

Empire - Book Four

A'chon

By Richard Allen Stotts

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Chapter One

A Royal Marriage

Daniel and Ellen were extremely nervous, so was the Archbishop of the Reformed Church. Mankind's Emperor and Miss Ellen Murphy had been living under the same roof for almost eight months now. Proper behavior had been observed by both young people but it wasn't easy to refrain from what the two of them ached for. Despite chaperons and separate living quarters there were whispered speculations across the breadth of the Empire. The Archbishop wasn't told specifically why he had been asked to the Summer Palace, he did have a good idea about what request might be forthcoming.

"Thank you so very much for coming here, your Grace. Please be quite at ease with no ceremony." Daniel began.

"I am always honored to be at your service, Your Majesty." The elderly cleric had bowed deeply and was indeed honored, despite past friction between the Emperor and himself.

"This is Miss Ellen Murphy, Sir Ian's sister." Daniel introduced the pretty girl at his side.

"I know, Sire. All of the Empire knows her beauty. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Murphy."

Ellen managed a passable blush at the old man's very large compliment.

"Come and sit and be comfortable, We have a matter of some importance to discuss with you." Daniel motioned toward the sitting room just off the formal reception area.

The Emperor, Sir Ian Murphy and his twin sister Ellen had all turned fifteen within a few weeks of each other. In the Free Trader society that was Daniel's origin marriages were often arraigned and took place as early as fourteen years of age. In the mainstream society of the New Empire such early unions were generally frowned upon, the age of twenty was considered an appropriate age. There were no laws concerning the age of marriage, indeed there were few laws pertaining to any matters of marriage. Incest and same sex unions were forbidden, that was about it as far as the Empire cared. Still, there were certain conventions, especially when the marriage of an Emperor was concerned.

After taking a seat as requested the Archbishop began the conversation.

"Master Jeremy and Miss Alexandra, how are they progressing Sire?"

"Good. They are becoming more independent of each another," Daniel replied, "but We think that perhaps they will always be a part of each other's lives. Thank you for asking."

"Let us arrive at the purpose for my being here, Sire. With respect, I can see your discomfort and I am an old man who prefers not to waste your time or my own."

Ellen and Daniel glanced at one another, here it comes.

"Miss Ellen and Ourselves intend to wed, soon. To come directly to the point the two of us would very much like the blessing of the church."

The Archbishop only nodded and remained silent for a moment before responding.

"You both are still so very young, Sire. There is the matter of Miss Ellen's parents and of their approval."

"We have known each another for more than four years now, we have been through a great deal, both of us. Her parents are...they do not even want us to be together at all. We will not be parted, we intend a life together with or without the approval of the Church or the Empire. We mean no disrespect to Your Grace in any event."

"No offense is taken, Sire. It is still a difficult position that Your Majesty puts the Church in."

"Why? Ellen and Ourselves love each other and always will." Daniel knew that this would be a difficult meeting, he was right.

"There are... conventions." The Archbishop replied.

"We are two humans who love and honor one another. How would God look upon us?" Ellen asked.

"With favor, I think." The Archbishop answered simply.

"And how do you look upon us?" Daniel asked.

"The church cannot sanction such a union until a more acceptable age is attained. I pray that both of you can understand this."

"We do not." The Emperor's eyes had narrowed just a bit as he answered, the faint scar on his face reddened, something that did not escape the Archbishop's attention.

"May I be so bold as to ask what Your Majesty now intends?"

"If we are forced to there will be a civil or maritime marriage."

"And Miss Ellen's parent's, if I may ask Sire?"

"They... They do not even approve of Ellen or Sir Ian being in Our presence, they will never approve of our marriage." It was a hard thing to say, but there it was.

"I am so very sorry, Your Majesty."

"Thank you for coming on such short notice, your Grace."

The Emperor stood abruptly, as did Ellen. The Archbishop of the Reformed Church rose as quickly as his age allowed. The cleric had hoped to bring up a possible funding contribution for the new cathedral on Elysium, but not now. In times long past certain English kings might have instead asked for someone to rid them of this troublesome priest.

The audience was over, a complete failure.

While the meeting took place Ian was down at the lake with Jeremy and Alex, both of the youngsters greatly enjoyed messing about in the antique rowboat. Alex became silent for a moment, the smile gone from her face.

"What's wrong, Sweetpie?" Ian asked.

"Daniel's unhappy. The church man said no."

Ian had by now come to accept the small girl's talent, the news was not unexpected. Ian's unspoken opinion of the Archbishop contained multiple expletives.

The evening meal was not very festive at all, Ellen had her heart set on a real church wedding, perhaps one with even her parents present.

Ian tried to lighten the mood some. "Why don't the five of us all climb up to the overlook and just hurl ourselves off?"

"Only if the Archbishop comes along," Daniel finally smiled a little.

"It's not like we were asking the Archbishop for sainthood or something!" Ellen said with a little bite in her voice.

"What's done is done," Daniel concluded, "we have a quiet civil ceremony or perhaps a shipboard wedding, or we live in awful, go-to-hell sin."

Ellen finally added her own smile to the evening, she would marry Daniel if they had to wear mud and feathers and sacrifice a goat under a full moon.

Ian shifted the conversation to another subject altogether.

"The work on N35467 is finally getting some results, Professor Hyde really wants me to come and have a look at the A'chon control ruins, so do the naval research people."

"No!" Daniel's answer was short and to the point. "It's too damned dangerous there! I nearly got vaporized by those 'ruins' the last time we were there. Besides, the animals tried to eat everyone."

"Ease up," Ian countered, "they have a complete powered perimeter around the place and enough marines and Falcons to hold off the entire Snake civilization! Starling is still there, his nastiness will fend off anything."

"Why not set up a shield to keep out the local beasties?" Ellen asked.

"There might be some sort of interference effect with the still functional A'chon devices." Ian prattled off into matters that would give a normal intellect migraines for a week.

"I need a best man to stand beside me," Daniel interrupted, "perhaps after the wedding you could go. With a marine escort, maybe with all of the marines."

"So when are you two going to work up the nerve to be husband and boss?" Ian asked with a wicked grin.

Daniel and Ellen looked at each another for a moment before the Emperor came to a sudden decision.

"This Saturday, aboard the flagship of the Blue Fleet." Daniel had the ability to reach quick and certain decisions. Ellen's eyes went to full wide at this news.

"So soon?" Ellen squeaked (the girl tended to squeak in moments of stress).

"Cold feet?" Daniel teased.

"I have very warm feet," Ellen replied in a mock-sulky voice, "which you will find out about after Saturday."

Daniel reddened a little, Ian nearly choked on his pudding. Jeremy and Alex didn't quite

understand but erupted into giggles anyway.

"But what about Jacob and Stephanie?" Ellen asked on a more serious note.
"Their baby is due very soon, we could wait another month or so if you want to."
"No. I'm tired of waiting, they'll understand, I know that Stephanie will anyway."
"So will Jacob," Daniel agreed, "he hates ceremonies anyway."

Meanwhile.....

N35467

"God-damn this stinking ball of moldy green shit!" Starling had thought that his first assignment as a Senior Flight Lieutenant might be just a little better than this pest-hole. Even the things that passed for insects on this planet had oversized teeth and an attitude problem, the one that had just bitten Starling on his neck looked like a miniature vampire bat. Starling vowed to put in yet another request for a reassignment. Anywhere.

The Summer Palace

Daniel and company had just settled in the sitting room after dinner when the security duty officer entered the room and bowed.

"Pardon my intrusion, Your Majesty."

"What is it, Major?" Daniel asked.

"Sire, there is a chartered passenger shuttle requesting permission to land, it is waiting just outside the palace's restricted zone."

"And...?" This didn't seem to be a matter for the Emperor.

"Sire, the pilot says that Elizabeth Murphy and her daughter Mary are aboard. Sir Ian and Miss Ellen's mother apparently."

There was a moment of silence in the room as everyone tried to come to grips with this sudden turn of events, then they all tried to speak at once. Daniel finally called for quiet and spoke again to the officer.

"Grant permission to land at once."

"Yes Sire. Please, if you will, let our security people first verify who is aboard the shuttle when it lands."

"Of course, you have their photos and such in your security files."

"Yes Sire, we shall be as quick as possible."

The marine bowed again and left quickly.

"She never said she was coming, and where's father?" Ellen asked with some alarm.

Daniel looked down at Alex with an unspoken question.

"Dono," Alex answered simply, she hadn't a clue. Even a Talent sometimes draws a blank.

"Let's go on down to the receiving area and wait." Ian's suggestion stirred them all into action, there were a thousand questions to be answered.

The instant the small charter craft sat down on the stone landing area it was surrounded by fifty Alert Force marines, each had a beam rifle aimed at the shuttle. Heavier weapons some distance away had also locked onto the unscheduled arrival. Recent events had resulted in

security measures that left little to chance. The craft's pilot was very much regretting taking this fare and prayed that the woman was who she said she was.

"Jesus, lady! I sure hope you know these people!"

"I do," Elizabeth Murphy answered with some pride, "now please open the door."

The pilot did as requested and was immediately staring down the barrel of Lieutenant Baka's very impressive pistol.

"Step outside, everyone! Do exactly as instructed in all matters!"

"No problem." The pilot was the first to carefully exit, then Elizabeth and Mary. Harsh lights bathed the entire area as Baka held up photos of the Murphy women to compare them with the unexpected visitors. Fingerprints were next.

"Please place your palm on the scanner, ma'am."

The device beeped once and glowed green.

"Welcome to the Summer Palace, ma'am. We do apologize for the weapons and all."

"Thank you, no apology is needed. May I see my children now?"

Baka's earpiece caused him to turn and gesture toward the approaching group of people. Elizabeth remembered to bow to the Emperor before embracing her son and daughter. Daniel stood back a little as tears flowed and hugs were exchanged between the Murphy's. Alex and Jeremy stood very close to the Emperor, it seemed a moment of both happiness and sadness.

After a time Daniel moved forward to greet the woman, it was awkward at first when he extended his hand, unsure of how she felt toward him.

"A handshake won't do, come here." Elizabeth Murphy embraced mankind's absolute ruler in a tight hug, one that was returned in kind. When they stood apart, Daniel's eyes were also leaking.

"Where is Mister...?"

"John is, well we had a parting of the ways about you and our family, I wanted to see my children. May we go inside and talk, it's been a very long day?"

"Of course, I forget my manners."

Daniel picked up little Mary (who was getting bigger) and welcomed her with a hug before they all moved inside. Alex and Jeremy had a new playmate.

The shuttle's pilot managed to unload the luggage under the watchful eyes of the marines, he promised himself several stiff drinks if he ever made it home alive.

Ellen (and several dozen of the palace staff) helped her mother and little sister to settle into their own rooms before everyone (the little ones were packed off to bed) sat down for a very long and very private talk. Where to begin?

"John was doing what he thought was best for his family, for a time I thought he was right." Elizabeth Murphy looked close to tears.

"Mother, we know that." Ellen answered softly, "no one feels badly toward either of you. We do feel bad that Ian and I had to sneak away like we did."

"I knew from the very first that you and Daniel were intended for one another," Elizabeth continued, "John can be so stubborn when he gets his mind wrapped around something. We haven't separated or anything like that, I just needed to be with you all for a while."

"We intend to marry," Daniel said.

"Of course, I knew that in time..."

"Saturday." Daniel added gently.

"Oh." The woman seemed taken very off guard, who would not be?

"The Archbishop won't sanction our being married," Daniel continued, "he says that we are too young. My mother was Ellen's age when she married my father. We need to be married,

very much."

"Have you.... forgive me, but...?" The woman tried to ask a most delicate question.

"No mother," Ellen replied, "we have behaved ourselves."

"They are flesh and blood, mother!" Ian interjected. "Flesh and blood has limits. I know my flesh and blood does."

"What do...?" The woman looked at her son with a question on her face.

"It's not important. Daniel and Ellen are going to be married this Saturday, will you stand with them?"

It did Elizabeth Murphy great credit that she could finally gather her wits enough to answer her son.

"Yes. I will be honored to."

There were uncounted arrangements to be made in the next few days, one of the first was a very private meeting between The Emperor, Ellen and the Royal Physician.

"Are you well, Sire?" Doctor Flynn asked with some concern, no announcement had been made yet of the impending wedding.

"We are fine, so is Ellen." Daniel paused for a moment, a little embarrassed. "Ellen and Myself are to be wed, this Saturday. We need..."

"Conception inoculations." Ellen finished Daniel's awkward request.

Doctor Flynn wasn't easily surprised, this day he was. "I see. As your physician Sire, I must ask some very personal questions, may I?"

"Of course."

"Have you and Miss Ellen had sexu..."

"No. We take a lot of very cold showers, that can't last much longer." Daniel grinned slightly at his own openness.

"Indeed not, Sire." It was Flynn's turn to smile. "How long do you wish to delay any chance of conception?"

"We thought for three years at least. We both know that we are marrying very young, there is plenty of time for children later." Daniel looked at Ellen, it was something that they had talked of in private many times.

"I think that is a very wise decision on both of your parts," Flynn replied. "I will calibrate the injections for three years. If either of you have any 'problems' do not hesitate to consult with me. I am a physician, there is no subject that you should ever hesitate to ask me about."

"Thank you, Doctor." Daniel and Ellen rose, as did the doctor. One small 'arrangement' had been taken care of.

The wedding of an Emperor was never a state occasion, but was always a private affair. Ellen would be receiving no official title other than the courtesy of being addressed as "The Lady Ellen." This is not to say that when the official announcement of the pending wedding was made public that it was received with little comment or excitement. The media went berserk. Public opinion was fairly evenly divided between approval and disapproval. Everyone who had ever met Daniel or Ellen were seen to be in an excessively good mood. Even Starling managed a rather crooked grin when he learned the news.

Ellen's father was best avoided by everyone on the farm. Ellen's older brother Freddie went to stay with the neighbors for the time being and was considering enlisting in the Imperial Marines.

James Evan Kincaid, Admiral of the Blue, had never performed any sort of wedding ceremony. Now he had to officiate at the marriage of an Emperor. Admiral Kincaid was not a happy man, he was a very worried man.

