

## Meredith and the Brigadier

### Chapter 1

#### *Meredith*

It was quiet. Far too quiet. Well, for me the world is always quiet. Silent, in fact. I'm deaf, and have been so for the past nine years. But there's more to hearing than the sounds most people can pick up. I was blessed, or maybe cursed; I'm honestly not sure, with the ability to pick up on people's thoughts, as long as they're within a certain range. Within a maximum range of three to four hundred yards, I can read them down to the last detail. Not that I always want to, believe you me! Other people's minds can be dreadful places. Fortunately, I learned very young not to divulge my ability to anyone, and how to shield my own mind so I wouldn't be deluged twenty-four hours a day with the minute trivia of how people feel. I can shut it out, and usually I do.

Today was different. I had been away in Perth for the weekend, shopping and catching up on a couple of good films. Not musicals. Although I very much enjoy going to the city, I always find it exhausting; there are so many minds jabbering on about so many things and it's an effort to shut them out. A necessary effort, if I'm to retain my sanity.

I'd slept in and got away rather later than I'd intended. As a result, it was mid afternoon when I came within sight of the sign informing me that Karrelin (population 273) was just ahead.

Normally by the time I reach that, my mind can pick up on the couple of farmhouses back from the road. Once I was driving along and passed the school bus going in the opposite direction. Those young minds *yell*, believe me. I nearly went off the road. For the same reason I always avoided going near the school during playtimes.

This time there was nothing. Silence in every sense of the word. It was abnormal and worrying. I was tired, I told myself. Maybe after I'd got home and had a cup of coffee I'd feel better.

As I drove along the main street – Karrelin only has one main street – things got worse, not better. I didn't see anyone around and that was unusual in itself. I passed the school and there were no kids running around outside, although there were half a dozen of the staff's cars parked where they normally were. No one was walking along the street and the bowling green was devoid of afternoon players. In itself, that was unusual. Monday was the day many of the ladies competed, attired in long white dresses and regulation flat shoes. Fortunately I'd avoided being involved in the game.

I stopped my car outside the hotel and turned off the engine. I listened with my mind, but there was nothing. Not even the normally confused and confusing thoughts of Tam Blake, our local drunk. This was more than worrying; it was scary.

Where was everyone? Facetiously, I wondered if aliens had abducted them all.

## Chapter 2

In the cosmic beauty stakes, the Kruggah would have ranked in the bottom ten, or maybe even the bottom one, percentile. They were ugly beyond belief. Spines, tentacles, pointed teeth in an oval mouth, eyestalks and slime pads rather than feet; these all combined to create nightmares. The only being in the galaxy who could love a Kruggah was another Kruggah.

When it came to sex, though, their ugliness didn't matter. Neither did anything else. They were an oddity, cosmically speaking, for they were true hermaphrodites. Rather like snails.

However, revolting though they may have seemed to other races, they possessed intelligence, curiosity and a thirst for knowledge. Their ships spread out through the cosmos, seeking out all that was new and different. Oddly also, they tended towards pacifism rather than aggression, although they could fight when necessary. Often the mere sight of them was enough, though, to send their potential enemies fleeing.

Deliberately causing harm to others was against the beliefs of most of them. Some, however, were different and longed to rule the universe rather than explore it. The Kruggah were individuals, some kind, some cruel, some placid, some ambitious. Some had many abilities and others had few. Rather like humans.

One ability, possessed however by less than ten percent of the population, was that of being able to take on the shape, either temporarily or permanently, of other life forms.

Very useful for an incredibly ugly, yet space-faring race. They used it well.

## Chapter 3

### *From Vree's Diary*

This is our final mission; the last system we will visit before we return to our home world. So far, I regret to say, it hasn't exactly been a blinding success.

We started off so young, so idealistic, so full of enthusiasm. To explore the unknown, to find other civilizations and peoples. We'd found far fewer than anticipated, and most of them at a very low level of development. Our few encounters with those who had a more advanced civilization were more worrying than exciting.

This one, we hoped, might be different...

From our observations, brief though they have been, this system appears to have only one planet capable of sustaining life as we know it; a carbon based system.

I am one of the crewmembers with the ability to shape shift, and we have been able to form ourselves into replicas of these *humans*, as they call themselves. In contrast to our natural forms, they are fragile in appearance.

Supreme Captain Tartredd ordered our ships to approach, but as always with extreme caution. On one of our previous missions to study new life forms, we suffered loss of life; possibly due to the aliens' perception of us as a threat. I hope this will not occur again. Tragically, we have lost two of the ships of our fleet. One was damaged by a hostile race; the other simply disappeared when going through a pinhole channel in hyperspace. Always a risk, unfortunately.

In order to minimise possible danger, we will follow the procedure we have used successfully, in the past.

The flagship will remain concealed behind the planet's only natural satellite. We have observed that although this planet has begun space exploration, it is so far very limited. They have not yet achieved passage to said satellite, although it appears a number of artificial satellites are orbiting the planet.

Each of the other five vessels, including this one, under the command of our Captain Zolgoff, will travel simultaneously towards the planet. Our ships will take up positions close enough in to teleport a small number of the planet's inhabitants from five disparate areas. We will be able to remain unobserved due to the cloaking devices with which all the vessels of our fleet are equipped.

After taking up a selection of local inhabitants (as they call themselves humans so I shall also use that nomenclature) – in stasis, of course, as always, for their safety and ours – the ships will immediately move to rendezvous with each other and continue out to take up and maintain positions on the far side of the planet's moon.

After we have carried out a study of these inhabitants of the planet, they will be returned, with all memories of their experience wiped from their minds. We have found out this is the best procedure. It's against all our beliefs and principles deliberately to harm other life forms, but at the same time our study of them has been resented on occasions. I'm not entirely sure I understand why. Maybe it's something to do with being taken up without their say so. I'm not sure. All subjects we take up return to their planets healthy, probably healthier than when we encountered them. I might try speaking with some of these humans and asking them what they think. It won't matter. They'll not carry any memories back with them in any case.

## Chapter 4

*Meredith*

I left the car parked outside the hotel and went inside, into the ladies' lounge. Habit, I suppose; I'm not sure that in all the eight years I'd lived in Karrelin I'd ever been in the main bar. It just wasn't the done thing.

I almost smiled at the sight before me. There were two balls remaining on the pool table. Clearly, a game of 8-ball had been in progress. From the purse and bag on a table, I gathered Jilly and Shirley had been playing. They are about the most hopeless players I know, but even they wouldn't just dump their cues on the floor and leave them there. I picked them up and leaned them against the table, then walked through into the kitchen area.

Empty, and with the wood burning stove down to coals. I checked to make sure the kettle and frypan and various other appliances were off, then steeled myself to go into the bar.

As I knew before I walked in, it was just as empty as the lounge, even though there were signs of very recent occupation; half full glasses, cigarettes in ash trays, a wallet lying on the counter and a couple of hats. One belonged to Tam Blake. I recognised it from the black and white feather in the band. He'd put it there the year Swans won the Grand Final and I think it's been there ever since.

I left the pub by the main door and walked along the street towards the co-op. There were always customers in there; local farmers browsing the hardware section, their wives in the clothing areas and any children in the toy department or the small play area Corinne, the manager's wife, had set up to keep them entertained and under control. They had a staff or half a dozen although it was seldom that they were all on duty.

I entered, knowing about but not hearing the bell that jangled when the main door was opened or shut. There was no one there. No sound from anyone's mind either. It was deserted, and eerie. Shaking my head in puzzlement, I walked along the aisles until I came to the door leading to the back area. They had a small eating area and doors that led to storage areas. On the table were three cups of tea. A plate by one held a half-eaten sandwich. The cups were still warm to my touch but I shivered and hurried back out into the main area of the co-op.

It was still deserted. I could have called out, but that was pointless. Instead, I went out into the street and stretched out my mind to its limits. Had any person been within a radius of several hundred yards, I would have picked up their thoughts.

Nothing. Silence in every meaning of the word.

Now I was really scared.

I turned back, past the hotel, round the corner, and kept walking, along as far as the bakery. On the way I popped in and out of several smaller shops and half a dozen houses. All were deserted, but all bore signs of very recent occupation.

Out the front of the bakery, on the pavement, were a couple of tables, where people often sat for snacks and tea or coffee. As I approached I saw a blue pram beside one of the tables and recognised it as belong to Katie Day, who'd recently had a baby boy. She and her husband lived across the road from me. The back of

the pram was to me but as I came level with it I realised it was empty. A baby's rattle lay on the ground beside the pram. On the table was a half-empty cup of coffee and in an ashtray on the other side of the table was the ash of a cigarette. Almost complete. It had been set down there but never lifted up.

Katie didn't smoke but some of her friends did. There was a small purse lying beside the ashtray and when I opened it several coins fell out, and a folded up one dollar note, of our recently introduced decimal currency. I replaced the coins and set the purse down.

Usually, delicious smells wafted out from the open main door. I can't hear anything, but my other four senses are well enough developed, as is my mind reading ability. I suppose the word for it is telepathy. I never asked anyone what it should properly be called; in fact never shared with anyone except my parents the fact of this ability.

This time, the main smell coming from inside was that of something burning.

## Chapter 5

### *Daniel*

It was a long drive out to Karrelin and I was buggered by the time I pulled the hired car into the driveway leading to Max's place. I hadn't wanted to do this, but there wasn't any option. Not unless I wanted to face up to the Terrible Twins and explain how I had come to be in possession of some of their masterpieces.

Not masterpieces in the terms of artwork, but certainly examples of the most brilliant forgery I've ever seen in my life. I was damn sure they'd want them back, but merely handing them over and claiming I'd 'found' them would definitely not satisfy them.

Until a week ago, I was one of the most successful cat burglars in the country. There wasn't a building I couldn't get into, and out of again, undetected. Then made a big mistake, the biggest of my career.

I broke into the luxurious Sydney townhouse owned by the Terrible Twins. To tell the truth, I wasn't after their forged stuff but their diamonds and emeralds and rubies. When I opened the bedroom safe I saw, along with the velvet jewellery cases, an interesting looking leather document satchel. Upon opening it, I found a bundle of documents. In a moment of foolishness and without looking at them carefully, I weakened and stuffed it all into my bag.

When I turned around and saw the man lying on the floor, sprawled under a bed, I almost dropped everything. A closer look ensured I had nothing to fear from him; he was cold and had been dead before I'd even got there. Nonetheless he was a complication.

If he was in the Twins' townhouse they certainly wouldn't want anyone to know about him. He wasn't just dead; someone had shot him. One very neat bullet to

the head and very little blood. I knew the place was deserted. I had checked and double checked. If I hadn't been kneeling on the floor to get at the safe I wouldn't even have seen the body. It wasn't anyone I knew, but I had the horrible feeling the Twins would be very very annoyed to know *anyone* knew he was there.

If I'd been smarter, I would have quietly replaced the jewellery and the satchel and high tailed it out of there. No one would ever know a thing. The Twins could have got rid of the body and everything would have been just fine.

But I wasn't smarter. I'd put considerable time, effort and planning into this heist, too, so even a body wasn't really going to deter me. I left him there and let myself out as quietly as I had entered.

At home, in my very modest (and very secure) house in an outer suburb, I examined what I'd acquired. The gems were beautiful, even though I knew I'd get only a fraction of their true value from my friendly local fence. Nonetheless, I was satisfied. The Terrible Twins would be furious, for sure, but they had insurance, and I always broke into places when there was no one home, so no one ever got hurt. I hated the idea of violence, especially if there was a possibility of me being the target.

When I opened the satchel I knew I was in deep shit. Deep, deep and very smelly shit. Not just because I'd seen a body I should never have known about.

I knew the Twins were master forgers. I had seen examples of their work before. Now, in front of me, on my kitchen table, lay scattered complete sets of personal documentation for at least ten people. It was worth a fortune to anyone who needed it and had the funds to pay for it.

Birth certificates, marriage lines, driver licences, school records and everything else one would need to establish a new identity. Even bankbooks, with nominal sums deposited to start accounts. I knew the Twins would be out for my blood. Well, not *mine*, as in me specifically; after all, they didn't know yet (and I hoped they'd never know) who had burgled their joint.

I deliberated for a while on my best course of action. Trouble was, as I soon realised, my friendly local fence would recognise the gems as having belonged to the Twins. If I tried to pass them on via his place and the Twins came to hear of it (and they would, they'd be onto all the known local fences within days or even hours) it wouldn't be exactly a brilliant leap of logic to work out from that who'd nicked their forged documents.

And then they'd know who else knew about the dead body in their home.

Oh yes, I really was in the shit. Time to disappear, I decided. That's what I did. I stuck the gems and the documents into the hidden pocket in the bottom of my leather suitcase, packed it and a small bag with necessities, and caught the next flight to Perth. From there I headed to Karrelin, several hundred miles inland. No one would find me there. I could lie low for a while and decide exactly what I should do. Part of me wanted to dump the documents in a bag in either the mail or the closest Police Station, while the other part of me urged patience. In other words, to wait 'n' see.

Max and I met in our first year at high school in Perth and were always in the same class, until he left to work on his parents' farm out at Karrelin. His father dropped dead in the paddock one hot afternoon and his mother died less than six months later. So the farm was his and he'd been there ever since.

I was brought up in a home for orphans, never knowing either of my parents. It wasn't that bad; the nuns did their best and encouraged us all to use whatever talents we had, although that's about the best I can say about it. Looking back, I'm not sure those black and white robed women would have approved of the use I made of my talents.

I continued to the end of my fifth year at high school and then got a job in a department store for a while. I shifted from Perth to Melbourne and then to Sydney, where I made a better, if less legal, living. One of the things I put my talents to was finding out about my origins. My mother's maternal grandmother was an Aboriginal while her father and his kin were northern Italians; my father's ancestors came from Scotland and Russia. I was a mixed bag. Well, it explained my olive skin, fair hair and occasional sixth sense. I considered my ancestry, accepted it and liked it, which was a damn sight more than a lot of other people managed to do with their backgrounds. There was bugger all I could do about it anyway.

Last time I saw Max was when he and Emma got married. Fifteen months ago.

Emma. She and I had gone together since she was twelve and I was thirteen. I asked her to go to Melbourne with me when I left. I begged her, and she refused. So I went without her, and that was that. I saw her once, a couple of months before she and Max got married. Up until that time she and I had exchanged letters and the occasional telephone call across the country.

I flew to Perth for a week's holiday, during which I saw Emma every day – and yes, most nights too. This in spite of the fact she was supposedly Max's girlfriend. I asked her again to go to, this time Sydney, with me, and she refused again. I wasn't certain exactly why, but I think it had something to do with my 'criminal lifestyle' as she termed it. I did try to explain, but we had a flaming row and that was that.

She married Max and although I was his best man she barely spoke to me. Looking back, my so-called criminal activities couldn't have been all that bothered Emma. She had been going out with Max, on and off, and must have decided between us he was the better bet. Well, her loss!

Max rang me from the phone box in Karrelin when their baby was born. He was drunk as a lord and bragging about his wonderful son. I listened, congratulated him, told him I'd have a drink to celebrate and let him ramble on until his small change ran out and the call was cut off. Then I went off and did some rudimentary maths, opened a bottle of Scotch and got drunk too.

His place out at Karrelin offered me a place to lie low for a while. It'd give me an excuse to see Emma again too. And the kid. *My kid?* Maybe; I wasn't sure and doubted whether anyone, even Emma, knew the answer to that one.

“Hey, Max!”

There wasn't any response from inside, but I knew he had to be there because his heap of a Holden was parked under a tree. So was Emma's Mini. I banged on the door and yelled again.

Still no answer. It was quiet, too. No dogs, no cattle or sheep over in the paddock beside the house. I hadn't seen Emma's beloved old moggy anywhere either.

The front door was locked, so I went round and pushed the back door open a little. The hinge squealed as I did so and I realised that apart from my voice and my bashing on the door, it was the first sound I'd heard since I'd got out of the car.

*Bad. Very bad. Bad place.*

I could almost hear my Aboriginal great grandmother whisper the words.

I opened the back door wide and stepped into Max's house.

## Chapter 6

Undetected, the five alien ships swooped towards Earth. As planned, each was to scoop up a small number of local inhabitants from selected locations around the world. In darkness, the first ship took up twenty sleeping residents of a small town in the north-west part of Canada, not far from the Alaskan border. With its cargo safely aboard, the ship set course for the moon and swung in behind it.

The second and third vessels similarly took up inhabitants of small villages in Belgium and Botswana, achieving their missions with precision. Twenty or less subjects were taken to the space vessels, which then departed immediately for the shelter of the moon.

It was then that things started to go wrong. Not entirely by chance. There was dissension among the Kruggah.

Ska, second in command to Captain Zolgoff on the Dendrator, couldn't have been happier. Back on Kruggah, his clan and those of Zolgoff and Tartredd had been locked in battle for generations. Ska had slimed his way aboard the Dendrator, but his ultimate aim had always been to damage the mission as much as possible. He had been careful; he was malign but not stupid.

The time they had spent studying the planet before making their move had apprised Ska of the fact that these humans were, in his opinion, a danger to the universe in general and themselves in particular. Unsuccessfully, he had argued the case for simply annihilating life on the planet and heading for home as soon as possible.

Tartredd, Zolgoff and Javokaran were among those who most vehemently opposed this barbarous suggestion. Ska wisely shut up, but he did not forget, and when the opportunity came for revenge, he grabbed it with all tentacles.

Javokaran's ship, the Skarpo, was to select individuals from a small village close to the border between Cambodia and Vietnam.

Ska pondered on the potential for damage should the group to be teleported aboard be actually engaged in battle at the time of their arrival on the Skarpo. Normal practice was to ensure subjects were comatose, but Ska had bribed, blackmailed, bullied and cajoled enough crew members on both the Dendrator and the Skarpo to have a plan he believed would benefit himself.

Not far, only a couple of points as the teleport operated, was the neighbouring and divided country of Vietnam, where currently a war was raging. Ska messaged his henchman on the Skarpo and arranged for them to pick up, not a dozen peaceful and harmless Cambodians, but soldiers involved in a battle. Ska didn't find it necessary to warn his contact of the possible danger to the Skarpo because of this action. He merely smirked and waited.

The Skarpo, under the command of Captain Javokaran, hovered a thousand linear units above the surface of the planet and the teleportation device, now with coordinates set in Vietnam, was activated.

Twenty-five Viet Cong and twelve US marines, all heavily armed with AK 47s, Uzis, grenades, miscellaneous other rifles and handguns, suddenly found themselves – awake, alert, and in sudden close proximity to one another – in a totally alien environment. They did not react well.

## Chapter 7

### *Meredith*

Fortunately, it was a minor matter. But the piece of steak in the electric frypan, probably being prepared for someone's steak burger, was beyond rescue. The rubbish bin was the only possible place for it. After switching the frypan off and checking around to make sure there was nothing else turned on that could start a fire, I left, closing the front door behind me.

I walked back to my car very slowly, trying all the time to pick up on someone's thoughts. *Anyone's* thoughts. There was nothing. In my car, I slumped and rested my head on the steering wheel. I suppose that set the horn off, but I didn't notice. As no one came running, obviously there was no one else around to notice.

I lifted my head up and realised something else. Normally there are a couple of dogs sleeping outside the pub, under the shade of a huge old tree. They weren't there. There were no birds in the trees. No flashes of white, or pink-and-grey, or even the bright green that indicates a '28. No magpies.

No people. No dogs. No birds. Come to think of it, I hadn't noticed any sheep in the paddocks either.

I have a dog. And a cat. I started the car and drove straight to my house.

"Rilly! Tom!"

It was just as deserted as every other place I'd been in. That, I think, is when I started to panic. I ran next door, and to the next house, and the next one, till I reached the end of the street. No one.

I got back into my car and drove to the school. The classrooms were full of desks and signs of occupation, but there were no children or adults to be seen. I checked the staff room. Empty, like everywhere else. So was the office. In the staffroom, however, was an electric kettle with the water bubbling away merrily. Someone had switched it on, but was not there to switch it off. I did so, worrying as I did so. In how many more houses in my deserted town were there kettles, frypans and other electrical appliances turned on, all with the potential for causing a fire? Scary thought. I pushed it aside temporarily and went outside. I called again, in the vain hope someone would hear me and come running. Even as I did so, I knew there were no minds close enough for me to expect any response.

There was a pile of discarded jumpers and shoes on the edge of the oval, along with the settings for a game of softball.

Nothing else. I think I screamed out then, calling for anyone who could hear me to come forth. The silence in my head told me there was no one to respond. There were tears running down my face and I could feel my heart beating frantically. I curled up on the grass of the oval and wept.

When I felt something soft and furry against my face I nearly died of shock.

## Chapter 8

*I don't understand what's going on. After my morning nap I went off hunting. I am, you know, the Mighty Hunter and I always bring home titbits for my queens and my kits. I crossed the noisy place and went across the soft green stuff and into the jungle.*

*Very far I travelled, as I always do, and the Hunt was good. I caught and devoured a small squeaker and a little feathered one. I was stalking a furry one with long ears when suddenly it disappeared from view. It did not run away and hide; neither did it dive into a hole.*

*It simply – went!*

*I searched for another small creature, but there were none. No scaly ones, no sliding ones; although I saw enough of the creeping small ones with odd-shaped legs, and once I swiped with my might paw at one of the many-legged ones that sit in webs and watch for their prey. I do not like them!*

*I came back through the noisy place, but there was no noise. I saw no one; none of the big four legged ones, and none of those who walk on two legs and consider themselves rulers of the universe.*

*In short, I saw no living thing – none worth mentioning, in any case. The insects and the spiders, as they are named, are valueless.*

*On velvet paws I sought my home – to find disaster had struck! My queen and my kits had gone, disappeared like all the rest.*

*What had happened? I could not tell. There was silence where there once had been sounds. There were empty places where in the morning the humans had gathered and made their noises and their smells.*

*I think I slept for a little while; my mind could not take this in. I was woken by of the noisy smelly things the humans called cars. A two-legged female got out of it. She walked around, in and out of several of the buildings, and then she ran. She got back into her car and drove away. But I am the Mighty Hunter and I followed it by sound.*

*Finally I found her, on the soft green stuff near the noisy place. She was curled up as a kit might curl, but was making the most appalling sounds. At first I was – not afraid, you know, because the Mighty Hunter never feels afraid – but cautious. I sat and watched for a little while. When I made a querying miaow sound at her she did not react, so I walked forwards and touched her with my paw.*

*She screamed. I do not know why.*

## Chapter 9

*Daniel*

Max was always a noisy bugger when we were at high school, and Emma loved her music loud, too, so I anticipated their place, even, or maybe especially, with baby would be noisy. But it was silent. It worried me. I had expected at least a dog to bark when I pulled up, but there hadn't even been that.

Their back door led straight into the kitchen. It smelled of food; there was a pot on the wood stove and when I lifted the lid the savoury smell of stew wafted out. I realised I was hungry, but replaced the lid. The fire had almost gone out.

Emma must have been doing the ironing, but it looked like she'd left it abruptly. The iron was face down and when I picked it up the sharp odour of scorched fabric totally took away that of the stew. What? She'd left the iron lying on one of Max's good shirts? He'd kill her! I switched the iron off at the wall and pulled the plug out, for good measure. I sat the iron on the kitchen table to cool down. The shirt was beyond rescue.

"Max, mate? Where are ya? Emma? Anyone home?"

No response. This was weird and getting weirder by the moment. Like the Mary Celeste. I walked through into the living room. There was a bottle of beer by Max's chair, and a cigarette smouldering in the ashtray. I wrinkled my nose at the smell – pot more than tobacco. Max was a fool. I butted it out and looked around. The baby's playpen was set up on the floor and was littered with toys and a bottle...but no baby.

I could hear a clicking sound it and it took me several moments to track it down. There was a record – Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass – on the stereo and the needle was still clicking at the end of the final track, as the record revolved, waiting for it to be switched off. God alone knows how long it had been doing that. Five or ten minutes? Certainly not much more. I obliged, raised and replaced the needle on its stand and switched the stereo off at the wall.

“Max!”

No answer. There was no one there. No Max, no Emma, no baby. They had disappeared into thin air. When I went outside and looked around, I couldn’t see or hear any animals either. No dogs, no moggy sunning itself on the fence, no sheep... nothing. Not even a lizard.

I had to get out of there. All this silence was giving me the creeps. I jumped back into my car and headed for the Karrelin hotel. Maybe someone there would be able to tell me what the hell was going on.

## Chapter 10

*2 pm Monday*

“Mr Davies, sir, can I go first base? Please?”

“No, sir! Me!”

“Me!”

Ross Davies put his hands to his ears and then waved at the group of twelve year olds who were clustered round him.

“Up to the oval first, everyone. Then I’ll decide. Here, Travis, carry the bat and ball, will you, please. Peta and Shane, the bases. Okay, everyone, off we go.”

As they followed Mr Davies onto the school oval Wendy and Joanna poked their tongues out at each other.

“I asked first!”

“Huh! You couldn’t catch the ball if you tried. You oughta go longstop. Right over there.”

“And you reckon you could do any –

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“Honestly, Ruth, I’d give me back teeth for a decent night’s sleep. Between Pete waking me up every couple of hours for a bottle and Steven snoring, I got hardly a wink last night. Or the night before, or the night before that. You’re so lucky your older kids are going to school now.”

“You could always try just popping the dummy back in for a while.”

“Yeah. Tried that. It worked for about fifteen seconds.”

“Makes you wonder why we do it more than once, doesn’t it, girls?”

“No kidding. Me nana had sixteen kids. I dunno how she managed it. And me mum had five. But I’m gonna stop after this one.” Contentedly, Ruth patted her bulging belly. “The doctor said he’d give me a prescription for the Pill. Three is quite enough, if you ask me! I’d’ve stopped after two, if one of them had been a boy. But we’re hoping third time lucky. ”

“Isn’t Steven a Catholic?”

“Yes, but what he doesn’t know won’t –

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“Gimme another beer, Tom. Those two tarts still tryin’ t’ play pool out in the lounge?”

“Yeah.” Tom Goodsmith looked at his watch and laughed. “They’ve been on the one game for half an hour. Been tryin’ to pot the black for the last ten minutes.”

“Sad, ain’t it?”

“Sure is.”

“You oughta toss ‘em out so the men can play.”

“Yeah. In a while. They’re not drunk, anyway.”

“Huh. Might be able to play better if they were. What’re women doin’ in the pub on a Monday afternoon anyway? They oughta be home doing the washing –

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“Daniel? He’s coming here? When? Why didn’t you tell me before? You know I don’t – “

“Oh, shut up, Emma,” Max said wearily. “I dunno what it is you’ve got against Daniel. He’s a good bloke. You an’ he used t’ be thick as thieves when you were kids.”

“Yes. But that was a long time ago.” Emma looked back at her husband. “Before I married you. I don’t think he’s ever forgiven me – or you – for that.”

Max shrugged.

“Who cares? Anyway, he’s got himself into some trouble over in Sydney and just wants a place t’stay for a while.”

“What? Here? Why?”

“Why the hell not? We’re mates, him and me.” He stared at her. “We share everything – even you.”

Emma went red, then white.

“That was a long time ago Max. I don’t wanna see Daniel again.”

“Tough luck. He’ll be here sometime this arvo. He can –

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In the small local branch of the Bank of New South Wales, the manager, Joseph Taylor, regarded the man seated across from him.

“So, things are pretty good out at the farm at the moment, Serge?”

The younger man grinned and shrugged.

“Good enough to think about a loan for that new tractor, yes.”

“And how’s Lucy? Will she let you come into town tonight for a while?”

“Might be able t’ soften her up if I promise her a counter meal at the pub.” A brief shadow passed over the young man’s face. “Might cheer her up a bit. Me mum keeps asking her if she’s got any good news for her yet. She’s itchin’ for grandkids but we haven’t had any luck yet.”

“Not practising enough, maybe?” Joseph jibed gently. “How long have you been married now?”

Serge looked at the other man, dead-pan.

“Seven months, eight days and –

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“Get the black ball in, you silly bitch!”

“*You* get it in, you silly bitch. I set it up for you.”

“Yeah, sure, and then you gave me a shove when I had a shot.”

“Well, you did the same to me.”

“I reckon we need another drink!”

“Bloody good idea! Hey, Laurel! Two more Cokes in here!”

“Watch your language, you two. Tom’s just about ready to throw you out as it is.”

“Aw, I’m scared. Are you scared, Jilly?”

Jilly Daniels and Shirley Calley looked back at her, leaning on each other’s shoulders and shaking with mirth.

“You know he won’t toss us out, Laurel. We’re stone cold sober and he wants to keep on Jilly’s mum’s good side anyway.”

“Heaven help us next month when you’re old enough to drink something stronger.” Laurel put their drinks on the counter. “Are youse girls gunna have a party or –

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“Come for the school mail, have you, love?”

Jane Bealey forced herself to smile at the postmaster. She *hated* being called ‘love’ and had told the man so on numerous occasions. For all the attention he’d paid, she thought sourly, she might just as well have saved her breath. Cyril Tonkins called every female he encountered ‘love’. He didn’t intend to be offensive, Jane realised. It was just his way. She briefly considered responding by calling him ‘darling’ but had the horrible feeling he’d either love it and make a big joke out of it, or simply stare blankly at her, missing her point totally.

She accepted the bag of mail, shuffled through it and found one addressed to her. Smiling, she started the short walk back to the school. A letter from her boyfriend, also teaching, but in the far north of the state, was something to be savoured. Except that this time it started: *‘Dear Jane, I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but I can’t marry you after all. It isn’t anything you said or did, it’s just –*

## Chapter 11

*From Vree’s diary*

Today there have been disasters, and triumphs. Three of our vessels carried out their missions perfectly. They moved in, took up the required number of subjects, and rendezvoused safely out past this planet’s satellite. We discovered it’s very unimaginatively named the Moon (and is also known by some, mostly their scientists, as Selene or Luna), and it seems to fascinate the population in many ways.

However... those three ships were lucky. So are we, but events have been chaotic aboard this ship. Even worse, one of our fleet was destroyed.

I am too distressed to write more at the moment. Fortunately I have duties to attend to. They may keep my mind off our losses.

## Chapter 12

The crew in the teleportation area of Skarpo were totally unprepared for anything like this. Until now, on every mission, their subjects had been lifted up and materialised in a state of unconsciousness. These new arrivals were only too conscious.

Treffna jabbed in vain at the controls, and around him other Kruggah reacted in various ways. Some panicked, turning all shades of green and purple, and tried desperately to leave the chamber, some simply went into catatonic states and a few, like Treffna, devoted their efforts to trying to put right what had obviously gone so very badly wrong.

One of the Kruggah, who had shape shifted prior to the event, stepped forward in a feeble attempt to calm the group of humans. In a less stressful situation, he might even have been successful, but as it was, his shape kept wavering between a semi-human form and his natural appearance. Others of the crew were turning all colours and morphing wildly in their fear.

Every sentient being in the teleportation chamber was under stress of some kind; even those of the crew who had experienced several missions. Unfortunately, they were not armed, and their intended subjects were. Highly armed, and with a variety of lethal hardware.

The officer in charge of the American marines took one shocked look around. Seconds before, he and his companions had been sneaking up on a small group of Viet Cong, unaware that behind them they were also being shadowed by several Vietnamese civilians. Or possible civilians; it would have been difficult to tell. To the officer they were all gooks, whether or not they wore uniforms.

But now – his profane reaction was drowned out by the appalling noises coming from around them. Screams and screeches such as none of them had ever heard before.

The Kruggah were a very noisy race when frightened – and they were totally terrified at this turn of events.

He blinked once, and focussed his eyes upon the unbelievable sight before him.

