecessors, the current regime's officials agreed to overlook this transgression. Veera had become far too powerful to martyr. They were terrified of what might happen should they attempt to execute her now. Free from their meddling, Veera went on to increase her reach to the furthest ends of the populated galaxy, collecting new recruits and allies in droves until she felt she was ready to succeed.

That exhilarating moment was now close at hand. She raised her fist to the ceiling and cackled.

Sensing a communication from one of her aides, Veera allowed the sender to reach her mind. "*Your Eminence, an urgent message from Commander Ector.*"

She didn't wait, but extracted the message forcibly and cut communications.

Commander Ector had intercepted a transmission from one of the many spaceships incapacitated by the navigational virus. The Mission Commander of this observation vessel had permitted one of his crew to go loose upon the seedling planet known to the natives as Earth.

Veera frowned as the full implications sank in. First off, the fools had violated their own codes against interference with a seeded planet—something she hadn't believed they would do for any reason. Still, other than serving as a curious point of support to her Society's beliefs, it didn't offer much interest. The presence of one of her people on a seeded planet, on the other hand, gave her pause.

The girl's name was Aldrea, daughter of the crew's Observation Commander, a prominent supporter of the Purist government. An enemy.

Veera's obsession with detail ensured her plans were invariably foolproof, but such an ability to perceive all the possible outcomes of a situation meant that dangers were imbued with more potential than they deserved. This girl's presence concerned her.

She pulled up data on the planet in question. The girl was marooned on a planet filled with primitive, arrogant creatures possessing an innate tendency toward violence. With Aldrea's technical assistance, they had the potential to master interstellar space flight equipped with sophisticated weaponry. The incentive to do so was already part of their violent nature. If nothing else, Aldrea could warn the seedlings about Veera's plans of conquest—if the girl figured things out—complicating what should become a simplistic breed-and-abduct operation in the near future. On the extreme

side, Aldrea could organize Earth's seedlings into an offensive attack unit, perhaps spreading the same advanced technology to other seeded planets as well, creating aggravation if not inciting outright rebellion. Veera was not one who dismissed the motive of revenge lightly; indeed, it was the strongest incentive for action in existence, as far as she was concerned.

She had not reached the threshold of victory through poor planning or taking unnecessary chances. A blazing fire began with a spark.

"Dispatch a trusted resource to the seedling planet in question. Locate the girl and terminate her. Avoid confrontation, but if necessary, eliminate any seedling who gets in the way."

She dismissed the matter from her mind. There were more pressing issues at hand, such as preparing her first communication introducing herself as Empress.

A whimper caught her ear just as she returned to her desk. Ah, yes, the curious server upon whom she'd graciously bestowed her biography. Sadly for him, it was lethal knowledge. Her followers thought her a mysterious, powerful demigod, a trust she could ill afford to fracture.

The only organ Veera possessed from her original body was her brain. While her people possessed basic telepathic capabilities, she had learned that those powers enhanced over time. The older she grew, the more potent her mind became. She had funded covert scientific experiments to augment the powers of her mind through implanted cranial receptors with corresponding amplifiers hidden within the structure of her desk. This forbidden technology enabled mental feats no other being was capable of. Power and mystery did not engender trust, but she would settle for awe and compliance.

For now, it was going to help her eliminate a useless pile of excrement.

Closing her eyes, Veera reached out with her mind until she'd snared his. Then, like squeezing a lump of butter, she squashed his involuntary reflex controls until his heart and lungs ceased to function. She deflected a desperate mental attempt to block her, enjoying herself. It wasn't often she indulged herself in life's little treasures. She would make this last as long as possible.

Somehow the fool found the will to rise to his feet and stagger toward her.

Pity, he was forcing the end too soon.

She stood still, allowing him to come closer. His choice to fight was amusing and curious. Why didn't he try to run? Still, she wouldn't stop him.

The server couldn't know about the radius of defense that projected invisibly outward from the queen. The moment the server stepped over this threshold, a thermal-laser stabbed his head with an intense ray of heat. He collapsed to the ground for a final time, his brain destroyed. Veera's desk housed many deadly secrets.

WAYNE MEYERS

Her body pulsed with a purple-red glow. She twirled again, bathed in her own light, invulnerable and unstoppable.

CHAPTER ONE: DOUG

Adirondack Mountains, New York

Douglas Keller plodded along the rock-strewn trail, enjoying flashes of warmth from the sun poking through gaps in the swaying leaves. He considered how people took the brilliant orb's light and heat for granted, then laughed at his whimsy. If nothing else, this little vacation had freed his mind from the mundanity of his day job, but once back home, it wouldn't take long before his hectic life consumed him again. That was okay, though. Doug enjoyed keeping busy, and had plenty of tasks to occupy his mind besides what might happen if the sun went away.