"They say that His Majesty is very informal and easy to speak with, sir." Captain Trevor offered his encouragement to the Admiral.

"All the same I would rather face the Snakes with just a stick to fight with." Kincaid replied.

"The ceremony is really quite simple, sir." Trevor continued, "The men will be well rehearsed, Triton will be gleaming from bow to stern."

"I still have the most awful feeling that I shall forget the words to say."

"Crib notes, sir." Trevor suggested.

"What?"

"In the Book of Prayers, sir. Paste in the words you need to say."

"Good idea."

The Summer Palace

Elizabeth Murphy had shifted into full Mother-Mode. To save time Ellen and her mother made a quick trip to Paris for a private fitting for the wedding dress. The designer struck a balance between simplicity and elegance, the small diamonds flowing in a pattern down the silk gown were as real as they appeared to be. Ellen fretted that the short train of the snow white gown might get soiled on the deck of the warship she was to wed in, not to worry though, the deck would be suitable for performing surgery on.

Daniel took Ellen and her mother to the Sun Palace and then down deep into the bowels of the ancient castle. Where the Imperial jewels were kept.

"Pick out something nice for a necklace," Daniel suggested, "both of you."

Ellen and her mother were wide-eyed and open-mouthed at what they were looking at. In any direction you cared to look everything glittered. The wealth of an Empire was literally at their feet.

"Holy shit!" Ellen squeaked. Her mother did not think to chide her daughter for her language.

"The first time I was down here I kept having the urge to stuff things into my pockets, then I remembered that it all belonged to me anyway." Daniel explained.

In the end Ellen settled on a 'modest' necklace of white diamonds with a pendant consisting of a flawless blue diamond the size of....well it was very big. Elizabeth Murphy dearly loved pearls, the strand she selected was simply amazing.

There was the matter of the rings. Both Daniel and Ellen's parents had wed with simple gold bands and that was what their children easily decided upon.

Alex and Mary would be flower girls, Jeremy would bear the rings. In times past the rings were carried on a satin pillow, this tradition had changed during the years of chaos. Jeremy would be carefully carrying the rings on the upright tip of a very sharp stiletto, symbolizing that marriage was a most serious undertaking that sometimes had sharp edges. The children took their practice sessions most serious, especially Jeremy who felt very grown up and manly carrying the sinister looking ring knife.

And then it was time to wed.

HMS Triton - Orbiting Earth

Everything that could take a shine had been polished, the crew included. Everyone, including those at regular duty posts, wore their dress uniforms. Admiral Kincaid stood with over one-thousand naval and marine personnel on the main hanger deck, the Emperor would be the first to arrive.

"Attention on deck! Empire arriving!"

As Daniel stepped down from the Imperial shuttle there was the sound of a thousand men snapping to attention. The Emperor wore the formal uniform of state, gold filigree on both black shoulders, all of the medals so hard won in defense of mankind. In Daniel's right hand was the Imperial scepter, an object seen in person by very few.

Sir Ian was next to set foot on the deck, he wore the dress uniform of a naval ensign (retired), the silver filigree of an Imperial Knight was on his right shoulder. Ian fell into step two paces to the rear of the Emperor as they slowly made their way between the ranks of marines and naval ratings. Not a sound was heard until the Emperor and Sir Ian reached the small altar where Admiral Kincaid stood. Daniel turned and faced the ranks, a thousand men bowed as one in respect to their Emperor, Ian included.

"Welcome aboard Triton on this best of days, Your Majesty." Kincaid felt remarkably calm, all things considered.

"Thank you, Admiral. We do appreciate all of the effort you and your men have put forth."

Precisely on time, the shuttle carrying the Emperor's bride-to-be touched down on Triton's deck. A thousand battle tested men failed to suppress smiles as two little girls exited first and as they had practiced and began dropping rose petals from the baskets they carried. Three cheers of welcome greeted Ellen as she carefully stepped down to the deck, she seemed to glow with a white light in the sea of blue and khaki.

Jeremy was next, he was dressed in a miniature rating's naval uniform, the ring knife held firmly and proudly upright in his small right hand, two gold bands pierced by the keen tip of the blade.

Arched dress swords sheltered Ellen on her way to the altar, her mother followed behind Jeremy with a pride only a mother could feel. At last they all met before the altar where Daniel took his bride's hand as they knelt for the prayer. Ian took the scepter into his left hand, no one but the Emperor could hold it in the right hand. The ship had members from all of mankind's religions but they all joined in the simple prayer for the two people who were being wed this day. Then it was time to say the ancient words.

"Do you, Daniel Grayson of Gryphon, take Ellen Wallace Murphy of New Albion to be....."

"Do you, Ellen Wallace Murphy....."

They did.

The rings were taken from the knife, Jeremy never so much as blinked.

They kissed.

Daniel Grayson and Ellen Murphy were made man and wife.

His Imperial Majesty and The Lady Ellen.

Chapter Two

Gateway

The Sun Palace

"Thank you for this." Daniel was having a final word with Ian before departing on his honeymoon with Ellen, The Lady Ellen, his wife.

"I never thought I would want to set foot on that place again, but what Professor Hyde has sent is beyond amazing. I'll content myself with studying his recordings and notes until you two get back." Ian replied.

"Two weeks. It means a lot to me that you'll stay with Alex and Jeremy, you and your mother."

"You be good to my sister," Ian looked Daniel square in the eye.

"I have to, she's the boss now." How could he not be good to her.

Ellen and Daniel's only wish for a honeymoon was to be left the hell alone, away from everyone and everything. The tiny atoll in the South Pacific fit every part of the bill. No air or surface vessel would be allowed within fifty miles, nothing short of the end of mankind would interrupt their time together.

They stood on the white sand beach watching the departing shuttle, the sun would be down in another hour. The pilot and crew had been unable to hide their grins as they transported the very young newlyweds to this small piece of paradise.

"It's quite warm here." Ellen finally said.

"I think we overdressed for this place," Daniel added.

They remedied that mistake and went for a swim in the clear water of the lagoon. Then it was time to be together.

Daniel was so very afraid that he might hurt his dear Ellen, she so afraid that she might not please her Emperor. They were very tentative at first, awkward and unskilled in the ways of love.

They learned.

Very well indeed.

The atoll had one man-made structure, it had three rooms and a view that extended to the horizon. Water was imported and stored below ground in a huge cistern, power was a small converter likewise out of sight. Food was simple and easily prepared, stocked in an enormous cold locker. A communications link was built into the bedroom wall. Both Ellen and Daniel wore small pendants around their necks in case of trouble, open them and press the tiny stud and all of the Empire would come charging over the horizon to the rescue.

There would be no trouble, for at least this one time.

Almost none, Ellen cut her right foot on some coral on the fourth day.

**"Shit!" The girl had by now taken up some of the language of Daniel and her brother.
"What's wrong?" Daniel was poking around for shells in the shallow water as he looked up at his new wife.**

"I cut my damn foot! Oww!"

Daniel was at her side in an instant, he knelt to examine the injured appendage.

"It needs sterilizing and a wound closure. A doctor."

"No! There's a first aid box in the bungalow."

"Sorry, this needs some actual doctoring," Daniel replied, "let's get back and call for some help."

Ellen didn't like the idea of an 'intruder' on their island but Daniel picked her up anyway and carried her to the small beach house, feeling very husband-like in the process.

"We should probably put some clothes on." Ellen suggested after Daniel had made the call to Fleet Communications.

"Oh! I think you're right." Daniel agreed. Paradise made one forget about such things.

The doctor was gone in fifteen minutes, Ellen's foot was slightly numb as she cuddled up next to her hero and whispered to him. A soft late afternoon rain was falling outside, thunder murmured in the far distance.

"I do love you."

"Why?" Daniel asked gently.

"I'm not sure, maybe it's that little birthmark on your cute butt."

"Just that?"

"Pretty much, that and all of those jewels in the palace basement."

"And I do love you." Daniel responded in kind.

"Why?"

"Your mother taught you how to cook and I'm starved."

Whack!

Dinner could wait for a while, there were other matters at hand.

The Sun Palace

"Why so many smiles, Sweet Pie?" Ian asked.

"Ellen and Daniel are really happy!"

"Slow down! What are they up to?" Perhaps not Ian's best thought out question.

Alex just grinned all the more and ran off with Jeremy to the play room, a trail of her giggles in their wake.

"Oh. Stupid question," Ian decided. And it was.

N35467

Professor Hyde and the naval research team knew that they were in the presence of enormous power and a technology beyond their immediate understanding. Perhaps it would always be beyond their understanding.

"It all centers around the disk," Hyde began, "but what does the disk actually do?"

The naval commander at his side said nothing, it would have been a wild guess anyway. The 'disk' they were talking about sat shimmering in the morning sunlight, it seemed to be a solid

slab of iron at least ten meters thick (eight meters of it underground) with a diameter of over two hundred meters. Its surface was polished beyond mirror bright and despite being pure iron it had never rusted in the more than eight thousand years that it had rested here.

"Sir Ian will be here in another three weeks, maybe that amazing brain of his can sort this out."

The Atoll, Earth

Daniel and Ellen had joked about building a raft and sailing away to an island unknown to the Empire. The two weeks were over, the young couple had nothing to show for the time except very dark and even tans, that and a love that could never be ended.

"Well, back to work," Daniel sighed as the shuttle appeared on the horizon.

"We will always be together now," Ellen whispered, "that sounds so very good."

"Keep your wits about you, you are the Emperor's wife now, that too holds great power in it's own way."

Ellen did know that, it frightened her some.

The shuttle's pilot was chosen for his skill, the craft barely disturbed the white sand as it landed. The crew chief in dress tropical whites lowered the ramp and stood to attention beside it as the Emperor and the Lady Ellen approached.

"At your service Your Majesty, My Lady Ellen."

"Is the Empire still in one piece?" Daniel asked as they boarded.

"It is indeed, Your Majesty."

"Then let's go home."

The Summer Palace

"My God, your father is here!" Daniel whispered as they left the shuttle.

"Oh shit!" Ellen held tighter to her Emperor, what now?

Prince Jacob and his wife (no longer pregnant), Ellen's mother and father, Mary, Jeremy and Alex and of course Ian all bowed in respect to their ruler. It fell to Jacob to speak first, he stood some distance in front of the group.

"Welcome home Your Majesty, Lady Ellen."

"Thank you, it's good to be back, I think."

"Mister Murphy arrived four days ago," Jacob said quietly, "there have been words between his family, Sire."

"Words?" Daniel asked just as softly.

"I believe it's been sorted out, peace if you will, Sire."

"I see. And Stephanie?"

"A baby girl, Sire. We named her Ashely, after my grandmother."

"Outstanding! Let's go face the music now."

John Murphy had finally yielded to the way that things simply were. It had been a mistake to think that he could in any way alter the course of history, his family and the Empire were forever linked now. Make the best of it and get on with life. He was the last to be greeted by the Emperor, Lady Ellen stood at Daniel's side as he spoke. Ian had given a quick whisper of

encouragement to the Emperor that all was better now.

"It's good to see you again, sir."

"It's good to see the both of you," John Murphy replied, "you both look so very good. Tanned too."

Ellen couldn't restrain herself any longer and moved forward to hug her father. There was a spot of gray at the man's temple that Daniel hadn't noticed before.

"I... Can the two of you forgive me?" John Murphy asked.

"Only if you can forgive us," Daniel replied.

"There is nothing to forgive, you belong together."

Daniel's answer was to embrace the rough hewn man of the land, so much time together had been squandered on hurt feelings. The Emperor then looked around at the small group of people.

"Where's Freddie?"

"He enlisted in the Imperial Marines, that's what finally made me see the light."

"I could cancel his..." Daniel began.

"No. He really wanted to, let him have his own life."

Daniel nodded in agreement, there had been enough of interference.

That evening the Emperor and The Lady Ellen sat at opposite ends of the polished ebony dining table, as tradition dictated. All of the family were present, save for baby Ashely. It was a very good welcome back from a honeymoon. Daniel steered the conversation away from the honeymoon (no one's business) and asked Jacob about his time learning the trade.

"I don't think I made any major blunders," Jacob began, "I got a very good price for the Imperial Jewels."

"Magic beans?" Daniel asked with a smile. The ancient child's story had survived history almost intact.

"Five in fact, I am a little worried that the beanstalk hasn't sprouted yet."

"He's fibbing!" Alex interjected with a giggle.

"Indeed!" Daniel said in mock surprise.

"And to think that these two are in charge of humanity," Ellen sighed.

On a more serious note the Prince brought up the subject that had been bothering him now for almost a week.

"The Minister for Military Procurement submitted the contract for the new standard issue beam rifle, the Brieling Ultralight."

"And?" Daniel had thought the issue was already decided.

"I have held off signing in your stead, the weapon's a piece of sh... junk in my opinion. Something smells bad about the whole submission."

"It's an enormous contract." Daniel said.

"If you could spare some time you should speak with the enlisted men in the test battalion, away from any officers. Perhaps I am overstepping my position on this."

"Not at all, you know more about marine weapons than I ever will. We'll zip over to Camp Ferris tomorrow afternoon, unannounced." Daniel could see that Jacob Asher was a troubled man.

John Murphy sat listening to Daniel and Jacob as the dinner progressed. He had never until this quiet moment fully realized the extent of power and responsibility that resided in the boy who sat at the head of the table. He did now. Ellen sat just as quiet during the conversation between her new husband and the Prince, her pride could not be concealed.

"So are you prepared for the coronation?" Daniel finally asked.

"Oh Lord!" Jacob paled visibly at that question.

No one was ever ready for that.

"At least I'll be spared that!" Ian said with real glee.

"Why?" Daniel demanded.

"The supply mission to '67 leaves in three days, I'm to be part of the cargo."

Daniel's eyes narrowed a little, he didn't like the idea at all but he had said that Ian could go when the honeymoon was over. The Empire did keep it's word, so did the Emperor.

"They have the whole A'chon complex completely secure now," Ian explained, "there's no danger from the animals now."