Aliens! Slimy, purple and green, ugly, nightmare inducing *aliens!* Worse in their way than VC; they at least were human. He had no idea what had gone wrong, but his first reaction, like that of every other human present, was aggression.

He levelled his automatic weapon at the nearest alien, yelled 'Geronimo!' and fired a steady round. Beside and around him his men followed suit, and for the first time ever, the Kruggah found themselves under attack on one of their own vessels.

Treffna raised himself behind his console, attempting to call his team to safety, and the stream of slugs from the AK 47 cut through him like a hot knife through butter. He wasn't alone; in a matter of seconds most of his companions had met the same fate. The Kruggah died very messily and the Marines howled as they were splattered with slimy multi coloured body parts, most unrecognisable.

Meanwhile the Viet Cong had taken in the situation but mostly rejected it as impossible, therefore a capitalist plot. They started firing indiscriminately at

Americans and aliens alike. Several threw grenades and improvised Molotov cocktails. Chaos ensued.

Nobody won. Bullets ricocheted around the chamber; electrical equipment shorted and caught fire. Automatic blast doors slammed down, isolating the area from the rest of the vessel, and intra-ship communications crackled, hissed and screeched.

The Marines retaliated and a short, vicious battle followed. It ended in a devastating manner when one sustained blast from a bazooka smashed through the bulkhead, and drove a hole through a number of pipes and conduits close to the outside surface of the ship. Here, by the teleportation chambers, the outer hull was the thinnest of anywhere on the ship.

Coolant mixed with fuel and pure oxygen; sparks from the power supply set off a small fire which in turn triggered a larger one, and so on up to a massive blast which destroyed the Skarpo.

For a few seconds, in the daytime sky, a bright star hung over Vietnam, and then there was nothing. Pieces of minor debris dropping through the atmosphere burned up in milliseconds.

The Skarpo, its crew of a hundred and thirty, the Viet Cong, the Vietnamese civilians and the US Marines were nothing more than cosmic dust.

In all the history of the Kruggah, nothing quite as bad as this had ever occurred. The crews of all the other ships in the fleet were shocked beyond belief.

Tartredd was devastated by the loss.

This episode of disasters was not yet over. More was to come.

## Chapter 13

### *Meredith*

Nimm! The publican's cat. Why, I asked myself, was this scruffy creature here, batting at me with his paw as if to ask questions I wasn't able to answer? Why him and not my animals? Where had they gone? Not to forget all the people of Karrelin, several hundred of them. And the school kids.

My initial reaction when Nimm came up and butted at me was to scream and then to reach out for him. Poor beast! I couldn't hear myself, but I must have given him one hell of a fright. He leapt away from me but didn't run away. I waited, then he came to me and I sat there on the grass of the oval, stroking him and murmuring incoherent words into his ear. Just the touch of another living creature was consoling.

Poor Nimm! He looked as bewildered as I felt. I stood up slowly, putting him on the ground beside me.

“Where have they all gone, Nimm?” I wish I knew. I wish I could read cats’ minds like I can read humans. But I’ve never been able to. Never been able to pick up even a spark of intelligence from any other than humans. Perhaps that’s just as well. Even sleeping human minds were readable, although naturally, in a dreaming state, totally muddled.

Obviously, something totally bizarre and inexplicable had happened. I opened my car door and to my surprise Nimm leapt up and inside, settling himself on the passenger’s seat and looked at me as if to say ‘What next?’

What next, indeed?

I had to go and let someone know what had happened. Karrelin’s less than twenty miles from Wolerin in one way and about the same from Lake Penger in the other. Driving that far with a cat didn’t strike me as particularly smart or desirable, so first I drove to the pub. Slowly and carefully. When I stopped and leaned across to open the passenger door Nimm looked at me and I shook my head.

“I’ll be back in a while, Nimm. So will everyone else be, I hope.”

Am I daft or what, talking to a cat when I can’t even hear the sound of my own voice? I gave him a gentle push and watched as he sauntered across the footpath and jumped up onto the ledge of the open window. He disappeared inside and I looked at my watch. I was amazed to realise it was less than two hours since I had passed through Wolerin, on my way home.

Before I left town, I sat still for a few moments and concentrated on trying to pick up any mental activity. Nothing. Of course, it wasn’t beyond possibility that everyone in the town was clustered just beyond my telepathic reach. Highly unlikely, of course. I shrugged and headed for Wolerin.

I didn’t get far. About a mile from the pub, my little car just stopped. My first thought was that I must have run out of petrol, and I scolded myself for not having checked the fuel gage when I was in town. No; it showed a quarter full. I tried to restart the engine. Nothing. Not a single vibration from it.

Damn! By now I was more than worried. No people in town; just myself and Nimm – and now my car had stopped for no apparent reason. I got out and went round to open the bonnet. Everything looked normal inside, so I slammed it down and had another try.

Nothing. I muttered and grumbled to myself and tossed up between walking back into town and walking along the road. I still couldn’t ‘hear’ anyone. I remembered there was a farm about half a mile further along, so I thought I’d walk that far and see if I could get some help.

Two or three steps past my car, I bounced off an unexpected and invisible *something* that stopped me in my tracks and knocked me off my feet onto my backside. What the – ?

There was nothing to see, but something had stopped my progress. I picked myself up off the ground and stepped forward again, this time with a hand

outstretched. I'm not sure what I touched; it was cool and soft, but yielded only an inch or so till my hand could move no further. I put both hands up and felt in front of me.

A barrier of some kind – but totally invisible. I walked from one side of the road to the other, still feeling it before me, blocking the way completely. When I stretched as high as I could reach, it was still there. There was no gap either, at all at the base, where it met the road. Tentatively, I stepped off the road onto the gravel verge, still following the barrier. Down into a dry ditch and up the other side, across a flat stretch of gravel and sand, till I reached the wire fence of an adjacent farm property.

Curiosity drove me. Carefully, I climbed over the fence and started across the paddock, one hand against this invisible barrier. I was scared, I admit, but fascinated at the same time. Maybe due to the fact all my fifty plus years of life I have possessed and sometimes used an ability most people would relegate to the realms of science fiction, I've generally found it easier to accept new concepts.

Nothing human could have produced such a barrier, that I did know. I followed it across the paddock. The small farmhouse and all the outbuildings were my side of the barrier, and they were empty of human life. There was nothing to gain by continuing this way. I started back towards my car and realised that not four yards away was a very large, very angry looking bull. If I'd not been deaf I probably would have heard him. As it was, I could feel the ground vibrate as he stomped his front hooves up and down, glaring at me.

For one insane moment all I could think of was how much the beast resembled all the paintings I'd ever seen of King Henry VIII of England. I couldn't have moved to save my life. Just as well it wasn't necessary.

The beast pawed at the ground, opened its mouth and emitted an earth-shattering roar. At least I presumed the latter, from its expression. Then it charged. I didn't move, but held my breath as it thundered forwards – and bounced off the barrier. I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry hysterically. The poor animal staggered, shook its head and fixed me with a 'What happened?' look of bewilderment. I took advantage of its confusion to bolt back to my car. I jumped in and tried once more to start the engine.

To my surprise it started, but I could move the vehicle only in reverse. Fine, but I had no intention of reversing all the way back to Karrelin, so I performed a neat and successful three-point turn. Thoughtfully, I drove back to town.

It was as still and quiet and deserted as it had been. I drove through the town and found, not entirely to my surprise, that there was another unseen barrier (or maybe even a continuation of the one I'd previously experienced) along the road about a mile the other side of the pub, the one leading to Lake Penger.

Karrelin sits on a T-junction, with the road between Wolerin and Lake Penger as the crosspiece. The other road leads eventually, via several other towns, to the coast and the capital city. It also was blocked, by the same invisible sort of barrier. Before I got to it this time, however, I came across a crashed cattle truck. It was

deserted; no driver and no cattle to be seen anywhere. Although I could certainly smell their very recent occupation of the truck. I smothered an almost hysterical giggle; if indeed aliens had abducted everyone in the town, they'd also ended up with a pile of cattle and sheep.

I didn't bother trying to see how far the barrier stretched, and I didn't even consider trying any of the several gravel tracks leading out of town. I was coming to the horrible conclusion that Karrelin was completely closed off from the outside world, and that my only companion was an ugly but affectionate ginger tomcat.

I supposed it could have been worse. That bad tempered bull could have been on *my* side of the barrier.

## Chapter 14

### *Daniel*

Something bloody weird was going on. Stuffed if I knew what, though. On the drive between Max's place and the pub, just under a mile, I never encountered a single vehicle driving, although I did see one, and what I saw scared the shit outta me.

It was a cattle truck, which could probably carry a dozen or so cows in reasonable comfort. Looked like it had run off the road and into a tree. Hadn't exactly been speeding before it crashed, I realised. The front was only a little bashed in, but it had slid into a ditch first and was tilted at an odd angle. I cursed at the sight, stopped my car and got out to see what, if anything, I could do.

There was steam rising from the front of the truck but I couldn't smell any petrol fumes, so I took a look in the cab.

It was empty. The door was shut and the key was still in the ignition, although the engine had stopped. There wasn't any blood anywhere either. I walked round the truck and looked in the back. It stank of cattle shit and urine, but was also empty, and locked. Now, I've been a city boy for years, but none of the farmers in or around Karrelin would have driven an empty cattle truck in that condition. So where the hell were the cattle and the driver? I scratched my head, walked back to my car, lit a cigarette and tried to make sense of this. Together with Max's deserted place, this was all beginning to give me the creeps.

I got into town and it was even worse. Karrelin was like a ghost town. There were cars parked in the main street, house and shop doors wide open and all the signs that people were around. Only they weren't.

I tooted my car horn and no one came out of any of the shops to see what was going on. I drove at crawling speed around the town, up and down the few

streets and saw no one. Not even a stray dog. There weren't any birds in the trees either.

I tried the pub. If there was no one anywhere else, surely there'd be someone *there!* It was silent and empty, even though there were half empty glasses on the bar. A cigarette had smouldered to ash in an ashtray and there were two pool cues leaning against the pool table in the lounge. I looked at the table; whoever had been there last had been playing 8-ball and only the white and black balls remained. On a whim I potted the black and laid the cues across the table. I went into the bar, where I helped myself to a bottle of Scotch and a carton of cigarettes – well, face it, under the circumstances wouldn't you have done the same? I got into my car and headed back out of town the way I'd come. I figured if the pub was deserted, the whole town would be as well. No sense wasting my time. I'd have to find somewhere else to lie low for a while.

Just past the turn off to Max's place, I ran into trouble.

Literally, you could say.

## Chapter 15

*From Vree's diary*

What a terrible day it has been! And it should have been so great and successful.

I had been looking forward to this mission. We'd visited a number of planets already that held sentient life, but it ranged from very low level on most of them to slightly below us on several. On very few planets we had encountered highly intelligent aliens.

We took our time, putting the six vessels of our fleet into a parking orbit near the peculiar asteroid belt in this system and taking some time to observe the planets closer in to the sun. The third one out seemed promising. There was considerable life, and their civilizations fired out plenty of radio waves into space. They'd obviously invented such primitive means of communicating, using sounds and images. This planet was home to a developing race. Not as advanced as we are, but intelligent and adventuresome. Communicating with them and studying them was going to be an interesting experience.

I didn't know it at the time, but our chief leader Tartredd and our captain Zolgoff had already had a major disagreement with second officer Ska about the inhabitants of this planet. Ska had seen them as a threat. He wasn't entirely wrong.

Commander Tartredd ordered our ships to move, albeit with extreme caution, from the asteroid belt to a position behind the planet's only natural satellite. On a couple of previous missions to study new life forms, we have suffered loss of life; possibly due to the aliens' perception of us as a threat.

The Ktacthee reacted with extreme hostility. They tried to EAT us! We immediately returned them to the surface of their planet. Unfortunately, not before they had made a meal of two of the teleport operators and a medical staff member. Since then we have found it advisable, although fortunately not always necessary, to have security personnel on call during teleport operations. Of course, not in the actual teleportation chambers, but close by.

The Lescourten displayed behaviour at the opposite extreme – they took one look at us and ran screaming. Our encounter with them was extremely brief; we were not even able to speak with them as they simply rolled themselves into catatonic balls and would not move. Better than their trying to devour us, but very disheartening. You would have thought our mere appearance frightened them!

This, we had hoped, would be more successful.

The plan was for of our five vessels to travel simultaneously towards the planet. To being with, it went well.

We took up positions close enough in to teleport a small number of the planet's inhabitants from five disparate areas. Due to the cloaking devices with which our ships were fitted, they remained unobserved from the planet's surface.

Then disaster and tragedy struck! One of our ships was destroyed during the operation to uplift subjects from the planet. The entire crew, plus an unknown number of humans, was annihilated. We still do not know how this could have come about.

On our ship, sabotage nearly wrecked our mission. We are still coming to terms with what happened, both to our friends and companions whom we shall never see again, and also to us.

## Chapter 16

*Monday 2.00.23 pm*

It should have gone so smoothly. In three other places, the uplift of a small number of human, in stasis and safety, had been carried out successfully. The fourth vessel however had encountered massive difficulties and as a result had been destroyed. On the Dendrator...

“Teleportation device engaged!”

“Successful transfer commenced.”

“Subjects appearing...now...”

Upon the receptor pad, a dozen human bodies shimmered into existence. Then a dozen more. And more. Now non human forms began to appear. In spite of the fact they were all comatose, they were piling up. The area was cluttered with bodies; humans, dogs, cats, guinea pigs, lizards, budgerigars, cockatoos, magpies, a few – mercifully few! – sheep and cattle, several snakes, a couple of kangaroos

and even more. A spiny anteater, rolled into a protective ball, ended positioned between two cats. One small thorny devil lay close to the edge of the receptor pad.

“Cease teleportation device! Now!” There was more than a note of panic in the voice of the chief operator. His immediate subordinate twisted an eyestalk at him, his tentacles flashing through a multitude of colour changes, purples and greens predominating.

“Can’t...stop...it...sir!”

“Cut off power to the teleport!”

“Impossible.”

Horrified and bewildered, the group of Kruggah watched as the body count increased. At least the bodies were alive, if comatose. The chief operator snapped an intercom switch.

“Security to the teleportation chamber. One the double! Hurry!”

“Sir... in one minute the capacity of the chamber will be exceeded. What – “

“Initiate immediate and direct transfer of sentient life forms to SAC number one! Technical staff to the SAC at once. Transfer non sentient life forms directly to SAC number two.”

The chief operator slumped, his tentacles wavering and grey ichor dripping from his lower spines.

“That should hold them temporarily. What went wrong?”

“I don’t know! The controls refused to respond.”

Ska oozed into the control room.

“Report! Immediately and at once!”

“Sir!” The teleport official tried to regain his composure; his colour changed from the ugly greens of panic to an even uglier purple of fear. Ska, related to the Grand Ruler, was even more intimidating than Captain Zolgoff. The latter at least was prepared to listen to reason and explanations. “We have suffered a massive malfunction, sir. But it is now under control. I hope.”

“And these?” Ska waved a bright blue tentacle at the life forms that continued to arrive, in spite of others being removed at the same time.

“I don’t know...sir.”

“Get rid of them! Now!”

“Um, yes, sir. They are being transferred as quickly as possible to the SACs.”

Ska shrieked in rage.

“No! Jettison the non sentient life forms. They may contain all kinds of contaminants. You imbecile! Do you want us to suffer a worse fate than the Skarpo did?”

“Belay that order!”

Zolgoff was at the doorway, as calm and pale as if there had been no malfunctions. “Continue transferring sentient and non sentient life forms as you have been, Chief Operator Krell.” He beckoned to Ska with one tentacle. “I wish to speak with you, Second Assistant Ska. In private.”

Just as they could reach the outer door the technician called out again.

“Captain, sir!”

“Yes?”

“Ah...the teleportation activity has ceased. We have now brought aboard all the life forms from the selected area. This was not supposed to happen. We should have retrieved less than twenty humans only. But now that area – within a radius of a mile, as the humans measure it, from the focal point of the operation – is empty of life forms... should we put up a containment field around it, to protect it while they are all absent?”

Zolgoff considered briefly.

“Yes, Operator Krell. I authorise that action. Erect a type three force wall around the area in question.” Beside him Ska seethed and hissed but was ignored. Zolgoff waited, as Krell’s tentacles and spikes vibrated in concentration and concern. “Is there a further problem?”

“I’m not sure.” Krell had gone a sickly shade of green. “It appears, though, that in the intervening period between the last life form being uplifted and the barrier being erected, two, no, three, other life forms entered the area. Should we bring them up, too, sir?”

“No, indeed!” Zolgoff snapped irritably. “Don’t you think you’ve got enough as it is? Leave them; they are of no concern.” He stalked through the doorway, Ska in his wake.

## Chapter 17

*The two-legged one carried me in her car to my home and she gave me food and milk, but then she went away. I prowled my territory, seeking sign of my queens and my kits, but they were not there. I found none of the barking ones either. I held my tail erect and strolled through the yard where a big noisy barking one had been. Once he had sunk his teeth into my back leg, but I had triumphed, for he will carry forever the mark of my claws on his face. It was ugly to start with; now it is marked with the mark of Nimm the mighty hunter.*

*My territory was silent; all of the other creatures were gone. I liked it. But I was lonely for my queens and my kits and I missed the sounds and smells of the two legged ones. I would have to find out where they had gone.*

*I crossed the green area near the noisy place again. There was good hunting in the jungle beyond. I leapt across a dried up stream and jumped up into a tree to survey my domain.*

*In the distance I saw a small scaly one, sunning itself in a clearing. I licked my lips and, belly close to the ground, crawled closer. My whiskers twitched; I could almost taste his blood and the softness of his flesh. I pounced –*

*Mrrrewowew!!*

*I was struck a mighty blow and fell backwards. It was only with great difficulty I landed on my feet, staggering a little.*

*What had happened to me? The little meal had disappeared and I was hungry. I stepped forwards and once again was struck. I jumped, and was beaten back. I sat for a moment and then stretched out my paw.*

*There was nothing there, but I could feel something. It stopped me. I turned and butted my hindquarters against it. Again, there was nothing to see, but I felt resistance to my body.*

*I am Nimm the mighty hunter, and I do not understand this. But I am not afraid, you understand. Never.*

*I wonder if the kind two-legged one will feed me again? I shall find where she lives and call to her. When there are only two creatures, they must stick together and help each other.*

*First, I shall have a sleep.*

## Chapter 18

*Meredith*

I went home. There didn't seem to be anything else I could do. It was late afternoon; I was hot and tired and frightened and more than a little stressed.

I showered, made myself an omelette, drank a glass of wine and then started in shock, remembering the boiling kettle at the school. I had switched it off, but now the memory was worrying me.

From what I had seen, everyone had disappeared so suddenly that no one would have had time to turn anything off.

Kettles, taps, irons... and heaven alone knew how many untended cigarettes burning to ashes on floors and carpets... Being alone I could cope with; after all, in

one way I had been alone all my life. However, if a fire should begin, I would be helpless to fight it.

Karrelin held between two and three hundred inhabitants. When they were all there, that was. I wasn't sure how many houses, but I visited as many as possible before a mixture of exhaustion and worry forced me to return home to catch some sleep. It was eerie going in and out of places, some of them where I'd never been before, and checking room after room. I know I turned several radios off, cursing my deafness for not being able to tell whether or not they were on. I turned off every switch, just to be sure.

I'd found fewer electrical appliances than I'd expected switched on; but if this had happened around breakfast or dinner time I fear there would have been more. I rescued one house from being flooded from an overflowing bath and butted out I have no idea how many abandoned cigarettes. My fingers stank and when I got home I scrubbed my fingers till the odour had gone.

Then I fell into bed and slept, as they say, like a log.

Once though, I woke briefly and thought I picked up on someone's confused thoughts. I must have been wrong though, as it wasn't repeated. More likely it was wishful thinking. My dreams were filled with wild bulls, cats and – inexplicably, spaceships and aliens.

I had no memory when I woke of the shapes these aliens had taken. Perhaps just as well.

When I took my morning coffee out onto the front verandah I had a visitor. As a matter of fact I almost tripped over him. He sat up and gave me a winsome look and I melted.

"Hello there, Nimm." I leant down and stroked him and he opened his mouth and presumably made an 'I'm hungry. Feed me,' sound. I put the coffee down and found a tin of tuna and a bowl of milk. You'd think the beast was starving, the way he attacked the food. He had to be damned smart though; he'd found his way to my house, which couldn't have been that easy as he wouldn't ever have been there before, as far as I knew. Or maybe he had; my dog Rilly bore a scar on his nose from a cat's claws; maybe it was from Nimm. I didn't know.

We sat on the verandah, him washing his face in self-satisfaction, and me wondering what I should do with myself. A little voice of duty kept calling to me and saying I really ought to check all the empty houses for electrical appliances like kettles and so on, while reason insisted if they'd been going to short out or boil dry and start fires, they'd have done so already. Logic won. There was only one of me and a lot more houses. I got dressed and decided to walk the short distance to the centre of town.

Along the way, I kept my mind open for any stray thoughts, but there was nothing. I was beginning to feel isolated; until now my deafness had been something I had managed to live with but now it was becoming a burden. Damn it, I couldn't even find out if the telephones were working! Or the radios. The power was on, after all, and the water. Presumably in at least one of those empty houses I hadn't yet

visited, a radio was playing, broadcasting news and music and maybe information about what had happened to my town.

I would never know. Damnation! I kicked in frustration at a stone and watched as it bounced across the road and into a garden. A cluster of bees arose, disturbed from the lavender bush and I let my breath out. At least the insects hadn't gone. Although of course I would have been happy if all the *flies* had disappeared. Who wouldn't be?

Nimm trailed me for a while and then took off on his own. I didn't doubt he'd return, later. I doubted he'd find any tasty snacks like mice or little birds. Just as well I had a supply of pet food at home. With a sudden sharp pang I realised that was the first real thought I'd given to Rilly and Tom since yesterday afternoon. I felt guilty. Where had they and everyone else except Nimm and me, gone?

I stopped, swung on my heel and hurried back home. If that damned invisible barrier were still up, by now there would be – would *have* to be – people on the other side trying to get *in*. There probably had been last night, if only I'd bothered to go look. Feeling foolish, I started my car and headed out along the Wolerin road.

## Chapter 19

### *Daniel*

Sometime late Tuesday morning, I staggered out into the backyard at Max's place and threw up into Emma's garden. I hoped she'd forgive me. I hoped Max would forgive me. I hoped they'd come back from wherever it was they'd gone – or been taken – and beat me to a pulp. I felt bloody awful. I threw up some more, then sluiced my face under the tap before tottering to the back step and sitting, well, falling into a sitting position.

Yesterday afternoon I had every intention of leaving the town. What I had seen had scared the wits out of me. No people, no animals, no birds, and no indication of where they had all gone so suddenly.

But I *couldn't* leave. Only a couple of hundred yards along the main road past the turn off to Max's place, my hired car died on me. It stopped in the middle of the road. Just stopped without any reason at all. I restarted the engine but as soon as I tried to move forward it died again. When I started it and tried reverse that was okay. However proceeding any further along that road in the car was impossible.

Damn it! I thought and jumped out. I'd bloody walk then! Three steps forward and I bounced back on my arse. What the – ? I got to my feet and took a couple of cautious steps and repeated the action. Might have seemed bloody funny to an onlooker but I was just getting more pissed off by the moment. First everyone had disappeared and then I couldn't get away.

There wasn't anything there I could see that was blocking my way. A brick wall, a stone barrier or something like that I could have understood. No, there was just this invisible *something* that stopped me from going where I wanted. I hit it; I

kicked it and I tried to jump over or around it. Frigging waste of time. It didn't feel hard; more like a balloon feels. It gave slightly, and rebounded after I pushed at it. Bloody hell. What was going on?

It blocked the road completely, and when I investigated further I found it continued on both sides, one into the bush and the other onto a farm. The fence was barbed wire and I decided against trying to climb over it. From what I'd seen (or more to the point not seen) it would be a pointless exercise.

I couldn't face that empty town again, I really couldn't. I tried the gravel road past Max's place, remembering that it led to others that eventually led back to either the main road to Perth or the one to Lake Penger. My way was barred again. I couldn't see anything, but the car stopped and when I tried to walk, I banged into an unseen something. I cursed and swore and even threw rocks at it.

They, damn them, went straight through as if it wasn't there. But I couldn't. I ended up with a bloody nose and bruised fists, and was still a prisoner. Same when I tried the road in the other direction. So if I was stuck there, what the hell had happened to everyone else? Why weren't they in the same predicament? Where had they gone? How on earth could a whole town full of people and animals disappear, just like that?

I ended up going back to Max and Emma's place. The light was beginning to fade when I pulled up next to his heap of a car and sat, swearing and sweating. I beeped the car horn several times, hoping against hope that he'd come out and yell at me. Or even set his dog on me, I wouldn't have cared. Just as long as he was *there* to do it. of course, he wasn't.

This was worse than having the Terrible Twins on my trail. The only good thing about this situation was that I was stuck on one side of a barrier and they, with a bit of luck, were still on the other side of the country, bemoaning their losses. I hoped they were, anyway. Trouble was, they were probably also worrying about who might be able to talk about the dead body in their townhouse. I sat in the car for a little while, smoking and thinking back on how careful I'd been to cover my trail. Nah, they'd never find me. I hoped.

I carried my case inside. The jewellery would have brought me a nice little sum if I'd got rid of it in Sydney, but I'd been too scared to try it, so had brought it with me. It, and the precious packet of forged identification papers were in the bottom of my case. I took both packages, one of jewellery and one of documents, out and transferred them to a leather satchel. I'd keep that close to me.

Myself, I was hidden, trapped is more like it, in an empty town. Almost funny. Bizarre, in any case. I was hungry too.

The pan was still on the stove and the food inside smelled good, so I stuffed myself with it and then lay down on the lounge, had a swig from the whisky bottle, and fell asleep.

It was dark when I woke. Dark, and silent. I dragged myself up and went out into the kitchen and switched the light on. It was eleven o'clock. I wondered what, if anything, had changed while I was sleeping. Only one way to find out.

Very carefully, aware of the Scotch sloshing around inside me, I walked rather than drove back into Karrelin. It wasn't far, less than a mile. If it had looked like a ghost town during the day, it was worse at night.

I stopped outside the pub. For a while I just stood there, waiting and hoping I'd see someone, anyone, stagger out and along the street. Hell, right then I would have welcome the Terrible Twins or one of their minions with open arms.

It occurred to me that by now *someone* had to have realised the town of Karrelin had been isolated off from the outside world. Someone must have come along to investigate. By now, there were probably hordes of people parked outside that bloody barrier, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. The streetlights were on, and a few houses showed lights as I walked around. A couple of the shops, too. I went into the hardware section in the Co-op and found myself a decent sized torch and some batteries.

I didn't want just anyone to know I was there; if this was being covered by the media, as seemed very likely, I certainly didn't want my face splashed all over newspapers or television. I walked cautiously along the side of the road that led out of town and fifteen or twenty miles across almost flat farmland to Wolerin. Almost a mile from the pub, I could see lights ahead. I switched the torch off and snuck into the meagre bush, moving closer but hugging the trees and keeping quiet so no one would see or hear me. One of my talents is the ability to blend into the shadows.

Oh, yes, I wanted out of there, but even more I wanted to know *who* and *what* I'd encounter if I made myself known.

It was close to midnight, but the area was far from deserted. The Army, newspaper and television reporters, and several cops. That did it. I wasn't going anywhere near *them*. The Army had set up lights and tents and even a camp kitchen. Emma's food had smelled better, but I was biased. I leaned against a tree and watched and listened for a while, but although there seemed to be a lot of talking going on, nothing much was happening. There were a couple of soldiers doing sentry duty where the invisible barrier apparently crossed the road. I could see the shapes of earth moving equipment, a bus and trucks, too. The other side of the road from where I stood was part of a farm, but the paddock seemed empty of livestock.

I nearly died of fright when one of the Army blokes moved up close to the barrier and shouted through a loud-hailer.

"Anyone there? Hello, can anyone hear me?"

For a moment I was tempted to rush forward and throw myself at the barrier. But the mental vision of one of the Terrible Twins seeing my face on the front of the morning newspaper stopped me. If that happened, my life span would be shortened abruptly and drastically. I stayed put. Half an hour later the call was repeated, and when all was silent again, I made my way back into the centre of town. I counted my paces as I went and figured it was about a mile; pretty much the same distance to the place where I'd been stopped on the other road. I figured there wasn't much point in trying the Lake Penger Road, but out of curiosity I took a walk. Believe it or not, it was a beautiful night. Not much moon, but the stars were more plentiful and

brighter than I'd seen for many years. It was cool, but not cold and anyway, by the time I'd walked out there, seen pretty much the same as on the Wolerin road and then jogged back to the pub, I was sweating.

There was a quaint little painted sign by the side of the road, giving the population of the town as a little over two hundred – but it was wrong. Dead wrong.

The current population of Karrelin was one.

Me.

For the third time in less than twelve hours, I opened the back door at Max's and went inside.

I remember going into the house, dropping onto the lounge and taking a healthy swig of the Scotch. I don't remember much more, but when I woke this morning I was as sick as a dog. Probably deservedly so.

After I recovered, I went back inside and had a shower. Barely tepid, I'm afraid. Max and Emma had a solid fuel hot water system and it didn't seem to have been lit since Monday morning. I put on some clean clothes of Max's; fortunately he and I took more or less the same size, and made myself a cup of scalding hot black coffee. I wasn't hungry, although midday had come and gone while I was suffering.

I was dead scared.

And I was *alone*.

## Chapter 20

*The two-legged one fed me, but did not try to stop me when I left. I did not wish to stay there; I could smell another of my kind, and also a barker. This place was good for food, but not for sleeping. I purred for her and she rubbed my head and then I went to find a suitable spot for a nap.*

*I did not go far; I remembered what happened before when something I could not see stopped me and I did not wish to repeat that experience. Sooner or later the world would return to normal and I would see my queens and my kits again. Worrying about what I could not change would detract from my rest time.*

*It was a shame though; my mouth ached for the taste of a small feathered or furry one. The food the two-legged one gave me was from a tin. But she gave me cream, too, so she was forgiven*

## Chapter 21

*Ska*

Our captain is a fool. He does not understand the danger these people – these *humans!* – pose to us. They are at a dangerous stage in their development and must not be allowed to progress further. These are the sort of people our Supreme Leader on the home world wished us to find. My clan group agreed with him, but they looked to our future safety. To me, they entrusted the responsibility that when we did find intelligent aliens I would ensure the proper course of action was taken. I was to see they were destroyed, by whatever means I needed to utilise.

These humans possess the aggression of the Ktacthee and the brains of the Lescourten. They are dangerous; if not now most certainly in the future when they develop space travel. For our safety, we must destroy them now while we can.

Zolgoff is a fool, Tartredd is a fool, and I am the only one of us brave enough to give the orders that will keep us safe.

Did they learn nothing from our previous encounters with sentient beings? Did they not see the problems races such as the Ktacthee will pose when they develop further?

Did they learn nothing by the destruction of the Skarpo? That was a tragedy, but a necessary sacrifice of one of our ships to demonstrate the warlike nature of these humans. It had to be done.

These humans also have to be destroyed. For our safety. For the safety of the home world, of our race, *and of my clan.*

I hoped the tampering with the teleportation device would have caused enough of a problem for Zolgoff to see the value in my suggestions, but no. The man is a fool. I am left with no alternative. I shall have to take the ship, depose him and dispose of the humans. I might have to kill Zolgoff to ensure this happens. So be it. It is his fault for not seeing clearly.