He whistled as he walked, cheerfully swatting away clouds of gnats and the occasional mosquito. Other than a dull ache in the back of his head, he felt awesome. He rubbed the sore spot, expecting it to hurt from his touch, but it didn't. He must have slept on a rock or something last night.

Doug paused, sensing something wrong, as though an important event on the edge of his mind was struggling to emerge. All he'd done in the last week was hike trails in the Adirondack Mountains. What could possibly have happened, except maybe a mosquito bite or poison ivy rash?

Well, there *had* been that encounter with a black bear he'd surprised in a clearing, but Doug wasn't sure which one of them took off faster. Forgetting everything the ranger drilled into him before starting his hike a week ago, Doug had run as fast as he could in the opposite direction from the bear, only realizing the bear did the same when he looked back over his shoulder to see how close he was to being eaten.

Doug indulged in a chuckle as he imagined relaying this story to the physics students once he was back in the classroom. For the past four years of graduate school, working towards a doctorate in Material Sciences, he'd subsidized his tuition by taking a post as an assistant professor. It was enjoyable work but he longed to teach his own class. Starting September, he

would be. Now if he could only come up with some catchy connection between a fleeing bear and the composite materials on NASA's latest space shuttle, he'd have the perfect lead into the syllabus.

But what happened after I turned to look at the bear?

Doug tilted his head as he paused in mid-stride, the wind-rustled leaves and symphony of bird vocalizations fading into the background. His hand rubbed the back of his head again, and he was still surprised it didn't hurt. Then, a falling sensation made him dizzy, forcing him to bend over with his hands on his knees until the vertigo passed. He breathed slowly while his vision cleared and waited, listening for...something. More birds singing, more creatures rustling through the woods around him. Nothing different from what he'd already heard throughout the past week, repeated over and over again, until it faded from conscious thought.

Doug straightened, shrugged, and resumed hiking. Probably an allergy attack, and he was out of medicine. He expected to arrive back at the campground he'd started from before nightfall, and return home in the morning. One more day without popping an antihistamine wouldn't kill him.

He couldn't wait for this hike to end. Doug was so looking forward to settling down in front of his TV with a cold soda. Now that whatever compulsion to leave the comforts of his Long Island home had been appeased, Doug swore he'd never take another vacation again. He wouldn't even be here in the first place if not for the constant nagging by his best friend Ken to "get out of his lab and breathe some fresh air for a change." Doug should have known better than to take recreational advice from an avid outdoorsman, but Ken made it sound too awesome to resist. In hindsight, the fact that Ken made tons of money selling Jaguars should have given Doug pause, but by the time his friend's pitch was over, Doug couldn't wait to sample fresh air by the bucket.

Well, Doug was so done with fresh air at this point he looked forward to sucking in Manhattan's polluted smog and even unwashed taxi drivers. All fresh air did was make him sneeze—hard. He sighed, wiping his nose with a tattered handkerchief his mother had shoved in his shirt pocket before he drove off. The surrounding chirps and scuttles continued despite the loud noise he'd made. Even out here in the middle of nowhere he was barely noticed. Story of his life.

Pulling off the Yankees baseball cap plastered to his head, Doug knelt beside a small creek to splash some cold mountain water over his face. Closing his eyes to avoid the bright sunlight reflecting from the water's surface, he imagined he heard steam hiss as the water struck his skin. His eyes opened, revealing his rippling reflection, then widened further when he noticed his shirt was spattered with dried blood.

What happened after I turned to look at the bear?

VISITOR

Doug blinked several times while rubbing the back of his head, unable to recall where the blood came from. Had he scratched himself on a thorn bush? He pulled the shirt over his head and felt his torso for a wound, then sat back on the grassy bank perplexed. He couldn't find a single scratch, although more blood clung to his chest. He splashed water and rubbed the dried blood from his skin. Turning his body sideways, he noticed even more clung to his back, and scrubbed that away too using a small branch on the areas his hands couldn't reach.

As the sluggish current carried away red swirls of dried blood, something caught his attention. It took him a moment to realize it was an unfamiliar smell. He sniffed the air, inhaling an intoxicating, exotic fragrance, which prompted him to search for its source. Seeing no flowers in the immediate area, Doug lifted the balled up shirt to his face, breathing in a scent unlike any other he'd ever known. It reminded him of lavender and jasmine with a hint of licorice, yet smelling it felt like seeing a fourth primary color. It was just so...alien to his nose.

Had he slept on a flowerbed? How had this scent infiltrated the fibers of his shirt? Doug strained to remember, but all he could recall was turning to look at the bear.

What happened after?

A surge of pain shot through his head as though a molten spike was pounding through its core, until he turned his thoughts elsewhere. With a grunt, Doug gave up remembering and after stuffing the bloody shirt in a side pocket, pulled on a semi-clean shirt from his pack. Sweat and grass stains abounded, but at least it wasn't covered in blood. What strange things being in the wilderness did to a person's sense of cleanliness.