"The ruins still have power, keep your wits about you," Daniel replied.

"I intend to. Professor Hyde's report on the central control building seems to suggest that it's some sort of communications system or perhaps even a transport center."

"Transport?" Ellen asked.

"Maybe a way of shifting material objects, or people even, across great distances."

"Is that possible?" Jacob asked.

"It is if they did it, we haven't a clue right now if it can be done."

"There's one thing about that place I have never understood," Daniel said.

"What's that?" Ian asked.

"The animals. Why is the place swarming with such nasty wildlife?"

"It is pretty apparent that the A'chon did not colonize the planet in the way we might. Professor Hyde thinks they just used the planet for a sort of way station, they probably had barriers to keep the fauna out and then just ignored them."

"There is the one nasty thing that you will still have to be very careful of," Daniel warned.

"What's that?" Ian and everyone else were all ears.

"I believe that Starling is still there."

After the laughter had died down Ian suggested that perhaps Lieutenant Starling had served long enough on N35467 and could be rotated home.

"Then he would be on this planet," Daniel argued.

"Not if he is 'assigned' elsewhere." Ian said.

"I'll contact Fleet tomorrow." Daniel decided.

John Murphy held his tongue about Ian's trip to N35467, he didn't like the idea at all but had come to realize that his son was now in charge of his own life. A parent has to let go sooner or later, it had come sooner to Ian's father.

Camp Ferris, Australian Continent

"I think we just passed the headquarters building," Jacob Asher said.

"I know, let's set down over there at that firing range, there's some marines using it right now." Daniel was piloting the Imperial shuttle, he always did if the situation permitted. Camp Ferris had no prior warning that the Emperor and the soon to be Prince would be arriving this day. Surprise visits always revealed more of the truth about any military installation than formal, preplanned inspections.

"Let's talk with the non-commissioned people first, if need be you run interference for me."

"Understood." Asher had grown to like Daniel more as each day passed, today was no exception. The two of them thought a great deal alike. There were two escort shuttles in the

Imperial flight, security would never again be taken for granted no matter what the situation.

As it turned out there were no officers present at the firing range, just four disgusted Gunnery Sergeants and eighty of their charges.

"The fucking brass ought to have these piece of shit rifles shoved up their fat asses."

Sergeant Cruz was not a happy marine. The other marine standing next to him interrupted Cruz's opinion of things in general and pointed to the area behind where they stood. A polished black shuttle bearing the gold Imperial crest had just settled silently to the dusty ground.

"I'll be dipped in dog shit," Cruz croaked. (This expression has existed in one form or another for as long as men have worn uniforms).

"Yeah, me too," Sergeant Sluzarski agreed.

Imperial Marines of the royal security forces fanned out from the other two shuttles as the Emperor and Lieutenant Asher stepped out of the black shuttle. Cruz bellowed for a cease fire on the range and ordered all of the men to unload and stand to attention at their firing positions. Daniel was the first to speak as he reached the Gunnery Sergeants.

"Pardon our intrusion, Sergeant. We wanted to get some honest opinions about the Brieling."

Cruz and Sluzarski had snapped to attention and saluted as the Emperor had approached, Cruz now found himself shaking hands with the God Almighty Emperor and wondering if he should have bowed instead.

"Your Majesty..." Cruz's mouth seemed to be jammed.

"Be at ease, sergeant. We only need your opinion, not your head."

"Yes Your... Sire."

"Is it any good?" Daniel asked.

"Sire?" Cruz asked in a fog of confusion.

"The rifle, Sergeant. Is the Brieling any good, speak the truth."

"It's a total piece of horse crap, Sire." Cruz couldn't believe he had just said that to mankind's ruler.

Daniel and Asher looked at one another, it would seem that the official reports on the weapon were less than candid.

"Explain," Asher commanded.

"Sir, the weapon is very light and easy to carry. It's light and easy to carry because it's stock is made out of too thin composites, it breaks. The barrel is too small in overall diameter to dissipate heat fast enough. The charging circuitry can't handle high G-loading, it stops firing if you drop it on a hard surface. It won't hold a pattern for crap, throwing rocks is more accurate. I could go on all day, sir."

Daniel and Asher looked at one another again, they seemed to have found someone who had a working acquaintance with the truth.

"Let's have a look at one, please put your men at ease." Daniel said to Cruz.

"Stand easy!" Cruz had a voice that cut bend steel. "Preston! Bring your weapon!" A very rattled private did as ordered and fairly flew through the air to comply.

Daniel took the rifle from the open-mouthed Preston and tested it's heft and feel.

"It doesn't feel right," was the Emperor's first opinion. Daniel wasn't an expert on small arms but the weapon just didn't have the correct balance and 'sense of purpose' that it should. It felt cheap. It was cheap.

The Emperor, with Cruz's coaching, fired the rifle at the two hundred meter target. Daniel had an inborn ability to fire anything at a target and hit what he aimed at, the dead monsters on N35467 proved that, so did countless deceased Snakes. Despite careful aim and a steady hand

Daniel was unable to hold a proper pattern. Throwing rocks was indeed just as accurate, more so.

"You're right, Sergeant. It is indeed a piece of horse crap."

Daniel had just made both Cruz and Slusarski very happy men.

A marine utility flyer landed as Daniel was speaking to Cruz and Slusarski, the base commander had finally gotten wind about who had stopped for a visit.

"Men, if anyone asks you about what we talked about here today we were discussing the quality of new recruits," Daniel explained, "this weapon will never see service on Our watch."

"God bless you, Sire!" Cruz meant it, he had seen men die in battle, he knew what an honest weapon was and the one they had been training with was a liar.

Daniel explained to Brigadier General Wallace that they had just stopped on an impulse and that they had to be on their way to a meeting. Wallace had no say in the choice of the new rifle and was an honest officer. The Minister For Military Procurement was not so honest and would soon be standing before his Emperor to explain himself.

The Sun Palace

It was time for Ellen's parents to return home to New Albion. A peace had been made between them, a peace between everyone.

"You will come to visit?" John Murphy asked as they stood by the shuttle.

"Soon, and often," Daniel replied, "we are family and always will be."

"When you do come I'll put you all to honest work, there's new acreage to prepare for a first planting."

They parted on far better terms than the last time.

Ian left two days later for N35467, Daniel had lectured him endlessly about being careful.

"I may be there for some time, there's so much to study and to try and understand," Ian explained.

"I want weekly reports from you and that is an order!" Daniel looked his 'brother' in the eye, he meant what he said.

"Yes, Your Sireness." Ian could follow orders, he always had.

"Then get going before I change my mind." Daniel embraced the person who had been through so very much with him, Ian's sister did the same.

"Brush your teeth on Sundays and put on clean underwear at least every other week," Ellen teased as she hugged her brother.

"If you insist," Ian replied, "don't boss the Emperor around too much, he's already henpecked as it is."

And then he too was gone.

The coronation of Jacob Asher would be in one week, in the meantime there was the matter of a corrupt Imperial Minister to attend to.

"Sums totalling eight-million Imperial dollars have been deposited into three separate accounts held by Minister Watts. All of the deposits have been traced to companies and accounts under the control of Brieling Industries."

Daniel and Jacob were being briefed by Senior Agent Mary Sethwasi.

"There is no doubt in this matter?" Daniel asked.

"No Sire. The transfers were very well shielded, but not well enough. It's all documented in

the report."

"Arrest Minister Watts, bring him before Us. Arrest the Chairman of Brieling Industries and do the same."

"Yes Sire, at once."

"What would you do with them?" Daniel asked.

"My first impulse would be to have them both shot, with a Brieling." Jacob replied. "In truth I don't really know what to do with them."

"But you do. You just said so." The Emperor's answer chilled Asher. Watts was a dead man, so was Brieling's Chairman. Jacob came to realize that the friendly boy who had named him a Prince of The Empire had another side altogether.

"You placed your own personal gain before the lives of good men who would die for the Empire if need be. How do you answer this?"

Minister Watts and Brieling's Chairman, Allen Caruthers, stood in the Great Court of The Empire facing their Emperor. Neither man could offer an explanation to His Majesty that even a small child would believe.

Ellen and Stephanie had wanted to be present to watch these proceedings, they stood quietly out of sight of the assembled Knights and dignitaries. Both young women learned some more about whom they had wed as a decision was offered. Jacob read the Emperor's simple, hand written verdict.

"Your lives are forfeit, your property is confiscated, your names are dishonored forever."

Thirty minutes later both men were executed. There was no appeal process after being judged by the Emperor.

Fifteen-foot tall pikes of oak and steel would be placed in front of both the Ministry of Military Procurement and the headquarters of Brieling Industries. You know very well what would rest atop those pikes. It was an example that greatly discouraged those who would place personal gain before the good of the Empire.

A request for new submissions for a marine service rifle was sent out by the new Minister For Military Procurement.

Sergeants Cruz and Slusarski were promoted two grades.

Jacob Asher was finally installed as a Prince of The New Empire, the ceremony was the greatest ordeal the Lieutenant had ever faced (at least he thought it was). Leaders of all of the major faiths had read prayers at certain points in the rite, even the Archbishop of The Reformed Church. No crown is involved, indeed none existed for either the new Prince or the Emperor. As the final vow is given the Prince is allowed to hold the Imperial Scepter in his right hand, but only for a moment and never again until he himself becomes Emperor.

Finally it was over and Prince Jacob stood beside the Emperor as they overlooked the sea of humanity filling the Great Plaza of The Empire. The ceremony had been as it always was, in the Assembly Forum of The Imperial Knights. The Ladies Ellen and Stephanie stood proudly at each of their sides.

"How does it feel?" Daniel had to lean over close to Jacob to make himself heard above the

cheering crowd.

"Numb. I feel numb."

"That must be the standard reaction, I felt the same way," Daniel replied.

N35467

Ian and Lieutenant Starling met briefly while the transport vessel HMS Paulson was off loading it's consignment. The vessel would also be taking Starling back to more civilized parts of the Empire.

"Watch out for the fucking bat-bugs, and wear a sidearm." Starling offered some good advice, for a change.

"Bat-bugs?" Ian asked with total disbelief.

"Yeah. They go for your neck mostly, they look like little God-damned bats. You'll need lots of itch cream if you're lucky."

"And if I'm not lucky?"

"A week in infirmary with a nasty infection. Have fun."

With that Starling turned and boarded the Paulson, as usual he had shown no respect, not even to an Imperial Knight.

Ian hadn't really expected any respect, it would have altogether shattered his opinion of Starling.

Ian had a few thousand questions for Professor Hyde as they sat that evening having a simple dinner in the portable shelter, a downpour outside drummed on the thin roof. Both Ian and the professor still wore small but rather nasty beam pistols, from time to time some of the smaller of the uniformly unpleasant fauna would make it over, through, or under the powered perimeter fences. Ian did have a special marine escort but it paid to be careful on this planet.

"The echo-soundings indicate that the power taps extend all the way down to the magma?"

"Yes," Hyde explained, "the whole complex can draw a fantastic amount of power using the temperature differences between the planet's core and the surface."

"Yet so very little power seems to be in use?"

"True. The disk is the key, at least in my opinion," Hyde concluded.

"Pure iron?" Ian had no idea why the massive artifact wasn't a shapeless mound of rust by now.

"Totally pure."

Ian changed the subject to a more delicate matter.

"How is Rebecca, sir?"

"Apparently I am a great-grandfather, a boy." Hyde displayed a small grin as he said this, Ian just blushed.

The morning would find Ian standing in front of what had brought him back to this distant place. The A'chon complex was only a way station, a gateway used by travelers long departed. It held great dangers for those who didn't possess the instruction manual. Ian would be attempting to write his own instruction manual, a dicey undertaking at best.

Chapter Three

Traveler

N35467

There was what could only be a control console that overlooked the immense iron disk, it was housed in a low structure with one entirely transparent wall. Ian did a spectrographic reading of the clear 'wall' and whistled softly at what the readout on his hand held device said. The advance team had assumed it was glass of some sort.

"What is it?" Hyde asked

"Pure carbon."

"But.....?" Hyde didn't understand.

"Carbon crystal," Ian explained, "it's one solid piece of diamond."

The window was forty feet across and fifteen feet high. It was two feet thick.

"Good God," Hyde said quietly.

"Indeed. It would seem that the A'chon were rather advanced in the manufacturing of large chunks of elemental substances."

"Rather advanced doesn't quite seem to describe them," Hyde concluded.

The control console itself was never designed for the human form. In the middle of the semicircle of low, flat panels was a circular raised platform, a shallow depression on top probably once held a pad or cushion of some sort. All of the 'panels' were a gloss black and totally without so much as a button to push. There was no dust on anything, somewhat odd after eight-thousand years or so. There had been speculation before Ian had arrived that one simply touched the panels at the appropriate places. The panels had been touched everywhere to no effect.

"Perhaps our hands and fingers are too soft," Ian said, "what we know of the A'chon was that they had hard, pincer-like 'hands'. Let's try a stylus or something sharp."

"But where?" Hyde asked. "What activates it, assuming it's still functioning?"

Ian sat on the hard central platform (making a mental note to bring a cushion the next time) studying the layout of the thick, slab-like panels. Where was the 'on' switch? After some time Ian opted for the smallest of the panels. It was directly below the largest panel in the middle of the console and was about three inches square.

Pressing once with the writing stylus did nothing.

Likewise pressing twice, three times and so on.

Tapping didn't work either.

Ian rather absently slid the tip of the stylus across the panel from left to right.

Every panel blinked on with a soft red glow displaying the gibberish that was A'chon text, the largest central panel held the crystal sharp image of a lush green planet.

"Shit!" Ian nearly levitated off the platform. Whatever it did, the console was very much functional.

With a slightly shaky hand Ian slid the stylus across the small panel in the reverse direction. Everything went to black again.

"Well, we have step one in the operation manual," Ian said.

"To activate unit, slide stylus from left to right on panel designated as number one."

Ian wondered just how thick the operations manual might finally be.

Earth, The Sun Palace

Prince Jacob and his wife had very much earned a vacation. It surprised no one that they chose their own small cottage in the countryside of what had been Bavaria for their time away from everything. A more normal routine settled in for the Emperor and his new wife, there were duties as always but now there seemed the time to perform them.