And he had the nerve to reprimand me for my order to jettison those creatures! He deliberately countermanded my sensible order. Now we have two of the SACs filled with life forms that may be dangerous to us. My only course, I can see that now, will be to speak to as many of our loyal crew as possible and convince them the captain is not worthy of his position.

Many of the crew already share my feelings; we have become disillusioned through the events of our long mission from our home planet. It started out so gloriously. But it has become demeaned and contaminated by many factors. We had hoped to find new worlds and new peoples and maybe even new civilizations with whom to share our ways.

The Ktacthee were among the most aggressive and repulsive creatures I have ever encountered in my life. They responded to our peaceful gestures by attacking us. They tried to *eat us!*

And the Lescourten... they were miserable cringing creatures; supposedly intelligent but fearful every moment of their lives.

Neither of these two, and none of the other less advanced races we encountered, has developed to the extent we have. I recommended we ignore them; they were not worthy of our attention.

But no! Tartredd and Zolgoff paid no attention to me; instead they used our teleportation devices and brought numbers of both these races aboard our ships. Members of our own race then utilised their own shape shifting abilities in order to interact with these disgusting aliens and exchange ideas and knowledge with them. Not that any of them had knowledge worth mentioning. Their beliefs were still mostly superstition and myth. Afterwards Tartredd sent them back to their planets to continue their development.

At least he behaved wisely in ensuring their memories had been wiped of their contact with us. We may have gained ourselves a little time by that. One day, in the far distant future, I fear one of these races will achieve interstellar travel and may come looking for us. I shudder to think of it. I even heard a rumour – and I pray it is nothing more than rumour as the very idea chills me to my central core – that volunteers from at least one of our other vessels chose to remain on the planets we had visited.

Shape shifters! They are an abomination upon us. It is blasphemous and criminal and stupid to tamper with the superior forms we possess. Tartredd however views with great approval the idea.

‘Makes other races less uncomfortable,’ he says. ‘Is less intimidating and worrying for alien people to speak with those bearing a familiar shape.’

As if there were something wrong with the natural shape and form of a Kruggah!

Terrible, indeed. It is perhaps a fortunate fact that only a very small minority of our race possess this ability, to change their forms. It is aberrant and abhorrent, to allow one’s being to be changed in such a way. It is to be hoped in a few generations such a trait can be bred out of our genes.

## Chapter 22

### *From Vree’s diary*

Things are improving. The chaos has settled and we are looking forward now rather than backward. I have been consulting with my colleagues, Gly and Kla and we shall shortly be able to begin interacting with a small group of humans. We had many to choose from; rather more than we had anticipated. Originally we had decided a selection of twenty would be perfect. However, the technical glitches, the causes as yet unknown, resulted in the entire human population of this small town being uplifted to our ship. Two hundred and forty two of them! Fortunately the chief operator rose to the occasion and prevented any injuries. We also – definitely unintentionally – acquired a wide selection of what appear to be vertebrate creatures. I heard a nasty rumour that the Dendrador’s second in command, Ska,

wanted them jettisoned. Fortunately that order was countermanded. As a result our xeno zoologists have some new creatures to examine, much to their delight.

They took a selection of the creatures and at this very moment are engrossed in studying them. It's quite fascinating that they, like the sentients of this planet, appear to possess nervous systems protected by a series of interconnected bones, part of their skeletal system. Their external appearances are diverse however; although most have body hair, in one species it is much thicker and of a very different texture and form than most of the others. Some of the smaller creatures possess feather instead, and several are covered with scales. A most fascinating collection!

We are going to use one of the four SACs on our ship to set up a suitable environment for the small group of humans we are going to interact with. The others will be kept in stasis until they can all be returned to their planet. Originally, we had hoped for a longer period than we will actually have. The chaos involved in their arrival on the ship had changed our plans somewhat. However, the three of us are looking forward to this experience with great anticipation.

It is an honour and a privilege to work with Gly; he has been the chief investigator on several missions. Kla is my junior but very enthusiastic. We should all work well together. I have chosen to take on the form of a human female while they have become human males.

It's very sad, but very true, that if we presented ourselves in our Kruggah forms, the humans would be repulsed.

It's also something I have to admit, that I *like* being human! This body feels comfortable and versatile and clean.

## Chapter 23

"Captain Zolgoff! Captain, sir!"

Xeno Zoologist Prattex hurried along the corridor to catch up with the other.

"I was expecting you, Prattex. Want to get your tentacles on some of those creatures, do you?"

"Oh yes, sir, indeed!" Prattex was glowing orange with enthusiasm. "They are so unlike anything we have ever encountered. Can we have a selection for study, please?"

Zolgoff considered, his upper tentacles vibrating gently. Prattex jiggled noticeably.

"Yes, but...there are conditions."

"Oh yes, anything!"

Zolgoff raised one spike and pointed it at the scientist.

“They are not, under any circumstances, to be harmed in any way. No dissections, no nasty experiments, no poking them with sharp objects to see how they react –”

“Fine, fine, yes indeed! Sir, we wouldn’t dream of injuring an alien species in any manner. Truly!” He paused to consider. “Ah, is it acceptable if we take DNA samples? We won’t hurt them, truly!”

“That will be acceptable. Prattex. Go along to SAC number 2 and inform Security there that you have my permission to remove selected samples to your area. You may have them for as long as we keep the rest of the humans aboard. As soon as you have taken those you wish, inform Security they are to return the others to the teleportation area in small groups. I shall send them orders to return the creatures to a place just outside the quarantined area. Your lot can go back there when we return the humans.”

Prattex jiggled in excitement.

“Thank you, Captain Zolgoff, sir! Thank you!”

As the scientist departed at speed Zolgoff rolled his eyestalks. At least someone on this ship was going to enjoy the next couple of days. Well, things couldn’t get much worse than they already were, could they?

## Chapter 24

### *From Vree’s diary*

I’m so excited! This has been a fantastic day for us, and for the humans with whom we have been able to communicate and interact.

They all looked very worried at first, which was understandable, but as things progressed they improved. It must have been a shock to them to wake and find themselves on a space vessel rather than in their little town.

There has been a nasty rumour going around that our situation, and the appalling disaster that overtook the Skarpo, were the result of sabotage by one of our own. I can barely countenance such a terrible suggestion. Yet, on reflection, so *many* errors occurred, and in such a short period of time, that maybe this could be possible.

Only a few humans should have been brought aboard each of our vessels. We have been in contact with the three other surviving vessels, and they experienced no technical glitches of any kind. Like our ship, theirs are now sheltered behind the Moon, and the small groups of humans on those ships are interacting well with our scientists.

From records beamed directly to Commander Tartredd from the Skarpo before its destruction, we know there were far too many humans uplifted there also. Not only that, but they were fully conscious and apparently in the middle of a local battle. The area from which they were taken was not the one settled upon at our

earlier briefings. I am not sure what went wrong, but there have been murmurings, of errors, unintentional but also deliberate.

I had friends on the Skarpo. Now they are gone, and their ship is but cosmic dust.

The group we brought aboard comprised the total of those in the selected area. We had planned for twenty, but received two hundred and forty two! Plus an unknown number of assorted other life forms. Fortunately all were comatose and the humans, other than a small group we selected for variety, have been kept in stasis. Our medical staff members, led by my friend Kadakkial, are currently examining them as a number appear to have defects which we can cure before their return. I understand the non sentient creatures were returned to an area outside the containment field Captain Zolgoff ordered set up, to protect the area while all its inhabitants were absent. Xeno Zoologist Prattex was practically salivating when I saw him; the captain allowed his section to keep a small number of the animals to study. But not to harm. Our departure from the planet was delayed for several hours while they made a selection and then returned the others.

I believe many of us on the ship are going to be paying casual visits to the zoology section over the time the humans and their strange creatures are aboard. Although I prefer sentient beings, I have been fascinated by some of these non sentients. One, so I have been told, has two pairs of limbs, but the back pair is disproportionately large, and it also possesses a tail. And, I blush to record this, a set of very large and obvious male sex organs.

## Chapter 25

Gly, along with Vree and Kla, walked through the SAC where all the sentient beings had been transferred after the disastrous teleportation malfunction. He stopped and swung back to stare down at the chief teleport operator, who was clearly trembling. His eyestalks drooped, his tentacles were limp and his spikes pointed downwards. The very image of a sad and scared Kruggah.

“Twenty! We only wanted twenty, Chief Operator Krell. What happened? How many humans are there here? None of them have been injured in any way, I trust?”

Krell recoiled. Like the majority of his race, he was not a shape shifter and although he did not share Ska’s distaste for those able to change their forms at will, he found Gly’s words emanating from the human shape more than a little disconcerting.

“No, no, no! Of course not. I do apologise, friend Gly. I really do not understand what happened. There was a major error and instead of bringing up the small number you had required, we ended up with the entire population of over three square miles, as the humans measure it. We had set a radius of one mile around a building in the centre of the town, with selected humans to be taken from with it. It was truly a terrible mistake, I assure you.”

“An error? A major error. Is there more?”

Yes, of course there was. He could see the green hue of Krell's tentacles, and the moisture around his eyestalks.

"Ah, yes, I'm afraid so." Krell cringed a little more. "But – at least Xeno Zoologist Prattex is happy. He has some alien species to study."

"What?" Gly stepped forward and the other shivered and took several rapid steps away. "Tell me, Krell, what exactly has happened here."

"Well, you see, it was all an accident. Something went wrong – "

"I understood that bit. Now tell me *what* went wrong. Everything that went wrong. In detail, and *why* it went wrong."

"Um... how long have you got?"

Gly rolled his eyes and gritted his teeth.

"Summarise it."

Krell went even greener. "Sir, I believe the controls were tampered with. Sabotage, in a word."

## Chapter 26

Jilly came slowly back to consciousness, aware of an elbow being jabbed into her ribs and Shirley's worried face over her.

"Wake up, Jilly. Please. C'mon, wake up!"

"Urgh ... what is it? What happened?" Jilly tried to sit up and fell back with a groan. "Bloody hell, Shirl, what happened to us? I've got an appalling hangover but I didn't have a thing to drink except Coke. What's going on?"

"We've been abducted by aliens, that's what's happened."

"Aargh, don't be so bloody silly. What would aliens want with us, huh?"

Shirley leaned closer and whispered.

"You know ... experiments and all that."

"What?" Jilly finally managed to pull herself into a sitting position and stare at her friend.

"Experiments? What sort of experiments? What are you talking about?"

"Alien babies, dissections, that sort of stuff. *You* know."

"Oh, shit!" Jilly shook her head in disbelief. "That's ridiculous, Shirley. You've been reading too many of those trashy magazines. There aren't any aliens, and if there were, why would they bother with *us*?"

“No aliens?” Her friend pointed past Jilly’s shoulder. ‘What do you call *them*, then?”

Jilly turned, stared and swore again under her breath. She and Shirley were one side of what seemed to be a wall, with a large viewing window in it. The – things – on the other side looked like absolutely nothing on earth. There were humans among them; but strangers, people Jilly had never seen before. To her dismay and annoyance, it appeared *she* was on the inside and *they* were on the outside. Something had to be done about that.

“Hey there!” she screamed, banging on the glass. “Hey! What d’you think you’re doing? Let us out!”

Shirley pulled her away. “Don’t make them angry.”

“Make *them* angry?” demanded Jilly. “I’m angry. Who do they think they are, kidnapping innocent harmless citizens? And what do they think they’re going to do with us?”

“Oh, this is awful.”

Jilly swung round to see Jane Bealey, one of the youngest of the local teachers. She was clutching a bundle of mail in one hand and an opened letter in the other. Tears trickled down her face, but her attention seemed directed far more at the letter than at her surroundings.

“He dumped me,” she sniffed. “My boyfriend dumped me. What am I going to do now?”

“Um,” Jilly started, “I honestly think we’ve got a bigger problem than your boyfriend, er, ex-boyfriend at the moment, Jane.” Much as she disliked admitting it to herself, Jilly considered Jane a wimp. She knew and – *liked* was too strong a term, maybe tolerated was better – the young teacher, but heartily wished the woman had more interests in life than teaching and her love life.

“What’s going on?” Not one, but most of them were wondering that, in various tones of fear, puzzlement and dismay.

“I only wish I knew.” She looked past Jane, realising there were more people from Karrelin present than she had previously realised. Close to twenty, gathered together in what seemed to be a large living area. There were sofas and chairs in small groups, and a long table with a dozen chairs around it. The floor under her feet was carpeted, the air smelt fresh, and there were open doorways in three of the walls. For a little while she ignored who and what were on the other side of the glass window and examined her companions and their surroundings.

She and Shirley were not the other women there; she had already noticed Jane Bealey, who had taken her bundle of letters and seated herself on one of the lounge chairs. She was still sniffing, but as the cause appeared to be the letter in her hand and not her current situation, Jilly shrugged and turned her attention to the others. Unsurprisingly, she knew them all by face if not entirely by name. Karrelin was a *small* town.

The tall man near the end of the room, with two primary school children beside him, was Mr Davies. Jilly gave a cry of relief when she realised one of the kids was her younger sister Joanna. She ran over and the girls hugged each other. She herself had harboured a crush on Mr Davies, the popular principal during her adolescent years, although he had grown out of it when Lonnie Doone, two years older than herself and the best looking boy she'd ever seen, had walked her home and given her a thorough and long kissing session on the front verandah at her house. They'd gone out on and off for several years, until he left the district to work in Perth. His departure had devastated Jilly for all of a week. She was, unashamedly, what her mother called 'fast'. And a flirt, but not at all serious about any of them.

Mr Davies seemed to have been assuring Joanna and her companion, a boy about the same age as herself. They were both barefoot and as he was wearing a whistle on a cord around his neck and holding a clipboard, Jilly guessed they'd been playing sport.

Joseph Taylor (the bank manager), Serge Pirrotini, Cyril Tonkins (the old bloke who ran the local Post office), Max Stiles and his wife Emma, Katie and her friend Ruth (Lonnie's sister), both looking shaken and terrified, Tom Goodsmith and Tam Blake. Laurel, Shirley and herself, Ross Davies, Travis and Joanna. And Jane the weeper.

Ruth, she noticed, was doing her best to console Katie, who was also crying. Tam looked around, grumbling.

"Me beer! Who nicked me beer? And me smokes?"

Max and Emma were glaring at each other; apparently they'd been having yet another of their infamous arguments.

Joseph Taylor and Serge were sitting with stunned expressions on their faces. Jilly was more than a little amused. She'd always been in awe of Mr Taylor, probably due to his position of power. As for Serge, she knew him and his new wife Lucia. At their wedding celebrations early that year, she and Shirley had sipped enough illicit champagne to decide it was worth spending their money on when they were old enough to do it legally.

Fifteen people, out of a town of over two hundred. Where, she wondered, were the others? Why were they where they were? Come to think of it, where *were* they? She walked to one end of the room and looked through the open doorway. A dormitory, by the look of it. Ten single beds arranged in two rows of five. There were small cupboards between them but no wardrobes. Same at the other end of the main room. This time she walked through and discovered another door, closed his time, but which opened to lead into a bathroom, with facilities for half a dozen to use at once.

Looked like they were expected to be here for a while, anyway.

But – where was here?

Jilly didn't know, but she was damn sure she was going to find out.

## Chapter 27

“Sabotage?” Gly repeated, thunderstruck. “That’s unthinkable!”

“I wish it were. Sadly, there are those among our people who are not in favour of our mission to explore the galaxy and search for other sentient races. They feel we should remain on our own planet and strengthen it for the future, rather than go out to meet others who could prove to be a threat to us.”

“Oh, that’s a ridiculous attitude to take. But surely no one on any of our ships would deliberately try to cause harm to our own people?”

Krell’s tentacles wavered a pale grey in sorrow and droplets of ichor dribbled down his body.

“There are those –” This, Gly believed, just had to be one of Krell’s favourite phrases. “– who believe no sacrifice is too much to make for their beliefs. There are even those who see you shape shifters as mutations and abominations to the purity of our race.”

Gly was horrified. “But there have always been those among us who can change our shapes. Not that many, admittedly. It’s a natural ability, Krell, like being able to heal, not an aberration. Look at me! Am I an aberration?”

“Of course not. I do not think that for one moment. But sadly, there are those who do. Keep your eyes open, Gly. Tell Captain Zolgoff if you see or hear anything of concern.” A pause. “Zolgoff. *Not* Ska.”

“Oh. I see.”

Gly continued on his way, perturbed at what he had been told. Admittedly, he never had cared much for Second Assistant Ska, but neither had he ever considered him capable of anything that would harm his fellow Kruggah.

## Chapter 28

Opposite the large glass window, which Jilly was studiously avoiding looking through, was another doorway leading to a refectory type area. Tables and chairs, low cabinets with crockery and cutlery. Well, looked like they weren’t going to be starved, either!

She stood in the doorway and regarded her companions. Apart from Ross Davies, they all appeared to be still in various states of shock. She walked over to him.

“Mr Davies, sir?”

He swung around.

“Oh? What –” He frowned in memory. “Jilly, yes? Haven’t seen you for a while.”

“Do you have any idea what’s going on, sir?”

He shook his head.

“No. last thing I remember is trying to get all these kids organised for a softball game. Then we all woke up here. Got an awful headache though.” He rubbed at his head and frowned. “Hey, there’s a sore spot here, just behind my ear.”

Jilly regarded where he indicated.

“Looks like a mozzie bite.” Curiously, she put her fingers to her own head and felt a tender bump. “Me, too. What about youse kids?”

“Travis? Joanna?”

They fingered their necks and nodded.

“Yeah, hey, what d’you think happened?”

“I don’t know.” Jilly frowned. “Last thing I can remember is that me and Shirl – I mean Shirl and I were having a game of 8-ball at the pub.” She shook her head. “And then we were here. Wherever *here* is.”

Ross looked around. “Y’know, Jilly, I think it would be a good idea if we got everyone sitting down. One of those girls looks like she’s about to pass out. And Jane’s bawling her eyes out.” There was a glimmer of humour in his eyes. “Although that seems to be a pretty normal state of affairs.” He turned to the two children by him. “Joanna, Travis, you two okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine, sir,” Joanna said. She sounded excited. “Hey, those people on the other side of that window, sir – well, they’re not all *people*. Look!”

Shirley came up to Jilly. “Hey, Katie’s over there, howling her eyes out. She doesn’t know what’s happened to her baby. He’s only five weeks old and she says she was sitting outside the bakery with Ruth and another friend and then all of a sudden they woke up here. And there’s an itchy spot here on my neck.” She rubbed at it and Jilly nodded.

“Yeah, us too.” She sighed and looked across to where Katie and Ruth were sitting, the former weeping against her friend. “Okay, Shirley, I’ll be right there.” She turned back to Ross Davies. “Mr Davies, you’ve got a big voice. Do you reckon you can tell them all to sit down? It might help.”

He grinned crookedly. “A big voice, you reckon? Okay, Jilly, that’s a good idea.” He cleared his throat. “Look, everyone, we’re not sure what’s going on, but I reckon sitting down and trying to work out what happened might be a good idea. Plenty of seats, by the look of it.”

He carefully shuttled members of their small group to seats, and Jilly watched, impressed, as he seemed effortlessly to organise them so they were mostly with their backs to the large glass windows.

An observation window of some kind, Jilly decided. It appeared they were on the inside. She gave the group of humans and very definite non-humans a quick glance and then deliberately turned her back on them. Were they non-humans? They could just be people dressed up. Maybe.

“Most of us here know each other,” Ross Davies started. “But we don’t all know everyone else. Let’s start off by saying who we are and what we can last remember.”

Travis sniggered but Joanna beat him to it.

“I’m Joana. We were playin’ softball, and then I woke up here.” She lowered her voice. “I reckon we’ve been abducted by aliens. Aliens, probably, or Russians.”

“Oh, you’re an idiot!” Travis gave her a shove. Ross caught his arm and scowled then let him continue. “Yeah, we were all out on the oval. Then – zap! We were here.” He sat down, glaring at Joanna. “Aliens, huh! Not a chance, kiddo.”

Joanna poked her tongue out at him. “What are *they*, then?”

“People dressed up, you dork. There aren’t any aliens. My dad said so. So there!”

“Your dad doesn’t know anything!” Joanna jeered and Ross intervened.

“That’s enough from you two. Now be quiet and let’s hear what everyone else has to say.”

Emma looked around and edged a bit closer to Max, their argument forgotten in their present plight.

“Dunno. We were at home. I was doing the ironing – “ She gave a gasp of horror. “The iron! I left the bloody iron on the board. Oh hell! And the baby in the playpen.”

“Can’t do anything about that right now,” Jilly interrupted. “What about you, Miss Bealey?” She looked from the young teacher to the older man behind her. “And you, Mr Tonkins?”

Jane answered first. She was still holding her letter, although she had dumped the rest of the mail onto a table. She also seemed to have got her tears under control, Jilly noted thankfully.

“Walking back to school from the post office.” She shrugged. “I just opened my letter and then, like Joanna says, zap!”

“I want my baby!” cried Katie. “I was just sitting outside the bakery with Ruth and Lisa, and everything went black. But I don’t know where Paulie is! I’m scared

something's happened to him!" She put her head down and Ruth leaned across to pat her shoulder.

"There, there, Katie, love. Everything's gonna be all right. Don't worry. It'll be okay, you'll see. But I dunno where Lisa is, either."

Jilly looked past them to the others.

A stockily-built man, dressed in shorts and a blue singlet, pulled his hat off and scratched at his head, his expression puzzled.

"I was out on the road t' Perth with me truck loaded up with a dozen head of cows. Takin' them over to a mate near Quairading. Last thing I remember was going past the track down t' your place Max." He shoved his hat back on, and then, obviously unsure about what exactly to do with it, took it off again and dumped it onto a seat. "Haven't got a bloody clue what happened or where we are. I dunno. That was about two o'clock, I reckon. Anybody know what time it is now?"

When those who were wearing them checked their watches, the timepieces all appeared to have stopped just after two o'clock.

"Twenty three *seconds* past two!" insisted Travis, who had recently received a watch for his twelfth birthday.

Laurel, the middle-aged barmaid, pointed.

"Me, I was watching these two twits trying to play 8-ball. That was about the funniest thing I've ever seen in all me born days!"

Shirley snorted and Max sniggered. Well, Jilly admitted ruefully to herself, she and Shirley did have a reputation in town as the most absolutely and utterly hopeless 8-ball players ever to grace (or disgrace) the hotel lounge. One night they'd rashly challenged Max and Emma, and had failed to pot a single ball. On another memorable occasion Tom Goodsmith had tossed them out twenty minutes after closing time, telling them they were too painful to watch any longer.

Joseph shrugged. "No idea. Serge here and I were just having a talk down at the bank and then – wham, we were here." He tapped his head, just behind his ear. "Same here. Like a bloody mosquito bit me. It was itchy, but it's okay now."

That, Jilly realised, was something they all had in common. The others added their accounts, some brief and concise, like Tam Blake (having a beer and a smoke) to Cyril Tonkins, who related in detail, until Ross cut his narration short, whose mail he had been sorting, where it had originated and where he had been placing it.

Jilly leaned back and counted.

Laurel, Shirley, Tom the publican, Tam, Jane Bealey, Cyril Tonkins, Jack Elliott the truck driver, Katie and Ruth, Joseph Taylor and Serge Pirrotini, Max and Emma, Mr Davies and the two kids, Joanna and Travis. And herself. Seventeen people.

Several of them got up and walked around, exploring the several rooms they were in. No one tried the door beside the large glass window, and it seemed to Jilly that, like her, they were all trying to pretend it, and their observers, simply did not exist.

A living area, two sleeping areas, bathrooms and a dining room. Adequate but not luxurious. Could have been like a cheap boarding house or backpackers' hostel. She had the idea it was far from either of those.

And then...

"Look!" Travis pointed and gaped and they turned to look.

Beside the glass window was a door, and it was opening.

## Chapter 29

### *Meredith*

Oh yes, there were people there, all right, where the invisible barrier had closed the road between Karrelin and Wolerin and left me on the wrong side of it. I could hear their worried and confused thoughts long before I could see them. The road went into a slight dip and a curve, and then there they all were, set out before me, clustered on and alongside the road. They must have heard my car coming; there were chaotic, hopeful and very frightened thoughts. It hurt just hearing them in my head. I nearly stopped and ran away right there and then.

Instead, I slowed down and stopped, just before the spot where my car had died on me the previous afternoon. I turned the ignition off and sat taking in the scene before me. I was trying to weed my way through the mental chaos and find someone, anyone, I could talk to. Preferably someone in authority to whom I could unburden myself.

An orange school bus, a small farm truck, a utility and three or four cars. And more. I could tell at least two of the people hurrying forwards were from the newspaper and radio, and there was also a couple wrestling with a television camera. Oh good grief! I was likely to be on television! Awful thought! As yet, no one in Karrelin even owned a TV set, although there had been telecasts in the city area for some years.

Set up in an orderly line on the other side of the road, were a dozen small Army tents, with three vehicles parked side by side and facing me. One truck, three jeeps and a small khaki sedan.

Normally I avoid listening in on people's thoughts as much as possible. As a people, we value privacy and I respect that. I'd learned young, from my parents, the responsibility that went with my gift. Now I sat and opened my mind, searching for whoever it was who was in charge here.

I flicked through their thoughts.

*Wonder what she did?*

*Who's she?*

*Couldn't have been a pretty young bird, could it!*

*Where's everyone else?*

*Where's my husband?*

*What's happened to the kids?*

*I gotta write this report up and get it to Perth for the night news. Wish she'd move herself!*

And then a breath of sanity, thanks be.

*Looks like we might finally find out what's happened. The poor woman looks scared out of her mind.*

Poor woman indeed! Damn, I knew I should have put some makeup on before I left home. If I'd known about the reception I was going to receive, I most certainly would have. I fixed my gaze on the man whose thoughts I'd listened to, then carefully got out of the car, unconsciously smoothed my hair down, and walked towards him.

"Brigadier Lucas?"

### Chapter 30

With Vree on one side of him, Kla on the other, and two security guards flanking them, Gly opened the door and stepped into the reception area that had been programmed into the SAC. Originally anticipating no more than twenty human subjects, they had set the area up with two separate dormitory areas, each with an ablution block to cater for the two human sexes, a dining area and this reception area. All had been furnished adequately if not luxuriously and so far the humans hadn't displayed any more discomfort than anticipated.

He and Vree had been watching and listening for a while, as the humans had made themselves comfortable, to varying degrees, on the furniture provided. For not the first time, Gly mentally thanked the technologists and inventors of their race, who had worked upon the SACs and all they could hold. He dealt with living creatures; they dealt with objects and energy, and did a brilliant job of it.

He wasn't entirely surprised at the expressions of fear and revulsion on most face; the Kruggah had experienced this reaction before. Nonetheless it was still painful; a reminder they, although intelligent, could never consider themselves potential winners in the galactic beauty stakes. Not as far as other races were concerned, at least; to one Kruggah, another was the most attractive of beings.

He was however totally surprised when two of the human females launched themselves forwards, one white faced in fear and the other screaming in rage.

“My baby! Where’s my baby! What have those monsters done with my baby?”

“Who the bloody hell are you people and what the bloody hell d’you think you’re doing with us?” demanded the other woman, glaring into his face.

Totally taken aback, he stared at them, but gestured for the security contingent to back off.

“I can assure you both; no one is going to be harmed. We are a peaceful people. We mean you no ill at all.” He indicated the seats scattered around the area. “Please, all of you – sit down again and make yourselves comfortable and I shall explain the situation to you. There is no need to be afraid.” He cast his glance on the other woman. “Or angry.”

“Hmm.” She put her arm around the other young woman. “It’s all right, Katie. We’ll find out what’s going on. We’d *better*.” The glare she sent Gly was far from friendly.

## Chapter 31

### *Meredith*

Unhurriedly, I walked along the roadway until I was less than a couple of yards from the tall grey-haired soldier. He was a few years older than me, I think, and he stood very erect and still, while his mind was chaotic. I tried to shut out all the other confusing thoughts screaming at me from all his companions. At least I didn’t have to hear their voices.

He tilted his head at me inquiringly. I tried to ignore the fact that two young privates, rifles in their hands, had snapped to attention by his side and were fixing me with wary looks.

“You have the advantage of me, ma’am,” he said. I can lip-read; even without my telepathic ability I knew how he had responded. He was wondering how the hell this woman knew his name... and he was wondering how *old* I was. Cheek!

“Yes.” I hesitated. “Brigadier Lucas, sir, can you hear my voice?”

The confusion was clear in his mind although his face showed none of it.

“Yes. Can you hear me?”

I smiled and indicated the grassed verge, away from the majority of the others, who were hurrying along to join us, their minds full of concerns and questions. It was, to put it mildly, overwhelming.

“No. I’m deaf, Brigadier. I wouldn’t hear you if you yelled into my ear with a megaphone, I’m afraid. I can’t even tell you if sounds pass through to this side. They probably do, seeing as you can hear me. But I’m very good at lip reading. Please, get all those other people to stay away for a while, and walk with me, so I can concentrate. How close to this barrier are you?”

He grinned and pointed to the ground and I saw the white marked lines. Someone had been busy with a pot of whitewash. Then he put his hand up, pushed very slightly against the resistance of the barrier and let his fingers splay. Cautiously I did the same. The barrier felt cool, as it had the previous day, with a slight give to it. Rather like pushing against the side of a tent, I thought. Less than six inches separated our hands. I nodded.

“Have you found out how far this barrier extends?”

*Hmm, you know a lot more than you're letting on. And how the hell did you know my name, lady?*

“From what we can calculate, a roughly circular area with a diameter of just over two miles, centred on the middle of Karrelin.” He frowned. “As yet we're not quite sure how high it is, and there's no way to get under it. We tried digging – ” He indicated the earth moving equipment parked along the road a way and shook his head. “Not even a couple of men with shovels could do anything.”

*For all I know she's got something to do with it. Must get her to talk to me and tell me everything she knows.*

“Walk along here with me, Brigadier Lucas, and I will tell you everything I know. Which really isn't much at all, I'm afraid.”

He gave me a cool calculating look. His eyes were grey and chilly, but there were laughter lines beside them. This was a man other men – and women – could easily like and respect, I decided. Idly, I wondered whether he was married or not. Then I quashed the thought; it was really none of my business. He wasn't wearing a wedding ring, but then, lots of married men didn't.

*Cut it out, Meredith, I told myself. This is neither the time nor the place. More's the pity...*

He nodded, gestured and spoke to the two privates. He turned away from me and I couldn't see his lips, but from the mental activity I guessed he'd told them he was okay, I was okay and that they were to keep ‘that mob of civilians and media morons’ away. Which they proceeded to do, very firmly but efficiently. There were obviously howls of protest, which they steadfastly ignored. Other soldiers popped out of the tents and grouped themselves across the road, blocking all access to where Brigadier Lucas and I were facing each other, on either side of an invisible barrier, and close enough to touch had it not been in the way.

I liked this man.

## Chapter 32

*The night is my friend, but it is still empty. And I still cannot get over into the jungle to hunt. I prowl, a small shadow among the trees and the buildings and the noisy vehicles that are no longer noisy. I stroll across the hard ground where the two-*

*legged ones often bring those noisy vehicles at night and watch pictures cast upon a square of white. It seems to entertain them.*

*There are sounds and lights and other two-legged ones beyond the nothingness that will not let me pass. It will not let them pass either.*

*And there is another two-legged one in the town. He came during the night and prowled, as I also prowled. I saw him and followed him, but he did not notice me.*

*I do not think he is a mighty hunter. If he were not a two-legged one, he would be a small furry one, and I would eat him.*

### Chapter 33

#### *Daniel*

For some bizarre reason – optimistic human nature, I suspect! – I had hoped that when I got into town that Tuesday afternoon, things would have reverted to normality. Some hope!