Doug glanced at his watch. By this time tomorrow, he'd be in the lab at Columbia. He'd be able to analyze the blood to determine its origin, and hopefully find an answer. If not, he'd schedule a CT scan to make sure his brain wasn't harboring a tumor.

But first he needed to return to the campground. He looked for the blue markers on the trees along the trail to confirm his position, then resumed hiking, a growing excitement adding a spring to each step. He attributed this positive feeling to being psyched about retrieving his cell phone from his car, which Ken had forced him to promise to leave behind, just to make sure he actually relaxed instead of working. If he was honest with himself, after withdrawal anxiety faded by the second night while he sat by his campfire, Doug felt relieved the phone wasn't in his pocket. He knew he'd check emails and make phone calls to his colleagues at the lab, and his mother would check in on him every hour to make sure he was still alive, while his father yelled at her to leave Doug alone in the background.

Doug smiled as he recalled her protestations when he explained this vacation to her in detail. No phones, out in the middle of the wilderness by

himself communing with nature, and possibly deciding to remain there to become a hermit and live in a cave. Off the grid. Of course he was joking. Like anything could possibly stand in the way of his career as professor and scientist now that his doctorate was finally completed. But he loved to tease her.

It would be ironic if something happened to him after he promised his parents he'd be fine.

CHAPTER TWO: BILL

Pentagon

FBI Deputy Director Bill Hoffman tried to contain his irritation as he watched Dr. Cornelius Smith saunter into the executive conference room after calling this emergency meeting.

Smith's flushed face, bright eyes, and the way he marched rather than walked toward the podium clearly indicated he was excited. From his tight grip on a bundle of manila folders clutched to his chest as though they possessed the secret to eternal youth, Bill surmised they contained the reason behind this impromptu get together.

Bill rubbed his chin. The fact that the President had ordered all security agencies to provide representation indicated how important the matter was. All that remained was for Smith to begin, if he would only quicken his pace. Smith paused to fuss with his collar. Bill repressed a sigh; Smith was going to milk the spotlight for as long as possible.

Smith was the senior lead for satellite surveillance analysis. Bill couldn't recall whose department that put him under these days as congressional committees squabbled where to bury the budget, but his agents used them from time to time to gather intelligence data. If Smith was driving this, that meant a satellite had captured something significant to national security.

But what Bill couldn't quite figure out was why Smith seemed almost...eager. If some foreign power threatened US territories, why didn't Smith's body language convey fear, or at the least, apprehension, instead of anticipation? Bill glanced around. The other invitees were assembling around the massive oblong table, sitting on or standing behind plush, red velvet-trimmed armchairs. Resting on the mahogany top before each seat were notepads and crystal water glasses. Pitchers of ice water glistened as droplets merged into little pools on the glass surface covering the wood. The aroma of brewing coffee permeated the room.

Dr. Smith nodded his hellos before strutting to his place behind the podium. He continued to take his time, fussing with the position of the microphone even though it wasn't powered on. Trying not to think about the growing stack of paperwork waiting back on his desk, Bill continued to look around the room.

His apprehension grew as he identified the other participants. They were all high-ranking officials such as Edward Swann, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, sitting closest to the podium wearing his usual pompous "I'm better than you" expression. Across from Swann sat National Security Advisor Brian Krawley, and his aide. Two three-star army generals and several members of the National Security Council, along with their own aides, completed the assemblage.

Bill was taken aback, realizing the only reason a person of his rank was sitting here was that his boss, the FBI Director, was on a golf course across the country. Something big was taking place, something that wouldn't normally include a Deputy Director. His mouth suddenly dry, Bill reached for the water pitcher.

Smith cleared his throat from the podium. "Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. Please take your seats and we'll get this show on the road." Murmured responses emanated from the audience as they shuffled in their chairs, clutching coffee mugs and smartphones. Dr. Smith stood there beaming, basking in their attention. Bill felt like slapping him across the head. This wasn't kindergarten, dumbass!

Brian Krawley rolled his eyes while tapping his Rolex. "I have other appointments on my calendar, so please do get started, Doctor."

Smith offered a reassuring smile. "I promise we'll finish up here soon enough."

One attendee stood, his eyes gleaming. "Is it true? Do you really have concrete proof of extraterrestrial life?"

Bill's jaw dropped. Was he joking?

Brian Krawley snorted. "What rubbish!"

"For heaven's sake, contain your outbursts, please, or we'll never get out of here." Swann, the thin-faced, middle-aged CIA Director spoke with a soft but forceful voice. "Let's hear the facts before leaping to conclusions. The President would not have insisted we all meet here today if he wasn't reasonably certain of the validity behind Dr. Smith's information."