Jeremy and Alex continued to progress in returning to a life not surrounded by alien monsters but instead by people who loved them dearly. Jeremy's musical talents went beyond just the amazing singing voice he was blessed with. Piano lessons had commenced in addition to his choir practice and instructions. The boy's music instructors quickly determined that he had the makings of a prodigy of the keyboard.

The piano that Jeremy used for his lessons and practiced on was unchanged from one that Steinway and Sons had constructed so many centuries before. It was possible to build electronic versions of the piano, scientific measurements of the tonal qualities said that they were identical to the real thing, the ear and heart knew better.

As for Daniel and Alex's musical talents, they are best not remarked upon. Ellen had even asked Daniel to refrain from 'singing' while in the shower, which only encouraged him.

Ellen and Daniel enjoyed the early morning air and had begun a daily ritual of a jog around part of the enormous palace grounds and a quick swim before breakfast. Their route usually took them within sight of the gated entrance, something caught Ellen's eye on one of their runs, she had seen it the day before also.

"Those people, the man and woman out past the gate. They were standing there yesterday."

"I see them, they have a sign or something," Daniel replied.

"Yes. I wonder what they want?" The sign was too small and far away to read.

"I could get security to check them out," Daniel offered.

"Just find out what it is they want, they don't look like nuts or anything."

"All right. Security probably knows about them anyway, they've been pretty paranoid since you and Ian were snatched."

The newlyweds were almost finished with breakfast when a captain with the marine security detail came to the shaded veranda and waited to be noticed. Daniel motioned the officer to approach, he bowed before speaking.

"Your Majesty, Lady Ellen. You inquired about the couple at the gate?"

"Yes Captain Lewis," the Emperor responded, "what did you find out?"

"They seek an audience of appeal, Sire. It seems that their son has been found guilty by a naval court martial of a capital offense, murder in fact. The execution has been set for tomorrow."

An audience of appeal was an ancient rite that a vastly enlarged Empire had made impractical, no Emperor could ever see all of the people who hoped for an intervention. The Imperial courts as a matter of routine denied further appeals to the Emperor.

"Oh dear!" Ellen had a very soft heart, the people standing at the gate wanted help.

"But the courts..." Daniel's knowledge of the law in this matter was a bit sketchy.

"They were denied an appeal, Sire. They came anyway. They have been well behaved and

aren't actually in violation of any law by standing there. Perhaps we should have them leave, Sire?"

Ellen looked at Daniel, her eyes asking him all that words could.

"We have some time before the Governor of Germania arrives, bring them to the outer sitting room."

"Sire, forgive me but is this perhaps a wise..."

"Probably not. Do it anyway." The small glint of anger in the Emperor's eyes told the officer that no further argument was permitted.

"At once, Sire."

"Thank you," Ellen said after the officer had left.

"This is going to be a hard thing you know, I can't just wave my hand willy-nilly and say that the law doesn't apply to their son. You will meet them with me." Daniel seemed to be somewhat irked at this unwanted complication.

"Are you mad at me?" Ellen could see that he was, perhaps just a little.

"Not much, how can I be very mad at you for wanting to help someone? I have all of the power in the Empire, that doesn't mean that I can always use it."

Ellen could see the position that she had put Daniel in.

"I'm sorry."

"We'll hear what they have to say," Daniel replied gently, "maybe there might be something I can do. I think Alex might be useful to have nearby, she always knows when people are speaking the truth."

Mister and Misses Walter Krieg knew that there was really no chance that the Emperor would see them. They had to at least try, they knew in their hearts that their son did not do what he was convicted of. The couple prepared to leave as the marine officer approached them, they were so very tired and had no wish to be arrested.

"His Majesty has agreed to see you. Please come with me."

The couple could find no words in reply and simply did as the officer asked. It was a very long walk.

N35467

There was no Rosetta Stone to provide a key to the A'chon written language, it had been studied for years with little progress. The alphabet consisted of forty-three intricate characters, the A'chon mathematics was based upon the simple binary system of one and zero. It was possible to easily decipher the A'chon numbers, but did they refer to the number of light years to a destination or to the local price of parsnips?

Ian proceeded very slowly with the control console. Four of the panels only seemed to display information, the central viewscreen had many touch-controls around and on the image, none of them marked in any way. The planet displayed was N35467, in real time. Where was the image being sent from?

Ian was showing Professor Hyde some of what he had learned in the last four days,

"Moving the stylus across the planet shifts the point of view." Ian demonstrated, the planet seemed to rotate, in fact it was the viewpoint that changed.

"Pressing on one place selects it as a spot to zoom in on, that's then controlled by moving the stylus along the bottom edge of the screen. Start in the middle and move left, the view zooms

out, move from the center and to the right, you zoom in."
Way in.

Working in steps, Ian soon had an overhead view of the two perspiring marines who stood guard just outside the control structure.

"Extraordinary!" Hyde was beyond impressed. "How far does it go in the opposite direction?"

"Watch, this is even more mind bending," Ian replied.

The planet quickly receded to a small blue and green dot and was then lost in a sea of stars, after a while the entire galaxy filled the viewscreen.

"How is that possible, where is the image coming from?" Hyde asked very softly.

"It shouldn't be possible, but there it is. I have no clue as to what is generating that image, let alone how."

During this small demonstration some of the A'chon numbers on the far left information screen had changed, Ian said that it probably indicated the amount of power being used by the device. The numbers had changed very little, they could change a very great deal.

The Sun Palace

Daniel wanted his sister to be present, it was a small test in a way. Could Alex see the truth in what the condemned rating's parents said? Could she see even beyond that?

"We're going to talk with some people, me and Ellen," Daniel explained, "their son is in some bad trouble. Tell me what you can see, if you can. If you can't see anything that's fine too."

"kay." Alex was calm and relaxed, even with Jeremy off in his music room, away from her.

Walter and Winifred Krieg had been through a long ordeal, even before this day. Their only son, Alfred, had been so very proud when he had enlisted in the Imperial Navy. Their son had also been found standing over the body of a dead officer, a bloody cargo shifter in his hand. The Kriegs had sold their home and small restaurant to make the hurried trip to Earth, all to no use. So far.

By the time that they were ushered into the presence of the Emperor and The Lady Ellen they were both close to collapse.

"Walter and Winifred Krieg, Your Majesty." Captain Lewis introduced the couple, both Ellen and Daniel stood to greet them. Alex stayed back a little behind her big brother as the couple entered the room and bowed.

"Welcome. Come and sit, be at ease." Daniel motioned to the ancient love seat that was worth more than the Kriegs could earn in a lifetime. Walter Krieg finally found his voice.

"We...Thank you for seeing us, Your Majesty. We had no real hope that you could, we just had to come here, there was no other hope."

Daniel just nodded and remained silent for a moment before speaking.

"Tell Us about your son."

The man did, Daniel and Ellen found no trace of a lie in anything he said. Alex moved next to the Emperor and whispered in his ear after Walter Krieg had made his plea.

"Alfred didn't hit Lieutenant Marsh, Smelly did it."

"Smelly? Who's that?" Daniel asked, also in a close whisper.

"Theguy... The guy with the red hair." Alex didn't know who 'Smelly' was, she did know what he looked like. She did know that Alfred had never hurt anyone. Was the word of a little girl

enough to stay an execution?

It was enough in the Emperor's mind.

The outer sitting room was often used for meetings with visitors to the palace, as such it was under constant unseen observation. Hidden auto-tracking beam weapons were always centered on the visitors, the right (or wrong) hand signal by the Emperor fired those weapons. If the security staff saw danger to the Emperor they also had the authority to fire the weapons. Security was very tight after Sir Ian and The Lady Ellen's kidnapping, nothing was taken for granted anymore.

This time the Emperor's small hand signal merely summoned Captain Lewis. Daniel worried about someday giving the wrong signal by mistake, two quickly clenched fists meant instant death for the visitors.

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Contact the watch officer at Coldstone, We are staying rating Krieg's execution until further investigations can be made. Coldstone will still need a formal letter in my hand, tell them it will be delivered later this day."

"At once Sire."

As Lewis backed up and then turned to leave Walter Krieg silently pitched forward onto the floor. Daniel stood and shouted for a doctor as everyone else tried to assist the man all at once. If there was a hand signal for this situation Daniel couldn't remember it.

Walter Krieg would recover nicely, it wasn't a heart attack or a stroke. Exhaustion and the words temporarily sparing his son had caused him to pass out, he had merely fainted. Both of the Kriegs would spend that night resting in their own rooms at the palace. The couple's home and small business on Atlantis were ordered repurchased in their names, Daniel's way of saying to Ellen that she had been right to want to help them.

How to pursue the investigation into the murder of Lieutenant Marsh remained to be decided.

N35467

Ian had finally realized that the viewscreen in the alien console could be used to navigate the entire galaxy, perhaps even beyond that.

"This isn't just a glorified travel vid," Ian explained to Hyde and Commander Wilkes, "this complex is a gateway of some sort, a means to travel anywhere, possibly instantaneously."

"There's still the one big question," Wilkes said.

"What's that?" Ian asked.

"What the hell happened to the A'chon?"

Ian had no answer but he would continue to study the alien device, what he would discover next would be more mind-numbing than anything revealed so far.

Coldstone Naval Prison, Earth

The Imperial Navy wasn't all virtue and decency. Like all of man's large institutions the navy had it's share of lawbreakers, although it was a much smaller share than in times past. The harsh penalties accounted for the low crime rate. The mention of Coldstone in naval circles would always cast a chill over the conversation, only those sentenced to death or life without

hope were sent there. No one left the place alive unless freed by the Emperor and that hadn't happened in over four-hundred years. In Coldstone's nine-hundred and seventy-six years as the navy's prison of lost souls no Emperor had ever actually visited the place.

That record was broken when Daniel showed up unannounced. The Emperor could have delegated the task, he probably should have. Daniel didn't like letting go of something that wasn't right once he had it in his mind.

"We wish to visit with Rating Krieg, if you please."

Daniel's simple request to the watch officer snapped the man out of his mind-lock.

"At... At once, Your Majesty. I shall send for him." Captain Hussein replied, still trying to get a grip on reality.

"Take Us to him. We would like to see some of this place."

Hussein did as ordered, it was a grim excursion for Daniel.

"Is it always so cold here?"

"It only seem that way, Your Majesty. In fact the temperature is held at a constant sixty-eight degrees, the stonework and iron have an effect on the senses of new visitors. This place was never meant to be a comfort to anyone."

"How long have you been here, Captain?" Daniel asked as they walked along, the armed marine escort in front of and behind them.

"Just four months, Your Majesty. A tour of duty is only one year, any longer is thought to be bad for the morale of the men assigned here."

Daniel nodded in understanding. The prison was clean and free of vermin, there were no screams from tormented prisoners. It was still a damned depressing place to be assigned, or even to visit. A nameless rock of an islet off the coast of the tip of South America, even the howling wind of the Cape told you that all hope was lost here.

Alfred Krieg was sitting quietly in his bare cell, the young rating had composed himself for the coming execution. His priest had believed him when he had proclaimed his innocence.

"Stand to attention!" Captain Hussein commanded.

Alfred did so instantly out of habit and training, wondering why the prison's commander was here now. There was a young boy in his teens with the officer, he wore a plain black officer's uniform. After a moment the condemned rating realized that the Emperor was standing just outside of the cell's bars.

"Stand at ease," Daniel softly ordered.

Alfred assumed the correct position, his mind failing to understand what was occurring.

Daniel would have preferred to simply sit alone with the young man and talk as equals, to find out just what the hell had happened. Out of deference to the security detail the Emperor opted to talk with the prisoner through the iron bars of the ancient prison.

"Do you know a red-haired person by the name of Smelly?"

It took Alfred a moment to shift back into reality before responding. "Smelly Wadsworth... Your Majesty. My Cargo Crew Chief."

"What is his actual name?"

"Uh.. Let me thi... Senior Rating Benson Wadsworth, Your Majesty."

"Did he have any... bad feelings for Lieutenant Marsh?"

"Everyone did, Your Majesty."

"Marsh was unpopular?"

"He was despised by the whole ship, Your Majesty."

Daniel and the young rating talked for almost an hour, everything they said was being recorded by the security detail. Smelly Wadsworth would soon be having visitors.

N35467

Ian was reluctant to shift the point of focus off of N35467, if he did could he find it again? A recording of all of the data screens was made, it might take a lot of searching but Ian was finally confident that he could return to this place. Now what to look at next? Earth was the logical choice.

It took most of eight hours of hunting and guessing at the star fields on the viewscreen. Ian was able to start in the general vicinity of Earth's solar system by beginning with the full view of the galaxy. At last the blue-green planet of mankind's birth lay in the center of the alien device. Something was very wrong.

"That's San Francisco!" Ian had paid some occasional attention in history classes, he knew what the graceful old bridge looked like, he also knew that the entire area had been obliterated in the war that had sent humanity into darkness. Ian was looking at an Earth long past. Why was the view of N35467 present time and the view of Earth almost three thousand years old?

There was one other control on the viewscreen that Ian had yet to discover, after a long while he found it.

The time scale along the top of the screen. Moving the stylus along caused a blurring of the image until you stopped, then the image cleared again. Ian could watch history unfold over a period of eight thousand years or so up until the present. No amount of fiddling revealed the future, only the past. He could have spent a lifetime just watching history occur.

"Perhaps there's a time shift that has to be compensated for when using the transporter?" Ian had taken to calling the massive disk a transporter, what else could it be?

HMS Wolf, in orbit around Sparta

"But I testified fully at the court martial, sir!" Wadsworth was perspiring heavily in the cool of the Captain's day cabin.

"I have received an order directly from Fleet Headquarters. You are to be subjected to interrogation using Recall by the ship's medical personnel. It seems that the Emperor himself has taken an interest in the case of Rating Krieg." Ship's Captain Matsui explained.

"But.. Using Recall in testimony is against Imperial law, Sir! Everyone knows that!"