I couldn't face the prospect of passing the abandoned cattle truck again, so I took the gravel track that led eventually to the main street. I could almost feel a chill in the air as I drove along those deserted streets full of empty houses. There was emptiness where there should have been people, silence where there should have been sound. I was beginning to feel hungry – and damn it all, I had several places to choose from where there'd be food – only I'd have to find and prepare it myself.

It occurred to me this was an ideal opportunity to see if there was anything worth lifting in any of the shops. But I was disappointed, or I would have been, if I'd really cared. Karrelin's a small place – no shops full of glittery jewellery or suchlike. And I don't do banks, even though the one small bank in the town was wide open and unguarded. Out of sheer curiosity, I pushed the door open. The ceiling fan was still on and it was cool inside. There was a handbag on the counter in front of the empty teller's position, and a shopping bag on the floor. I walked into and through the manager's office and could see from the arrangement of the seats, and the fact there was a packet of cigarettes and matches on the desk and the remains of two cigarettes in the ashtray, that here also the occupants had disappeared without warning.

Behind the counter, I checked the money trays, almost tempted. When a little voice inside me jeered, 'What use is it anyway?' I shivered, told myself it was the breeze from the ceiling fan, and hurried outside into the sunshine.

I checked half a dozen houses. All empty, and with the signs of unexpected departures. In one a radio was playing and I settled down for a while, wondering if there would be something on the news. Shit, I thought to myself, why didn't I think of that last night? How stupid had I been?

I leaned back on the lounge and yawned, and still reprimanding myself for my stupidity, I fell asleep. When I awoke my mouth was dry and I was thirsty and sick

feeling. I hate being hung over. It was a relief to know that water still flowed from the tap and there were iceblocks in the freezer compartment at the top of the fridge. I sat down at the table this time, determined not to fall asleep again.

On the hour – and I was amazed to realise it was four pm – I straightened up and listened carefully.

Three small communities worldwide; one in Canada, one in Europe and the other in Africa somewhere, had reported the inexplicable disappearances of some twenty people from each place. None of these places, however, had been isolated from the outside world.

Karrelin was. But – and at this information I leapt up in a mixture of shock and relief – at least one person, a Mrs Meredith Dane, was known to be inside the area and had spoken with the media reporters. There were few details, but more were promised for the evening news. According to the report, investigations were ongoing and the public would be kept up to date with any further developments.

There was one further detail, which made me blink when I heard it.

Meredith Dane was deaf. One hundred percent deaf. Bloody hell.

I opted for the little café outside the bakery. It was downright creepy to see an empty pram beside one of the chairs, and remains of food and drinks, half consumed, on the tables. Inside, I used their kitchen facilities to make another cup of coffee and raided their enormous refrigerator and found the making for toasted sandwiches. When I opened the rubbish bin to get rid of some scraps, it was a bit of a surprise to see a very badly burned steak in there. Hmm, maybe I was better off serving myself!

I needed some fresh air. I finished my meal and grabbed a bottle of Coke from the display fridge. Across the road there was a sign pointing to the local drive-in. A bit of a walk would do me good, I decided, and set off briskly, swigging the Coke as I went.

### Chapter 34

*I have a two-legged one to feed me, and another to watch. But I do not have my queens and my kits. And I miss taunting the barkers and hunting the small fury ones. I do not know what had happened, and I cannot escape. I prowl in all directions, even as far as where the two-legged ones set up a camp and are making noises and smells and have scared away the small feathered ones from the trees.*

*I hear a loud bang but it is far away. It did not frighten me; I am Nimm and a mighty hunter. It is warm, and I have nothing to do. I find a pleasant spot near the noisy area with the bit white screen in the sky, and I snooze.*

*When I wake up the two-legged one who reminded me of a small squeaker is walking along the road. I smell food on him.*

## Chapter 35

### *Daniel*

A hundred yards or so along the road I caught a flicker of movement and to my amazement a large but scruffy ginger cat sauntered out of some bushes and strolled towards me. It was the first living thing I'd seen since my arrival at Max's place the previous afternoon. I squatted down, snapping my fingers and calling to it.

"Here, cat! C'mon, puss!"

It came right up to me, looking not in the least concerned, and butted its head against my knee. I like cats; they're better and more honest than lots of people I know. As I stroked it, I wished in vain it could speak and tell me where everyone else had gone. There was a collar round its neck; like those some people put on their pets to protect birds. There was no bell, but there was a round engraved tag reading *Nimm*.

"I s'pose you're hungry, Nimm. Come and I'll see if I can find you something to eat. Food, yes?" Oh yes, it knew that word, rubbing itself against me and purring. Not out of affection; I wasn't fool enough to imagine that, but out of the idea of something to put in its belly. "It's a damned shame you can't talk and tell me where everyone else has gone. Or where I can find Mrs Meredith Dane."

I thought it far more likely that I'd find her before she found me. After all, I knew she was in Karrelin while she didn't know anything about me. I could hear and she couldn't.

That was when I heard the shot.

## Chapter 36

The tallest of the aliens stood and regarded the small group of humans thoughtfully.

"We are from the planet we call Kruggah. It orbits a star on the other side of this galaxy. We mean you no harm," he said. "We wish only to find out more about you. My name is Gly, this is Vree." He indicated the female. "And he is Kla. We call ourselves the Kruggah. "

Shirley muttered to Jilly. "I *told* you so! I told you they were going to experiment on us! They're going to chop us all up to see what makes us tick. I wanna go home!"

The female shook her head in shock.

“No, of course not. Of course we don’t intend to do anything like that to any of you.”

Jilly fingered the little itchy bump behind her ear.

“What about this then?” She looked around the room. “What’s it for? What did you do to us?”

“Ah.” Gly nodded seriously. “It’s not going to harm you in any way. It’s merely a tiny nano implant to ensure you can understand us.”

“A *what?*”

He continued patiently.

“We can speak some, but very little, of your language, but have found it’s much more successful and there’s greater understanding if we don’t. You can all understand what I’m saying because of the implant.” He stepped forward and turned his head so the tiny red spot behind his own ear was visible. “We also have them. So do all the rest of our people.”

Ross Davies stepped forward to stand beside Jilly.

“Are you human?” He frowned. “You look human, and you sound human, but – what are those?” He pointed at the two Kruggah security guards, who had posted themselves on either side of the doorway, their eyestalks swivelling to survey everyone in the room.

“Yeah, they’re ugly creeps!” Travis muttered, obviously having come to the conclusion that they were indeed not people dressed up. Everyone in the small group either hushed him embarrassedly or concurred to various degrees. Gly blinked.

“We brought you aboard our ship in order to study you – to talk with you – because we are interested in the sentient beings on other planets.”

“You from Mars or something?” demanded Jack Elliott and Travis looked at him scornfully.

“Mars! Huh!”

Vree smiled. “No, not from any planet in your solar system. We come from far, far away. Our space vessel travels at speeds greater than light – “

“So where are we now?” demanded Jilly. “Half way to your planet or something?”

“Certainly not,” said Gly. “We are in a stationary orbit on the far side of your planet’s satellite. The Moon, I believe you call it.”

Jack looked stunned for a moment. “But what about me cattle?” he demanded. “I had a truckload o’heifers.”

Vree smiled at him. “Your animals are fine, Mr – “

“Jack,” he muttered, his face going red.

“The animals were all returned safely to the surface of your planet.”

“What?” Joe stared. “You got us up here, and animals too? But – “

“Heck, why did you want animals? And how did you do it anyway? Land a flying saucer of something?” Joe’s voice was derisive.

“We used a teleportation device,” Vree admitted. “Instant travel.”

“What have you done with my baby?” demanded Katie.

“The rest of the people from your town are also on our space vessel. They are in stasis, in a special area. It is our intention to return all of you safely to your planet.” He fixed his gaze on Katie’s tear stained face. “Your baby is quite safe.”

“I want to see him,” she insisted stubbornly. Gly frowned.

“We do not mean you any harm.”

“That’s what you say, but how the hell do we know it’s true?” Jilly demanded.

Ross spoke placatingly. “Ah, no offence, mate. But what are you? Where are we? On a *spaceship*, did you say? ”

There was a babble of response, ranging from Joanna’s ‘Groovy!’ to Jack’s ‘Bloody hell!’ Katie dropped into a chair and burst into tears; Ruth clapped her hand to her belly and groaned, while Laurel simply stared.

“Ah, whatta load o’ bullshit,” Tam muttered. “Look ‘ere, mate, we wanna go home, and we wanna go home *now!* Got it?” He staggered forward and poked his finger into Vree’s chest.

Not a wise move at all. The two Kruggah moved more quickly than anyone would have guessed, given their clumsy appearance. One touched one of its tentacles to Tam’s hand, and the man dropped without a sound, his mouth and eyes still open.

Gly raised his hand. “He is not harmed, but maybe next time he will think before trying to attack me or any of us.” He pointed to Joe and Tom. “Please, carry him over to one of the sofas. He’ll be back with us in a moment or two.”

Joanna’s eyes widened. “Hey, you really *are* aliens, aren’t you, all of you? But how come you don’t look like them?”

Vree smiled at the young girl. “We’re shape shifters,” she explained. “Well, we are, but *they* aren’t.”

“But – “ Jilly started, then shook her head. “Oh, hell, this is confusing. Is this really happening?”

“Oh yes,” Gly said quietly and she looked at him. Carefully.

He seemed human. From the top of his head (he had to be six feet tall, at least!) to his feet (clad in plain looking short black boots,) he seemed quite an ordinary (if very good looking!) specimen of masculinity. He wore a plain grey outfit of loose pants and a short-sleeved shirt, seemingly all in one piece. If she'd passed him on the street of Karrelin she would most likely have turned around and followed him, drooling, she decided.

But he was an alien. So were his other apparently human companions. There was no doubt about the *other* two. They were monsters, out and out. Basically conical bodies, low to the ground, covered from top to bottom with tentacles and spikes, all of which seemed to change colours rapidly and without reason she could understand. They were topped with four what appeared to be eyes, on stalks that swivelled and even changed length.

She hadn't quite figured out yet how they moved; their bodies were so close to the ground she couldn't see, unless she lay down on the floor and stared. That might not be the best of ideas...

“So what do you want with us?” she demanded, and the female at Gly's side smiled. She looked normal, too. Jilly would have put her age at in her early twenties, if she'd simply met her walking down the street in Karrelin. Heaven alone knew how old she was. Inconsequentially, she wondered how these aliens reproduced, but quashed the thought. They were kidnappers, nothing more.

“Sit down, everyone. Please.” Gly indicated the armchairs and sofas. With varying degrees of reluctance, Jilly and her companions found seats. Tam Blake groaned and sat up. He set his gaze on the alien who had touched him, rolled his eyes and settled as far back in his chair as he could.

Gly remained standing, although both Vree and Kla also sat, on the least comfortable looking of the chairs. All three of the aliens wore the same type of outfits, although Vree was undeniably female. Jilly had noticed it, and so had most of the men.

The two security guards retreated to the doorway, and when Jilly looked past them she observed a crowd of aliens behind the window, obviously watching.

“We aren't creatures in a zoo!” she said sharply, before Gly could open his mouth to speak. “What do they think they're all staring at?”

He swung his head and half smiled. Then he turned the smile on her.

“You are fascinating to them. The variety among you humans is something we have never before noticed in any other race. Especially ours. We all look very similar.”

“My name's Jilly,” she suddenly volunteered, almost biting her tongue. Why had she told him that? To cover her confusion she went on quickly. “Why don't you look like them, if you're all from the same place? Wait a minute, didn't you say you were shape shifters? What do you mean?”

It was Vree who answered however.

“In our natural form we do look like them, yes.”

She pointed and Jilly heard Shirley mutter under her breath. “Oh, yuck! That’s disgusting!”

## Chapter 37

### *Meredith*

We walked as far as the fence on the other side of the road and then I stopped and looked carefully at my companion. He didn’t seem to be in any great hurry, was calm and unworried. His mind, however, was full of questions.

“Now tell me what you know,” he started. “And you have the advantage of me, by the way. My name is John Lucas – and maybe you’ll be able to tell me how you knew – but I don’t have any idea who you are.”

“Mrs Dane – Meredith. I live in Karrelin, but at the moment it seems I have the place entirely to myself. I can’t get out, and no one else can get in. everyone else in the town has disappeared.” I gave what was, even to me, a weak laugh. “Maybe they’ve been abducted by aliens.” I made the joke partly to avoid the topic of how I knew his name, but it fell flat.

He didn’t laugh.

“Mrs Dane, I will be frank with you. The fact of the matter is that we have absolutely no idea where everyone is. However, we do know that no one in responsibility in any of our government departments, and no one in those of our allies, had anything to do with what has happened here. As a matter of fact, Karrelin is not the only place in the world where something like this has happened – “

“Really?” I was trying not to listen to his mind but the temptation was too much. The minds of the newspaper and radio and television people had been screaming ever since I’d got close enough to pick up on them. “Belgium? Canada? And – Africa somewhere? Botswana?”

“How did you know that?” His suspicion was almost tangible. I sighed.

“Oh, Brigadier Lucas, you really would not believe me if I told you. But please believe me when I tell you I truly have nothing to do with all this. I was away for the weekend and only got home yesterday afternoon. As a matter of fact, I have the feeling if I’d got home a little while earlier I wouldn’t even be here now talking to you.”

“But – there’s something else, isn’t there?” He looked back at me.

*How the hell did she know that? What else does she know?*

I was trying to work out the best way to broach the topic of my telepathy, but as I looked idly past him I realised there were several large stock carriers and trucks parked along the roadway. I pointed.

“Um? What are they for, Brigadier?”

“Ah. All the animals.” He rubbed the back of his neck and I could see in his mind’s eye the vision of the paddock suddenly scattered with all kinds of livestock and domestic animals. Truly chaotic.

“Oh. I see.” I murmured the words, almost to myself, but his hearing must have been more acute than I realised.

“You see! What d’you mean, you see?”

*Bloody hell! She does have something to do with it!*

### Chapter 38

Shocked but fascinated, they listened as Gly and Vree told them what had happened.

“You mean there are six ships full of you?” queried Tom Goodsmith. Gly shook his head.

“Not any more. Only five remain now. Our four exploratory ships and the flagship.” He paused and looked around at them. “When we left our home planet, four of our years ago, there were eight in the fleet.”

“What happened to them?” Ross Davies had been listening intently, his eyes for the most time on Vree.

“Who cares?” interrupted Tam Blake rudely. “Nasty looking aliens, the lotta ya. Sooner you send us all back home the better, I reckon. Bloody nerve you’ve got anyway, snatchin’ us up like that!”

“Oh, shut up, you old fool!” Laurel rounded on him. “You’re not exactly a prize specimen yourself, you know.”

“What?”

“I see you come into the pub all hours, drunk when you get there and drunker when you leave. You’re dirty and you smell. When’s the last time you had a good wash, let alone a bath?”

He gaped at her.

“Leave me alone, you bloody old woman.” He stood up and glared at Gly. “You got us all up here, mate, didja bother with dunnies and stuff like that? I gotta go shit.”

Joanna and Travis gasped aloud, then looked at each other and giggled.

Laurel snapped at Tam angrily, before any of the Kruggah could speak.

“You dirty old fool! If you’d spent a bit of time looking around here instead of being rude you might have found the loo yourself. Idiot!” She pointed towards the doorway at the end of the room they were all in. “There’s beds and things in there, and a bathroom ‘n’ all that through another door. You might even be able t’ find some soap while you’re there. It’d be a damn good idea.”

Jilly and Shirley looked at each other and smiled. Ah, Jilly thought, so Laurel had her eye on Tam, did she now? Well, good luck to her. She hoped she’d never be so desperate. Behind her she could hear Katie and Ruth murmuring to each other, the former’s voice becoming more and more distressed.

“Where’s my baby?”

### Chapter 39

#### *Meredith*

“Brigadier, I’m just as bewildered as you and everyone else. I truly don’t have anything to do with whatever’s happened here.” I looked back at the group of Army personnel and assorted other citizens. Their minds were still screaming, worrying, angry, puzzled and concerned. His was calm, curious and even friendly.

“Hmm.” He looked back at me. “All right, tell me what you know and I’ll tell you what I can. How does that sound?” When he realised what he’d just said, he had the good grace to flush. “I mean – you know what I mean.”

I nodded. “You said it’s got nothing to do with any of our allies? What about our not-allies?”

“Nothing to do with them either.” He gave a rather grim smile. “Actually the President of the USA and the Premier of the Soviet Union have been on the telephone to each other several times since yesterday. They both seem rather miffed that none of these disappearances have been from their countries. Although – “ And he went grave, “ – there was an unconfirmed report from Vietnam of a number of US Marines and Viet Cong disappearing, yesterday afternoon. And a tracking station picked up signs of a massive explosion just outside the earth’s atmosphere around about the same time.”

The thought in his mind was clear.

*Aliens. Has to be. Not that I believe in little green men, but there’s no power on Earth with the ability to do all this. I just hope she’s not one of them.*

I had to agree. Nothing of which I knew either could cause the sudden disappearance of several hundred people and a number of animals, or the sudden return of the latter. Which reminded me...

“What did you do with all the animals? Are they okay?”

*Why does she want to know that?*

“I have a cat and a dog,” I went on. “They’re missing, and I didn’t see any other animals around. Oh, except a cat, and a bull. But he was on your side of the barrier.”

His mouth twitched. “We, uh, had the police contact a local farmer to come and take *it* away for the duration.”

I grinned. “Probably a very good idea. I met it yesterday afternoon. It charged me and hit the barrier. Bounced off and got one hell of a shock.”

Telepathy wasn’t necessary to determine his amusement. He became serious again.

“Look, Meredith, can you just tell me what happened to you? We had a vet from Wolerin come out and take as many of the domestic animals as possible to a safe place. They were unconscious, asleep, whatever, but none were harmed. Quite a few native animals, too. And a lot of birds.” He shook his head. “It was totally weird. We got out here, oh, at about six o’clock yesterday.” 18.27, his mind informed me. “There were already people here, and some of them had witnessed what happened. They said – “ From his mind I was able to pick up both amusement and concern after the initial disbelief. “ – that the animals just started appearing, in the paddock this side of the barrier. They were all asleep, but the birds woke up first and most of them just flew away. After some of the bigger ones started coming to, someone had the brains to go get a cattle truck and find the vet to come out with some cages.” He smiled at me reassuringly. “None of the domestic animals made off, and the ones they’ve collected seem fine.”

“Must have been chaotic,” I agreed. “My dog is called Rilly and the cat is Tom. They have nametags around their necks. Rilly is a Collie and Tom is a common garden moggy. Black with white paws and bib.”

His eyes twinkled at me. “I’ll make sure for you that they’re all right.”

“Thank you.” He would, too. I knew it. I went on. “Yesterday afternoon I got here just after two o’clock and there wasn’t anyone anywhere.” He listened carefully as I related what had happened, and frowned when I mentioned Nimm.

“That’s odd. This barrier, force wall, whatever you want to call it, seems to block out anything organic – alive, that is. Our vehicles cut out when they get close, but if we start them up and go into reverse, we can move away.” I nodded; I had found that out for myself. I concentrated on watching John – Brigadier Lucas, and trying not to eavesdrop on his thoughts too much. Sooner or later, however, I was going to have to share my secret with him. From what I had seen so far, that would put him in an awkward position; he owed his loyalty to our country and the Army would no doubt see me as a threat. A very minor threat, truly, under the present circumstances, but eventually some boffin somewhere would want to put me under a microscope and work out how my brain worked the way it did. That would most likely include wanting to put portions of my brain under a microscope. Something I’d most definitely prefer to avoid, at all costs. I would avoid sharing my secret with him for as long as possible, I decided. For his sake as much as for mine.

“Looks like Nimm and I must have been about the last ones to get through before that barrier went up.” I looked at him very seriously. “Brigadier, this has to be the work of alien beings, you know that.”

He shrugged and I could see his thoughts. Unlike an awful lot of men, and women, I’d met in my life, his thoughts and his words matched up. He wasn’t trying to lie to me, and neither did he greet my statement with derision. I respected and appreciated that. He wasn’t condescending to me, either.

“Yes, I suppose there’s no other explanation. I’d like to be able to say it’s rubbish, nonsense and a totally ridiculous idea.” He shrugged. “But I can’t. Don’t you envy me, having to go back to my superiors and tell them it looks like the whole town’s been abducted by creepy crawlies from outer space?” In spite of the situation we both laughed, then he went grave. “Will you come back over there with me now and give a media interview? I’ll make sure it’s brief and they don’t hassle you too much. At least that way they’ll get the facts and won’t be able to make up too much stuff.” He was regretful. “I’m damned sure it would have been better if we could’ve just slapped a D-notice on all this, but it’s too late now. There were people here late yesterday afternoon, honking their horns and calling out and all that. The bus driver who was supposed to pass through Karrelin, dropping off the kids who attended the district high school in Wolerin, worried parents and all that. They contacted the police too. Didn’t take the newspaper people long to hear about it.”

“Hmm. I suppose it’s been on the radio and television as well. Not that anyone around here has a television set. And I really wouldn’t know what’s on the radio, unfortunately.”

“No, of course not.”

*How sad, not to be able to hear music. Beethoven, Mozart, the Beatles...*

“I can’t tell them much anyway,” I said. “I should have thought, y’know, that there’d be people coming along here fairly quickly. I suppose I should have stayed here last night. Not that I could have *done* anything.”

“It’ll be all right. Now – “ He became brisk. “What do you intend to do? After you talk to them, I mean.”

“I’m going to go back to my house and have a stiff drink.”

*At this hour of the day? Yes, well, I suppose I would, too.*

But he held back from making his thought his spoken response and smiled at me.

“Can’t say I blame you much. Is there anything I can do?”

I slapped the barrier.

“Pull this down?” I gave him a lop-sided smile. “No, thanks. The power is on, the water is on, and I have plenty to eat and drink. And Nimm to keep me company.” I frowned and rubbed at my face in frustration. “I can’t tell you if the phones still work, though. I don’t have one, for the obvious reason, and I’d never know if every

telephone in town was ringing at the same time. Sorry.” I shrugged and we walked slowly back to face the media.

I’ve managed to keep my telepathy a secret for over forty years. It hadn’t always been easy, but had always been necessary. Brigadier Lucas was a nice man. I found myself responding well to him. If I was ever going to divulge my secret to anyone, it would be him. Considering the circumstances, I felt I might even *have* to tell him, sooner or later. As a man, I felt he’d cope admirably with it.

But as a soldier? That was a bridge I’d cross when and if I got to it. I nodded at him.

They were much kinder than I had anticipated. Probably would have been even kinder if I were a sexy sixteen year old instead of a middle aged frump. Deaf, into the bargain. Nonetheless, we got it over with as quickly as possible, and with Brigadier Lucas assisting me ably. I could have screamed at them though, hearing in my mind some of their more inane and insane thoughts.

*Why doesn’t she get a hearing aid?*

*I thought deaf people couldn’t talk properly. Hadda use their fingers and all that crap.*

*They don’t have television out here? Whatever do they do at nights?*

They were interested in the fact that my only companion in the oh-so-close and yet oh-so-isolated place was a cat. I caught one unkind thought from one of them, pertaining to a witch and its familiar, and chose to ignore frigidly and pointedly any question he asked.

Afterwards some of the parents whose children had been at school yesterday came and spoke with me. I tried to be as reassuring as possible, yet felt totally helpless. We were all helpless, waiting to see what would happen next.

It was close to midday when the Brigadier looked significantly at his watch and shuffled as many people away as possible. I promised to return later that afternoon and shut my mind to his thoughts as I walked back to my car and drove away.

*That is one bloody gutsy woman! I’d like to get to know her better when this is all over.*

## Chapter 40

*From Vree’s diary*

We really should have spent a *lot* more time studying this planet before we brought people up to talk with us. Maybe if we’d done so, the Skarpo disaster could have been prevented. These people are friendly enough, although as a race they do have quite appallingly aggressive tendencies. They’ve been telling us about their

history, about the number of wars this planet has been involved in. Horrible! And there still are battles being fought all over the planet.

It was a major tragedy that the Skarpo teleported up opposing warriors from one of these war zones.

Even worse is the rumour going around our ship that controls aboard the Skarpo had been deliberately sabotaged, so that the warriors were not placed in stasis before being taken up. Not only that, but the coordinates for the area they were taken from had been changed. That would mean either that someone on that ship felt strongly enough to risk endangering the ship, or that their systems had been overridden by someone on one of our other ships.

For the first time during our mission, I am afraid.

Facing aliens who may wish our destruction is nowhere near as terrifying as being among our own people and wondering who of them would wish us harm.

This is one of the few truly sentient races we have encountered during our mission. I know that on many occasions our Supreme Leader Tartredd has considered returning home earlier than planned, but decided against that. He and those who worked for so hard and so long on our home world to ensure this mission was carried out did not wish to admit defeat. And neither do I.

These humans are sentient and in time may well take their place in the galaxy. We must study them well now and leave as friends, having done them no harm.

I am saddened to know they will not remember us. We will wipe their memories and knowledge of us before we depart. Maybe one day, many years in the future, they will explore space themselves and find our home world. I hope then there will be friendship between our two races.

I like these people.

On one of our previous encounters with intelligent aliens, members of other crews opted to remain on the planet, in order to continue their studies. I wonder...

## Chapter 41

### *Ska*

I am appalled, truly appalled. Offended and disgusted are two other words that come to mind. Our precious space vessel has been contaminated by these creatures from the nearby planet.

Zolgoff is a fool. A weak, placid fool, waiting to be overcome by a potential enemy. There is no other explanation for it. And he must not be allowed to endanger us any longer.

I had hoped that between the disaster of the Skarpo and the malfunction of our own teleportation device, he might have realised studying this planet and its occupants was not wise. But no! He showed himself weak and disregarded the wellbeing of our ship and our people.

Even worse, he has permitted some of these creatures to leave the containment area and move freely over our vessel. Some of our people have demeaned themselves by interacting with them and giving them information about us, our home world and our mission. They have reacted as weaklings to the false friendship and flattery of these humans. I have been embarrassed to see them glowing red and orange with pleasure and happiness.

I have even seen some of our traitorous shape shifters perform petty tricks for their entertainment and amusement. Bad enough they carry out their abominable practices here, to see it done in front of these human creatures disgusts me.

This must not be allowed to continue! For all our sakes, I shall have to make a move. Fortunately I have a group of loyal kinsmen on the ship, and we shall prevail.

Zolgoff is doomed and so is this miserable planet. For our future safety, earth must be destroyed! I have contacted the others on this vessel who feel as I do. We will take steps to do what has to be done. And soon, before more of our people are exposed to this contamination.

## Chapter 42

### *Meredith*

When I pulled up near the barrier later that day most of the onlookers and media people had disappeared. The orange school bus was still parked on the verge and two soldiers were on guard. I saw a third open the flap of John's command tent and stick his head in as I approached on foot.

*"Brigadier, sir, she's back."*

*Wonderful! She's coping bloody brilliantly.*

He smiled as he came out, tugging his uniform to straighten it and brushing absently at his moustache.

"Meredith! Mrs Dane, how are you managing?"

"Good afternoon, Brigadier. I've had an interesting day. And you?"

He grinned crookedly. "We've been carrying out a few small experiments on this blasted thing." He thumped at the barrier as if he could knock a hole in it and then coloured as he realised what he'd said. "Ah, sorry about the language."

"I think I could describe it even more colourfully," I admitted cheerfully. "So what have you been doing?"

“Well.” He rubbed his hands briskly and beckoned one of the soldiers, who looked to be little more than a boy. “Come over here, Private Arthurs.”

“Sir.” The young man marched over and stood at ease. John turned back to me and pointed.

“Just over there, Meredith, there’s a tall tree with a dead branch sticking out, about twenty feet up. See it?”

I nodded. John turned to his companion. “Reckon you could hit it, Private?”

“I’ll try.” The young man unslung his rifle, checked it and then aimed carefully. I watched as the dead branch disintegrated and dropped to the ground. John nodded in approval.

“Well done. So, we’ve established that we can fire through the barrier. Bring me that bucket, Private.”

When that arrived he grinned at me and swung the bucket, half full. The water splashed several yards to my left.

“Liquids pass through it. Y’know, when we first tried marking the boundary of this barrier with whitewash, someone tried to slap paint on it. Most of it went straight through and the rest just splashed onto the ground. And his nice shiny black boots.” I laughed at the mental image and he went on. “It seems that anything that is inanimate can pass through the barrier. I suspect if we all pushed we could get a vehicle through, but I’m not sure what would happen to anyone who was sitting in it. I want to try another experiment, now you’re back. All right?”

“Yes. What do you want to try?”

“I’ll be back in a minute.”

When he returned from his tent, he was carrying a cardboard shoebox and a small cage. He leaned up against the barrier and showed me the shoebox was empty inside.

“What are you planning?”

“I was standing here a while ago, watching ants. They went through that bloody barrier like it wasn’t there.” He gave a short laugh. “So I sent a couple of my boys off to bring back some local wildlife. Whatever they could find – and catch – that moved. We tried with spiders and various bugs. They went through easily. A bobtail goanna just bounced off, and so did a lizard and a magpie. None of them came back with a snake, so we couldn’t try that, but I reckon it would have been unsuccessful.

“So I’d like to try this way, now.” He squatted down on the roadway and placed the box on the ground and pushed. There appeared to be a very brief moment of resistance, then I reached out and took hold of it. He stood up. “Well, that worked fine. Push it back again, will you.” After I did so he reached into the cage, made of timber and flywire mesh, and pulled out a white mouse. He placed it into the

shoebox, pushed the lid on and bent down again and regarded me, his eyebrows raised. "Let's see what happens now, shall we."

We repeated the process and I lifted the lid off the box and caught my breath in dismay.

"Whoops." I held the small lifeless body up by the tail. "Not a good idea."

John sighed and shook his head. *Damnation*. "Push it back again. We'll take care of it."

I placed the still warm creature in the box, replaced the lid and pushed it through. He opened the box and took the mouse out, then gave a gasp as it squirmed out of his grip and bolted.

*Oh, shit!*

I laughed and then composed my face. "Not permanently dead, then," I observed. We caught each other's eyes. "Hmm, what if you borrowed a coffin and shoved it through? I could lie down inside and – "

*Not a bloody chance! Not gonna risk her life!!*

I didn't really need to read his mind to get that response. *I* didn't think it was a good idea, either. But his reaction was interesting. When this was all over, I looked forward to getting to know John Lucas better. Maybe a lot better. The way we were going, sooner or later I'd have to tell him my deepest and best kept secret. I had the feeling I would *want* to.

"No, certainly not," he snapped. "We don't know enough about it yet. And what we just saw didn't look promising."

I sighed. "You're right. It didn't. Hmm, have you heard anything more about the places in those other countries, where people disappeared from?"

"Not a great deal yet." He scratched irritably at his face. "D'you mind if I smoke, Meredith?"

"That's fine." I watched as he reached into his trouser pockets and pulled out a pipe, which he filled, lit and drew on with obvious enjoyment. I sniffed. "Well, smoke drifts through it, too." He laughed shortly.

"The USA got a report about what they think happened in Vietnam. Well, truth is, they haven't got a bloody clue. Observers simply report seeing Marines, Viet Cong and civilians disappear into thin air. Nothing else."

"And the other countries?" I persisted.