Bill restrained a smirk. The CIA Director and the National Security Advisor were renowned for their fiery clashes. This would be entertaining.

But much to Bill's surprise, no rebuttal came. Glancing at Brian Krawley's pale complexion and intertwined fingers, Bill realized despite his words to the contrary, the Security Advisor was taking this very seriously. Which meant the President was, too. Bill loosened his tie and sat up straighter in his chair. He despised politics, but accepted it as a necessary

evil in order to do his job. He had to be very careful what he said in front of these high-profile politicians. His boss had picked a great week to go away on a golf vacation. Bill hoped the FBI Director pulled his back teeing off, and spent the rest of it in traction.

"This won't take very long, gentlemen," Smith said. "I am responsible for collecting and analyzing the data obtained by our satellite network, from weather predictions to foreign surveillance. My team then analyzes the information before dispersing it to the appropriate parties."

"We are all quite aware of who you are, Dr. Smith," Brian Krawley said.

Smith nodded with pursed lips. He cleared his throat, coughed into his hand, then reached for a pitcher and filled his cup. As Smith sipped the cold water, Bill could see the advisor's face reddening.

Finally, Smith resumed. "Very well. Last night at approximately seven-thirty p.m., Eastern Daylight Time, one of our satellites detected a small oblong object at approximately twenty thousand feet, which appeared to materialize out of nowhere." He paused, glancing at each face around the table. "We tracked this object as far as the Adirondack Mountains before losing it once the tracking satellite orbited out of range. Never before have we come across anything like this. The object quite literally appeared out of thin air, guided itself to a specific area, and descended at what we'd call a reasonable landing velocity."

"Bullshit," the Security Advisor said. Even so, Bill noticed his expression remained thoughtful.

Bill decided he needed to offer something less volatile. "Are we absolutely certain this...object has indeed landed?"

"We lost track of it for a good half hour, Bill," Smith said, "and when the next satellite passed over that region, there was no longer any sign of it in the air. The trees and mountainous terrain offer a multitude of hiding places, but even spotting an object that small in an open field could prove challenging depending on the undergrowth beneath it."

Swann coughed, fiddling with his CIA badge card tied around his neck by a length of black lanyard. Bill watched his thumb circle the emblem of an eagle's head above a red starburst. "So, it just disappeared from whence it came, eh?"

Smith bit his lower lip. "Not exactly." His fingers drummed the stack of manila folders resting on top of the podium.

Bill again rubbed his chin between thumb and forefinger. "You're holding something back, Dr. Smith."

"Well, Bill, I see I can't pull one over on the FBI," Smith said, forcing a chuckle.

"Show us then," Brian Krawley said. From his dispassionate tone, Bill gathered he already knew the contents.

Smith frowned before passing down the stack of manila folders. Bill had

the impression Smith didn't appreciate being rushed. How often did a techie get to capture the attention of so many high-ranking politicians?

Bill opened his folder, which contained color copies of a grainy satellite photo. "What the hell?" The photo revealed a small, egg-shaped craft with open hatch revealing the anterior cockpit. Using the bed of flowers it lay within for scale, he estimated at most one person could fit inside the thing, if it wasn't entirely robotic. But if the hatch was open, something had emerged.

Bill couldn't accept the extraterrestrial theory that made Smith so animated, but a foreign power advancing technologically over the United States had him deeply concerned. A long-range pod capable of launching from the other side of the world, perhaps with pinpoint navigation? They could land a nuke on the White House lawn. It was sheer good fortune the satellites had captured any trace of it at all. How many others had landed without being detected? Why, they might have stumbled across the opening phase of a foreign invasion, or wide-scale terrorist attack.

Bill glanced around the table. Everyone's faces were scrunched in worry or disbelief.

Swann whistled. "You sure this wasn't photoshopped?"

Smith rolled his eyes. "From the satellite? I hardly think so."

Bill frowned. "It's too big to be a drone. When was the photo taken?"

"About two hours ago," Smith said. "I managed to get the President's attention for five minutes before he flew out to Los Angeles on Air Force One, and he ordered this meeting while in flight. He agrees with me that we need to move quickly, gentlemen, before whatever was in that capsule escapes the area."

"What do you want us to do, Dr. Smith?" one of the army generals asked. "Send troops into the Adirondack Mountains? Do you know how vast a range that is?"

Smith took another sip of water. "The purpose of this meeting is to determine the appropriate course of action. That's why we're all here."

The army general rose to his feet, the medals and decorations across his green uniform jacket rustling as he buttoned it shut. "All right, Dr. Smith, you have my attention now. Give me the coordinates and I'll get some choppers in the air, pronto."

"Hold it," the Security Advisor said. "I'm taking over."

The army general sank back into his seat as though deflating.