"It's not against the law if the Emperor has ordered it done. Do you wish to say anything about this matter before things progress any further?"

Wadsworth's shoulders sagged, he knew that no one had ever been able to resist 'recalling' absolutely everything asked of them under the effects of the drug.

"There's no point in using the drug sir, Krieg didn't bash Lieutenant Marsh. I got fed up with his bullshit and lost my mind, I killed him."

In a way it was a great relief to Wadsworth, he wouldn't have to live out his days (just a few now) knowing that some one else was executed in his place.

Coldstone Prison, Earth

Captain Hussein broke the news to Krieg. It was rare when any duty at Coldstone caused a person to smile. Krieg stood to proper attention as the prison commandant approached his cell. "Wadsworth has confessed to the murder of Lieutenant Marsh. You are acquitted of all charges. You are a free man."

Krieg had a blank expression at first, then a smile and then some tears.

"Thank you, sir."

"Thank your parents and thank your Emperor. You've had the most incredible luck in this matter."

The young rating could only nod in agreement as the iron bars moved aside. Some thanks to the Emperor's wife and small sister might also be in order, perhaps the most thanks of all.

The Sun Palace

Daniel and Ellen were having dinner with Jeremy and Alex when an aide entered the room with a dispatch form. The Emperor motioned the woman to approach, he could see by her expression that it must be good news.

"It seems that Smelly has confessed," Daniel said as he read the form.

"Oh My!" Ellen was all smiles, so was Alex.

"Who's Smelly?" Jeremy asked, out of the loop on this matter.

"Youarewhenyoueatbeans!" Alex giggled at her own witty jibe.

Everyone thought it was hilarious except Jeremy, he just blushed.

"I seem to owe you some sort of apology. If you hadn't wanted me to help the Krieg's their son would have been executed for the crime." Daniel said to Ellen.

"No apology. I'll just go down to the vaults a little later and pick out something nice," Ellen smiled.

"Too late. Jacob sold all of the jewels, don't you remember?"

"I'll just double check anyway."

Daniel found himself wondering how many others in the past and in the future might die wrongly convicted. Not very many, but then one was too many.

N35467

When Ian had centered the viewscreen on an extreme close up of North America's west coast something new happened. A thin slot opened on the console and a small ceramic-looking disk rolled out onto the flat area that formed sort of a narrow desk in front of the panels. The disk was slightly warm and had some of the intricate A'chon characters on it. Ian studied the two-inch disk and compared the writing on it to the 'data' screens to the left of the viewscreen. The characters matched the bottom row of letters and numerals on the far right screen.

"Perhaps a cosmic tram token?" Ian said to himself, he was alone in the control building. Another idea came to him.

"Maybe it's a locator device or something, if you want to make a return trip?"

It was as likely as anything else might be. He dictated some ideas into his small voice recorder and left it on the desk.

Ian 'switched off' the console for the time being and also left the ceramic disk on the console desk area. He had wanted to take some readings on the massive iron disk's surface, something that he had been putting off.

Ian had no idea at all that turning off the console did not turn off the 'transporter'. Indeed the alien device was never off. The only reason that those who had first inspected the disk hadn't been whisked off to elsewhere was because the device had been left focused on it's own location.

Ian was going to take a very long trip.

Chapter Four

History Lesson

The Sun Palace

Cedric Clarke had to intrude into the Emperor's sleeping quarters, a delicate matter at best but there was no helping it.

"Your Majesty, please Sire!" Clarke had turned up the lighting, the Emperor and his wife were still sound asleep in the huge and ornate bed. Finally Ellen stirred and sat up a little.

"Cedric?"

"Forgive this unseemly intrusion, Lady Ellen. Can you please wake His Majesty, I have urgent news about Sir Ian."

Ellen did wake His Majesty, she was not so tactful as Cedric.

"Daniel! Wake up dammit! There's trouble!" Pummeling was involved.

Instinct was in charge as Daniel bolted upright, the jeweled revolver that was so famous was pointed at Cedric's chest. Not even Ellen knew where the weapon had been hidden.

"What?" Daniel demanded, still not fully awake.

Cedric's entire life was being quickly reviewed in his mind as he looked down the barrel of the weapon. There had to be a better way to wake up this particular Emperor.

"Mister Clarke! What is it?" Daniel came into full focus and lowered the revolver.

"I do apologize for the hour, Sire. There has been a flash priority message from N35467, Sir Ian is missing." Clarke was himself in his dressing robe, his own sleep also interrupted this night.

Both Daniel and Ellen seemed to wilt as they moved closer to one another on the bed, both of them had been worried about Ian ever since he had left for that awful planet.

"Explain." Daniel finally asked.

"Sire, the message is rather long, the gist of it is that the alien device that Sir Ian was doing research on somehow activated. They believe he was 'transported' by the device."

"Transported? Where?"

"To Earth, Sire. They believe so anyway."

"Then he's here on Earth somewhere?" This wasn't making much sense to Daniel, or Ellen.

Cedric Clarke steeled himself to explain further.

"There seems to be some sort of time displacement involved with the device, Sire. Some sort of compensation is needed. It's a bit beyond me, I'm afraid."

"Time displacement? What are you saying?" Ellen demanded.

"With respect, Lady Ellen, I'm not sure. Perhaps you should both read the message yourselves."

It was a very long communications form.

N35467

Ian had climbed the ramp up to the disk's polished surface. He intended to test for any sort of shield that might explain the metal being unruined after so long of a time exposed to the elements. The marine security detail remained deployed around the edge of the disk, there seemed to be no risk to Sir Ian as he pattered around on the inert slab of iron. Things went very much to hell as Ian neared the center of the transport.

The guards reported later that as they watched Ian seemed to slide directly away from them and into the far distance. The guards were all around the circumference of the disk and all reported the same thing.
Ian just slid away into the distance.

North American Coast
Saturday, June 4th, 11:32 AM
2002

Ian just stood blinking for a moment as he looked at the ground around him. Where was the disk? Why was he standing on grass? Why was it suddenly so cool? Then he looked up.
"Hey Gomer! Get the fuck out of the way!"
Ian was standing in the middle of a softball game, the players took themselves a bit too serious. No one had quite seen Ian's arrival.
"What the...?" Ian started to realize what might have happened as he stood frozen in place staring at a sight out of ancient history. The second baseman finally had to shove Ian off the field, none too gently either.
Ian was in the middle of Golden Gate Park, the jumble of a city around him was San Francisco. San Francisco before the dark times.

Ian was dressed in khaki shorts and a light pullover shirt of the same color. Sandals and a floppy sun hat completed his hot weather attire, his small beam pistol was hidden at his waist under the loose shirt. In his right hand was the book sized spectrum analyzer, its display screen indicated nothing but a hash of simple radio frequency energy in all directions.
"Well now you've really gone and done it!" Ian finally said to himself. The young genius had to sit down for a long while on the grass, eventually his trembling ceased. The ever present fog was starting to roll in from the sea and it was getting colder. It is frequently colder in San Francisco in the summer than during the winter.

The Sun Palace

The Commandant of The Imperial Marines and the Admiral of The Fleet were being asked some very pointed questions by the Emperor. Lady Ellen was at his side in the meeting room, it was apparent that she had been crying.
"What was Sir Ian's security detail doing when this happened?"

"Sire, the men were deployed all around the outer edge of the disk," began General Peltzer. "They are good marines Sire, not scientists or engineers, they were guarding against possible threats from the native wildlife."

Daniel could clearly see that the marines had no possible way to know about the disk's capabilities, still he was angry that Ian had just vanished without warning.

"And what were Commander Wilkes and Professor Hyde doing when this happened?"

"That is uncertain at the moment, Sire. We do know that there were other places at the site that were being studied by them, perhaps they were at one of them." Peltzer didn't feel that anyone was really to blame, he hoped that the Emperor would conclude the same.

Daniel was silent for a time. Ian was believed to have somehow been transported here, to Earth. But to an Earth of the past. Were his dear friend's bones now dust on this very planet? The whole concept of moving across time seemed absurd to Daniel, the paradoxes were infinite.

A decision was quickly made.

"Admiral, prepare the flagship and suitable escort vessels for an immediate departure for N35467. We are going to see for Ourselves what happened and what might be done to get Sir Ian back."

"But Your Majesty, the risk....." Admiral Harker started to argue, something no Emperor appreciated.

"Damn the risk! Departure in six hours, Admiral."

"But..."

Daniel just glared at the Admiral, the officer had only recently been appointed Fleet Admiral and could see that he was now very close to being sacked.

"Then with your leave Sire, I shall make haste to obey." Harker bowed at Daniel's curt nod and did indeed make haste.

Alex knew that Ian was gone, she had screamed when she felt it. The small girl could not see where he was though, perhaps because it was not a 'where' but a 'when'.

Prince Jacob would have a shortened vacation, once more called upon to mind the store while the owner was away.

San Francisco, 2002

Ian was freezing his butt off and he was hungry. He had to find some sort of shelter, preferably shelter with food. Ian had no money, if he had it wouldn't be any good here anyway. He had been walking for several hours and was at once fascinated and horrified by the place he found himself in, sensory overload would best describe it. The city seemed endless, the choking mass of ground cars were a constant stream on almost any street he ventured on.

The people here at least spoke English, but with a very odd accent. Ian decided that he was probably the one with the odd accent. At last Ian came upon a line of rather seedy looking people, fragrant even. The modest looking place where the line formed read "Saint Anthony's." Perhaps it was a place of charity, Ian hoped so anyway. He asked the disheveled and hairy gentleman waiting at the end of the line.

"Sir, is there food here?"

"Yup. You hungry, kid?"

"Yes, I have no money I'm afraid," Ian replied.

"Where you from, you sure talk funny? You a russian or sumthin?"

"Uh, no sir. I'm from New Albion."

"Never heard of such a place. Anyway they'll feed you here, they're good people."

"Thank you." Ian would at least be indoors for a time and have something to eat.

"What's your name, kid?" Asked the hairy guy.

"Ian, Ian Murphy. And you, sir?"

"Moose. People call me Moose. You look cold. Watcha doin wearing stuff like that in this crazy city? The fuckin' weather here changes about every hour! You'll freeze your nuts off!"

"I sort of arrived here in a rush, this is all I have right now."

"I got some clothes stashed around the block, there's a coat you can use."

"Thank you, sir. A coat does sound good."

"What's that thing you got there, a TV or sumthin?"

"Sort of." The spectrum analyzer did have a view screen.

Apparently Ian had found a new friend, if a somewhat aromatic one.

The food was not haute cuisine but it was nourishing and there was plenty of it, hunger makes the best of all sauces. Ian looked out of place in the charity dinning hall but everyone left him to eat in peace. As they left Moose coached him to put a couple of the hard rolls in his pockets for later.

Moose was rather prone to ignore traffic lights and crosswalks. Ian attempted to follow and do as his new acquaintance did and was of course struck by a city bus.

The Sun Palace

"He's my brother and I'm coming!" Ellen was, as the saying goes, in Daniel's face.

"It's a dangerous place, there's nothing you can really do there!"

Not the right thing to say.

"Perhaps I could cook and do your laundry!" Ellen did indeed have a temper when provoked.

"I'm going if I have to hock the jewels and hire a private vessel!"

Ellen won. Alex and Jeremy would be coming also, although they would not be allowed on the planet's surface. Alex had a temper also, being related to the Emperor and all. Perhaps Alex might get some feel for where or when Ian was.

It was mutually agreed to delay notifying Ian's parents of this latest calamity. They would first at least find out if Ian might be rescued.

San Francisco, 2002

In a contest between a bus and a human the bus will always win. Ian was very lucky and was only bounced about fifteen feet while sustaining a mild concussion and what is referred to as a 'road rash'. Ian had only a vague recollection of lying in the street with Moose and a lot of concerned faces peering down at him. The spectrum analyzer was made of tougher stuff and survived intact, it wasn't even stolen.

When Ian woke up again he was being wheeled from the ambulance into the emergency room. Then the questions began.

"Can you remember your name, son?" Doctor Hake began.

"Ian. Ian Murphy."

"Good. And do you know what city you are in?"

"San Francisco, sir."

"Who's the President?"

"Of what, sir?"

"The United States."

"I haven't a clue, sir."

"Well two out of three isn't bad, you seem to have kept your wits. Where are you hurting?"

"Everywhere, sir."

While Ian was being questioned the nurses were removing his clothing, the first order of business in any emergency room is to embarrass the patient. Ian was racking his aching brain trying to remember if they had discovered anesthetics at this point in history.

"We've got a gun here!" Nurse Waters' discovery brought a policeman instantly from the adjoining hallway, Ian's beam pistol had been discovered. The EMT's had missed the compact weapon, Ian's impact with the bus had pushed the pistol down into the back of his underpants, no wonder his butt hurt. Ian found his arms pinned by the doctor and nurses as patrolman Jones retrieved the odd looking gun.

"Be careful of the..." Ian tried to warn the policeman.

"What the hell is this, kid?" Jones had backed away from the exam table and was doing his own exam of the pistol. It's weight and intricate construction told the cop that it was no toy, but where and how did you load it? The opening in the end of the short fat barrel was square.

"What is...?" Is all the officer managed to say next as he fiddled with a button on the side of the gun and tested the pull of the trigger (not smart). At least it was pointed at the floor.

Concrete always has a certain amount of moisture in it, no matter how long it has cured. Concrete does not take kindly to rapid and extreme heating, it will explode from the steam pressure within. This is why molten metal is not worked with over concrete floors, dirt or sand is preferred. All of this aside, the floor where the beam of coherent protons struck exploded with a deafening bang, bits of concrete and floor tile spraying the room and the people in it. Then the yelling and cursing started.

Ian got off easy with only a small bit of gravel buried in his left calf, Nurse Waters got the worst injury, a thumb-size piece of the floor had to be removed from her ample left buttock. It was some time before order and reason once more prevailed. The FBI was eventually called in to have a look at the odd weapon and the odd boy that it belonged to.

HMS Thunder, Enroute to N35467

Daniel and Ellen's harsh words didn't last very long. The thought of losing Ian had been almost too much for them to cope with, you say things you don't mean when you are frightened.