"The Canadian government says they are investigating an unconfirmed report of several disappearances. The Belgian government says the same and the only report we've got from Botswana is that the place concerned is some distance from any main centre and nothing definite has come through yet." He snorted. "No one knows anything and everyone knows bugger all."

“Brigadier, I’m a bit embarrassed to admit this, but where exactly is Botswana? Someplace in Africa, I know that, but where?”

He grinned. “Well, it’s only been called that for a little while. A month or so, actually. It used to be Bechuanaland, near South Africa. Heard of the Kalahari Desert? It’s in Botswana.”

“Ah, I see. Thank you.” I gave a little laugh. “Sounds like LBJ and Brezhnev have got their knickers in a knot over this.”

“That’s for sure. LBJ thinks it’s a Commie plot and Brezhnev is being tight-lipped about it. Mao Tse-Tung has even got into the act and accused the Western capitalists of kidnapping some of the peace loving inhabitants of Vietnam. God alone knows what he thinks happened to them.” He shook his head. “It’s a mess and a lot of people have been jumping up and down and yelling, but it seems no one really knows exactly what has happened.”

I suddenly felt very depressed and miserable.

“I wish, I wish I’d left Perth half an hour later. Or earlier. Then I’d either be stuck outside trying to get in, or else off with everyone else. Wherever they are.”

He didn’t say it, but I knew what he was thinking.

*I’m very glad you left there when you did.*

“You’re our only link at the moment, Meredith. Being able to speak with you has helped us in trying to understand what the hell’s been going on here.”

“Hmm.” I grunted and then thought of something else. “Has the Air Force tried to fly over the town? They might be able to find out how high that damned barrier goes.”

He scowled. “Not yet. I think they’re worried, after hearing about the motor of your car cutting out when you got close.” And I could see the mental vision of a plane approaching the barrier and its engines failing. Not good at all. It *hadn’t* happened, but there were fears that it might. I swallowed.

“Ah. Yes. Quite so. Just as well we’re not under any major air route.”

My comment was met with wry amusement. I changed the subject.

“Brigadier, have you been able to check up on my pets?”

## Chapter 43

### *Daniel*

Was it a shot? Maybe a rifle? Or was I imagining things? I didn’t hear anything else for a while, maybe half an hour, and then I knew I wasn’t imagining anything this time. It was a vehicle, coming in along the Wolerin road.

The vehicle stopped, somewhere back towards the T-junction that was the centre of town, I decided. Only one, though. That made it extremely unlikely that the barrier was down and people were beginning to come in. Besides, I rather thought that the first people through would be the Army, probably armed to the teeth. It had to be her. Mrs Meredith Dane. Trouble was, being deaf, she wouldn't hear me, so I'd have to find her. And hopefully, not scare the shit out of her. I'd never tried to communicate with a deaf person before and had no idea how to go about it, although I vaguely remembered seeing deaf people 'talking' to each other by using their fingers. Maybe I should find a writing pad and a pencil somewhere...

I patted Nimm, straightened up and started walking towards the bakery. By the time I got there, the vehicle had started up again and I heard it moving off, away from me.

What to do? I certainly didn't want the fact that I was in the town to be common knowledge; at the same time I itched for the company of another human. It shouldn't be too difficult to convince her not to mention me.

She clearly wouldn't be able to get any further along those roads than I had, so I decided just to sit and wait for her. Sooner or later, I'd hear her car again and be able to find her.

#### Chapter 44

"Zolgoff?"

The Kruggah captain glared with all four of his eyestalks, his tentacles shading purple.

"That is Captain Zolgoff to you, Second Assistant Ska. What do you want?"

"You have made a great error and it must be rectified." His second in command oozed in through the doorway and slid it closed behind him.

"Continue. You are digging your own grave, Ska, be assured of that."

"I am your second officer. My clan is among the highest and most influential on Kruggah. I – "

"I am well aware of your connections, second officer Ska." There was heavy sarcasm behind Zolgoff's words. "Your family influence is the only reason you are on this vessel, and in such a position. I am fully aware of how they and you feel about many matters." He snorted, waving his tentacles and eyestalks in derision. "And that is why, for as long as I am in command, you will never be in a position to make any order without it being referred to me. You have made it perfectly clear you are against all races that are not the Kruggah; you have shown blatant disregard for the sanctity of all sentient life forms, and disdain for the less sentient forms. You disgust me." He pointed a spike at the other. "You remain on this vessel only by my good grace. Personally, I would prefer to push you out through the nearest airlock. Remember that, next time you try to give an order. Now, get out!"

“You are making a big mistake, Zolgoff! I have powerful friends, both at home and on the vessels of our fleet. You would be wise to listen to me now. I have just encountered a group of those – creatures – freely roaming our ship, in the company of one of our own who has chosen to take upon their disgusting form – “

Zolgoff’s voice was icy.

“Are you referring, Ska, to our guests, and their companion Xeno Investigator Vree?”

Ska gestured in disdain with a spike.

“Is that her name? One of the little people on our ship, Zolgoff. You and I do not need to be aware of every minion under our command. She is unimportant. What *is* important is that she deliberately compromised our security, by allowing them to walk free. She could have put us all at risk by such a stupid action. She should be severely reprimanded and punished – “

“How dare you question my authority, Ska?” Zolgoff rose to his full height and glared at the other with all four of his eye stalks. “Xeno Investigator Vree carried out that exercise, not merely with my full permission, but at my request. You are therefore questioning not her actions, but mine. I will not have that. Not from anyone and especially not from you.”

“You fool! This is too much. I have endured you for long enough.” Ska’s tentacles went dark, dark blue, almost black and he moved forwards, to find himself staring at the weapon Zolgoff had suddenly produced. “What? You are going to fire on a fellow officer?”

“No.” Zolgoff stretched a tentacle to activate the intercom. “Security, to the captain’s quarters. Immediately!”

Ska quavered, his tentacles drooping and changing colours until the door slid open. Zolgoff addressed the four-member security contingent. “Conduct ex-Second Assistant Ska to his quarters, and ensure he remains there until further notice. Ska, you are relieved of duties. Immediately and permanently.”

“You will regret this,” Ska snarled and Zolgoff shrugged his tentacles.

“Doubtless. But not half as much as you will.” He grinned. “*Ex-Second Assistant.*”

## Chapter 45

“Can I come, too?” Jilly begged, her eyes on Gly’s face. He really was a dish, she thought idly. Alien or not. She pushed away the idea that in his natural form he’d be as repulsive as the security duo.

“Oh, yes, please let her come with me,” said Katie.

“Me too!” demanded Joanna and Gly blinked at them.

“Why?”

“She’s my friend and she’s worried about her baby. Don’t you have children? Wouldn’t you worry about them if you’d suddenly been dragged away from them?” Jilly stopped and stared at him. “Hey, how do you people reproduce?”

“Jilly!” Katie gasped and Joanna tittered. Gly’s face was serious.

“We, ah, we – “

Vree came to his rescue.

“We do not reproduce in quite the same manner as you humans. Similar but not identical.” She smiled at them. “Gly, I believe it would be a positive gesture for us to allow this human – Katie, yes? – to ensure her child is safe and well. And there really is no problem if these other two accompany her. I shall go with them if you so wish. They’re hardly a security risk.”

Gly sighed. “Vree, I shall have to consult Captain Zolgoff. You know that.”

“Then go and consult him.” She looked around at the others. “Kla and I will be fine here while you do so. They’re not going to attack us, you know.”

“Hmm.” His reaction was so typically human that Jilly almost laughed. As he exited the room she turned back to Vree.

“So, tell us please, how do you, ah, people reproduce?”

“Yeah, d’you lay eggs or something?” demanded Travis, and Ross Davies scowled at him.

“That’s enough from you, Travis.”

“Oh, sir, we just wanna know. And she asked first,” he protested. Jilly blushed.

Vree shrugged and then she looked intently at Ruth. “You are shortly going to give birth to a young one, aren’t you?”

“Ah, yes.” She winced a little. “Sooner rather than later, I think. How long d’you think it’s gonna be before you send us all home again?”

“You have all been here six hours already.”

“What?”

“How long?”

There was a chorus of alarm and she shook her head. “Truly, don’t be alarmed. You were all asleep, and so are the rest of the people from your town.” Human-like, she flushed a little as she explained. “We had a minor malfunction, and brought up everyone from your town, rather than a very small number of individuals. We also, due to factors we haven’t as yet discovered, teleported up all the non sentient beings from your town.”

Jilly stared and then chortled.

“The animals? You ended up with a pile of animals, too?”

Vree nodded. “Oh yes, it was very chaotic for a while. However, we were able to transfer them to a safe place, and then they were returned to your planet. Safely, of course.”

“So you will all be returned home safely. Maybe another forty eight hours, certainly not too much longer.”

Ruth grimaced and rubbed her belly. Vree looked momentarily alarmed.

“I’ll try to hang on until then.”

“Now, come on, tell us,” Jilly prompted but as Vree was about to speak, Gly returned and nodded at her.

“Captain Zolgoff agreed. Actually, he said it was a brilliant idea and he wished he’d thought of it himself. You are to take two security guards from the group outside. For everyone’s safety and security.”

“Great!” Joanna was almost jumping up and down in excitement. “Hey, Mr Ross, we’re off to have a look around the spaceship!”

“What? Hey, I wanna come, too!” Travis came hurrying over at her words and within a couple of moments they were surrounded by half of their group, all eagerly clamouring to be allowed to go with Vree.

Gly cast her a quick look and Jilly almost laughed. That was an ‘I told you so!’ look if ever there were one. She smiled at the alien woman.

“Can we come then? We won’t be any trouble.”

“I just want to see my baby and make sure he’s all right,” Katie said. She was already half way to the doorway and Vree shrugged. She selected Katie, Jilly, Shirley, Joanna and Travis to accompany her.

“You must all stay together. Do not touch anything. Is that clear?”

“I’m coming, too!” Emma suddenly pushed her way forwards. “My kid was in his playpen. He’d bloody well better be all right.”

Vree looked back at her coolly. “You may come along,” she said, but her voice was colder than Jilly had so far noticed. Maybe something to do with the fact that up until then Emma had displayed very little concern about her child. “However, you will do as I say. And hear me first. We do not harm our guests. Your child has come to no harm. Nobody has, and nobody will. Is that clear?”

Emma recoiled from her, nodding frantically. “I didn’t mean anything! I was just worried – “ She lapsed into sullen silence.

Joanna grabbed at Katie’s hand. “C’mon, let’s go.”

## Chapter 46

### *Meredith*

You've heard of love at first sight. That's more or less what I felt when I first set eyes on Brigadier John Lucas. Then there's the opposite, when you take a dislike to someone and never quite get over it.

What I felt when I first met Daniel Pinker was something else, something in between love and hate. More accurately, between liking and not liking.

When I walked into the lounge at the hotel and saw the two pool cues laid neatly across the table instead of where I had left them the previous day, I nearly had a heart attack. There was someone else in the town, someone I had neither seen nor picked up on mentally. The question was, did that someone know about me?

Even worse, assuming the mass disappearances were indeed the work of a non human agency – was I at that moment sharing my town with an alien being? I was scared. I nearly bolted right there and then back to Brigadier Lucas. I stopped myself in time and instead sat down calmly and listened with my mind.

## Chapter 47

It wasn't a simple door, Jilly realised. More like two doors, with a vestibule between them. It was Joanna who recognised the set-up.

"It's an airlock, isn't it?" She addressed Vree, who nodded as they exited their quarters and came out into a small area like a vestibule, full of aliens and unrecognisable but obviously technical equipment.

"You know about airlocks...Joanna, isn't it?"

The young girl beamed. "Oh yeah. I read lotsa books. Some of the science fiction stuff has spaceships in it, and aliens and all that sorta stuff. I never really believed any of it. But you're real enough, and so are they. Sheesh, they're ugly, but, aren't they? Oh!" She turned scarlet when she realised what she had said but Vree's mouth only tightened and she did not react further.

Jilly stifled a giggle. Fancy being told by a little girl that your race was *ugly*. She reached across and touched the alien woman.

'She didn't mean to offend you, you know. She's just a kid.' She glared at her sister. "A mouthy kid. Shut up for a while, hey, Jo."

"Sorry," Joanna muttered and Vree's expression relaxed.

Actually, Jilly told herself, once you got used to them, they weren't quite so bad. They were nightmarish, with their tentacles and spines, and all the different

colours they seemed to go, but she'd seen worse in the comic books she'd read when she was younger, and on the fronts of the magazines Joanna was always buying when they went to places like Wolerin to do their shopping.

Vree addressed the group of aliens and they all waved their tentacles and swivelled their eye stalks. Joanna tugged at Vree's arm.

"Please, miss – Vree – why are those tentacle things all different colours? And some of them changed colours when we came out here. They were green and some of them were purple, but now they're mostly orange and red and yellow. We can't change colour like that, how come you can?"

"They're happy," Vree explained. "Some of them were worried when you came out, and frightened, but they know everything is okay now."

"Frightened?" Katie looked around in puzzlement. "*They're* frightened of *us*?"

"Yes," Vree said simply. "We'll talk more about that when we come back here. Follow me now, all of you, and stay together."

So saying, she opened the outer door and they walked out into a passage. It was plain and functional, Jilly decided. There was something like matting underfoot, and the lighting was adequate, but it was drab. All it needed was a coat of government green paint and it'd look like any institution anywhere.

The small group took a couple of steps to the left and then turned left again down a wide corridor. Jill frowned. There was something wrong here. She stopped, turned back to the corner and blinked. Vree stood waiting for her.

"Um..." Jilly's fingers, in front of her face, were busy as she tried to visualise where they had come from and where they were going. The others seemed puzzled except for Joanna, who was also waving her fingers, her lips moving as she muttered under her breath. She spoke before her older sister.

"Vree... how come this passage is here? We were all in that big room, and if we went through a doorway, there was another room, with beds and stuff. But, we're right where that room was...and it isn't here. Where is it?"

"Ah." Vree looked around. "I should have told you. The room you were all in, that's part of the SAC. It's a spatially anomalous area. Bigger on the inside than the outside."

"That's not possible," Jilly argued. "Can't be so. You can't fit something big inside something small. What have you done to us?"

"Hey, that's right, but. It's okay, Jilly!" Joanna was beaming now, her voice excited. "You know that television show we saw when we went to Perth that time? The one with the monsters and things – "

"I remember," Jilly snapped. "The one Nana let you watch even though Mum said you couldn't. What was it called?"

“Doctor Who.” Joanna addressed Vree. “He’s an alien, y’see, and he’s got this really funny looking spaceship, only it’s not just a spaceship, it can travel through time as well, and his granddaughter and some of her teachers went with him only they didn’t believe it at first either. ‘Cos it was bigger on the inside than the outside, too. It looked like one of those funny telephone boxes the Poms have to call the police. He called it, um, a Tardis.”

Jilly rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on, Joanna. It was just a story. There aren’t really any – “ She stopped and looked at Vree and Joanna, who both wore smiles; *smug* smiles, Jilly decided. “Aliens.” She snapped her mouth shut, shook her head, rubbed her face and addressed their guide. “I’m sorry. Yes, there are aliens, you’re an alien and we are on your ship. Guests.” Prisoners, more like!

Vree looked back at her and said mildly, deadpan, “Actually, to us, *you* are the aliens.”

Jilly stared, open mouthed, then burst into laughter.

“Well, come on then, let’s go check up on Katie’s baby.” She paused. “And Emma’s kid too.”

## Chapter 48

Zolgoff did not anticipate with delight his communications with Supreme Leader Tartredd. Although his header was related more closely to Ska’s clan than to his, Zolgoff trusted him. Nonetheless, the report that he had stripped his Second Assistant of all power and actually confined him to quarters was not going to be well received, he was sure.

To his surprise and gratification, Tartredd displayed satisfaction rather than dismay. He had his spies and suspicions about Ska. nothing concrete, but enough for he to approve Zolgoff’s actions. They conversed briefly about the progress of their mission and when he was finally able to cut the communication Zolgoff slumped in relief.

Their return to Kruggah was something he looked forward to now even more than ever. The humans were interesting, but he would be glad to see the back of this system. He did not envy his Xeno Investigators their jobs, fascinating though they claimed them to be.

## Chapter 49

Vree stopped outside a white door. “Another airlock,” she said. “This SAC has been turned into a medical section.”

“Medical?” echoed Jilly. “Why?”

Vree smiled faintly. “We wish to ensure that every person from your town will be returned in perfect health. A compensation for the days they will have lost.” She saw their expressions of confusion and explained. “We examined you all while you were asleep and have repaired anything we found that would impair you or cause you long term damage.”

“Huh?” from Travis.

She smiled at him. “You, for example, fell and broke your left humerus recently. When you did so, it tore through the skin and left scar tissue. That is gone. And you – “ She turned to Katie, “ – you had an abscess forming under a broken tooth. The tooth is repaired and the abscess is gone.”

Jilly watched as Katie felt with her tongue and then gave a weak smile. Vree continued.

“Our medical staff are examining everyone else and they will do everything possible to ensure you all live long, and healthy lives. Even the one who tried to attack Kla. He had the beginnings of a carcinoma in his lung. It is gone. So is the inflammation in his liver. We also cured the arthritis in his knees and hips. Others of you had smaller ills.”

Jilly blinked. “You all *look* like monsters, but you don’t *act* like monsters.” She flushed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you, but – “

“I understand.” Vree touched the door and it slid open. “Come along.”

## Chapter 50

Ska slumped in his quarter, brooding and furious. How dare that fool Zolgoff do this to him? His tentacles glowed angrily and he jabbed with his spikes in all directions, venting his anger.

All was not lost however. He had many many friends on the ship, clan associates and those who would assist and obey him. Even some of the security detachment were his kin. He relaxed, plotting and planning his next move. Zolgoff would not be captain of this ship for much longer. Ichor dripped from Ska’s mouth. Zolgoff would not be *alive* for much longer. Neither would the rest of the traitors and shape shifters. As for the aliens from the planet...

He had been totally shocked when he’d seen the small group of them, walking around as freely as if the ship were theirs. And those damned shape shifters! Allowing themselves to take upon such disgusting forms! Not to mention the couple of idiots who had been performing for them. Demeaning themselves and the entire Kruggah race with them.

The fact that he was confined to his quarters did not restrict him, other than being an insult to his position. He was still able to communicate with others on the ship who shared his ideals, were related through the clans or who simply obeyed when he directed. Zolgoff had no idea how many of his crew sympathised with Ska.

He settled on his bunk, working a plan of action that would shortly see him in his rightful place, as captain of this ship. After that, he would assume command of the mission; Tartredd's days also were numbered. Upon their triumphant return to Kruggah, he would have even greater things in front of him.

Delicately, he activated the intra-ship communication between his quarters and that of his most trusted underling. He passed on a terse order to have all his compatriots assemble there in six hours' time. That would be plenty. He lay back and his tentacles assumed a reddish glow as he meditated upon the glory that would be his.

## Chapter 51

### *Meredith*

There wasn't anyone within range of my mind. That was, at the best of times, between two and five hundred yards, generally tending to the lower end of the scale, and from what John Lucas had told me, the town was encircled by a barrier some two miles in diameter. That was a lot of area to cover.

Admittedly, I could stand out the front of the pub and call, toot my horn and so on. I might be heard, but unless the person who had moved the pool cues actually came within a few hundred yards of me, or within my field of vision, I wouldn't know.

Somehow it was scarier knowing I wasn't alone, than believing I was.

I got into my car and started a slow cruise up and down the streets of the town. I went out along the main road towards Perth, and once again saw the cattle truck against a tree, tilted and deserted. I shivered although it wasn't cold. I drove carefully along the gravel roads leading out to other farms, as far as I could go, before turning back towards the centre of the town. I was becoming tired and frustrated by now, more than scared. I headed along the main street towards the turn off to the drive-in.

And then I heard his thoughts.

## Chapter 52

Jilly regarded Vree thoughtfully. "I wish we had lots of time to sit and talk with you people. But – "

The alien woman smiled. "We'll go in here and reassure your friend Katie, and then we can go back and talk with the others."

"All right."

"There's just one thing," Vree said to them, as they clustered around her at the airlock door. "Not all of my people can change their shapes. In fact, we shape shifters are in a distinct minority. Everyone you will see in there is, well – "

“Ugly as sin,” Jilly suggested and she nodded.

“Yes. I’m afraid so.”

Travis and Joanna looked at each other and grinned.

“Bug eyed monsters, that’s the term,” Joanna said. Jilly winced.

“Oh, shut up, you two. Come on.”

Once inside the second airlock, they stopped and stared in shock.

The room was enormous. Against the right and left walls, and down the middle, stretched hundreds of beds. On each lay one of the inhabitants of Karrelin, apparently asleep. About half way along, small groups of the aliens clustered around several beds, some holding strange instruments in their tentacles, others standing by and operating unknown devices. Katie hurried along until she found her baby son, lying sleeping, with a very contented expression on his face.

“Is he all right?” she demanded and Vree went along to hold a quick conversation with a tall alien, who appeared to be more or less in charge. He or she left the others and returned with Vree.

Jilly watched with approval and admiration as Katie turned from the bed and managed not to recoil in horror as the alien stood close by her.

“You will be able to understand whatever our medical officer says, Katie.” She tapped the small red spot behind her ear. “This tiny implant, which you have, and which we also have, allows understanding between us all.”

“Katie? Is that your name?” The alien’s voice was low and husky, but perfectly understandable, and the young woman nodded. “My name is Kadakkial. Your son is absolutely healthy now.”

“Now?” Katie whispered. “Was there something wrong with him?”

“I’m afraid so. He had a problem with his heart.”

“But he’s only a baby! Five weeks old.”

Kadakkial waved tentacles and Katie stepped backward.

“What she’s doing, it’s like you nodding,” Vree explained. Kadakkial went on.

“It was something your doctors would probably never have been able to diagnose. But as he got older it would have become worse. He might not have lived to become an adult.”

“Oh!” Katie clapped a hand to her mouth in horror. “But now – “

Kadakkial glowed a soft red. “Now your son will live a long and healthy life.”

“Thank you.” Katie stepped forward and held out her hand. Kadakkial looked at it with all four eyestalks and then gently reached out one of her long tentacles and accepted the human’s hand.

Jilly beamed. Joanna and Travis and the others moved off to hurry up and down the lines of beds, calling out names and exclaiming in relief.

Vree left them to it for some ten minutes or so, then shepherded them out and back towards their original quarters. They were chattering and excited and cheerful.

Part way there, they encountered two most peculiar creatures.

### Chapter 53

#### *Meredith*

He was sitting at one of the tables outside the bakery, feeding Nimm, who was rubbing himself up against his legs. That was encouraging; cats tend to be good judges of character. I pulled up beside him, stopped my car and got out. He stood up, his expression confused. I didn’t want to go poking around in his mind, but caught his first reaction.

*If she’s deaf, how the hell am I goin’ t’ talk to her? Followed by: She’s no spring chicken!*

I gave him a smile, probably looking (and sounding, at least to him) a great deal more confident than I was. As I was old enough to be his mother, the second thought didn’t rankle. Besides, over the years I’d heard a lot worse. I did wonder how he knew about me, but didn’t probe his mind any further.

“I think you and I are the only people left in the town. You are the one who went into the hotel and moved the pool cues, aren’t you?”

*Huh? Oh, yeah. She noticed that?*

“Ah, yes.” He smiled. “Couldn’t resist it. Had you been playing?”

“Oh, good grief, no!” I laughed. “Probably a couple of the young girls I know. I saw the purse that belongs to one of them.”

“Do you live here?” he asked, casually leaning down and stroking Nimm.

“Yes. You have a car here?”

“Just down the street.” He pointed.

“Okay. Go down the road towards the drive-in, and turn right. I live a little way along, on the left. You can’t miss it. It’s the only house in the street on that side.”

“I thought you were deaf.”

I looked at him curiously. "Why?"

He shrugged. "I heard a report on the radio. They mentioned your name and that you were the only person left in Karrelin."

I smiled at him. "Well, yes, I am deaf. But clearly I am not the only person left in the town. How did you get here?"

"I drove here yesterday. In the afternoon."

"Ah. Round about two o'clock, I'll bet?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"I got here just about that time, too."

He stared back at me and I could see the myriad questions forming in his mind. I started back towards my car and turned back to him.

"We need to talk, you and I. Drive yourself down to my house." I looked at the bakery and back at him. "Are you hungry?"

"Not very. I found some food in there." He was young, younger than I had first thought. He looked down and then back at my face diffidently, almost embarrassed. "You – I'm really glad you can understand me. I didn't know what you'd be able to do. They didn't say how deaf you were."

I lifted a finger to my mouth. "If you speak clearly, I'll be able to read your lips. There's no point in yelling. I'm absolutely deaf. If I can't understand I'll get you to write what you mean. All right?"

He nodded, looking very relieved.

I got into my car and drove home, waiting for him to find my house. I doubted even a city boy would get lost in Karrelin and I was right. Five minutes later he pulled up in front of my house.

## Chapter 54

### *From Vree's Diary*

The humans were incredibly interesting. They were more than a bit tactless too, on occasion, but that was understandable. After all, I do remember how the Lescourten reacted to us. Bug-eyed monsters, Jilly said. Interesting choice of phrase, if uncomplimentary.

They found it very difficult to understand exactly why we had treated their ailments. Even though we explained that, and several times, they found it amazing. We had the ability, I told her; we knew how to heal, and as we were taking from them several days of their lives, it was a repayment to them. At the time I imagined we would carry out our usual tests, talk with them for a while and find out as much as

possible about them and their world, and then they would all be returned, with their memories of the encounter with us gone from their minds forever.

It didn't work out quite that way. Things seldom do work out as they are supposed to, when so many random factors can influence them.

Second officer Ska was furious when he came upon us all in the corridor leading back to their SAC we were using for their quarters. I suppose it was my fault; I was the nominal officer in charge and I should have prevented Torradet and Lysitrada from showing off. However it so entertained the humans as well and I saw no harm in it.

Torra and Lysi had been with the Xeno zoologists when they examined the animals we had mistakenly brought up from the planet. I didn't see them, but I heard about them, and when Lysi offered to show us just how strange they were, I agreed. I should have refused, reprimanded them and sent them off upon the tasks they were supposed to be doing.

But, like a weakling, and because I also wanted to know, I said yes.

The humans were goggle eyed when Torra slipped from his normal shape into that of one of the creatures they told me was a kangaroo. His wicked sense of humour gave the beast a change of colour. Jilly laughed at the sight – a green kangaroo jumping around in front of them Lysi went one better; she shifted into the shape of a cat, compete with fur and whiskers – but bright pink with purple eyes.

That was when Second Assistant Ska arrived and yelled at us all. The humans recoiled from him; in fact Katie almost fainted and the two younglings screamed. I think they were excited as much as terrified. Emma, the other young woman with a child, huddled against the wall of the corridor, trying not to have hysterics. His reaction horrified me. It was as if he had caught Torra and Lysi in the act of treason or subversion. He screamed at them to revert to their normal, natural forms, and they did so and slunk off in fear.

I hadn't ever had much to do with Second Assistant Ska, and I don't want ever to encounter him again. He is insane.

I heard, afterwards, that he had gone from that encounter to confront Captain Zolgoff and they had almost come to blows. As I write, Ska is confined to his quarters. But he has sympathisers on the ship, of that I am sure.

Should any of his minions find and read my diary, I am dead.

We returned to the quarters we had set up for the humans in a very chastened manner. At the doorway to the airlock, Jilly turned to me.

"Who was that?"

"The second in command of this ship," I told her and she shuddered.

"Are all your officers like that?"

"No," I assured her. "Our Captain Zolgoff is honourable and admired."

At least the one called Katie was happy. And the two younglings, after they settled down, looked upon what had happened as an adventure. Emma hurried across and assured her husband that their young one was safe and well. He didn't pay much attention though, just grunted and went back to talking with his companions.

I am coming to like these people, very much. Ska's attitude worries me greatly. I am glad he is no longer Second Assistant to Zolgoff. I have heard of captains being killed or injured in the course of their duty. It would be very bad for us all if anything happened to him.

## Chapter 55

Zolgoff had made a mistake. Confining Ska was insufficient; he would have been better off to have given in to his inclination to push the other through an airlock. From his quarters the ex second assistant contacted many of his sympathisers aboard the ship. Ska spoke persuasively, spreading his poisonous opinion of Zolgoff and his disregard of security in allow the humans to wander freely – an exaggeration but then he had never allowed facts to stand in his way.

Within a few hours he had the beginnings of a nice little mutiny fomenting, and was congratulating himself on his ability. Admittedly his followers were definitely in the minority, but they would be enough, he decided.

If Ska had found it necessary to join the Kruggah star ship complement through the normal channel of applying, sitting for examinations, undergoing psychological testing etc, he would have failed the very first time he was heard to spout his nonsense. However, with his family connections, he had received a commission and a place of authority on one of the eight vessels chosen for their intergalactic mission of exploration.

Zolgoff had complained, both officially and verbally, many times, but had been overruled on every occasion. Tartredd, Supreme Leader of the fleet, was related to Ska's clan and had been unable to act against him in spite of opposing his appointment.

Not that this relationship would stand in Ska's way if he decided he wanted to aim even higher.

His resentment had grown over the time he served under Zolgoff. As the captain had told him, not one single order of his had ever been acted upon or carried out without reference first to Zolgoff. It was insulting and demeaning, but shortly the tables would be turned.

Ska's mouth dripped ichor as he contemplated the delightful mental image of Zolgoff being shown the airlock. And as for all his precious humans – they would be jettisoned and good riddance to them!

His spy in the section where the humans were currently 'interacting' as it was described, with Gly and Vree and Kla, informed him that they were all getting along

very well together. The humans were cooperating incredibly well; this reaction was attributed to their having been permitted to see what was happening to their sleeping companions. Ska's tentacles twitched and turned blue in fury as he contemplated this. He rather liked the idea of shoving those three traitors out with their precious 'guests'. Would serve them right for betraying their true forms.

In twenty four hours' time, he decided, his compatriots would take over the ship. He would be released from his quarters in time to lead their triumphant takeover of the flight deck.

He slept, his spikes and tentacles twitching as he dreamed of success and vengeance.

In his contemplation of victory, he quite ignored the last sentence of the report from the SAC; that one of the human females was in a very advanced state of gestation.

## Chapter 56

After Vree and her small group left, Gly found himself and Kla the focus of attention. Not all of it was friendly. Some of the humans were worried, some obviously dubious about what was going on. One at least was blatantly hostile.

"I don't believe anything you said," Tam Blake stated. He had returned from the sleeping and ablution area, looking pale and shaken. As he had sat watching and listening, he had become increasingly antagonistic. "An' I don't like you either."

"Shh," muttered Laurel but he threw her arm off and glared at Gly.

"You've been lyin' to us, feedin' us some bullshit about being from another planet. But I don't believe it at all. I reckon your ugly looking mates are just midgets dressed up acting the fool. I reckon you kidnapped us all! What the hell d'you want with us, hey?"

Gly shook his head. He had sent the security duo out of the room, confident there would be no further incidents, and was surprised both at Tam's quick recovery and his suspicions.

"We do have only your word for it that they're like – them," Tom Goodsmith said slowly. He seemed not to wish to take Tam's part, but was obviously doubtful. "You look human, you sound human. How do we know it's not just some sort of a trick? To try to make us believe we're on a spaceship –"

"Like I said, a loadda bull!" Tam growled. "And I've had enough of it. Get us back where we belong and stop this foolin' around. I wanna beer."

"Be assured," Kla started, "that we are not lying to you or deceiving you. You really are in a spaceship, and we really are on the far side of the moon from your planet. And we really are going to get you all safe and sound back home when we've finished with you."