Bill enjoyed watching Swann's cheeks flush with irritation, but another glance around the room showed most of the others looking relieved to let someone else take charge rather than own responsibility for this unprecedented situation.

Bill had mixed feelings himself. True, responsibility was how careers ended, but it was also how they flourished. He glanced over at Swann and

noted the man's clenched lips. He had a feeling Swann didn't intend to let Brian Krawley run away with all the glory.

The Security Advisor pounded a fist on the table. "How do we know this isn't some sort of prank? We would look mighty foolish flying squads of helicopters over civilian territory, only to find a forged spacecraft cardboard cutout! It's happened to us before and the public goes nuts about wasted tax dollars."

Most of the others nodded, perhaps remembering—as the Security Advisor undoubtedly did—that this was an election year, and what was bad for the President tended to trickle downhill...

Swann seized the opening to insert his own authority, as Bill had expected. "Prank or not, we have to do *something*. No, not with General Brown's troops, not initially. That would stir up too much interest from the press, but I have an agent in mind to lead this initiative. As for the other members of his team, well, all they would need to know is that they're searching for an escaped criminal from one of the New York state penitentiaries. Only my lead would understand they're looking for something else."

"How does the CIA find jurisdiction to become involved with a domestic prisoner escape?" Brian Krawley countered. "Why not the local police?"

Bill spoke up. "I'll loan you a team of special agents to assist in the search, taking direction from your lead agent. We should still ask for local police cooperation and some of General Brown's helicopters. We'll have to feed the press a story about an escaped prisoner, someone extremely dangerous who must be found at all costs before innocent people are hurt. We'll need some favors at one of those state prisons, say the Adirondack Correctional Facility in Ray Brook."

The National Security Advisor nodded his approval. "Agreed. We can't have them refuting our story while we conduct the search. Later we can issue a statement to the effect that we were fed incorrect information, call it a computer glitch or something—those always come in handy—and apologize for all the commotion we caused. We can't be criticized for taking all necessary actions to protect the public, and we'll find some clerk already skating on thin ice to take the fall as negligent in his or her duties. We kick them to the curb, the public has a few laughs about buggy computers then cheers us for firing someone over it, and life is good."

Bill's forehead creased. "I doubt if the prison board will be too happy about being blamed for an imaginary escaped convict, but I can address those details. I suspect a special grant will be forthcoming, perhaps along the lines of funding an enhancement to their security procedures so it can be justified from your department. That should make them happy afterwards."

The National Security advisor nodded. “Agreed.”

“Say he was in the process of being transferred to Attica,” Swann said, “because the Adirondack facility is for medium security offenders and you want to make it believable.”

Bill nodded. “More work for me but I agree with your logic, especially if the army is dispatching helicopters to assist with the search. The more afraid the civilians are, the better chance they’ll stay out of our way.”

“Good plan, gentlemen. I approve,” the Security Advisor said. He cracked his knuckles and prepared to rise.

Swann grinned. “I’ll get in touch with my agent immediately.”

Bill couldn’t let Swann take charge unchallenged. “Hold on, I have one more thing to say—if this does turn out to be true, then it’s an FBI issue, not CIA.” Bill’s eyes turned cold. “The FBI runs with it from there on.”

Swann bristled. “For Christ’s sake, Bill, this isn’t a case of kidnapping and crossing state lines. This could very easily be an extraterrestrial intelligence spying on the United States for malicious purposes, and the CIA is the best agency to handle that scenario. Our department has the resources and talent trained to deal with this the most effectively.”

“Wait one darned minute,” Smith said. He jabbed his finger toward the CIA and FBI agents. “You can’t turn this into some kind of a manhunt! This might be the single most important event in the entire history of mankind. It’s—it’s momentous! Incredible! We have to find out if someone—*something*—arrived here from outer space, yes, but not with professional assassins and rocket launching helicopters!”

Swann’s lips tightened. “With all due respect—”

Smith glared at Swann as he pounded his fist on the podium. “Not with soldiers. Not with policemen!”

“Settle down, Dr. Smith,” Brian Krawley said, looking bored. “Let’s not turn this into a pissing match, okay?”

Smith’s lower lip trembled. “But we should welcome them with open arms. We should invite them here to speak with the President and the world’s leading scientists to impart the wonders of their technology and culture to us. There is so much we could learn.”

“On that much we agree,” Swann said. “They should be brought here and interrogated thoroughly, but if they were so interested in imparting their marvels of technology they would have landed in the Capitol parking lot, not some remote mountain chain in upstate New York.”

Bill shook his head. “Let’s complete our investigation before we have this conversation. Despite the visuals, this could still turn out to be a hoax or new model drone from a hostile country. We need to examine that pod.”

Swann nodded. “I agree with Bill. Time is of the essence. Then we’ll decide who remains in charge and what we’re going to do.”