"What if we've lost him?" Ellen whispered, the two of them stood just holding onto one another in the main Imperial cabin.

"Don't say that. We'll get him back if it takes the rest of our lives." Daniel was indeed fully prepared to make Ian's rescue his life's work.

It would be an eight-day crossing to N35467, that too would seem like a lifetime.

San Francisco, 2002

Ian was deep in the middle of the Federal Building that housed the FBI's San Francisco office. His headache had departed but he was still sore and stiff, his left calf still bandaged. More suitable clothing had been provided for him, the shoes were a little too big. Ian didn't have any answers that the agents seemed to want.

"Let's start once more, from the beginning. Where did you get that weapon?" Agent Morse didn't have a feeling that the polite boy was any sort of criminal, but what was he then?

"It's marine issue sir, it was on loan to me."

There had been an odd, flowing inscription stamped on the side of the pistol, it read "Property Imperial Marins."

"Please son, tell the truth. Imperial Marines? It isn't even spelled right!"

"Well, yes as a matter of fact sir, the Imperial Marines!"

"Who's "Imperial Marines" are you referring to?"

Ian was losing patience, they had been asking the same stupid questions all morning. "This is hopeless sir, just tell me what you want to hear and I will say it!"

"When did you get it then, can you tell us that much?"

"Yes. April of this year, 4947."

"4947?"

"Yes. On the survey planet N35467, for personal protection. There's some nasty animal life there."

"It's 2002, son."

"I know. It is here, not there or then."

"You are at least a creative liar, son."

"Well agent Bad Breath, perhaps you have some other explanation for a Masterson Arms Model Twelve beam pistol with enhanced proton stream focus and dual amplification circuits?" Ian had lost all patience by now.

Morse had no real answer for Ian's question. The agents had test fired the gun down in the building's basement, it had caused some considerable excitement (again). There was also the matter of the spectrum analyzer that no one in technical services could make any sense out of. Ian would be put on a flight to Washington later that day. Morse was very happy to let the spooks at CIA try and sort it all out.

N35467

Professor Hyde and Commander Wilkes had made the very correct decision to change none of the settings on the alien console, they did turn it on. A grassy area filled the viewscreen, people could be seen moving about. People out of history.

Ian's voice recorder told both men what had happened to Sir Ian and where and when he probably was now. Was there some way to retrieve him?

"Put the ceramic disk on one of the small surveillance crawlers, then send it out onto the transporter." Wilkes explained.

"And then?" Hyde was skeptical.

"We see what happens. Perhaps the ceramic disk will appear on the screen as some sort of marker or something."

Hyde nodded in agreement, but they both also agreed that any experiments should wait for the arrival of the Emperor and proceed only with his approval. Neither man wanted to do anything that might possibly jeopardize getting Sir Ian back and then to have to explain that to his best friend.

San Francisco, 2002

Ian didn't want to leave the area where he had arrived, there was just the slimmest chance that someone might try and rescue him. Also the idea of traveling in an 'aircraft' that depended on actual wings to stay aloft scared him witless. Needless to say his protests fell on deaf ears. The drive to the airport did nothing for Ian's nerves either, all of the fast moving ground cars on the freeway were being individually controlled by only their drivers!

"Look out!" Ian yelled as the driver braked for a fool in a blue Porsche.

"Ease up, kid. You act like you've never been in a car before." Morse could see that Ian was as nervous as a mouse in a trap factory.

When Ian finally climbed out of the government sedan at the non commercial section of the city's airport he totally balked.

"No!"

The twin engine business jet was actually quite new and well maintained, to Ian it looked like a polished exhibit from a museum of ancient deathtraps. Up until now Ian had never offered any physical resistance to his captors, indeed he had tried to remain polite and cooperative (mostly).

Ian was a good quarter of a mile away by the time they finally cornered him at the intersection of two security fences. The agents (by now they were CIA) put him in handcuffs and anklecuffs until they were somewhere high over Kansas. He was unlocked when it was deemed that he was unlikely to run again at thirty-five-thousand feet. The beam pistol and spectrum analyzer were in locked travel cases, they remained hand cuffed to two of the agents.

The reluctant passenger kept looking out at the wings during the entire flight. Some mild air turbulence over Kentucky did nothing to change his mind about this method of transport, he had seen the wings actually flex a little. Only the fact that the agent sitting next to him had actually dozed off and then slept through the bit of turbulence prevented Ian from jumping up to search for some sort of escape pod.

Ian just closed his eyes during the night landing, in the rain.

HMS Thunder

Partly to make the awful waiting go faster and because he had been meaning to do it anyway, Daniel decided it was time that Ellen became proficient with small arms. Also because of the nasty planet they would soon be on. The hanger deck made a good practice range, light target settings on the weapons made it safe for bystanders and the vessel's hull.

Ellen was handed over to Marine Gunnery Sergeant N'kwasi as the Emperor stood by and quietly observed the lesson. Daniel had at first thought to instruct her himself but decided it was best to let a professional do a proper job of it.

"You have Our permission to yell at her if need be, sergeant." Daniel's words and smile told the marine not to worry too much about protocol for the time being.

"I shall Sire, if need be."

Ellen gave Daniel a wide-eyed look before turning to the giant marine holding the lethal rail rifle. As things turned out she didn't need yelling at, within the hour she was putting all of the rounds in the black, her only failing was a tendency to keep her finger on the trigger while off target. Sergeant N'Kwasi's calm voice-like-distant-thunder soon cured her of that bad habit. As for the beam pistol she was almost as good as Daniel by the time the day ended. Ellen also tried the simple revolver that Daniel preferred, she didn't care much for the nasty report or recoil but could still put the rounds mostly on target.

Daniel was slightly miffed, with more practice Ellen could be giving him a close run for Best Shot In The Imperial Family. Maybe he should start Jeremy on a beginners target rifle, a guy could always shoot better than a little kid. Hopefully.

The Emperor had a few quiet words with Sergeant N'Kwasi as the lessons ended.

"Thank you for your patience today, sergeant."

"It has been a rare day, Sire. Lady Ellen was a very good pupil."

"She does seem to have some talent for putting rounds on target."

"Indeed Sire, I pray she is always on our side."

Daniel's grin mirrored the marine's. Sergeant N'Kwasi dined with the Imperial Family that evening. If any sort of rescue effort could be mounted for Ian the good sergeant would be one of those volunteering for the attempt.

Southwest of Langley Virginia, 2002

The Rolling Hills Clinic was very small and never had many patients, at present there was only just the one. The secluded retreat had very strict admission protocols, the CIA decided who was admitted and what 'treatment' was required. Ian wasn't being mistreated, indeed he had never been hurt or even physically threatened. All the same he knew he was in a prison of sorts, even if the sign at the entrance called this place a 'clinic'. He also knew that he had to get away from this place, he had the brains to do just that, some luck might be of use also.

The thought of being stranded forever in a place out of time and forever apart from everyone he knew and loved weighed heavily upon Ian. Even if he did manage to get back to the area he arrived at there was only a small chance that he might be rescued. In sixteen years this civilization would end and the world would be plunged into darkness. Ian did not want to be around to witness what was coming. Could he do something to alter history? Current theories on time and space said that even his just arriving at this place in history had created a 'fork' in the time line and a new history. The other future he had come from would remain the same. At least that was the theory. It made even Ian's considerable brain ache.

There was a new round of questioning the morning after Ian arrived at the 'clinic', it seemed to be just more of the same thing.

"Explain again what the small object in your shoulder is." This time Ian was being videotaped

and was wired to a lie detector machine. A language specialist would analyze his accent and speech patterns. Jason Burns was asking the questions, if you asked him his profession he would tell you that he was in advertising.

"It's just an identification chip, it has my name, serial number, rank, medical records. That sort of thing." Ian replied. X-rays in the emergency room had revealed the rice grain-sized implant.

"Military?"

"Yes. Imperial Navy, everyone gets an implant." Ian could see no purpose in lying. Why bother?

"You say that you're only fifteen, sort of young for military service?"

"If you want to be an officer you have the chance to enter naval academy at age ten, if you can pass the tests. After one year in academy you are enlisted as a midshipman for apprentice training. Later on if you can hack it you are commissioned as an ensign."

Burns wasn't buying any of this but it was a fascinating story anyway.

"And your rank?"

"I made ensign, then later I resigned my commission."

"Why?"

"I was better at applied physics than at being an officer."

"What sort of physics?"

"Defensive shield applications"

"Shield applications?"

"Yes, physical mass and wide spectrum radiation mirror fields phased and polarized as vessel and planetary defenses."

"Could you construct such a device?"

"Here?" Ian didn't like the turn that the questioning was taking.

"Yes." Burns could almost believe Ian's easy answers, almost.

"No. It takes specialized equipment and technology."

The lie detector indicated that this last question was the only time the boy had not told the truth. Burns decided that questioning with one's normal inhibitions eliminated by certain drugs was next on the agenda.

Ian's beam pistol had been subjected to every manner of test short of actually taking it apart. Then they took it apart. Three technicians and two scientists died during the ignorant attempt to cut open the power supply in the grip of the weapon. All that remained of the pistol was a piece of the barrel. A good part of the building at Sandia Labs where the pistol had been finally taken to would have to be completely rebuilt. This was one of the reasons that the Emperor (like his father) preferred the simplicity of a chemically powered revolver.

It would be some time before disassembling the spectrum analyzer might be considered, even though the device was about as dangerous as a door mat. Some thought was being given to removing the chip in Ian's shoulder, that too could wait. There was plenty of time.

HMS Thunder, three days out from N35467

"Tell them to proceed with the test using the surveillance crawler, it will save time and if it doesn't work perhaps we can try something else." Daniel had studied Professor Hyde's latest message carefully, the test seemed the logical thing to attempt first.

N35467

"The crawler's recorders are running." Wilkes said.

"Then let's proceed." Hyde responded. There was nothing else on the checklist.

The tracked crawler was small, only about two feet by three feet and a foot high. Tiny sensor probes and optical pickups bristled over its surface. The device had been programmed to stop all motion when the data link had been severed, it wouldn't go exploring Golden Gate Park on its own. The ceramic disc was firmly fixed to the inner surface of the crawler's top cover.

Moving at a slow walk the crawler edged out onto the massive iron disk, it seemed like hours had passed before it neared the center of the disk, then something happened.

"Data lost!" Wilkes reported, he didn't need to shout.

"Look!" Hyde was pointing out the window to where the crawler was, or rather to where it wasn't. Then both men looked to the alien display screen. Brilliant yellow crosshairs had centered on the grass in the image, in the center of the crosshairs was the crawler. A small girl of perhaps six years of age was standing just a few feet away from the device, there was no sound of course but it was obvious that the child was calling for her parent(s).

"Now what?" Hyde asked.

"Try touching the stylus to the crawler," Wilkes suggested.

Hyde did so, the crawler vanished from the screen as did the crosshairs. So did the small female child.

Both were now back on the iron disk. The crawler was continuing its mindless forward progress, the girl was just standing there while wailing at the top limit of her volume control.

"We've just abducted a child," Hyde croaked.

"Yes, but now we know how to return her," Wilkes added.

HMS Thunder

"Good Lord!" Daniel couldn't believe that an innocent child had just been snatched from her play and deposited six-thousand light years away in what was to her a far future. Apparently anything within a certain radius of the ceramic disk was automatically transported.

"It seems that the child is in good health, aside from being very frightened and confused." Admiral Harker had read the message also and was no less dumbfounded than the Emperor by this latest development.

"Hyde wants to try sending her back, what do you think, Admiral?" Daniel asked.

"Perhaps with a volunteer to escort her, Sire?"

"A day will have passed on Earth, she can't be just dumped alone there. Send a message authorizing her return if a volunteer steps forward to see her safely there."

"Yes Sire, at once."

The Clinic, 2002

Ian was being allowed outside for a little morning sun and fresh air, he had been trying to

convey the impression that he was no risk to flee and had mostly succeeded. There were still two 'government employees' watching him. A question and answer session involving drugs was next on the agenda. A preliminary report on Ian and the beam pistol would be given to the President that afternoon.

N35467

Amanda Sykes didn't like the hot place and the nasty bugs, she just wanted to go home. After a long night of fitful sleep she was finally getting her wish. Corporal Amos Watts was going to be her escort, he had been part of Ian's marine bodyguard detail and felt some serious guilt that they had lost the Emperor's best friend. The ceramic disk was taped to his chest under his shirt.

"Ready to go home?" Watts asked the little girl.

"Yes! I don't like this place!" Amanda's opinion of the planet was widely held.

"Then let's go."

Watts picked up the small girl and moved off at a easy pace toward the center of the massive Iron slab. At several points along the way he had second thoughts about volunteering for this trip.

San Francisco, Golden Gate Park, 2002

Officer James Bradford had actually witnessed Corporal Watts and Amanda's arrival, they blinked into existence fifty yards in front of Marvin and himself. Marvin was Bradford's horse, they were on mounted patrol in the park.

"What the fuck?" Bradford's reaction was perfectly normal, Marvin just snorted.

Watts knew a uniform when he saw one and headed straight for the mounted officer. Amanda had started to cry again, can you blame her? Watts stopped a short distance from the confused police officer and Marvin, gently setting Amanda down on the grass.

"Sir, this is Amanda Sykes. She was transported in error from this location yesterday. You have the Empire's apologies for any distress her absence may have caused." Watts had memorized what he was supposed to say, it seemed a little silly to him. With that the marine turned and walked back to where he had appeared.

Officer Bradford also knew a uniform when he saw one. Some sort of soldier wearing an oversized pistol had just returned the little girl reported missing the day before.

"Hey! Hold it right there!" Bradford had finally snapped out of his brain lock.

Watts didn't stop, he simply vanished.

Back on N35467 Watts was offered a shot of navy brandy, he declined and grabbed the bottle instead, no one felt any need to object.

The Clinic, 2002

"Shit!" Ian's reaction to having an ancient hypodermic shoved into his arm was understandable, especially considering that he was now strapped to the chair he was sitting in. "Sorry, kid. Just relax and go with the flow." Burns didn't like doing this to the boy but he had his orders.