“Yeah? And what the hell d’you think you’re gonna *do* with us, eh?” Tam Blake was not a big man, and when he drew himself up to his full height he was several inches shorter than either Gly or Kla, but he was definitely wider. By now, several of the other men were muttering to themselves, obviously influenced by his words.

“We are a peaceful race,” Kla assured him. “None of you will be harmed – “

“Bulldust! You already hurt me, and god alone know what you intend with our womenfolk!” He looked around at the others. “They kidnapped us, and took those innocent young girls off t’ – “

“Oh, shut up, you silly old fool!” snapped Laurel. “And believe me, they’re not exactly sweet and innocent, that lot.”

Kla looked at Gly, worry showing itself in his face. Gly smiled slowly.

“Let me get this straight. Tam – that *is* your name, isn’t it?”

“Mr Blake to you!”

Gly shrugged. “You do not believe you are on a space vessel. I could take you to the flight deck, but our captain is a busy man and doesn’t need the disturbance. And you don’t believe we are aliens, any of us. Have I got it right so far?”

“Abso-bloody-lutely right!”

Gly leaned again the table casually. “So, if I were to, say, change my shape in front of your eyes, would you be convinced?”

“I wouldn’t bloody believe it if I saw it!” snarled Tam but several of the others nodded and spoke.

“Yeah, but I would,” Tom admitted and Jack echoed him.

“Yeah. If you’re really like them, show us.”

Joseph and Serge looked concerned, and Laurel was almost smiling as Gly started to undo the outfit he was wearing. It slipped off easily, revealing that underneath it he wore absolutely nothing, and was – or seemed to be – perfectly human. Laurel blushed and covered her mouth with her hand, but not before he heard her mutter under her breath,

“Oh wow! I wish I was sixteen again!”

“Simmer down, granny,” Serge mocked her but no one else spoke.

Before their eyes Gly’s shape changed. He was human, and then he was *not*.

Very definitely not.

“Paah! Yuck!” Tam recoiled, as did several of the others. Laurel swallowed and crossed herself.

Joseph touched her arm tentatively. "Don't panic, Laurel. He'll change back again." He looked at the alien appealingly. "Please."

The alien shape shimmered and wavered and seconds later Gly stood before them. Wordlessly, he dressed, aware of them all watching, holding their breaths and with shocked expressions. He turned to his young companion.

"Your turn, Kla. Put on a show for them."

Kla shrugged and obliged, first stripping off his clothes as unembarrassedly as Gly had done. He reverted to his natural alien form, then switched his form half a dozen times. Gly smiled when his companion adopted Tam Blake's form before returning to his human shape. There was an appreciative chuckle from the humans and several laughed aloud, as much at Tam's discomfort as at Kla's performance.

Laurel was the first to break the silence. "Wow!" she said and dug Tam in the ribs. "Believe 'em now, d'you?"

The man muttered something under his breath, but Joseph stepped forwards and held out his hand.

"That was...impressive." Gly looked at the extended hand and Joseph explained. "When we meet someone, we shake hands. It's a custom."

Gly nodded, and for several moments he and Kla shook hands with the men. Laurel snickered when Gly held out his hand to her. Instead she wrapped her arms around him and planted a kiss on his cheek.

"We women," she explained, "often prefer to greet our friends that way."

When Vree returned, they were all sitting comfortably and chatting. Both Gly and Kla had produced small recording devices and each was with a small group. It was a two-way discussion; both humans and aliens asked and responded, sharing a wealth of facts and small details about their lives, their homes and their worlds.

## Chapter 57

It was fascinating for Vree, to sit with a group of human females and hear their opinions and experiences of life in general. When Ruth complained of feeling tired and generally aching all over, but had insisted she did not want to sleep or be left alone, Jilly suggested the women all move into their dormitory section. The others agreed enthusiastically and had carried in chairs and cushions to make themselves all comfortable. Gly and Kla remained with the males, who were slightly less forthcoming, but far less hostile than previously. When Laurel explained the reason for their change in attitude, Vree smiled crookedly, but said firmly she would not be following their example. She liked her human form, she said.

They demonstrated the use of the food and drink replicators in the dining section and although Tam grumbled at the lack of anything alcoholic, the others cheerfully pressed buttons and loaded up their plates and mugs with the resulting foodstuffs.

Jilly stared curiously at Gly.

“Is this all real? Vree said it was a – what was it, Joanna? A spatially anomalous area?” She giggled. “Bigger on the inside than the outside. I did pass science at high school but I still can’t quite work that out, even though I’ve seen it, from the inside and the outside. It’s beyond me.”

Gly explained.

“It’s beyond many of us, too, but it’s one of the reasons we can take up small groups of aliens, sorry, in your case humans, and stay with them in surroundings that are familiar to them. We have four SACs on this ship.”

The SACs were extremely complex, as Vree explained. In earth-like terms, each was about the same size (from the outside, anyway) as a medium sized room. Inside, they stretched forever. No, she hastened to add, she did not know the mathematics or the science behind them. To her, they just *were*.

Each of the SACs could be used in a variety of ways. For entertainment, for exercise, and, as their current purpose, to accommodate the people the Kruggah had taken up from their planet as ‘guests’.

She giggled a little as she described how they had used one this time.

“When so many of you were brought up, instead of only the twenty or so we had intended, we had you shifted to one SAC, which is where all the others still are. Then we used a second one for the animals. Oh, that was chaotic!”

“And this is also a – what did you call it?” asked Jane. She had cheered up a little, but was still prone to taking out her letter and reading it, generally with tears in her eyes.

“It’s a spatially anomalous chamber,” Kla said. She smiled up at him.

“I see. Well, I think I see. Bigger on the inside than the outside. Hmm. But it doesn’t always look like this, does it?”

“No.” Gly went on to explain to them all. They were round eyed and boggled. “We run a computer program which determines the contents of the SAC, and how big it seems to be. After you leave us, we shall simply terminate the program until the next time this SAC is used, whatever for.”

Joanna sighed.

“That is so brilliant.”

Ska would have been having hysterics if he had been able to hear the conversation. Telling other races about their scientific advances and secrets would have been treason to him. This was in spite of the fact that every time the Kruggah had thus interacted with other races, they had been very careful to wipe the minds of their subjects of any memory of their experiences.

“What else do you use them for?” Jilly queried.

“Mostly for when we encounter people like you. But they’re also excellent storage areas.”

She laughed.

“Sort of like a cupboard you can keep shoving stuff into, with it ever getting too full to take any more!”

“And we can use them for entertainment and recreational purposes as well.”

“I see. Hmm.” Jilly had taken her plate of food and left him, more or less reluctantly, answering questions from Jack about alien animals they had encountered. She was pleased to realise the exchange of information was working in both directions, but when her young sister teased her about the way she had hung on every word of Gly’s, she flushed.

“Oh, shut up, Joanna.”

Laurel, in between giggles, told them what had happened during the absence and Joanna had dug her sister in the ribs. “Look what you missed out on, sis!”

Her younger sister was *far* too discerning for Jilly’s liking. At the same time, she was glad to have missed Gly’s metamorphosis. As a human he was definitely attractive; as an alien... she didn’t want to think. And she still hadn’t managed to get Vree onto the topic of alien reproduction, although none of them had displayed any great curiosity about Ruth’s current shape. Maybe they did basically the same...

“Vree, how do you people reproduce?”

## Chapter 58

### *Meredith*

In my house, I first switched the kettle on to make a cup of tea. Then I reconsidered, turned it off and instead found the bottle of brandy I keep in the cupboard. I was trying to keep myself out of this young man’s head, more out of politeness than anything else. However, his reaction when I produced the bottle and glasses positively glowed.

*Thank god for that! I need something strong and alcoholic. This is bloody scary.*

“You know my name, don’t you? But I don’t know you who are.”

I really didn’t think he’d appreciate it if I told him I’d just read his mind. I was also interested to know if he was going to tell me his real name. He did.

“I’m Daniel. Daniel Pinker. I came out to visit my mate Max. He and his wife Emma live just the other side of town.”

“Yes, I know them.” I poured the brandy, sipped mine and looked at him seriously. “I got into town just after two o’clock yesterday afternoon. What about you?”

“Yeah, that’d be about right. And then I couldn’t bloody well get out again!”

I laughed a little. “I know exactly how you feel. That was a very scary experience. Haven’t you been out as far as the barrier again? There’s lots of people there now, and they’re – well, I’d like to say they’re trying to work out how to get in, but truly they’re not having much success so far.”

I told him about the Brigadier and even if I hadn’t been a telepath I would have sense his wariness.

“Cops there too?” he inquired and I nodded.

“Well yes, but they’ve gone. The Army seems to be handling it.”

“God help us all then,” he muttered. “I heard about you on the radio in one of the houses.”

“Oh. Good to know that’s working. I couldn’t tell. I wonder about the telephone system. Did you try using a phone?”

He shook his head. “Nah.”

He didn’t want anyone to know he was here, either. I wondered why.

“You’re a friend of Max, you said? I’ve met him and his wife but I don’t know them well.”

He sighed and looked at his feet, but remembered to sit up and look into my face before he started speaking again.

“Yeah. I knew Max at high school.”

## Chapter 59

Zolgoff didn’t *know* for sure that Ska was trying to start a mutiny, but he wasn’t surprised when the information came to him, via one of his loyal officers. He listened, made notes, thanked his informant and sent him off, swearing him to silence, but requesting he remained alert and ready for whatever eventuated.

Alone, Zolgoff twiddled his tentacles and plotted. Ska was by no means as well supported as he imagined; many of those he anticipated would flock to his cause were classic ‘undecided voters’ and were most likely to wait and see which way any struggle was tending before they threw their support behind whoever they predicted would win.

He had known from the beginning, even before the beginning, of their mission of exploration, how things stood. Ska's wealthy and influential clans were also among the most vociferous against shape shifters and other 'abominations'.

Basically, they were against anyone who did not think, act and believe as they did. Not a shape shifter himself, Zolgoff nonetheless approved of this ability, wherever it had originated. That was something none of their scientists had ever been able to discover. It was just a fact of life that a minority, less than ten percent of the population, had the talent to change their bodily form when and if they so desired.

On his vessel, there were half a dozen shape shifters of whom he knew, and others who did not make the fact public. Most of those who studied alien life forms were shape shifters; Vree, Gly and Kla had even chosen to maintain a human form while the occupants of Karrelin were aboard. *All* of the occupants of Karrelin. He twitched his tentacles thoughtfully. That had been a disaster, pure and simple. Although of course the cause was neither; it had to have been sabotage, and if so, there was but one probable suspect.

They had chosen Karrelin because of its relative isolation, and Gly's small group had selected, as they approached Earth, some twenty individuals whom they would teleport aboard the Dendrator.

However, they had got a great deal more than they had expected, with undesirable and almost tragic results. Now, over twenty-four hours later, Zolgoff was facing not only suspected sabotage but possible insurrection.

He rose and marched out onto the flight deck, brisk, positive and ready to defend his ship and his loyal crew.

## Chapter 60

Jilly yawned and stretched. "Um, Vree, can we go and have a sleep for a while?"

"Sleep?" The alien woman blinked. "Oh, yes, of course."

"You sleep, too, don't you?" This from Joanna and Vree smiled.

"Oh, yes. But not as long or as often as you do."

Jilly looked across the dormitory area to where Ruth was dozing restlessly.

"Yes, there are times when we need more. And some people need less." She walked across to the bathroom, found it satisfactory and returned to the bed she had chosen. Most of the other women had settled down by now, but Vree got to her feet and collected her recording equipment.

"I shall leave you all to it."

Jilly however didn't manage to sleep for as long as she had hoped.

"Vree!" She ran out into the main area. It was empty, but beyond the glass window she could see the shape shifter, obviously engaged in conversation with the small group of Kruggah. She knocked on the window and then ran to the doorway.

"Couldn't you sleep? Is there something wrong?" Vree asked as she came in.

"No. Yes." Jilly grabbed her by the arm and started back towards their sleeping area. "Ruth is going to have her baby."

"What? Yes, we are well aware of her condition, but – "

"No, you don't understand. She's going to have her baby *now*."

Jilly had settled herself on the next bed to Ruth, unable to sleep for a while. Firstly her mind had been going over the many new things she had experienced in the past hours, and then she could hear the other woman's restless murmurings. They become grunts and then groans. There was silence for a few moments until Ruth squealed in shock.

"My waters have broken! The baby's coming!"

Jilly hurried along behind Vree.

"She's going to have the baby here, Vree. On your spaceship! Can you help her?"

"We have medical staff, certainly. This is going to be a new experience for us all, but there is no need for you or her to worry." She reached the bed, where Ruth was trying to get to her feet. By now most of the other women were awake and clustered around. Katie was rubbing Ruth's hands and speaking encouragingly.

"It's going to be all right, Ruthie. You'll be fine. Everything's going to be okay, you wait and see."

"Wait!" wailed Ruth. "You bloody idiot, that's just what I can't do. I – oh – argh!" She clutched her abdomen and cried aloud. "It bloody hurts!"

Vree bent to her, her voice calm and soothing. "There is no need for alarm, Ruth. We can deliver your baby here."

"Oh, yeah?" The human woman stared back up at her. "Tell me, Vree – how many human babies have your medical staff delivered?"

"Counting yours?" Vree chuckled. "Actually, Ruth, there's something your doctor didn't tell you."

## Chapter 61

### *Meredith*

Sitting talking with Daniel Pinker that night was interesting, but at the same time more than a little stressful.

“Where’s everyone gone?” he asked me, holding his glass of brandy. At least he hadn’t tossed it down in one gulp, although I wouldn’t have been surprised if we’d both done that. I was trying hard not to listen to his mind; it was murky whereas John Lucas’s had been clear, although deep. The more I spoke with him, the less able I was to resist temptation. I needed to know about him and I didn’t think I could rely on him to give me the truth.

“I have no idea. But I do know what they suspect.” When I mentioned that the Army quite was seriously considering that the townspeople had, somehow or another, been abducted by a non-human force or agency, he roared with laughter. For only a moment or two, though, before he started thinking it through. Behind it, though, I could sense that it was, even his cynical mind, a distinct possibility. Wasn’t it Sherlock who had said ‘When you remove the impossible, whatever is left must be the truth.’? I’m not sure, but someone or something had made all those people and animals disappear – and had then returned the animals – and nothing we knew of could do that. Anyway, they were all gone and it seemed Daniel and I were the only humans left in Karrelin.

I told him all that had happened to me and he nodded.

“I thought I heard a shot, a while before you turned up,” he admitted.

He hadn’t come running to investigate, though. I was curious about him. I knew Max and Emma although they were not among my favourite people. Max wasn’t exactly in trouble with the law; it was more a case of the local cop keeping his eye on him. I could tell Daniel was also involved in less than legal activities. For one thing, there was the leather satchel in his car.

When he arrived at my house he parked the car in my driveway *and locked it*.

I hadn’t locked my car since I’d moved to Karrelin.

I eavesdropped. Just a little, and just enough to reassure myself that I wasn’t in any danger from him. When he came inside, I grinned and made a comment about there being no one around to steal his car. Turned out, of course, it wasn’t the car he was worried about, but the contents of the leather satchel he’d locked securely in it.

Gems and documents. Interesting. Illegally come by, too. No wonder he hadn’t rushed to make himself known to the police and the Army and everyone else waiting by the invisible barrier.

He was happy enough to talk about Max, and Emma. Yes, Emma was a favourite topic. She and her baby. Even when he was silent, the image of this young woman was seldom far from his mind.

When I mentioned my intent to go out the following morning to talk with John Lucas, he gave me a hard stare.

“Don’t tell them I’m here.”

“Why not?”

“Just *don’t*.” He tried to look threatening, but I could see that he was incapable of harming me. There are times when being able to see into a man’s mind had its distinct advantages.

“All right, Daniel. I won’t. But you have to tell me why.” I leaned forward. “Are you running away from something or someone?”

He grunted. I could feel it, without hearing it. By then we’d eaten the meal I’d cooked and had a second smaller brandy each. It was bizarre, to be sitting there carrying on such a conversation, while we had no idea where everyone else was, or even if they’d return.

“Yes,” he said slowly, “But it wasn’t my fault. I didn’t do anything to him.”

“Go on.” I leant forward and fixed my gaze on his face. “Tell me what happened.” And I’ll see if what’s in your mind and what’s on your lips match up, I thought.

Interestingly, it did. He had stolen jewels, and then, because they were there, documents. But, as he was about to leave the room, he realised there was a dead man under the bed. Clearly, someone who’d run afoul of the Terrible Twins. Luckily, they hadn’t yet discovered it was Daniel who had burgled them. At that particular moment, and for that particular theft, the police were not after him either. Nonetheless, he was in a lot of trouble. Hence, his reticence about making his presence in Karrelin known.

“The Terrible Twins? Who are they?”

You’ve never heard of the Terrible Twins? Lucky you! You do know about the Kray brothers in England, don’t you?” I nodded. “The Terrible Twins are worse. Much, much worse. And yes, I know I need my head examined for burgling their place. I’ll never make that mistake again.”

He looked so woebegone that it was almost funny. Well, if there hadn’t been a murder involved it would have been funny.

“Do you know anything about who it was?”

He shook his head. “Nah. Don’t know and don’t care.”

“Um, do you have a gun, Daniel?”

He looked shocked at the suggestion. And his response was honest.

“No way! Absolutely no, Meredith. I hate violence.” He shuddered. “Especially when it’s directed at me.”

What he told me tallied with what I dug out of his mind. And he liked cats. I didn't really like him, but I could tolerate him. I could also see his logic in wishing his whereabouts to remain unknown.

"All right, Daniel. Your secrets are safe with me." I raised my hand and pointed at him. "But, when this is all over and things get back to normal, you're going to have to go straight."

His face fell. "Try to earn an honest living, you mean? That's no fun."

I was annoyed. "Listen to me, you miserable little toad. I'm doing you a favour keeping quiet about you being here. So you can do me a favour and start thinking about mending your ways. Got that?"

I think it was the brandy talking, honestly. I'm not normally given to bullying young men, or anyone, for that matter.

Nimm rubbed himself against my legs and I fed him. Daniel and I watched as he slunk off into the darkness.

I yawned. "I can't offer you a bed for the night. But I'm quite sure if you go back to the hotel you'll be able to find a comfortable room. Come back here in the morning and I'll make some breakfast before I go back out to see John."

"John?"

*Ah! Didn't take her long to get on first name terms with him!*

"Ah, Brigadier Lucas. He's the Army representative in charge of whatever they're doing out at the barrier across the road to Wolerin." I could feel the colour in my face. Daniel smothered a snigger as he got to his feet.

"Thanks, Meredith. I'm glad to know there's someone else here. If only we knew what was going to happen from here on."

His mind had broadcast several times his disappointment, mixed with relief, that I was clearly old enough to be his mother. There was sadness in his thought and I found he had never known his parents. He had been brought up in an institution although he had also been able to find out a little about his family. Only a little; he told himself he didn't care, preferred to be alone and independent. He rather liked not having anyone to answer to.

Oddly, my telling him off about his criminal life style didn't bother him as much as it could have. I gather from what he was thinking, having the Terrible Twins – I could just about see the capital letters when he thought of them – on his trail was sufficient to motivate him to change his lifestyle drastically.

Even more oddly, he *liked* me! Maybe he just needed a parent figure in his life, I thought. I didn't relish being that parent figure, but he had such a helpless air about him, like a lost boy. Just needed a firm hand, I thought.

"Yes, indeed." I sighed and opened the door for him and watched him like Nimm, disappear into the darkness. Out of curiosity, I followed his thoughts until he

settled himself in one of the motel units connected to the hotel. He seemed more concerned about the Terrible Twins and their possible future actions than me, or anyone else in the town, with the possible exception of Emma and her baby.

Ah, maybe *his* baby rather than Max's! Well, that was interesting. I went to bed.

## Chapter 62

*From Vree's diary*

We have been privileged to witness one of the miracles of life on this planet. When we scooped up these people, we were aware that one of them was in an advanced state of pregnancy. We didn't know just how advanced at the time...

## Chapter 63

"I want to go home!" Ruth screamed out. "I don't want to have my baby on a spaceship full of creepy ugly aliens. I want to go home to hospital and have Doctor Jones deliver it for me!"

Vree flushed, whether in anger or embarrassment at Ruth's description of her people Jilly wasn't sure. The alien woman bent to Ruth and very quietly said,

"*Babies*, actually, Ruth. You are going to have twins."

"Twins!" the woman shrieked. But I've already got two. I don't want two more!" She calmed down a bit, turned her head to Katie and muttered, "I am most certainly going to go on the Pill. Twins, oh, hell!"

"It does not please you?" queried Vree. "Twins are unheard of among our people."

"Lucky you!" moaned Ruth. "I have two girls and we were hoping this one'd be a boy." She groaned again and Jilly addressed Vree.

"Do your, er, doctors know anything about delivering babies?"

Vree shrugged. "I am sure they are quite capable."

"It'll be all right," Katie said cheerfully. "I've had two."

"And I had five," Laurel added. Vree looked at Jilly and Shirley.

"And you? Do you have children?"

Jilly rolled her eyes. "Oh, my god, no! My Mum and Dad'd kill me if I got pregnant." Joanna giggled at Vree's lack of comprehension.

"It's the done thing t'get married first."

“Oh. I see.” Vree frowned. “No matter. We can discuss it later. I have spoken to our medical staff. Kadakkial will be here in a minute. You recall her, don’t you? Everything will be fine, Ruth. You’ll see.”

## Chapter 64

### *Meredith*

Daniel pointed to my ring finger.

“You’re married, Meredith. Is your husband – ah – was he – “

“Oh, I *was* married, Daniel. But he died. Nine years ago. We were involved in a car smash. We were both badly injured. I recovered. He didn’t.”

“I’m sorry.” That was truthful; I could tell. “Did you have any children?”

I shook my head. “No.” I had often wondered, though, whether our children, if we had any, would inherit my gift. I’d never know. “After the accident, when I first woke up, I couldn’t hear anything. I’d had some sort of brain damage and my hearing was destroyed.”

“That’s awful.” He didn’t even recoil mentally at the term ‘brain damage’. You’d be surprised how many people do. “But you seem to manage really well.”

“I lip read.” And I read minds, too. I didn’t tell him that. I’d never told anyone that, not even my husband.

I think he laughed, but he wasn’t amused.

“You lip read very well, Meredith. It’s almost as if you could read my mind.”

*I wonder if she really can, or if she’s just good at reading people’s faces and body language?*

“Ah.” I forced a laugh. No one had ever come quite so close to that conclusion before. Not even my husband. I never told him, either. “People can’t really read minds, you know. I’ve seen it done, at shows. It’s all trickery. Specific words and phrases and gestures.”

“Hmm.” He wasn’t convinced.

I was going to have to watch my step. Unless I opened up and admitted the truth to him. I wondered what the outcome would be if I did that. I liked Daniel; at the same time I didn’t trust him as far as I could throw him. Would he be repelled? Scared? Would he be able to keep my secret?

To end the discussion, I stood up and brushed the toast crumbs off my skirt.

“I’m going to drive out and talk with John – Brigadier Lucas – again. I shan’t tell him anything about you being here. But eventually, you’re going to have to do something.”

He nodded. "Thanks, Meredith."

"While I'm gone, you can do something for me." In all the excitement of discovering I wasn't alone any more, I had quite forgotten the job I had started.

Since Monday afternoon, in between my meetings with Brigadier Lucas, and looking after myself, I'd been checking as many of the local homes as possible. I remembered the boiling kettle in the staff room at the school and hoped there were no similar situations anywhere else; disasters waiting to happen. Now I had company in the form of Daniel Pinker, I bullied him into checking the places I hadn't yet got to. Before I did so, I gave him a severe talking to. I almost scared myself, I was so blunt to him.

"If I find one item missing from any of those houses I sent you to check out – just so much as a plaster ornament, I am going to tell the Brigadier all about you, and he can hand you over to the police. Understand?"

He blinked at me, totally taken aback.

*As if there'd be anything in this place worth nicking!*

"Meredith, I'm a cat burglar, not a common thief," he protested. "I've even been in the bank and didn't take so much as one cent."

"Hmm." I stared him down and pointed. "Over in that part of the town, near where Max and Emma live, there's a few places I haven't checked out yet. Not many." I sighed, admitting to myself that the main reason I was doing this was to keep us both busy and not so concerned about what might, or might not happen. God knows I'd spent long enough worrying about it the previous night.

What if the barrier never came down?

Where *had* everyone gone – and would they ever return?

And so on... it had been a restless night. In the wee hours of the morning Nimm had found his way in through an open window and leapt onto my bed. I nearly died of fright! When he settled himself against me I could feel him purring and we both drifted off to sleep.

"Just – make sure there's nothing turned on that'll start a fire. No taps running anywhere, things like that. Cigarettes left smouldering." I brightened up. "And you can have a listen to any radios that are playing. But switch them off afterwards. Are you sure you won't reconsider and try a telephone? They could still be working, you know."

He shook his head. "I tell you what, if nothing happens by, say, Friday afternoon, I will do that for you then. Okay?"

"Yes. All right."

"Tell me why, will you."

"What?"

He looked at me, very seriously. “Why have you been running around, turning taps and kettles and things like that off? Do you think if it’d been someone else here and not you, whoever it was would have been bothered?”

I shrugged. “I’m truly not sure. Maybe. But – “ I fixed him with a stare. “I suppose it was because it kept me doing something, and it probably was useful, or at the least, harmless.”

“Yeah. S’pose so.”

I thought of something else and chuckled. “Y’know, Daniel, I’m awfully glad whoever or whatever took the other people, that they sent the animals back outside the barrier. Otherwise, we’d have been flat out feeding and looking after them.”

He stared and then burst out laughing. In his mind I could see his mental vision, of me feeling the animals and him doing bugger all, and I laughed too.

## Chapter 65

Ska was appalled when the news about the human female’s babies reached him. Bad enough that those creatures were even aboard, without such a complication. He snarled. As soon as he and his loyal companions had control of the ship, he would personally see the humans, all of them, jettisoned into space. And Zolgoff with them, if by chance he survived the revolution. It was no longer a mutiny in Ska’s mind, but a necessary operation, for the good of his people – and himself, of course.

Nearly forty-eight hours had passed since the humans had first been brought aboard. Currently the Dendrator hung in a stationary orbit over the dark side of the moon. The other four ships of the fleet were similarly concealed from earth. It was the quiet watch aboard the ship, when most of its crew slept. They would have the advantage of surprise. Zolgoff would wake to find himself a prisoner on his own vessel, for as long as it took to march him to an airlock.

Ska and his companions, several of who had earlier released him from his quarters and armed him, moved stealthily along the ship’s corridors towards the flight deck. He could *taste* victory, it was so close.

Victory, and revenge.

## Chapter 66

*Meredith*

Wednesday morning, and we were no closer to finding any answers than we had been a day and a half, nearly two days before. The barrier was still there, firm and invisible. The Army vehicles and tents looked as spiffy and clean as they had when first erected, although some of the soldiers seemed almost bored. Brigadier Lucas had set a number of them to outline the barrier, shortly after they had arrived,

and now a broken line of whitewash splashed across roads, paddocks and low scrubby areas of bush. It was an almost perfect circle, some two miles in diameter, John told me.

He had groups patrolling it, but they had noticed nothing, although one had reported spotting a large scruffy ginger cat prowling the perimeter, just inside the barrier. Nimm, of course. No other signs of life had been observed. Clearly Daniel had evaded their notice. He'd be pleased to hear that.

There was no news from the towns in the other countries where members of their communities had disappeared. They hadn't been shut off from the outside world, more's their luck! I wondered why Karrelin had been encircled. And who exactly had done it.

Bizarre as the idea of aliens abducting humans was – more in the realms of science fiction or tabloid Sunday newspapers – it seemed the only possible solution. LBJ and Brezhnev had been chatting, at first mutually wary and then conceding they knew bugger all. I got the impression from John and everyone else whose minds I snooped upon that those two mighty world leaders were mightily peeved that none of *their* citizens had been abducted. The explosion observed over Vietnam may well have removed a few USA and Viet citizens, but no one knew exactly what had happened.

As for our Australian government, they were doing what politicians were good at doing and they were talking, each party blaming the other. Harold Holt had also been on the phone to LBJ and to Harold Wilson. Collectively, they'd got nowhere. Canada, Belgium and Botswana were crossing their fingers and waiting.

No other explosions had been observed, although some amateur astronomers in various places all over the world had made unsubstantiated claims of seeing 'flying saucers' between Earth and the Moon. Sadly, a lot of nutters had made similar and even wilder claims.

Like I said, no progress. I chatted a while with John and assured him I was managing fine. The vets in Wolerin and Lake Penger were having a busy time. The stock animals had been relocated and the wildlife had variously hopped, flown, run or slithered away. And the white mice, minus the one who'd escaped, had been returned to the lab from whence he'd acquired them.

So far though, no sign of Rilly. Tom had turned up and was loving the attention he was getting at the vet. I hoped that wherever everyone else was, there Rilly was too.

I didn't mention Daniel. I was tempted, but couldn't see any point. I left them to it, warmed by the growing affection I could feel from John Lucas's mind. I had discovered a lot of things about him, both from his spoken words and his thoughts. He was a career officer, but due for retirement within a matter of months. He was a widower, with three married children and two grandchildren. He liked cats, tolerated dogs, and once he discovered I was a widow, had started to wonder how I would look minus all my clothes.

It's interesting that he was gentlemanly enough to squelch that thought before it went too far.

## Chapter 67

Travis and Joanna, accompanied by Kla, exited their quarters, waved cheerfully to the Kruggah on duty and made their way towards the SAC where the other occupants of Karrelin remained in stasis. All the medical checks and treatments were complete and now, according to Kla, theirs was the healthiest town in Australia, if not the world. Of course, as the kids knew, in the case of Tam Blake, it wouldn't take him long to drink and smoke his good health away. However, they had both been relieved to know they, their parents, siblings and friends were in tip-top condition.

It wasn't their first trip outside the SAC; in fact, all of them and some more than once, had left it to explore the space vessel, always in the company however of Vree, Gly or Kla. They had all gone to be shown their family members and friends, comatose but healthy.

"Hey," Travis crowed, "We are gonna thrash all the other schools in the inter school carnival this year!"

Kla, who was nominally 'escorting' them throughout the ship, grinned at Travis.

"Are you looking forward to going back home, Travis?"

"Oh, yeah! And what a great story we're going to be able t'tell!" the young boy replied. Kla didn't respond to this but ushered them along the corridor. He felt a twinge at the knowledge the humans would 'forget' where they had been and what had happened to them once they were returned to their home planet. Regrettable, but necessary. The two or three days they had spent on the Kruggah ship would be gone forever, although he himself knew he would never forget them.

The birth of Ruth's twins, overseen by Vree and the medicos, was a true miracle to Kla. It had been a drama they hadn't anticipated, but were delighted and impressed to witness. The human woman had seemed terrified at the time, but Vree had calmed her, and even when the four Kruggah medicos surrounded her she concealed whatever revulsion she may have felt at their forms.

When Katie and Laurel carried the two young babies out to show to the rest of the humans, gathered in a little group in their main area, faces broke into smiles and grins. Even Tam Blake beamed at everyone and dug Gly in the ribs.

"We gotta wet the young ones' heads, y'know. 'Specially as they're both boys. Her hubby's gonna be over the moon."

Gly blinked at him in total non comprehension. "What?"

“A drink!” Tam said. “Some booze to celebrate.”

“Oh.” Gly shook his head. “Sorry, no. we don’t have any.”

“Ah!” Tam exclaimed in disgust. “Don’t them fancy food dispensers of yours run to something decent t’drink?”