“Good teamwork, gentlemen,” Brian Krawley said in a loud voice,

VISITOR

cutting off Smith's attempted rebuttal.

"I'll call my lead agent to head over there immediately, then arrange for a helicopter so I can see this thing firsthand," Swann said.

Bill held up his hands. "I'll have to pass for now. There's an important meeting I have to attend later today, but I'll have my agents meet your agent at the site with the appropriate forensics equipment, and report to him for instructions."

Smith cleared his throat. "I prefer to believe this visitor is friendly unless proven otherwise, but would like to point out one thing, gentlemen, before you take your leave. It appears you are about to conduct a manhunt, as though that is what you are preparing to find. But you're not searching for a man at all, at least no man like any here on Earth. You cannot expect your usual methods to be adequate or sufficient."

"Thank you, Dr. Smith, we'll take that advice to heart," the Security Advisor said. He turned back to the anxious faces surrounding the table. "Let's bag an extraterrestrial!"

CHAPTER THREE: DOUG

Adirondack Mountains, New York

Doug's head hurt worse, but inside now, not the back where he kept rubbing it without thinking. He wanted to brush it off as allergies but that didn't feel right, as though he knew what the actual problem was but couldn't put his finger on it. And thinking about it only aggravated the headache.

The sun hung low in the western sky when he arrived at the campground, which was centered in a large clearing. It contained a series of small cabins, a park ranger's office, and plenty of open space scattered with ash-seared, pole-mounted iron barbecue grills, splintery wooden picnic benches, and port-o-potty units. Numerous happy couples and families grilled their dinners, filling the air with the mouth-watering aromas of searing steaks, burgers, hotdogs and barbecue chicken. The pleasant sounds of animated conversations and children's laughter echoed across the clearing. Doug smiled at this snapshot of civilization after the past few days spent hiking alone, but his mood turned bittersweet. He was the only solo person in the bunch.

Doug was used to loneliness. An only child who found himself unwilling to commit to a serious relationship as an adult, Doug preferred to focus on his career. A significant other would only get in his way, as past girlfriends discovered after they had "the talk."

Doug shuddered. How he hated "the talk"!

It started off with "Doug, we've been dating for a long time now..." where "a long time" varied between two weeks and two years. Doug would explain that he'd meant what he said when they started dating, he wasn't looking for anything serious, and although someday he hoped to have a family—which was completely true—right now his career needed to come first. Next came the disbelief he could possibly put nanomaterials and

polymers before them, followed by any combination of anger, tears, or resignation.

He hated making anyone cry, and was genuinely sorry things didn't work out as planned, even though their plans were made without his knowledge or consent. Lately, he felt it best if he abstained from dating completely to avoid the unpleasantness of these miscommunications. If only they understood how he felt at some deeper level, since his carefully chosen words failed to convey the passion he reserved for his work....

A pair of unusual violet eyes and flowing locks of auburn hair flashed within his mind, startling him. Like the flick of a switch, they vanished as abruptly as they had appeared.

Doug stopped, rubbing the back of his head. "What the hell?"

The remnant of a wonderful dream, perhaps? A girl....

Yes, there had definitely been a girl in his dream, beautiful and exotic with the most amazing violet eyes he'd ever seen. He struggled to recall more, but that spike in his head threatened to return, forcing him to stop. Even so, he smelled lavender and jasmine and felt warm, smooth skin touching his face. She had been so beautiful.

Doug sighed. *If she were real, I wonder if she'd be thinking of me now like I'm thinking of—*

Doug gasped—his thoughts recoiled and it was like something akin to a door slamming in his mind. He blinked fast several times to help clear his head, uncertain what had just occurred. Fatigue? Sunstroke?

For one very bizarre moment, Doug could have sworn he had touched another person—not with his hands, something else. But what? What else was there?

A whiffle ball struck his face, jerking him back to his surroundings. He smiled at the youngsters who giggled apologies, tossed the ball back to them, and pushed the odd experience out of his mind. It hurt too much to think about.

Doug strolled around a crowd of raucous men wearing mud-stained purple jerseys, stepping over numerous empty beer bottles that littered the ground in their wake. The brazen stench of beer turned Doug's empty stomach sour. He'd never been much for drinking, not even in college where weeks were divided into the categories of "sober" and "drunk" instead of weekdays and weekends.

He made it through the human obstacle course to the door of the cabin with a large "Office" sign nailed across the top in crooked black lettering, only to find a much smaller handwritten sign taped to the door that read "No vacancy."

"Oh, great," Doug groaned. The shuttlebus to his car didn't leave until first light, so he was going to have to sleep on the ground yet again. At the edge of the clearing, he located an empty wooden picnic table, and

collapsed on the attached bench with a sigh of relief, burying his face against his arms.