"Kiss my....." Ian didn't finish his reply, he suddenly felt so warm and fuzzy.

"Tell me your real name," Burns began.

"Ian Murphy."

"Where were you born?"

"Freehold, New Albion."

"Where is that?"

"Sector Nine of The New Empire." Ian liked answering questions now, it felt so very good to be helpful.

The questions went on for another two hours, they did find out that Ian could indeed build a shield device given enough time. High temperature superconducting wire would be needed but Ian knew how that was made also. General questions about the near future left Burns and the others with a cold and empty feeling in their guts.

Ian woke up that evening with a splitting headache and the dry heaves from the effects of the drugs, he vowed not to spend another day in this place.

The White House, 2002

"Is this some sort of stupid joke?" Asked the President with a frown, he was normally a very easy going sort of person.

"No sir," explained the Director of CIA, "the weapon was all too real, five men died trying to open it's power supply. The boy is telling the truth, the new drugs have been one-hundred percent effective in past cases and now in this one. The speech experts cannot identify his accent and speech pattern, they say it is not possible to perfectly fake such things. There is the matter of the clothing he was wearing when he was struck by the bus. The fabric is only cotton but there are no seams, no sewn parts. No one has yet figured out how it is possible to weave fabric in that manner."

"What did you learn about the pistol before the accident?"

"Sir, the best description is that it is, or was, some sort of 'proton laser'. It could punch through four inches of steel. When aimed at a pig carcass the animal fairly exploded from rapid heating, so did the hospital's emergency room floor in San Francisco."

"And this other device?"

"Mister President, it appears to be some type of multi-function scientific instrument. There is some reluctance to try and open it at this time, the case is sealed and x-rays don't show anything that we can recognize."

The President could see that the Director was completely serious, he still wasn't convinced himself.

"What else did he reveal while he was drugged? And by the way, doing that to a fifteen-year old boy is beyond my limits!"

"I agree sir, it was a nasty business. The boy described how to make high temperature superconducting wire. A consultant on our staff from Sandia nearly broke into tears when he read the description of the process. The boy also described in detail the theory behind generating defensive force shields, that too had the consultant doing back flips even though he said he only understood a small part of it."

"Truly?" The President was starting to see the light.

"There's more, sir."

"Go on."

"There will be a nuclear war with China in 2017, no one will win. Two hundred years later the New Empire will be formed by the survivors of that war. Democracy as a political institution will end."

The Clinic, 2002

Ian's escape plan was by necessity simple to the point of being stupid. Fabricating a beam pistol out of his room's television remote control didn't seem to be a viable option, fashioning a club out of one of his bed's legs did. A furtive examination of the bed leg revealed that it unscrewed from the frame, a towel could be wrapped around it to avoid totally ending the guard's days. Ian was under constant observation from the low-light capable video camera over the door, he could use that to his advantage. Beyond whacking the guard and taking his door access card Ian would have to rely on a lot of luck and the small number (2) of people on the night staff. No point in waiting, the sun would be up in another two hours.

After hanging a plastic bed pan over the camera, Ian hurriedly unscrewed the bed leg and dashed into the small bathroom. Turn on the water in the sink to make some noise, wrap the bed leg, dash back and smash the wall light switch. Stand to one side of the door. It worked. "Kid! What's going on in here?" The night orderly tried to turn on the light in the darkened room, there was the sound of water running in the john. The man started to look up to see what was wrong with the camera when Ian whacked him.

Thud!

"Sorry," Ian whispered as the orderly became one with the floor. A hurried search of the man's pockets produced the door access card, a wallet and some sort of keys. Ian checked the man's pulse and breathing, he at least hadn't committed murder. Poking his head out the door he could see the other night orderly down at the security station, the man was sitting with his back toward him. Ian simply tiptoed down the hall and whacked his second victim, this netted him more keys and another wallet plus a .40 caliber Glock. Then he was outside.

There were two cars in the small parking area, now came the hard part. Could he drive one of these mobile deathtraps? Could he even get one started? One vehicle was a '93 Corvette with a manual transmission, the other was a '97 Volvo station wagon with an automatic. Ian had observed enough during his auto trips to know how the automatic transmission was operated and opted for the Volvo.

"I must be out of my fucking mind," Ian muttered as he tried the first key in the locked car door. The third key he tried worked.

"Now what?" Ian finally located the ignition switch. On the first click some small lights came on, on the second click more lights, third click started the engine.

"Shit!" Ian naturally had selected 'D' on the transmission indicator and then gently rammed the side of the building that the car was facing. Restart, try 'R' this time. Now how do the headlights work?

With all of the speed and recklessness of an eighty-five year old spinster on her way to church Ian finally maneuvered the station wagon out onto the deserted two-lane road. Twenty-five miles per hour seemed a safe speed, Ian calculated that at this rate he would be in

San Francisco just in time for the war with China in fifteen years.
Also the sun would soon be up and a lot of people would want to have words with him.

Chapter Five, Most Wanted

HMS Thunder, Orbiting N35467

"No! You two will stay right here until we have Ian!" Daniel was laying down the law to Alex and Jeremy, or at least he was trying to.

"But...howwillyou find him?" Alex pleaded.

Daniel didn't have a good answer for that, how indeed would they find him?

"I need you to do as I say for now? Will you obey me?"

Both children nodded yes, disobedience was something that did not come easy to them, nor would it ever. Daniel had the awful feeling that they may indeed have to rely on Alex's talent to find Ian, but that had to be a very last and final resort.

Ellen was coming, not even the Emperor was so powerful as to try and deny her that right. Ian was after all her bother.

"You look very deadly today," Daniel observed as Ellen presented herself for departure to the surface. Ellen had opted for a beam pistol and a small rail carbine. Her tan marine combat uniform and boots completed the fashion statement.

"Thank you. You look a bit grim yourself. Let's go."

Daniel piloted the marine assault craft down to the surface. Twenty fully equipped marines sat behind Daniel, Ellen was in the jump seat behind the craft's co-pilot. Lieutenant Hawkes was in command of the marines and sat with his men, all of them seemed to be watching Ellen. The Emperor's young wife had the entire Imperial Navy and Marines hopelessly in love with her. Gunnery Sergeant N'Kwasi felt very protective toward The Lady Ellen and would of course break the neck of any person on the shuttle who was even slightly out of line with her.

Eight Falcon's flew in escort with the shuttle, not that there were any threats other than those on the surface.

Commander Wilkes and Professor Hyde bowed properly in greeting to their Emperor as Daniel and The Lady Ellen strode down the assault craft's lowered ramp.

"Welcome, Your Majesty. I do so very much apologize for what has happened." Professor Hyde's words were heartfelt, he did indeed care a very great deal for both Ian and Daniel, the three of them had somewhat of a history together.

"Thank you, Professor. There is no fault in this, Ian would tell you the same. Say hello to Ellen, I've told her a lot about you."

Virginia, 2002

The sun was up. Ian had to increase his speed and that seemed very unsafe. People had

been honking and gesturing at him with their middle fingers.

"I need a place to hide," Ian had been saying this to himself for the last twenty miles. A rutted side road and an ancient looking barn seemed like the only option.

The half collapsed barn no longer had a door, Ian eased the mobile deathtrap inside and switched off the ignition with a sigh of relief. He was hidden from view from the road, no passing vehicle could see anything but the old barn. Two near collisions with large trucks and several trees had taken it's toll, Ian needed some sleep. He opted for curling up in the back seat of the Volvo, he was too tired to bother with any inspection of the barn.

Ian was asleep in seconds, the Glock rested on the seat next to him. Someone had watched as all of this occurred.

N35467

"There is just the one marker disk?" Daniel did not like that at all.

"Yes Sire, apparently there is only one disk dispensed for each location." Hyde explained.

"What if the location is shifted just a little, to one side of the original site. Will that dispense another disk?"

Hyde didn't know, it had never occurred to him or anyone else.

"Perhaps we should try that, Sire."

"Do so."

With painstaking care the field of view in the alien device was moved perhaps fifty yards to the right of the original site. Another ceramic disk then popped out of the console.

"Another marker, Sire." Hyde stated the obvious

"Can a shuttle or Falcon be transported?" Daniel asked next.

"We think so, Sire. A test is the only way to know for sure."

"Give me thirty minutes." Daniel turned and went off to where the Falcons had grounded, he would be the test. How could he ask someone else to try such a thing? Ellen bit her lip and refrained from stopping him, it was one of the hardest things she ever had to do.

San Francisco, Golden Gate Park, 2002

There was a small gathering of the local Ukrainian community underway, the park was as always a place to meet for celebrations and holiday events. An Imperial M Class Falcon hovering just over the picnic area had not been in the plans for the day.

"Holy shit (translated)!" Ivan Nachinko had seen many odd things in his life, this was moved to the top of the list. Several people managed to take photos of the nasty looking aircraft before it shot off to the east.

"Holy shit!" Daniel found himself staring out at a city out of time, only instinct and training had caused him to accelerate the Falcon forward and up into the blue sky. On N35467 the crosshairs shifted and followed his progress as he moved out over the inner bay area. A United 737 departing from SFO caught a quick glance of the menacing looking craft as it flashed in front of the airliner.

Daniel called on all of his self control and turned in a sweeping arc toward his arrival point.

In five minutes he was once more hovering over the assembly of Ukrainian immigrants. It had been agreed upon that his return to this spot would signal his wish to be returned.

"Holy shit! (translated)." Ivan Nachinko once more remarked. Two people managed to get video footage this time. The images would be on the networks within two hours with the predictable consequences.

Then Daniel was again over the great iron disk on N35467.

Virginia, 2002

"Hey, geek boy! Wake up!"

"Huh?" Ian bolted upright in the back seat of the Volvo, his blurry eyes finally fixing on who was yelling and banging on the car's roof.

Helen O'Conner backed up when she spotted the large black automatic in Ian's right hand. Helen was fourteen and on the lam herself, the barn had been her hiding place for two days now.

Ian carefully opened the door and stepped out, looking around for other people or threats, he found none and lowered the gun to his side.

"Who are you?" Ian asked quietly.

"No one! Don't shoot for chrissakes!"

"I'm not going to shoot, you startled me is all. Sorry."

"Cool. My name is Helen, Helen O'Connor. How about you?"

"Ian Murphy."

"I guess we're a couple of Micks then. What's your story? You have a weird accent for a Mick."

"I have to get to San Francisco, I sort of escaped from a 'clinic' place and took this vehicle."

"Did you shoot anyone?"

"No. I knocked them out with a padded bed leg, they'll be all right (he hoped)."

Helen was pretty, fair skinned and had hair as red as it is possible to be without artificial dyes. The girl was about Ian's height and looked a bit thin in her jeans and T-shirt. She also had problems of her own.

"What are you doing here?" Ian asked.

"I got tired of foster homes and the creeps running them."

"What's a foster home?"

"A place for losers like me. You sure act ignorant!"

"Sorry." Ian didn't know what else to say.

"Life's a bitch," Helen observed. "You have any money? I'm broke."

"No. Wait a minute, I have two wallets in the vehicle."

Ian retrieved the wallets he had taken off the clinic's night staff and handed them to Helen.

"Pickpocket, huh?" Helen teased.

"What?"

"Nothing. Let's see what's in these."

Wallet number one had twenty-seven dollars in cash and four credit cards. Wallet number two had one-hundred and fifty-three dollars and three credit cards.

"This will buy gas and some food, we can't use the plastic. We'll need another car, the cops will be looking for this one. You did steal it didn't you?"

"Yes, from the clinic parking area," Ian replied with some embarrassment.

"What kind of clinic, are you some sort of druggie or head case?"

"I don't think so. I had some information the government wanted, they got it."

"What kind of information?" Helen asked.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Let's just say a lot of people will probably be looking for me."

"Wonderful." Helen wondered if she should just take the money and run. But there was something about the awkward boy that told her he needed her help, someone's help. Besides, she sort of liked him, goofy as he was.

"We'll stay here till dark," Helen explained, "then we stop in the next town and swipe some new wheels and get some food."

Ian peered down at the Volvo's tires and asked, "What's wrong with the wheels on this vehicle?"

Helen looked at him like he was making a bad joke, but she could tell he wasn't.

"Where are you from, anyway? You sure talk funny for an Irishman."

"New Albion."

"Where the hell is that?"

"It's sort of a long ways off."

"I guess. I have some peanut butter and some bread left, let's finish it off and rest up till dark. No hanky panky!"

"What's 'hanky panky?'"

"Never mind. Let's just eat something."

"Fine." Ian was starved, whatever peanut butter was it sounded good.

The White House, 2002

The President had quietly called an emergency meeting of his cabinet and the JCS. Half of the country was in a near panic about the UFO footage running nonstop on every network. CIA was in a near panic over Ian's easy escape from the clinic.

"That site in Golden Gate Park seems to be the key to this whole mess," began the President's National Security Advisor. "The boy turned up in San Francisco, that little girl disappeared and then was returned in the park, now this."

"Could that have been some sort of experimental aircraft, some 'black project'?" Asked the Attorney General.

"No sir." Replied the Chairman of the JCS. "We have nothing remotely like that thing. It just hovered there for a time with no jet blast to support it. Witnesses say it only made an odd moaning sound, or a low rumble depending on who you talked to."

"And the markings on it?" Asked the President.

"Misspelled English, like was on that pistol. The number six on the tail, 'HMS Thundor' just below that. 'Flyt Lutenunt Hobbs' under the canopy." The CIA director explained.

"So why was that 'thing' doing just a quick circuit of the bay and then back to where it appeared?"

"It's only conjecture, Mister President, but it may have been a test of some sort."

"A test of what, General?"

"Possibly an armed invasion. If that thing wasn't some sort of war craft then I'm in the wrong business."

The President looked pointedly at CIA and told him to either find that boy or to go look for employment elsewhere. The Director of the FBI also got the message.

N35467

There was a growing confidence in using the alien transporter, it had worked without harm to anyone or any device, including a Falcon fighter. The tracking crosshairs shifted along with the movement of the ceramic disks. A better landing site on Earth was definitely in order.