“Oh, give it up, Tam,” Joseph advised wearily. “You can celebrate as much as you like when we get home again. Anyone’d think you were the proud dad.”

“Yeah,” Serge added. “I reckon you can buy for the bar when we’re home.”

“Huh!” With that, Tam had stomped off into the sleeping area, announcing at the doorway. “Wake me up when we’re gonna go home! I’ve had enough of youse all and I’ve gonna catch up on me sleep. That bloody woman kept me awake for hours with her caterwauling.”

“I’d bloody well like t’see *you* have a baby without screeching your head off!” Laurel snapped. “Bugger off and sleep. Damn good idea, if you ask me.”

Kla looked at the two kids.

“Would you like to see the flight deck?” he asked and they nodded enthusiastically.

“Oh yeah!”

“You bet!”

“This way.” He had checked beforehand with Gly, who after consultation with Zolgoff had agreed. Only the two young ones, he’d stipulated. They talked excitedly as they followed Kla. Several times along the way he stopped and chatted with fellow crewmembers. Mostly they maintained their normal appearance, but several of them, shape shifters like him, took great delight in changing their shapes to entertain the children and also, Kla suspected, to show off. When they finally arrived at the entry to the flight deck he stopped and admonished them.

“Be quiet, and don’t touch anything.” I’m responsible for you and if there’s one person I don’t want annoyed with me, it’s Captain Zolgoff.”

“We’ll be good,” Joanna promised and nudged Travis who nodded agreement.

“Of course. But if he offers us the chance to steer the ship – “

“Don’t be daft!” said Joanna. “You don’t steer a spaceship!”

Travis shrugged and followed her and Kla.

At almost the same time, in another part of the ship, Ska and his group of rebels were skulking along the corridor towards the armoury.

## Chapter 68

“Wow!” Travis and Joanna circled the flight deck, grinning at the various aliens who were manning their stations and computers. “This is great,” Travis said. “How fast can it go?”

Zolgoff waved his eyestalks and turned red with pleasure. He waved his tentacles, a shrug-like gesture and beckoned to one of his officers.

“Lieutenant Carrtilbyet, can you give this young man some information?”

“Certainly, sir.” The officer addressed Travis, almost as if lecturing. “We can travel at speeds considerably faster than that of light, but we also make use of pinhole apertures in the space-time continuum to travel great distances.”

“Wow!” Joanna tilted her head. “And when you leave here, how long will it take you to get home again?”

Carrtilbyet wiggled his tentacles in thought and went a delicate shade of green; not panic but concentration.

“A few weeks of your time. It is a very long way.”

“Sir! Alert!” Suddenly the alien manning the intra-ship communications systems cried out in alarm. “Fighting has broken out on the ship.”

“Details,” snapped Zolgoff.

Ska. Had to be. Sensors indicated several small groups attacking separate areas; the armoury, engineering and another close to the teleportation chambers.

In the flight deck, there was considerable alarm, but no panic. Yet.

Zolgoff waved his eyestalks at Kla. “Escort the human children back to the SAC. Prellaget, tell Vree and Gly to prepare them all to be returned to their homes. Take a weapon with you, Kla, and I hope you will not require it.”

Kla nodded, snatched up a weapon from a rack and ran to the exit. Joanna and Travis hurried after him, but he put out an arm to prevent them passing him.

“We will need to be careful. I am so sorry I brought you here and into danger. Stay behind me and be quiet. Your families will never forgive me if any harm comes to you.”

Cautiously he stepped out into the corridor. “It’s clear, come along and stay close.”

As they started back towards the SAC the entry doors to the flight deck locked behind them. Kla ushered the children along, pausing at every junction in the corridors.

“What’s going on?” demanded Joanna.

“Is there gonna be a big fight?” asked Travis. “Have you got ray guns or stuff like that?” He indicated the weapon Kla had taken from the flight deck. “It doesn’t look much.”

Kla cast a quick look down at it. Travis was right; it didn’t look much. The Kruggah were a peaceful race, true, but being also adventuresome, they knew the value of being well armed. This particular item, resembling nothing so much as a flute, was a standard disintegrator. With it in his hand, Kla felt much more confident.

“We’ll get you both back to the SAC as quickly as possible. Don’t worry, you’re safe with me.” He was heartily glad he had only two of the humans to worry about. Once he had delivered them safely he would be able to join the defence of the vessel against Ska and his mutineers.

He stopped and checked in both directions at the next junction, but as they crossed he heard running and slapping footsteps behind and half turned to see Ska, accompanied by half a dozen of his henchmen, rushing after them.

“Go!” he ordered Travis and Joanna. “Run!” Not far ahead of them was a T-junction and along on the left was the entry to their SAC. “Straight ahead and left. Hurry!”

The sound of fire from Ska’s weapon echoed along the passage. Kla gave a grunt of pain and surprise then staggered after the children. They stopped, horrified but he urged them on.

“Keep going, it’s not far now. I’ll be all right.”

They both grabbed his arms and helped him, all three fleeing for their lives. As they rushed through the door into the SAC Kla pointed.

“Shut it, Travis. That switch.”

The boy obeyed, and the door slid shut, but half a second too late to prevent Ska’s second shot. Kla pitched forward and his weapon dropped from his hand to clatter on the floor. He fell heavily on top of it and did not move again.

Warned by Zolgoff’s message from the bridge, Vree had started organising the humans to prepare for their return to Earth. Now they all stared horrified at the dead Kruggah. No longer controlled by his brain, Kla’s body returned to its normal appearance, and they could all see the black ichor bleeding from where he had been shot. Gly bent to him briefly but without hope. Vree ran across and locked the door that Travis had shut behind them.

Joanna ran to Jilly and hugged her. Jane and Emma stared in horror.

“They killed Kla! There’s a rebellion going on. But I reckon Zolgoff, that’s the captain, I reckon he can beat them.”

“Is he – dead?” whispered Jane. She turned and sobbed against the closest person behind her, which happened to be Joseph Taylor. Helplessly, he patted at her head.

“Don’t cry, Jane.”

“We must all get out of here as soon as possible and make our way to the teleportation chamber,” Vree instructed them.

“What about Ruth?” demanded Katie. “And her babies?”

## Chapter 69

Ska gloated. Things were going so well for him and his small gang of mutineers. They had had a stroke of luck, spotting the traitor shape shifter Kla and two of his charges wandering the ship. Unfortunately they had made it back to the SAC, although he suspected his shot had killed the other. Outside the entry to the chamber, he gave curt orders.

“They will try to escape from here. You two stay here and do not let them out. You four, take yourselves along to the other SAC. Dispose of the medicos there, and start loading the human scum onto anti-grav trolleys so they can be jettisoned into space. We shall storm the flight deck and kill all there. We shall be victorious!”

Overwhelmed by his enthusiasm, they ran to do his bidding. Ska’s clan at home on Kruggah was powerful, even more so than any of those connected to Zolgoff. In following Ska, they all looked forward to improving their own futures. Wealth, power and prestige were the attractions, more so than any desire to annihilate either their fellows or even the humans.

“Do we have to kill them *all*?” asked one rash young Kruggah, waving his tentacles in doubt and confusion. Ska fixed him with any icy glare, all four of his eye stalks swivelling to regard the doubter.

“Do you dare disagree with my orders?” he snarled.

“Um – er, no. But – “

“Unless you wish to end up like that dead traitor, then, I suggest you shut up and do exactly as I tell you. Is that clear?”

“I suppose so, yes, sir.” The young one still doubted the wisdom of Ska’s orders, but possessed enough wisdom of his own to know when to agree. He and three of his companions set off for the other SAC.

## Chapter 70

Leaving the SAC was easier said than done, Jilly realised. For the first time since waking to find herself on the alien ship she was afraid more than angry.

When Gly cautiously slid the exit door open half an inch, a rattle of energy bolts against it warned him such a move was not wise. He slammed the door closed and locked again and swore.

“Damnation! That bloody Ska. Captain Zolgoff should have dumped him in the brig as soon as we left Kruggah. He’s caused nothing but trouble all the voyage.”

“What are we going to do?” asked Serge. “Can we fight them? Do you have weapons so we can shoot back?”

“Not enough, I’m afraid,” Gly told him. “We have weapons, certainly, but very few. And not in here.”

“You said earlier on that a computer was running a program, to make the SAC look like it does,” Ross Davies said slowly. “I don’t suppose you could run a program that made this into an armoury, could you?”

Gly gave a short laugh. “I’m afraid not. That would set up the potential for harm to a living being. It is impossible. There’s a failsafe written into the program to prevent exactly that.” He frowned thoughtfully. “But if the program was terminated, then the SAC would revert to its normal unused status, and…”

Vree snapped her fingers. “Of course. The maintenance access channels. We could get into those and make our way along – “ She sketched with her fingers in the air. “Along and then down, as far as the teleport area. Gly, you’re brilliant!”

She bent to the impressive array of controls and keyboards and consoles that ran along the wall closest to the corridor.

“Jilly, Ross, Serge, will you please go and get all of your people and bring them out here?”

“Um,” Jilly started dubiously. “I’m not sure yet whether Ruth is up to something like this.”

“Mmm.” Vree grunted. “That may be so, Jilly, but all of you must come out and into this control area, regardless. When we shut down the program everything in there, all the furniture and so on, will disappear.”

“Oh. Yes, I see.” Jilly blinked; she hadn’t thought of that. So, everything in their accommodation area was just part of a program run by a computer? Their food and drink had also been produced by a computer? Fascinating. Her concept of computers relied heavily on what little she had seen in movies and read about in books. These people – aliens, whatever, seemed to use them so casually and for so many everyday purposes. Clearly they were far in advance of earth technology. When, and if they got out of this, she was going to start studying again. If she worked hard and talked her parents into it, they might even let her go to Perth to University. Her marks in her Leaving exam had been good enough, but she had lacked the drive to study further and had no goal. First, they had to survive, and to escape…

When she went into their sleeping area to organise the others, she found Ruth had recovered far more quickly than any of them had expected. She grinned at Jilly and indicated the two sleeping bundles held by Laurel and Katie.

“I’m feeling way, way better now. I don’t know what it was they gave me to help with the pain, but it’s made me feel wonderful.” She stood up, steady on her feet although her face was still a little pale. “And what a great going home present I’ve going to have for Steven. Not one son, but two.” She had found her husband lying in stasis along with all the others and had patted his hand, when she and Katie had been there last time. Their two small children had been there too, looking adorable, especially as they were sound asleep.

## Chapter 71

### *Meredith*

I supposed we’ve all wondered from time to time what we’d do if everyone else disappeared and we had the world to ourselves. Believe me, the reality was more boredom than excitement! After I returned from my morning chat with the brigadier, I made some lunch for Daniel and myself. He was waiting for me when I got home, sitting on my front verandah smoking, a self-satisfied smirk on his face and Nimm curled up sleeping on his lap.

It was probably something I shouldn’t have done, but I had unashamedly eavesdropped on Daniel’s thoughts when I sent him off to be a Good Samaritan. He griped a little about my ‘good two-shoes’ and ‘mother hen’ nonsense, but shrugged it off and decided he might as well humour me. There were thoughts of Emma and Max, and worries about his fate should the Terrible Twins find out about him. Under his bravado he was a very lonely, very scared young man and I pitied more than condemned him.

His thoughts about the jewellery he had snatched in Sydney was interesting, also his reactions when, while checking out possible fire hazards in various houses, he also checked out bedrooms for valuables. The few items he found he rejected in disdain as being totally unworthy of his attention. He was also worried that if anything was discovered to be missing afterwards – whenever afterwards was going to be – that I would hand him over to the cops or the Army. Either would be as bad, in his eyes.

On Tuesday I’d rescued several burnt cakes and switched radios off wherever I found them, knowing even if they’d been blasting at full volume I’d never have known. The record player in one house had a record still spinning and they’d need to replace the needle, I was sure of that. Basically there had been fewer fire risks than I’d expected, given the number of houses we checked.

I had found a house over past the school where the owner had obviously been about to do her washing when she had disappeared. The laundry was flooded and her undies had floated out into the garden. I turned the taps off, retrieved what I could and thanked heavens she had not had the washing machine switched on. I’m

not sure I would have been brave enough to wade through water if that had been the case.

“I had no idea you could hide so many houses in such a small area,” he complained. “Everything’s okay, though. All I found was one kettle boiled dry, and a couple of irons still turned on. Nothing really bad.” He smiled reminiscently. “Emma had been doing the ironing, Monday afternoon. Max’s shirt was beyond rescue. Just as well I went there, I s’pose. The house could have burned down.”

“Exactly why I sent you off to check on things,” I responded, more than a bit tartly. I was tired and irritable, frustrated at our helplessness. We couldn’t do anything about the situation we were in, so I’d concentrated on trying to manage the little things. Whether or not it was a waste of time and effort, I didn’t know.

After we ate, I stood up and stretched.

“I’m going for a walk, up as far as the hotel and then the school. Do you want to come?”

## Chapter 72

### *Daniel*

I liked Meredith Dane. She was a fussy old woman in lots of ways, like her worrying over people’s toasters and kettles and suchlike. I was worried at first that she would insist on telling the cops and the Army fellow she’d met about me. That would have really pissed me off and landed me in more trouble than I was already in. so I shrugged and did as she told me, figuring out that sooner or later that bloody barrier thing would have to collapse, and then I’d get myself out of the place.

Tuesday night, after I left her place I found myself a comfortable unit at the little motel attached to the pub, and slept well and dreamlessly. It was in fact the best night’s sleep I’d had in years. Before I drifted off I wondered one last time where everyone had gone. Weird and unbelievable as it seemed, the theory that they had been kidnapped by aliens was about the most likely, or the least unlikely. Would they return? Would I ever see Max and Emma and the kid? No idea.

Would Meredith and I escape from the jail the town had become? I didn’t know the answer to that, either. Last thing I remembered was touching the leather of the case I’d stolen from the Terrible Twins and thinking vaguely to myself that if only I’d chosen another night to burgle their joint, I would never have been in this position. I might have read about Karrelin in the newspaper instead.

*You’re a bloody idiot, Daniel*, I told myself. A bit late.

Wednesday morning I spent playing at being a Good Samaritan to please Meredith. I even resisted the temptation to filch anything, although I satisfied my

curiosity and cased a lot of places. Waste of time, truly. No one in Karrelin had anything worth stealing. We rendezvoused back at her place and had some lunch. She looked tired and depressed, much about the same as I felt. She was worrying about her dog, too, even though she tried to tell herself he was okay.

Nearly forty-eight hours earlier, we'd both driven into the town from two different directions, apparently just moments after everyone else had gone. Wherever they'd gone. We were really no closer to solving that puzzle. Not even her friendly Army brigadier had any ideas about that. Neither did he have any useful ideas about getting rid of that bloody barrier. As she told me, living things any larger than insects just couldn't get through the barrier. The experiment with the mouse was downright creepy. Trust a soldier to come up with something like that. She seemed to fancy this brigadier; I had my reservations about him.

When she suggested a walk I decided that was a damned good idea. I grinned at her.

"Yeah, let's walk along as far as the pub and I'll buy you a drink."

"All right."

We left both her car and mine parked outside her house. She didn't conceal her amusement at the fact I had locked mine. I stared back at her, deadpan.

"It's a *hired* car, Meredith. What am I gonna do if someone in this teeming metropolis steals it?"

She giggled like a teenager and then chortled, repeating my phrase under her breath. "Teeming metropolis indeed. Hah!"

We strolled as far as the drive in and turned towards the main street. It was, predictably, deserted. Past the Post office we turned right and crossed the road towards the hotel. Just as we got there, Meredith gave a cry and stopped in her tracks.

"They're back!"

### Chapter 73

Fortunately the maintenance channels to which Vree had referred were easier to get into than Jilly had feared. With the small group of now nineteen rather than seventeen humans clustered around them, Vree and Gly manipulated the controls. The alien woman muttered under her breath when the system requested confirmation of the shut-down command, and Gly leaned across to rap in his ID numbers below hers. There was a pause, then a beeping from the console and there in front of them was an empty room.

Tam Blake spoke for them all when he gasped, "Ber-loody hell."

"Where did it all go?" demanded Jane and Cyril gaped.

“It was merely a simulation,” Gly said gently.

“Wasn’t any of it real?” asked Joanna.

“It was real while it was running and you were in there, yes. Just as real as any of you, or us. But now it’s shut off.”

Travis took a step forwards.

“It’s only a little room,” he said, turning his head to look at the others.

“Yeah.” Serge surveyed it and frowned at Gly. “Bigger on the inside than the outside, you said?”

Vree’s mouth twitched.

“How far d’you think it is to the opposite wall?”

He shrugged. “Aah, about twenty feet, I reckon.”

She chuckled.

“If we had the time to spend, I’d let you see how long it took you to get to the other side.”

He gave her a disbelieving look and stepped forward. The others watched as he took ten paces but appeared to be no further away than when he started. Serge stopped, shook his head and retreated, muttering under his breath. Vree pointed to the corner closest to them, where a door has slid open, revealing a narrow passageway.

“Fortunately,” she said, “we can get out of here this way. You go first, Gly.” She handed him the weapon she had taken from the dead Kla. “Everyone else behind him, please, in single file. It might be a good idea to keep quiet. *Don’t* touch anything you may see along the way. This *is* a maintenance channel.”

“Are you okay, Ruth?” Jilly asked, and the other woman nodded.

“Yes. I think so.” She grimaced. “I’m just so glad I’m one of those women who can get up and go so soon after they have a baby.”

“Two babies,” Jilly corrected, holding up her fingers, and Ruth smiled.

“Yes. Well, let’s go then.”

Vree watched them all enter the channel, flipped the switch to close it and dived in behind them.

The SAC lay empty.

## Chapter 74

If Ska had thought it through carefully, he would have realised his mutiny was doomed to defeat. His men were in the minority, fuelled more by his words and ambition and hatred than by weapons or tactical ability. They scored a minor point by killing Kla and terrifying the humans, then pinning them down in the SAC, or so they thought. It would require more than that to defeat Zolgoff, veteran of several missions.

Two were left at the first SAC and another four dispatched to attack the second, where the remainder of the humans were being kept. Ska assumed that as most of the crew there were medicos, they would not be fighters. In the firm belief his cause would prevail, he and the others made for the flight deck.

They didn't all make it. After initially being taken by surprise, the crewmembers loyal to Zolgoff had regrouped, armed themselves and started to fight back. Even the medicos in the SAC were motivated to fight, for themselves and for their charges. Their sense of responsibility towards others was highly developed and the four sent by Ska to attack the SAC were outnumbered, outgunned, and defeated. One was killed, two wounded and the fourth dropped his weapon and surrendered, hysterically blabbing out what Ska had planned for the humans.

Kadakkial immediately contacted the flight deck and requested the captain lay in a course back to Earth so the humans could be returned before the situation deteriorated. After speaking with Zolgoff she turned around, her tentacles flickering green to blue to purple and back to blue.

"That idiot Ska! He is behind this criminal plan to take over the ship. We are heading back towards Earth, but some of his scum have managed to disable the controls providing direct transport from here to the teleport area. We will have to load these people onto trolleys and take them ourselves."

At her words, Rav and Dex, two of her staff, started organising the anti-grav trolleys – the same ones indeed that Ska's group would have used. Kadakkial glared at Ska's turncoat.

"What's your name?"

"Blekatrad."

"Where are the rest of you scum?" she demanded, waving a surgical scalpel at his face. "Tell me how many of you are still running loose, or I'll carve your eye stalks right out of your face!"

He cowered away from her, purple with fear. "Ah ... he left two at the other SAC." Whimpering and dripping ichor, he whispered. "And we killed Kla, I think."

"What?" Kadakkial was furious now. "Why, you disgusting piece of shit, I should kill you now and save Zolgoff the trouble of court martialling you!"

"But I surrendered," he bleated. "You can't kill someone who's surrendered." She swung round in disgust.

“Rav, toss this – *thing* – into the nearest stasis tube. If you leave him here I’ll start on him with this.” She stormed off to assist Dex and the others while Rav hustled Blekatrad to the far end of the chamber, pushed the terrified would-be mutineer inside the tube and slammed it shut. He could spend the rest of the trip back to Kruggah there. Personally, Rav thought he was safer there than anywhere near Kadakkial. The medico had a foul temper, but even she wouldn’t attack someone in stasis.

He hurried back to help the others. That was when the access door from the maintenance tunnel clicked open.

## Chapter 75

### *Meredith*

Daniel caught my shoulder as I started past him and pulled me round to face him.

“You *know*. *How* d’you know they’re back? Where are they?” His face was accusing. “I can’t hear a thing.”

“Uh.” I was so excited and relieved when I caught the ‘sound’ of those many human minds; sleeping minds, but live and healthy and *here*, that I lost all caution. I hadn’t betrayed myself like this since I was fifteen.

“You can’t hear them, or see them, but you can hear their *minds*, can’t you?” Daniel was staring at me wide eyed and I could see confusion, fear, anger and horror in his mind. He was afraid of *me*!

“Daniel,” I started quietly, “I will explain to you later.”

“Can you? Can you read my mind too? Of course you can. That’s how you knew all sorts of things about me.”

“Truly. I will tell you all about it later. I’ll answer all your questions.” I forced a smile. “Daniel, I am human. Totally human. I won’t tell anyone anything about you without your say so. I promise. Relax.”

“Hmm.” He stood back. “You’re strange, Meredith. So where are they all?”

“Around the corner, along a bit and across the road. On the bowling green.”

He blinked. “I don’t know whether you really can read my mind or not, but I’m damned well going to find out everything you can do, before we leave here.”

“All right. But now let’s go and see if they’re all okay. Come on.”

We went round the corner and across the road to the Karrelin bowling green. There were bodies lying all over it. Live, breathing humans; the population of Karrelin.

The bizarre thought struck me, as Daniel and I hurried in through the gate; that the green keeper was going to be furious. Just past the rows of sprawled sleeping humans, was a small collection of animals; a sheep, a kangaroo and several smaller creatures. And a dog...

"Rilly!" I exclaimed and bent to him. I ran my hands over him, feeling his strong heartbeat. There were no marks on his body and he looked fine. At my touch he wagged his tail; his eyelids flickered and he then lapsed back into deep unconsciousness.

Daniel squatted down beside me.

"Are they all here?" he asked. I got to my feet, walked along the rows and then frowned and turned back to him. I noticed the absence of a few familiar faces.

"No. No, they're not all here. I wonder where the others are."

## Chapter 76

### *From Vree's diary*

What an absolutely astounding day this has been. So many things have changed; some for the better and some for the worse. Nothing will ever be the same again. *I will never be the same again.*

Kla's death was an appalling event, but it would have been infinitely worse had one of the human children been killed. In the short time we had all been together I had developed considerable affection for all of these people. I was not looking forward to their departure.

## Chapter 77

The razor sharp scalpel in Kadakkial's tentacle was the first thing Gly saw when he eased himself through the doorway.

"It's us, Kada," he reassured her. "We came along the maintenance tunnel. A couple of the rebels had us pinned down there." Behind him the humans all spilled out into the SAC, crying out at the scene before them. Under Rav's command, the medicos were loading their sleeping companions onto anti-grav pallets. "One of them killed Kla," he said, and Kadakkial turned grey with sorrow. She had been close to the young Kruggah.

"That damned Ska has a lot to answer for," she snarled. "If there's anything left of him after Zolgoff squashes this little rebellion, I'll be happy to dismember him myself. Personally." She dumped the scalpel and moved over to where Shirley and Jane were helping Ruth into a seat. "Are you and the babies all right?" she asked and the young woman looked up at her, nodding.

"Yes. Thank you. We're fine. But what are we going to do now?"

“Home,” Gly told her. “You are all going home.”

“What’s going on, with all this fighting?” asked Serge. “I thought you told us you were a peaceful people. But it sounds like a mutiny or a rebellion.”

Vree sighed. “It’s complicated. Our captain is Zolgoff, and Ska, who was his Second Assistant till they had a major disagreement, is of another opposing clan. They have disagreed on many matters, but now it appears Ska has attempted to take over command of the ship. I really doubt he will be successful.”

A sudden blare from the intra-ship communication system grabbed everyone’s attention.

“This is the captain speaking. Abandon ship. All crew members to the life crafts. Medical staff are to ensure all the humans are conveyed to the teleportation area for transfer to the planet as soon as we come within range. ETA ten minutes. Xeno Zoological staff to take the animals to the same area immediately. Take precautions as unknown number of armed rebels are still at large. Defend yourselves with all necessary force. Repeat, abandon ship...”

“Oh, no!” cried one of the human women, her hands to her face in horror. Several of the others exclaimed in fear and excitement, but Gly rose to the occasion and his voice carried over the chaos.

“Remain calm, everyone. You will all go home safely. I promise it.”

They had practised such disaster drills before, but had never anticipated having to use them in reality.

What, Vree wondered, had happened for Zolgoff to consider, let alone order, such a drastic move?

## Chapter 78

Ska and his group had had early success, cleaning out the armoury and then disabling the short distance transfer system that allowed teleportation from one area to another within the ship. They had killed and injured several of the crew who had resisted them, pursued Kla and the two humans to the SAC and pinned them down there. No one had considered the access channels used for maintenance as a means of escape, so the two outside the SAC lounged against the wall and considered themselves in the best of positions, away from the main fighting.

As Second Assistant, Ska had all the necessary access codes at his finger, ah, tentacle tips. Zolgoff’s act in locking the doors to the flight deck delayed him, but did not stop him. They burst in, firing indiscriminately, and for a few short moments Ska believed he would triumph. Reinforcements, loyal to the captain, arrived and he found himself pinned down between two sets of consoles.

“Surrender, Ska, and you live!”

“Never!” Ska fired a burst towards the voice and was rewarded by a cry of pain. Others on both sides fired, and in the chaos, he realised he was close to the main control panel. If *he* couldn’t win, Ska decided abruptly, *no one* would.

It was the work of only a moment for him to feed in his identification codes and order self destruct, no countermand possible. He smirked. Zolgoff had been a fool; in his position Ska would have disabled his opponent’s access codes first thing.

Alarm sirens sounded, lights flashed and the discordant computer voice announced, “Self destruct sequence initiated. Thirty and counting. Repeat, self destruct sequence...”

“You fool!” shouted Zolgoff. “You’ll kill us all, and for what?”

“My clan will win!” Ska raised himself and, under covering fire, fled the flight deck in search of a life craft. Behind him, Zolgoff waved his tentacles, blue with rage, and made the intra-ship order to abandon ship. Then he put out a distress call to the other ships of the fleet. With luck, losses would be minimised and the escape life craft would all be picked up safely.

It was just as well, he realised, that he had already set the Dendrator on a course for earth. It would be close, but he knew the medicos and loyal crew would see the safe return of the humans as a priority.

Then he took his weapon and went in search of his traitorous Second Assistant.

## Chapter 79

### *Daniel*

I watched Meredith as she walked along the lines of people. She had known they were there, before either of us could have seen them. She had known a lot of other things, too.

She could read my mind! I was scared shitless at the realisation.

“I wonder if the barrier is down, too?” I remarked and she shook her head.

“I don’t think so. There’s something wrong here, Daniel. Where are the others?”

“Who’s missing? How d’you know they’re missing? Maybe more people were out of the town than you thought?”

“No.” She looked worried. “I can’t see the postmaster, or the school principal, or Jack – he’s the one who owned that truck that crashed out near Max’s place – “

“No! You’re right. Max isn’t here either. Nor Emma.”

We went up and down the rows again.

“The bank manager’s not here. Nor the publican. Ruth and Shirley... it’s Shirley’s baby whose pram is outside the bakery. The baby is over there, and most of the kids from the school.” She shook her head helplessly. “I don’t know who else isn’t here who should be, but this is not right.”

“Are they somewhere else, perhaps?” I asked. She looked back at me and sat still for a moment, her face creased in concentration, as if she were listening...

“No.” She sighed and pointed to a bench. “Sit down a minute, Daniel. There’s something I have to tell you. Before everyone starts waking up. But you must promise never, ever, to tell anyone else. Promise me that first.”

“You can read people’s minds.”

She looked at me and nodded. “Yes,” she said simply. “I can.”

## Chapter 80

### *Meredith*

I’d known since I was young, that other people didn’t ‘hear’ like I did. Where the ability came from, and why it was *me* who could read minds, I don’t know. It must have been latent in my very early childhood, I think, for I really don’t recall being able to tell what other people were thinking until I was well into primary school. At first the ability terrified me. I thought I was going crazy, with so many strange and unwanted ‘voices’ intruding into my mind.

Wisely, I told no one apart from my parents, but over the years concentrated and worked to control this ‘listening in’ on others’ thoughts. It became something I lived with, like other people live with their various abilities, skills and handicaps. For, believe me, there were times when it was a handicap. Fighting to keep secret all I knew about other people was difficult. I learnt to close my mind, to deliberately *not* listen, and to ignore the unguarded opinions, thoughts and imaginings people every day threw unknowingly in my direction.

Not even my husband was privy to this secret. We had a happy enough marriage; with my ability I would never have married or shared my life with a fool or a bully. Most of the time I didn’t eavesdrop on his thoughts, and he never knew I knew his thoughts as well as he did.

The time I was fifteen and almost betrayed myself, it saved a man’s life, but he didn’t appreciate it. Not at first, anyway. I was waiting for a train and the shabbily dressed young man, only half a dozen years or so my senior, stood in front of me, watching the steam engine approach.

It’ll only hurt for a moment, then it’ll all be over. When it gets a bit closer... god help me...now – *no!*

I had grabbed the back of his jumper and pulled, and the train engine had passed inches in front of him. When I let go, he swung around to me, shouting.

“Why did you – you’re only a kid! Lemme go!” And he had stomped off, up the stairs over the train line. In my mind I could see his clear intention to climb over the railing and jump down in front of the next train. I couldn’t let that happen, so I pointed after him and screamed aloud.

“My purse! That man grabbed my purse! Stop, thief!”

An eager railway guard ran to grab him, bundled him down the steps and into the stationmaster’s office. I ran after them, but didn’t call out till he was at the door.

“I’m sorry! Stop, please. I made a mistake. My purse is here. He didn’t take it.”

The guard, the stationmaster and the young man all glared at me. *Idiot girl!* This was the politest of their thoughts. I shrugged, smiled weakly and hurried away.

Three weeks later I saw the young man again. He looked clean, was shaved and wearing new clothes. Clearly he had a job now, and one in which he could take pride. The desperation of our previous encounter was gone forever. When I got off the train he followed me. I would have been scared except that I could see both puzzlement and gratitude in his mind rather than anything more sinister.

“How did you know I was going to try to jump under that train?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I dunno. But you didn’t, did you? And things are going better for you now, aren’t they?”

“Yes.” There was a wife there, too, and a baby girl in his thoughts.

“I am so glad you didn’t do it. Now go home to your family.” I smiled at him. “If you want to thank me, call the baby Merry.”

His thoughts as he watched me go were confused. I hadn’t had to explain myself back then, but I was most certainly going to have so now.

It was a relief that Daniel took it so calmly.

“I’m not sure if I envy you or pity you,” he said honestly when I’d finished. He made a face at me. “I’ll make you a bargain, though. You don’t tell anyone about me, and I won’t tell anyone about you.”

He meant it, too. I nodded and smiled.

## Chapter 81

They hurried, they bustled, but they did not panic. Within a surprisingly short time the sleeping inhabitants of Karrelin were arranged carefully in the teleportation chamber of the Dendrator. Krell spoke reassuringly to the others, who were gathered awaiting their turn.

“We will be within range of your planet within five minutes. The procedure will take only seconds. The sleeping people will be sent down first, and then the rest of you.”