After a short rest, Doug tossed his pack on the ground, marveling at the intricate web of footprints etched into the hard-packed dirt around him. He found himself contemplating who had made each footprint, what had brought them to this place, and how long ago they'd passed here. These were odd thoughts for someone who barely noticed if the toilet seat was down before sitting on it.

A quick dig into his pack located the portable camping stove and small propane tank, which he assembled and lit with a lighter. He had a few cans of pork and beans left, some dried beef, and plenty of trail mix.

"Yuck." He checked a side pocket but only extracted his bloody shirt which he quickly shoved back before the headache could start up again.

Doug made a face, wishing he'd actually tasted the stuff before trusting Ken's accolades. There was nothing less satisfying than chewing through stale nuts and petrified fruit. If he hadn't been terrified of starving to death, he would have thrown every baggie away his first night on the trail.

Doug surveyed the rest area while his beans simmered in a small pot, but all he could think about was how good it would feel to go home again. The parking lot where his car waited sat only a bus ride away. Doug couldn't wait to turn the AC up full blast before making a beeline for the nearest greasy spoon, order cheeseburgers and other unhealthy food, and wash them down with icy mugs of soda. After that, it was back home to his normal routine, but at least he felt much better now than before he'd left. Vacation accomplished. Nailed it.

Doug paused as he pondered his state of mind. Actually, he really did feel much better! Maybe Ken was a genius instead of a sadist, and there was something to this outdoor life stuff after all. He even felt excited about writing, a passion he'd harbored since a boy, but could never focus on as an adult. Well, if he ever found time in between teaching and lab work, maybe he'd give it a go. The last thing he'd written had been his doctorate dissertation, where Doug discovered he had a flair for telling a story, even if it was non-fiction.

The beans started to boil over, so Doug yanked the pot from the mini-grill and placed it on the table, hoping it wouldn't ignite. While he waited for his beans to cool, he watched a father playing catch with two young boys while their mother unpacked containers from a wicker picnic basket. Doug recalled similar trips with his parents and how much fun they'd always had. His mother constantly fussed he was going to get sunburned if he didn't let her put on plenty of sunscreen, while his father offered ridiculous camping advice they both knew made no sense, like fireflies could spark kindling if your lighter didn't work.

This father scooped up his shrieking boys and carried them over to their

picnic table, laughing almost as loud as they were. Doug smiled as he brushed a stray lock of hair from his eyes, wondering if he would ever become a father, and if so, what would his children be like? Did he want boys or girls? Maybe one of each? Would they giggle with delight when he played with them, too?

But not now. There'd be plenty of time for all that after his career ambitions achieved fruition, and things were just starting to take off. After all, he was only twenty-eight, with the rest of his life ahead of him for stuff like that.

With a wistful sigh, Doug turned his attention to dinner, spooning pork and beans onto a tin plate, when a familiar yet grossly out of place sound roared by overhead. He looked up to see a helicopter materializing in the twilight, beaming a bright spotlight down into the clearing. The manhole-sized searchlight flitted from table to table, generating choruses of protest from each target before the helicopter ambled away, its beam of light swinging back and forth below. The roaring of the rotors faded from Doug's ears about the same time yellow and white spots stopped flashing in front of his eyes.

His heart was pounding in his chest, but he couldn't understand why he'd become so anxious. It was just a stupid helicopter.

"What the hell was that all about?" a camper said. Everyone else milled about looking puzzled or scratching their heads.

A beefy man stared where the helicopter had faded off past the horizon. "That was an army chopper. Why in tarnation would an army chopper be flying out here?"

The ranger stepped out of his cabin and called everyone over, holding his hat in two hands and shuffling back and forth from foot to foot. The crowd gathered before him.

"Folks, I received a phone call from my boss about that helicopter. Something's up, something serious. All I can tell you is he's asking everyone to remain here until tomorrow morning, including me." The ranger loosened his brown tie, sweat beading up across his forehead.

"What on earth for?" demanded one of the frat guys. His friends cheered, toasting him with beer bottles.

An older man wearing a designer sweatshirt raised his hand. "The boy has a valid question. You can't tell us to stay here without a reason." The beer bottles pointed in his direction along with a resounding hoot.

The ranger's eyes darted back and forth as his finger slipped under his shirt collar, opening the top button. "I really can't say, my boss didn't know. But that's the message, folks. I'm sorry."

For several moments the crowd looked stunned, glancing back and forth at each other as though seeking approval to be outraged. When they saw their own frustration reflected back, they began to murmur to one another.

After another moment, the bolder people took heart and began to shout.

“You can’t keep us here!” a tall woman said. “I have to get home.”

“What is this, some sort of joke?” an elderly man said. “Some people have jobs to get back to, you know!”