“What about all of you?” asked Jilly. “Where are you going to go?”

“We will escape in the life craft,” Vree said sadly. She was full of disappointment that her time with the humans was to be so drastically curtailed. Had Kadakkial expressed a wish to eviscerate Ska with a sharp, or preferably a blunt, scalpel, Vree would have cheerfully held him down and handed the medic the equipment. It was just plain not fair, she growled to herself. These had been a most promising group of subjects. Their world was fascinating, their various cultures and belief intriguing, and she wanted many many more hours with them. Damn Ska!

“It’s going to be close,” Gly whispered to her. “But they’ll make it. I’m not sure if the rest of us will.”

“What do you mean?” she swung to him, horrified. “There are plenty of escape pods; every ship carries sufficient. More than sufficient.”

“By the time we stay here and oversee the teleportation process, there may not be time to get to them. You should leave now.”

“No! Absolutely no. We will survive together or we will die together.”

“Let’s all hope it is the former, then.”

They watched as the transfer began; pallet after pallet of humans disappeared from sight and after each one, Krell announced “Safely grounded. Next!”

Finally only the small group of very wide awake humans, Gly, Vree, Kadakkial, Rav and Krell remained. Dex had gone to check on the closest life craft. Vree gave Gly a tiny smile.

“You know,” she whispered, “They are all going to remember everything they have experienced here.”

“Oh, damn!” Gly muttered, then shrugged. “At least they’re all going to be alive to remember. And we’ll all be long gone. This time we’ll just have to live with it.” He gave a faint smile. “Let’s hope we do *live* with it.”

“Five minutes to self destruct,” announced the bland voice of the ship’s computer. Krell hustled the humans onto the platform.

“Goodbye! Good luck! Thank you!” With a chorus, they disappeared.

“Safely grounded,” said Krell quietly. “Now, we have to go.”

“We can’t,” Dex said flatly from the doorway. “The only available life craft are on the far side of the ship. We cannot get there in time.” Behind him there was a groan and a snarl, and Zolgoff staggered into view, several of his spikes broken, ichor dripping from several wounds and a weapon almost falling from his grip.

“Captain!” Both Gly and Kadakkial leapt to his side. Vree looked around and came to a quick decision.

“We cannot use the life crafts to escape – but we *can* use the teleportation device.”

“What?”

“Captain Zolgoff, sir, is the area we took the humans from still enclosed in the barrier?”

He grunted in the affirmative. “Yes, it was my intention to have the ship that rescued us shut it down.”

“Then we must go there and wait for one of our other ships to come in close to the planet and bring us up again.”

Vree surprised herself at the determination in her tone. Zolgoff fixed her with three of his eyestalks. The fourth was wilted and burnt. For a moment she panicked, afraid she had overstepped the bounds of what little authority she, as an investigator, possessed. Then she saw the red flickering around his tentacles and gave a sigh of relief.

“Excellent suggestion, Vree. Krell, see to the teleport. Set the coordinates and join us. There is no need for you to sacrifice yourself for our safety.” He looked around. “There is no need for anyone to sacrifice themselves. We will succeed.”

And Ska? he asked himself. What had happened to him? The last he’d seen of his Second Assistant – no, his *ex*-Second Assistant, he reminded himself – the other had been fleeing down a passageway towards the life pods. He had however not been fleeing very fast; Zolgoff had fired and seen the other stagger, fall, and then pick himself up and continue waveringly.

“One moment to self destruct. Counting, fifty nine, fifty eight, fifty seven... ‘

But there was no one left to hear the calm voice.

Dendrator was empty of life... except for Blekatrad, still in stasis. He died, unaware.

## Chapter 82

*Meredith*

“Daniel, one of us should go and tell John what’s happening.”

He snorted at me and his mind broadcast he wasn't going anywhere until he knew what the hell was going on. Neither was I, so that put us at an impasse. We would stay where we were until something happened.

And it did!

One moment Daniel and I were the only two people there not unconscious. Next moment a small cluster of slightly dazed but very relieved townspeople were standing just outside the gates. He leapt up and ran over them.

"Max! Emma! Where have you been?" *Thank god!*

I couldn't hear his words, but his mind was full of delight and relief. I staggered a little at the mental cries and images from the others. They came streaming in through the gates, some hurrying straight past me to run up and down the greens, finding friends and family. None of them had so far shown any signs of waking, but they appeared to be sleeping normally. I had checked several and their breathing and colour were normal.

It was going to be chaotic when they woke. I decided maybe this would be the time to go and tell Brigadier Lucas what had happened. I didn't get far.

Max and Emma, after greeting Daniel – rather less enthusiastically than he had hoped, I noticed – had rushed off to find their young baby. Emma snatched him up and cuddled him against her breast, and when I looked at him and then at Max standing by her I knew Daniel could not have been the father, much as he would have liked it. He saw it, too, and turned away from them, drooping slightly.

His gaze lit on young Jilly Daniels, and it was if someone switched a light on. His face lit up and I felt my smile at his reaction. Romeo must have looked much the same when he first set eyes on Juliet. I hoped these two would have better luck. Indeed, I intended to make sure they did. I called her name and when she looked at me and came across I asked her first of all where they had been and what had happened.

"Slow down, Jilly, you know I have to read your lips. Where? What?" I was overwhelmed and sat down, then called to him.

"Daniel, come and listen to what Jilly is saying. They've all been on a space ship."

I left them to it. From the way they were looking into each other's eyes, and the mental eavesdropping I could not prevent myself from doing, I suspected they would make an ideal couple.

I had a headache, from the thoughts flying at me from all of them and the efforts I was making to filter them. So many people in such close proximity taxed me greatly. It was like being shouted at, in a small room, by a dozen excited people, each one trying to get and hold my attention. I wanted to get away, but as far as they all knew I was deaf and could tell nothing of what they had experienced. The trouble was that several at once were trying to get my attention on their faces and lips.

In fact, the details were flying at me hard and fast. I could see the aliens they were talking and thinking about ... No! I really *could* see them. A third group of arrivals shimmered into existence, just past the rows of sleepers. At the sight I had to catch my breath, my hand to my mouth. I don't think I've ever seen such repulsive looking creatures in all my life. They were beyond ugly.

## Chapter 83

### *Daniel*

Jilly. Lovely name. And a gorgeous bird, too. Meredith left us to it; I could see she was looking disturbed. I suppose if I was suddenly faced with a mob of people who'd had such an extraordinary experience and wanted to tell everyone about it, and I could hear their thoughts, I'd be disturbed too. In fact I think I'd be getting the hell out of there as fast as possible. I truly pitied her more than envied her. As long as she kept her promise to stay out of my head, we'd get along just fine.

I was surprised to see Nimm strolling across the bowling green as if he owned it. Well, he was a cat; he probably thought he *did* own it! He stopped and sniffed disdainfully at the other cat lying there, and the dog. Meredith's dog, actually. She had exclaimed with delight and relief when the small group of animals had materialised. But they, like the people of Karrelin, were still sleeping.

And then, all of a sudden, there were even more people there – only these last arrivals weren't exactly what I would have called people. Beside me however, Jilly looked up, at first in delight and then in concern.

"Vree! Gly! What's happened? Why are you all here too? Whatever 's happened?"

She wasn't the only one, practically all of them hurried over to the newcomers. Two of them were human. Well, they looked human, but the others were, to put it bluntly, the most god-awful things I've ever seen in my life. Bug eyed monsters, I think, is the derogatory term for aliens that's used in a log of science fiction stories, and these were good examples. Yuck! Bloody disgusting!

Amazingly, no one apart from Meredith and me seemed disgusted. They were worried, certainly, but I gathered quickly that was not because of their looks, but that fact the aliens were there in the first place. Jilly filled me in quickly.

"They had a big battle on the spaceship. That's why we all came back so quickly. But they couldn't get away on life crafts, so they came down here to get rescued."

“Uh. Okay. Um, when?” The sooner the better as far as I was concerned. Who were the two humans with these aliens? *Were* they human? I got the answer to that when one of them – the female – came across to Jilly and me. Meredith was sitting on a bench, her face in her hands. I wasn’t sure if she was weeping or trying to shut everyone out.

“Vree, this is Daniel. Oh, I don’t know your other name. And this is Meredith Dane. Vree, they’ve both been stuck inside that barrier your captain put up around the town. When can you take it down?”

The woman spoke to Jilly. I couldn’t understand her but it seemed Jilly didn’t have the same problem.

“What is she saying?” I demanded and Jilly turned to me in shock and then understanding.

“Oh. Of course.” She smiled and touched her fingers to her neck. “Ah, they gave us a – what did you call it, Gly?” This to the tall, too-good-looking man who came over to stand with us. He answered her and again I couldn’t understand. He frowned, looked from me to Meredith and called to one of the creepy crawlies. When it came near me I recoiled but Jilly, looking irritated, snapped at me.

“Stop it, Daniel. They’re nice people. Just wait a minute.”

“Argh!” I tried not to show my revulsion as the creature came close and stretched out a slimy looking tentacle towards me. “What’s it doing?”

“*Her* name is Kadakkial,” Jilly said, her voice chilly. “And she’s going to make it so you can understand all of them.”

I gritted my teeth and winced a little at the tiny sting under my ear. “Ow! What is it?”

“So you can understand us.” The – thing – moved slightly backwards and surveyed me with not two, but four eyes. Amazingly, the voice was female and, if I shut my eyes, almost sexy. “I am chief medical officer aboard the Dendrator.” I blinked; the tentacles waving around her – head, I suppose, although it was difficult to tell where body ended and head began – went a shade of grey and drooped. “Although the Dendrator is no more.”

“True.” Gly reached out and patted her. “I saw the flash in the sky just after we came down here. That Ska has a lot to answer for.”

“I hope the bloody man was still on it when it blew up. I hope he disintegrated into a million slimy blobs.”

Hmm, for a medico, it, she was very bloodthirsty. She hurried back to the other aliens. I counted them surreptitiously. Two who looked but obviously weren’t human, and five others.

Then I heard Vree and Meredith behind me.

## Chapter 84

### *Meredith*

It was bedlam. I sat and wrapped my hands around my face and tried to shut it all out. It was worse that I couldn't actually hear their voices. However, I was 'hearing' all their thoughts, and mixed with them, the dreaming ramblings of the rows of people laid out on the grass, and incomprehensible gibberish from the aliens. I watched the exchange between Jilly and Daniel, then saw him recoil from the alien. After that he nodded his head in relief and comprehension.

*Gonna hafta work hard at getting back on Jilly's good side after that!*

*//My name is Vree.//*

Never, ever, had I experienced this. There was a gentle touch on my arm, and when I pulled my hands away from my face I looked up into the face of the woman who had appeared with the aliens. She had addressed me, but directly to my mind. She moved her fingers to my head, almost caressing it. I sighed as the mental noise quietened itself. It didn't go away, but was subdued so I was no longer overwhelmed and distressed. She sat down beside me.

"What are you?" I looked into her face and as she spoke I read her lips carefully.

"I can speak a little of your language. Let my friend touch your neck, like she did to Daniel, and you will be able to understand me, and the rest of us."

For the first time since I had lost my hearing I was angry and bitter.

"I won't be able to *hear* you but, will I?"

"Maybe you will." She smiled and beckoned the one who had touched Daniel.

"This is Kadakkial. Relax, we are not going to hurt you."

I submitted to the tiny sting in my neck. For a moment I noticed nothing, then a soft voice spoke to me. It was the ugly looking creature before me, but the voice was beautiful.

*//You are a telepath. People like you are rare, and valued.//*

"I'm deaf!" I said angrily. And I thought at her, even more angrily. *And none of these people know I can hear their minds. If you tell them, they're going to be scared of me for the rest of their lives!*

"I see." Vree looked at me, speaking so I could lip read. *// We shall keep your secret for you.//* She continued, speaking, not thinking at me. "Kadakkial is a medico and works with technology, but she is also a natural healer. She may be able to give you your hearing back."

I shook my head. "It's gone, Vree... that is your name, Vree? Are you one of – them?"

“We are the Kruggah. That is the name of our planet, and of our species. We are explorers, looking for new worlds and new peoples. We took the people of your town to study and talk with – “

“And you got rather more than you bargained for.” This came from Jilly, who had drifted back to us, Daniel in tow. She knew of my deafness; actually I think everyone in Karrelin knew of it. I hoped Daniel would remain the only human who knew the truth about me.

“That is very true.” Vree smiled at them. “We had planned on only twenty or less, but something went wrong. Sabotage, and the one responsible also led an insurrection against our captain. Kadakkial – “ She turned her attention to the medico. “Can you attend to Captain Zolgooff? He is wounded and requires attention.”

“All right.” The alien waved her tentacles at me and hurried off. There were so many things going on around me, I just wasn’t able to take it all in. The awake townspeople seemed to be clustered around young Ruth, whom I remembered as being very pregnant the last time I’d seen her.

“Did Ruth have her baby? On board their spaceship?” I asked Jilly and she grinned and held up two fingers. “Twins?”

“Oh yes. Her hubby’s going to be over the moon when he wakes up. They’re boys.”

“That’s wonderful.”

Wonderful, and more than a little bizarre, I thought to myself. A week ago, if anyone had said ‘aliens really do exist’ around anyone in Karrelin, they would have been laughed to scorn. But here we all were, carrying on conversations with the ugliest, most revolting group of extraterrestrials you’d ever hope (or not hope) to meet, and no one batting an eyelid about it.

Kadakkial glided back to us. Her eyes were swivelling to take in the surroundings, as were those of all her companions, but her tentacles had changed colour and glowed reddish.

“The captain is recovering, Vree. Shortly he will contact the flagship and call for us to be rescued.” She addressed the others cheerfully. “As soon as we leave, the barrier will be removed, and all your friends and family members will wake up.”

I looked at Daniel.

“We’re going to have a lot of things to catch up on, from the ones who’ve been on the spaceship. An adventure, that’s for sure.”

“Hmm.” Gly didn’t look particularly happy. “If that rebellion hadn’t happened, they would have all been returned, but no one would have been able to remember anything that had happened to them.”

I could see Jilly’s amusement, tinged with annoyance.

“Maybe we should be grateful to that horrible Ska then! I’d much rather remember all that. It was interesting.”

“Yes, maybe so.” Vree looked at Gly. “Gly, this place is so different from home. These people are... fascinating. I wish...” She did not finish the sentence, but I could see the unspoken thought. She was one of the Kruggah, but she wanted to stay behind.

## Chapter 85

### *Daniel*

Meredith and the woman called Vree were having a real heart to heart conversation. I wondered what that was all about. Jilly dragged me off to meet her friends and admire the babies. Speaking of babies, I had caught a good look at Emma’s little boy, and all my doubts had disappeared. He had Max’s nose, Max’s hair and probably Max’s temperament. In a way, I was relieved.

The aliens also had names, and I even managed to touch some of them when they extended tentacles towards me. Thanks to whatever it was that Kadakkial had done to me (and to everyone else as well, I gathered), we could talk to each other. For one fleeting moment I was sorry I had arrived in Karrelin too late to have been take up to the spaceship. With my luck, I would have been one of those who had slept through the whole thing.

Soon, Rav said, their flagship would enter the upper atmosphere of earth, and they would all teleport aboard it. We would never see or hear from them again. They were going home.

Several of the men were starting to make their way from the bowling club towards the hotel. One of them was loudly exhorting another, who must have been the publican, to ‘get a man a decent bloody drink before he dies o’ thirst.’

Beside me, Jilly and her friend Shirley giggled.

“Trust bloody Tam Blake. He’s been on the wagon for a coupla days, so he’s got a lotta drinking t’do t’catch up.” They laughed. “That bloody Jane’s been moaning about her boyfriend dumping her. I can quite understand why he’d do that. She’s wet. And we’ve gotta go finish our game, too.”

“Er, too late,” I said. “I potted the black for you. But you can have another game,” I added hastily. At that moment, I would have done anything for Jilly Daniels. If she’d asked me to, I would have cheerfully embraced every one of those revolting Kruggah. (Although embracing *her* was much more what I had in mind!)

A sudden loud explosion, followed by cries of dismay, rage and fear drowned out my offer to escort Jilly and Shirley to the pub. All of the aliens were turning all shades of green and blue and purple as their eyes swivelled to see what had happened.

“Oh, shit!” Jilly muttered. “It’s that bloody Ska. I thought he’d been blown up with the ship.”

## Chapter 86

His attempt at rebellion was a disastrous failure, but Ska itched for revenge. And revenge he would have, regardless of the cost. Mere seconds before the explosion blew the Dendrotor to dust, he dived into an escape pod and set course for earth, specifically the town of Karrelin. Knowing his life would be worthless if he were picked up by his fellow Kruggah, he decided on one final act of revenge.

It was an added bonus when he saw his ex-captain and several crewmembers along with the humans. He pulled himself from the escape pod and lurched towards Zolgoff, his weapon concealed behind his back. Fools! They’d suffer for this.

Between him and his main target however, were some of the humans. They didn’t matter. Ska produced his weapon and aimed at them all. Several things happened at once. As he fired, Daniel pushed Jilly and Shirley away, and Nimm, who had been perched on the fence, took a flying leap towards the low hanging roof of the nearby shed.

The spray from Ska’s weapon took Daniel high in the shoulder, narrowly missed the two girls, struck Rav just below his spines and barely grazed Zolgoff.

And hit Nimm...

## Chapter 87

*Nimm*

*This is no place for a cat. Taunting the sleeping barker is little fun as he cannot move. For a while I watch the two-legged ones. They are noisy and happy. The unearthly ones are something I have never seen. Their scents are different. Everyone seems happy. I wish someone would feed me. I want my queens and my kits.*

*There is a sudden horrible noise. Another of the unearthly ones comes towards us all. His scent is nasty.*

*This certainly is no place for a cat. I leap from my perch on the fence.*

*Something hard hits me. So very very hard, hot and cold and sharp at the same time. It hurts.*

*I fall.*

*I do not land on my feet. I cannot feel my feet.*

*There is pain, much pain. There is a great darkness coming for me.*

*It's not fair. I want my queens and my kits. I cannot die. We cats are supposed to have nine li –*

## Chapter 88

Zolgoff gave an unearthly scream compounded of pain and outrage. Before anyone else could react, he fired point blank at Ska, and then again, till the other Kruggah was a twitching, and then a still mass of tentacles, slime and ichor.

Dex was huddled over the dying Rav, while Kadakkial rushed first to Daniel, after casting a quick worried look at her captain.

“What the bloody hell was that?” Daniel was in pain but coherent.

Kadakkial's voice was low as she reached towards him and laid several of her tentacles, now a brilliant yet ugly blue, upon his shoulder.

“That – *thing* – was Ska. He caused all of this. I am so glad he is dead.”

Daniel blinked up at her. The pain disappeared as if by magic and when he put his hand to where he knew he had been hit, there was no blood, no shattered bone. He flexed his arm and stared in bewilderment.

“He – shot me. But you – “

She flickered red and her eye stalks bent towards him.

“I am a natural healer, Daniel. Some of my people, like Vree and Gly, can change their shapes. I can heal people. Now excuse me, I must attend to my captain.” She turned sorrowful again. “I regret Rav is beyond my help.”

“Rav? Oh ... I am sorry.” Helped by Jilly and Shirley, Daniel got to his feet slowly and followed the alien medico to where Dex was huddled low, moaning over Rav, who now lay still, all his colouration fading to a dull grey. She touched him consolingly and attended to Zolgoff. They all totally ignored Ska's remains.

At the firing, the townspeople who had started down the street came running back, horrified at the sight that met their eyes. The others had witnessed Ska's arrival and attack, and also the seemingly miraculous healing by Kadakkial of Daniel.

She and Zolgoff had a brief but low conversation in their own language, accompanied by much tentacle waving on both sides. Then Zolgoff, clearly no longer suffering from any injuries, called out.

“We will be leaving very soon. But before we go, I must ask a favour of you all.” His gaze lit on Tam, who had, according to Gly, been a total pain and annoyance during their time on the Dendrator. “All of you,” he emphasised.

“Go on,” Ross urged him, but it was Gly who, at his captain's urging, spoke for them all.

"If you had stayed on our ship for a little longer, we would have wiped your memories of everything that happened. But now, you all know about us, about our ships, and about who and what we are."

Jilly looked at him curiously.

"You want us all to keep our mouths shut, about everything?" she said.

Gly shook his head

"Not everything." He gave a crooked grin. "From what you all told me aboard our ship, many of your people do not believe in, ah, 'little green men'."

"That's true," Jilly conceded. "But, Gly, it's impossible for us all to say absolutely nothing about what happened. We will be asked questions by the Army, by the police, by the government and by our friends and relatives who didn't get the chance to meet you all. Not to mention people from the newspapers and radio station. Someone would slip up and talk about you." She indicated Ruth. "Not to mention her babies. Three days ago, before any of this happened, she was still pregnant."

Gly nodded. "Yes, that's all right. I'm only asking you to keep one secret. Vree."

The alien woman stepped up beside him. "I am not going home. I wish to stay here among you all."

Jilly grinned widely and applauded. "Great idea, Vree! You'll love it here."

"But," Gly continued, "You must not tell anyone about her. One day your people may reach out into the universe. You might even find us still around. But for the moment it's better that no one knows there is an alien among you."

"Yeah?" Tam scowled. "An' what's in it f'r us? Tell us that, mate!"

"You ungrateful little bastard!" snapped Laurel. She gave a surreptitious look at Zolgoff and the other Kruggah. "They're ugly as sin, but they're better people than you'll ever be!"

"Yes, indeed, Tam." Tom Goodsmith growled. "One bloody word from you, mate, and I'll shut off your booze supply. Permanently."

"You horrible man!" Ruth snapped. "I owe them a lot. They were kinder to me than you've ever been to anyone."

"And me, I owe them too." Serge stepped forward and addressed his friends. "You all know Lucia and me, we've been hoping for a baby." He shrugged expressively. "But without any luck so far." He turned red in embarrassment but continued. "I could, ah, do it okay, but, ah... "

"Shootin' blanks, were ya, mate?" Max suggested and the other nodded, relieved at being rescued.

“Yeah. But they fixed me. Lucia an’ me, we owe them, that’s for sure.” Serge fixed hard blue eyes on Tam. “So I reckon, Tam, if you say anything, having your booze cut off is gonna be the least of your worries. Got it?”

There was a babble of voices, all assuring Zolgoff they agreed.

Meredith Dane, her eyes shining, came forward from where she and Kadakkial had been carrying on a private conversation. From their demeanour, it had clearly ended well.

“While you were all gone, I made contact with the Army brigadier in charge of the area.” She went on to explain briefly what had happened to her and how she had been alone, with an invisible barrier preventing her from leaving. She looked at Daniel. “I wasn’t quite alone. Daniel was here too, but for, ah, reasons of his own we’re not going to mention that.”

“Hey, Mrs Dane, you can hear,” Shirley observed and Meredith beamed and nodded in delight.

“Right,” Jilly agreed and looked at all the others. “So, we woke up on their spaceship, they talked with us, Ruth had her babies, there was a mutiny and we all got put back down here. There was a bit of a fight and then – off they all went.” She gave Tam Blake a glare. “*All* of them, Mr Blake.”

“Yeah, right,” he muttered sullenly.

“Don’t be so bloody ungrateful, you lousy twerp.” They had all heard so little from Cyril Tonkins that they had almost forgotten he was there. The normally garrulous old man shoved at Tam angrily. “You had lung cancer developing and god knows what else wrong with you. They cured you. They cured us all. Keeping quiet about one small thing, er, person, sorry, miss, ain’t too much to ask, is it now?”

From the chorus of agreements, comments and muttered threats it was plain that if Tam Blake valued his well being, his booze supply and his life, he would bow to community pressure and, as Laurel put it, ‘shut his gob and keep it shut’.

Daniel frowned in concentration. “Ah, Vree? If you’re gonna stay, you’re gonna need to *be* someone.”

“What? But I *am* someone. Whatever do you mean?”

Meredith, aware of what was in his mind, smiled as the young man went on.

“Uh, I reckon, when the cops and the Army and all the others come inta town, they’re gonna know something weird musta happened to everyone. You’ll need t’ prove you belong here, somehow.”

“I’m not quite sure I understand.”

“Ah, he means you’ll need a birth certificate and things like that. You’re going to *look like* a human – “

“Oh, I’m going to *be* a human,” Vree assured them. “Kadakkial is going to lock my body into this shape. I will be human, just as human as you are.”

“You’re giving up an awful lot,” Ross observed. “Are you sure you want to do this? What if you change your mind after a while?”

“I won’t regret it,” she said. “And I’m not going to be the first of my people to make this choice. It has happened before. Not on this planet though,” she added hastily. “But this – birth certificate? Identification? Ah – “

Daniel grinned. “That,” he said, exchanging a meaningful look with Meredith, will not be a problem.”

## Chapter 89

*Meredith*

I was watching and listening.

Yes, listening!

Kadakkial had edged close to me after she dealt with her captain.

//Meredith?// I heard her voice in my mind. //We healed the other townspeople of their ills. When I healed Daniel from his wound I also ensured he was all right in every other way. Do you wish to be able to hear again?//

“I knew you were a healer and a medico, but I didn’t think you dealt in miracles.” I’m sure I sounded surly, but she glowed red and swirled her tentacles around her, in what had to be a gesture of glee.

//Not a miracle, Meredith. Just an ability.// There was brief sorrow in her mind. //If I dealt in miracles Rav would be alive.//

“Oh yes, then. I do want to be able to hear again.” I recalled John Lucas’s thought. *Beethoven, Mozart, the Beatles...* Although I wasn’t sure about the latter. I knew the name, but not the sound, except it seemed to drive teenage girls wild.

She – and oddly, repulsive as they had seemed at first sight, now I knew them better, the Kruggah were no longer ugly in my eyes – stretched out a long tentacle and wrapped it round my head. I felt a pressure and an instant of pain, and then –

“That wasn’t so bad then, was it?”

Her voice was wonderful; calm and gentle and with a very slight accent I would never be able to place. Impulsively, I hugged her. I had anticipated something slimy and repellent, but her body was firm and muscular.

“Thank you! I don’t know what else to say. That was – oh dear! Nimm!”

The ginger body was still warm as ran over and I lifted it in my arms, tears on my face. I felt a touch to my shoulder.

“Your cat?” asked Kadakkial, and I shook my head.

“No. He belongs – belonged – at the hotel. Tom Goodsmith says they’ve never seen a mouse or a rat since Nimm turned up. Poor Nimm. He was caught inside that barrier, too. He must have been hit when we were attacked. This is awful.”

“Give him to me.”

## Chapter 90

– ves.

*It’s true!*

## Chapter 91

*Meredith*

I almost laughed in delight. Nimm leapt from her arms and bolted in the direction of the hotel. But...

“You could bring Nimm back, but not Rav? That’s sad.”

“An animal,” she said slowly, “is different. And I don’t know why.”

“I’m sorry.”

She gave an alien shrug, a wavering of her upper tentacles as, like the others, she possessed neither neck nor shoulders. Daniel came up to me.

“You can hear again?”

“Yes.” I indicated Kadakkial. He smiled.

“Did she take away your, ah –?”

“No.” I paused. “In that bag of, ah, stuff, you have, would there be documentation for Vree?”

“Oh yes, I’m sure of it.” He grinned. “She won’t be able to call herself Vree, but I know there’s a set for a young woman there. I looked through them. Jilly and I had a chat with her. She can actually speak English, without need of that implant thingy. She said she’d been practising, while they were on the spaceship.” He considered. “I’m gonna stick all the rest in a big envelope and send ‘em back to the Twins.”

“What about their jewellery?” I asked and he shrugged.

“Dunno about that yet. I’ll think of something. And I’m gonna go straight, too.”

Well, I really didn’t need to see into his mind to know what had brought about that decision. Jilly was coming towards us, and when he smiled at her his whole face lit up. “I’ve got a reason now. More than one, actually.”

“Oh yes.” I’d forgotten, Jilly Daniels’ father was the local cop. They were going to have an interesting future.

Zolgoff called to his companions.

“Tartredd’s ship is overhead. We are leaving. Ah, one thing before we leave.” He produced the weapon with which he had killed Ska and glided over to where the dead alien lay. There was a flash of light and the body disappeared. Zolgoff swivelled and aimed at the life craft in which Ska had arrived. It also disappeared, although there was a charred area where it had been. “The best I can do,” he explained. Joanna and Travis ran to him.

“Wow! That was brilliant. Can I have that?” asked the latter and Zolgoff quickly concealed the weapon within his tentacles.

“I think not, young ones.”

Ross Davies hurried forward and grabbed Travis. “Sorry about that.”

Zolgoff laughed, his tentacles raised and red around his mouth and eyestalks.

“Young ones are the same all over the universe. Good bye to you all.”

The last they heard, as the small group of incredibly ugly aliens disappeared, Dex cradling the dead Rav, was Zolgoff’s voice.

“The barrier is down and your friends will wake up now.”

It was so. All over the grass people were stirring and waking. Joanna and Travis hurried to be near their parents when they woke, while Ruth, flanked by Laurel and Shirley, each holding a baby, settled herself beside her husband.

Jane Bealey, clutching the bundle of mail she had collected from Cyril Tonkin Monday afternoon, sat down and very deliberately tore up the letter she had read and reread while on the Dendrator.

Meredith chuckled at the young teacher’s thoughts.

*Bugger him, there’s lots more fish in the sea, Mum used to say.*

Tom Goodsmith started back towards the hotel. He was a widower and there was no one person he was waiting for to wake up. He was however certain he was going to be doing a brisk trade later that day. Nimm, he promised himself, was going to get the most delicious piece of fish he could find. Meredith had filled him in on the companionship the scruffy ginger cat had shown her, and his far too close brush with death at the hands of the late, very unlamented Ska.

Katie was still cuddling her young son, and when he opened his eyes and mouth and howled, she laughed down at him.

“Oh, darling, what an adventure your Mum’s had while you’ve been asleep.”

Emma and Max, carrying their young son, waved to Daniel. Engrossed as he was talking with Jilly, he barely noticed.

Ross Davies walked among the sleepers, checking out his staff and the children under his care. Joanna and Travis, keeping a watchful eye in the direction where their parents lay, trailed him and settled themselves near their friends, prepared gleefully to tell their stories, but mindful of the promise everyone had made regarding Vree.

## Chapter 92

### *Meredith*

I shut out my mind to all the chaos, greeting and bewildered delight behind me and started walking towards the Wolerin road. I didn’t have to go far. I could hear the approaching sounds of the Army vehicles, cars and buses. In my mind I could hear their thoughts. I listened carefully for the one I wished to hear over all, found it and stood waiting for Brigadier John Lucas to arrive. I was going to have a lot to tell him.

And a lot of time to tell it in.

the end

### Acknowledgements:

Aspects of this story; concepts, ideas, character traits, etc, have been borrowed freely from a host of science fiction stories, movies and TV series.

Some include Dr Who, Star Trek, Blake’s 7, Star Wars, Alien, Galaxy Quest (and a host of other movies and series) and such writers as Stephen King and Eric Frank Russell.

I did not deliberately plagiarise anyone’s writing, but the SF which I have absorbed over the years has most certainly influenced this tale.

This is never going to be published anyway. It is my 2011 NaNoWriMo effort and was lots of FUN.

Any errors are mine and not due to anyone else, although I did some research on certain aspects of the story in order to make the settings, both in Karrelin and on the space ships as realistic as possible. Where real people are named, no libel is intended.

I deliberately gave John Lucas the rank of Brigadier, whether or not it is correct. Karrelin was based on several country towns, among them Kulin and Carnamah.