“This is our vacation! We don’t have to listen to you, you’re just a ranger, not a cop. Right?”

Doug lost track of all the hostile comments fired at the ranger, who held his hands up, palms facing toward the crowd, looking flustered. His mouth opened and closed without saying anything. Doug felt sorry for the man. Still, he didn’t like the sound of this either. What possible reason could they have for locking down the campsite? Hopefully they’d have this cleared up by morning. He wanted to get home too.

“Hey, listen up everyone, the news!” a heavysset man said. The crowd huddled around his picnic table, where a digital tablet broadcast a live news video feed. Doug pushed through the crowd until he was close enough to hear.

“...an anonymous but trusted source has revealed that an extremely dangerous convict escaped from this prison and is roaming free somewhere in the region. However, local prison officials have denied any such occurrence took place. The identity of the alleged escapee, a convicted rapist and murderer, has not been revealed. The FBI and local militia have joined the search and police are urging people in the area to remain in their homes, not to panic, and await further information.”

“Strange,” Doug said to himself, his stomach in knots. But his apprehension wasn’t from fear that this dangerous character was anywhere nearby, though the families around him looked worried. They peered into the darkening forest yelling for their children to return to their tables or cabins, or clutched them if they were within arm’s grasp.

No, something else troubled Doug, a foreboding sensation as though.... He rubbed the back of his head. It had been so bizarre. The helicopter’s beam had seized on him just for a moment, no longer than a second, but he’d felt horribly exposed, like how a fox might feel when the hounds caught its scent and began the chase.

“Quick, let’s pack up and go,” one woman said.

“Best thing to do is stay together,” another man said. “Besides, it’s getting dark. D’you want to come across this guy all alone at night?”

The comments escalated. “Why don’t we have some protection here?”

Doug frowned. It seemed a mob mentality was taking hold with hysteria building as each person inflamed the next. He glanced at the ranger, whose scowl seemed to mirror Doug’s concerns. His fingers twitched against the holster looped through his belt.

“Hey, that guy’s all by himself!” One lanky woman pointed at Doug while backing away.

“Yeah!”

Like a dry box of tinder, her accusation became the spark needed to ignite the crowd’s paranoia. Grateful for a target, they all turned toward Doug.

Doug’s eyebrows went up. “I didn’t escape from any prison! I’m just hiking along the trail, like all of you are.”

The people pulled together away from him, making it difficult to identify who was saying what in the twilight.

“He’s got a pack. Only a hiker would have one.”

“How do we know it was his...before today?”

“There was blood on his clothes, I saw him shove it back in his pack real quick!”

The ranger stepped between Doug and the grumbling crowd. “Now wait one minute, folks! Look, we can’t go around accusing every lone guy we see of being this escaped convict. Besides, in case you didn’t notice, they didn’t even bother to show a picture of him. That seems a little strange to me.”

The elderly man shrugged. “Whatever, Ranger Rick, I’m out of here at first light. An’ if anyone comes too close to my tent before then, I’ve got something bullet shaped for him to chew on.” He stared directly at Doug.

Doug’s eyes widened, but he didn’t know what to say. He had a feeling talking right now would only upset the mob more. He was very glad the person who had witnessed his bloody shirt went unheeded, but what if they pressed the matter? Would Doug lose the ranger’s protection and face the mercy of this enflamed crowd alone?

The ranger sighed. “I can’t force you to stay here, so if you want to leave then go right ahead.” He turned to Doug. “Look, sir, these people sure are riled up. You’d better camp away from that group there just to be on the safe side.”

Doug made a face. “Sure thing.” He didn’t want to be alone either, but he also didn’t want to get shot by some hot-headed redneck.

The ranger put a hand on Doug’s shoulder. “Listen, I’ll be staying in the office cabin tonight in case of any trouble. You pitch your tent next to my cabin so I can watch out for you. I doubt there’ll be any trouble once these folks settle down, but better safe than sorry.”

“Thanks.” Doug smiled before sitting back down to finish off his dinner, ignoring the fearful glances people shot toward him from the corner of their eyes. Having a bunch of strangers treat him as a pariah was unsettling, but a deeper current of angst throbbed inside him that he couldn’t quite place. He felt...hunted. He did his best to ignore it and act normal. After all, no one was after *him*. Unless his bloody shirt became visible...maybe after dark he could get rid of it, but right now too many suspicious glares made that impossible.

Later on, Doug unrolled his sleeping bag over a patch of grass next to the office cabin and tried to fall asleep. Several people still shot him dirty looks by the flickering campfires, but they were appeased he was sleeping away from them. Doug figured in their minds, the ranger was keeping an eye on him to protect them, rather than the other way around.

As he dozed, an inexplicably familiar stranger's face danced within his mind, scared, lonely, and confused, her shimmering hand reaching toward him though the inky blackness of night.