"Why don't we shift the focus point to some remote location, away from any population areas," Daniel suggested.

"That would seem a logical move, Sire," Agreed Commander Wilkes. "Perhaps the desert area to the southeast?"

"Agreed." The Emperor and everyone else had been avoiding the next subject, except Ellen.

"How do we find Ian?" She asked.

"Could we not just go directly to the government there and ask for their assistance?" Asked Professor Hyde.

"They may already have him, perhaps he contacted them when he arrived." Offered Admiral Harker.

There seemed no other course of action for the present short of taking Alex along, Daniel didn't want his little sister put in harm's way if it could at all be avoided.

"All right then, we try to make contact. Any suggestions as to who or where we begin with?"

Daniel looked around the table, Ellen had a suggestion.

"Why not their capitol city, where their President is?"

"Start right at the top, so to speak?" Hyde asked.

"Yes. What better place?" Ellen replied

It did seem like a very sensible idea.

At the time.

Virginia, 2002

"Wake up! It's getting dark!" Helen shook Ian's shoulder, he had been catching up on lost sleep.

"Where do we go?" Ian asked, still half asleep.

"West, dummy. We stop at the first town and ditch the car, then we find another one they aren't looking for."

"How...keys are required to start a vehicle."

"Well duh! Idiots are always leaving cars unlocked with the keys in them. Fast food stores are a good place to hang out at, we should get lucky."

"What's fast food?"

Helen just gave her dopey new friend an exasperated look. Where was this funny geek from, anyway?

It took another ten minutes to get organized and to use the 'facilities', then it was time to go.

"Can you drive a vehicle?" Ian asked as they approached the Volvo. His last excursion had left him a nervous wreck.

"Yes. I don't have a license or anything, why?"
"I had my first lesson last night when I stole this thing."
"Oh. Then maybe I'd better do the driving." Helen replied.
"Good."

"Fasten your seat belt," Helen said. Ian watched as she did so and learned something else about cars.

"The restraint feels loose, is it faulty?"

"Nitwit, it locks up if we crash!"

"Oh. How clever!"

"Christ Almighty!" Helen started the car, she was much better at it than Ian was. They were out on the main road and doing sixty before Ian would have made it out of the barn.

"Do we have to go this fast?" Ian asked through tight lips.

"If we go too slow it will attract attention, besides we're not even doing the speed limit. You act like you haven't done much driving."

"Actually I've done a lot of traveling, just not in one of these things."

"Well, relax! You're making me crazy!"

"Sorry."

N35467

A review of some history texts and ancient maps was in order. Professor Hyde gave a short lesson to the Emperor, Ellen and the assembled pilots and marines.

"The large Capitol Building is not where the President resided or even visited very often. The real seat of power was the White House, as you can see in this restored photograph it was indeed a large white house." Hyde pointed to the image on the large view screen. The lecture was taking place in a temporary hanger structure.

"Can we land there?" Daniel asked.

"I believe so, Your Majesty. All of the photographs and records indicate large grassy areas surrounding the building."

"Will it be defended, sir?" This from Flight Lieutenant Pak.

This caught Hyde unprepared.

"I honestly don't know. I haven't found any records or indications of defensive weapons. I should imagine that some sort of security force will be present."

The subject changed to military forces of the time. Commander Wilkes was a military history buff and gave this part of the briefing.

"As you may already know, there were aircraft in large numbers during this time period, mostly civilian transports and such. Military aircraft with speeds of perhaps twice that of sound existed, they had conventional rapid fire cannons and various types of missiles."

"Do you know how high they could fly?" Daniel asked.

"It is believed that the more advanced turbine powered craft of this era could reach perhaps seventy thousand feet in an all out climb, Sir. Combat was normally engaged at much lower altitudes."

Lieutenant Pak had a direct question for the Emperor.

"Your Majesty, if we are attacked what is our response?"

"As you know, the shuttle and Falcons will be shield equipped. We are not out to initiate some sort of war with our ancestors, We just want to get Sir Ian back. If fired upon there is no need

to respond. If things get out of hand on the ground we will proceed on to the rendezvous point over the Atlantic ocean for transport back here."

There would be no communications with this expedition, only the shifting crosshairs on the alien console would indicate progress. If the crosshairs moved on to a point off of what had once been called Cape Charles it would signal that transport back was requested.

Lynchburg, Virginia, 2002

The roadblocks went up behind them one hour after Ian and Helen coasted to an out of gas stop in the MacDonald's parking lot.

"Come on, let's get away from this heap!" Helen didn't have to ask twice, Ian was all too glad to have his feet doing the traveling for a while.

"Where...?"

"That Zippy Mart up the street, maybe we can get lucky."

By mutual consent they had left the Glock on the floor in the back of the Volvo, the girl had explained how nervous cops became when they spotted a gun. Besides, Ian wasn't too sure how the damned thing worked and he certainly didn't want to shoot anyone.

"I'm starving to death," Ian complained.

"Me too, geek boy. We'll snag something in the Zippy Mart while we check things out."

"Why do you keep calling me that? What's a 'geek' anyway?"

"A geek is a valiant and heroic warrior," Helen lied, not too successfully.

"Why don't I believe that?" Ian grinned.

"Maybe you're smarter than you look."

Both of them were starting to like each other, a lot.

Alice Kies was a ditz. She had as always stopped at the Zippy Mart for a lottery ticket and a cup of bad coffee. She as always just left the motor running in her pride and joy Mustang.

"Move it!" Helen was dashing from where they had been standing beside the outside phone booth. Ian obeyed and they were inside the blue Mustang in an instant. Blue smoke from the rear tires was all that Alice saw as her not paid for steed disappeared from sight.

"Yeeeeehaw!" Helen seemed to enjoy this sort of thing far too much.

"Slow down!" Ian was having his first ride in a 'performance' vehicle. He didn't care for it at all.

N35467

There would be three craft in this mission. Daniel would be at the controls of the marine assault shuttle, an escort of two Falcons would fly cover. The focus point of the transporter had been shifted to a remote desert area as agreed. Two slight shifts after the initial transport had been made would provide each craft with its own ceramic marker disk.

"Shuttle One is ready," Daniel spoke into the com link while giving Ellen a final glance before departure. The two Falcons had already made the trip and would be standing watch when the shuttle arrived. A marine dashed out of the control structure and handed the final disk to Sergeant N'kwasi who stood waiting on the shuttle's ramp. The huge black marine closed the

ramp and delivered the precious disk to his Emperor, without it they would not be returning.

"Thank you, Sergeant. Strap in."

Daniel sealed the disk into it's own special container that had been welded to the instrument panel. Time to go.

Mojave Desert northeast of Barstow California, dusk 2002

Mildred Hooper and her group of fellow rock collectors thought that the damned Air Force was off it's reservation again. Fred Naughton put them straight.

"Those things don't belong to our Air Force! The fucking things are just floating there!" Fred was retired from the Air Force.

Mildred was shocked at the man's language, she was even more shocked when a much larger 'thing' blinked into existence off to the side of the two hovering Falcons.

It took a few seconds for Daniel to adjust to the new reality around him, just as it had for the Falcon pilots. Ellen would have squeaked if she could have found her voice.

"Take up formation and activate shields," Daniel finally ordered, "follow my departure."

"We have an audience, Sire." Lieutenant Pak observed, pointing to the small group of people off to the south.

"Shit!" Daniel hadn't needed another complication at this point.

NORAD, Cheyenne Mountain, 2002

Red lights were starting to blink, alarm klaxon's activated. The heightened alert status caused a faster than normal reaction to unknown radar tracks over the continental United States.

"Three Fast Walkers tracking to the east. Launch strip alert aircraft at sites east of Nevada. Notify Alamo (the White House) and CINCUSAF."

Over southern Nevada, 2002

Daniel had opted for a fast suborbital arc, it would save time but not Ellen's stomach. A motion sickness candy still dissolving in her mouth kept things from getting messy. The acceleration was crushing the poor girl into her seat, the marines in the back were used to this sort of thing.

"How are you doing?" Daniel's question seemed entirely too casual to Ellen, didn't he feel like an elephant was sitting on him?

"Shut up!" Ellen was focusing on the control readouts, the view outside only made things worse.

Daniel just smiled.

The White House, 2002

The Red Phone was ringing, something every President had nightmares about.
"Cold Wood." The President wondered again who dreamed up these stupid authentication code words.

"Mister President, this is Cheyenne Mountain. We have three unknowns tracking from California to the east. Performance parameters are beyond known aircraft, altitude is presently fifty miles and increasing, speed is in excess of five-thousand knots."

"Christ! Where are they headed?"

"On the present track and speed they could be over your location in twenty minutes, sir."

"Fuck!"

"Yes sir."

"Keep me informed." With that the President hung up the phone. Now what? Nothing the Air Force had could touch them.

Wytheville, Virginia, 2002

"Just give the guy this twenty, he looks like he just crossed the border anyway." Helen's instructions were a bit confusing but Ian did as directed. The immigrant in the cash booth was indeed only interested in the color of the money. Ian returned and watched fascinated as the girl started gassing up the car.

"Refined hydrocarbons?" Ian sniffed at the fumes.

"What?"

"The fuel. Refined hydrocarbons."

"It's gas, hair brain!"

"Sorry."

"And stop apologizing all of the time!"

"Sorry."

"Jesus Christ!"

A stop at an all night drive through burger dispenser was next in order, Ian was getting a quick education in early twenty-first century history. He didn't care too much for the watery cola but drank it without complaint as they sat parked on a dark side street.

"Thank you," Ian said quietly.

"For what?" Helen looked over at her odd friend.

"For helping me."

"No problem. I still haven't figured you out."

"I am...I'm not supposed to be here, it was a mistake."

"What are you talking about?" Helen stopped ingesting french fries and looked closely at Ian.

"Never mind. It's too weird to even try and explain. Perhaps we should be moving along now."

Helen said nothing as she started the car but she was troubled by what Ian had tried to say. What was his real story?

A nation wide alert had been put out on Ian. He was described as dangerous, having escaped from a mental institution. He was not to be approached, call the cops. The fact that Helen and Ian had got as far as they had was due to the fact that law enforcement's ability to track and apprehend fugitives is highly exaggerated.

Over Virginia, 2002

A good portion of the state had their windows rattled as the shuttle and its Falcon escort descended and decelerated into the lower atmosphere. By the time the formation had gone subsonic they were over the nation's capitol. So were two formations of Air National Guard F-16's.

"We have possible fighters closing on us from the west, Sire." Lieutenant Pak was known for being cool under pressure, he may as well have been reporting the time of day.

"Very well. Let's make it easy for them, turn on all anti-collision lights and the forward search beams. Notify the escort."

"Yes, Sire."

Daniel double checked the indicators on the shield control, it was indeed on.

"Apparent missile launch's from the closing fighters, Sire." Pak simply could not be rattled. Ellen could but she managed to keep her panic to herself.

"Let's just ignore them, no point in killing good men who are trying to defend their country." Daniel hoped that their welcome on the ground might be just a little more civilized.

The F-16 flight leaders reported multiple missile impacts and then watched in amazement as nothing but missile fragments fell out of the sky. Indeed the formation of the three unknowns flew on as if nothing had happened. This did nothing to settle the nerves at the White House.

The White House Situation Room, 2002

"I see. Where are they now?" The President was once more on the Red Phone, after a moment he softly hung up and turned to his Cabinet.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have visitors. I for one am going to go up and see what they want. Care to come along?"

Washington, D.C. 2002

"Follow Us down, the grassy area at the rear of the building." Daniel could see what had to be an actual 'helicopter', something laughed at when photo's of them were shown to new cadets. There was room on the grassy expanse for three more aircraft, of sorts.

The entire area was bathed in brilliant light from the shuttle and Falcon's anti-collision beacons. The Shuttle's forward search beams lit up the entire White House. People were already firing small arms and shoulder fired projectiles at them, to no effect of course. It was very, very noisy.

"This is not good." Daniel observed calmly.

"No, Sire." Pak agreed.

"Let's wait, perhaps they'll quit after a while." Daniel suggested.

The President had some limited military experience and ordered the Secret Service to cease firing.

"It's like throwing rocks at a tank!" Observed the President's Chief of Staff.

"Whoever they are they seem to have some remarkable self restraint."

"Yes, Mister President, they do."

"They seemed to have calmed some, now how do we communicate with them?" Daniel had no intention of dropping the shield. Pak had a solution.

"Perhaps we could resize the shield, Sire. To put a few of them on the inside with us?"

"I like the way you think, Captain." Daniel had at that moment just promoted Pak.

"Thank you, Sire. I do try."

"We need to send someone forward, perhaps with a flag of truce or something," suggested the COS. In response the President took out his white handkerchief and handed it to the man.

"Go for it, Dave. History will remember your bravery."

"But I didn't mean...."

"If they had meant to do us harm I do believe they would have already done so." Replied the President.

"Cripes!" Dave Chatsworth just shook his head and opened the door, he always did have a big mouth.

"Someone is approaching, Sire."

"I see him, let him get close to the shield and then reestablish it another twenty yards or so further on."

"Yes, Sire."

The COS could sense something had just happened, it seemed suddenly much quieter. He stopped waving the silly God-damned handkerchief and just stood waiting, concentrating on not wetting himself.

"Lieutenant Hawkes!" Daniel called the marine's commanding officer forward.

"Sire?"

"We intend to speak with that fellow with the white cloth. Lower the main ramp and deploy your men in a perimeter. Search that person."

"At once, Sire."

Daniel turned to Ellen as the marines started to deploy. "Are you up to some diplomacy?"

"Now that I'm on solid ground, yes."

The President's COS almost bolted when twenty or so Imperial Assault Marines in combat armor charged out of the rear of the shuttle and took up a ring perimeter around the wingless craft. The weapons they were carrying looked suitable for hunting dinosaurs. Lieutenant Hawkes and Sergeant N'Kwasi walked calmly up to the frightened (very) COS. Hawkes even saluted before speaking.

"Sir, are you the President of The United States?"

"No....I..I am his Chief of Staff. My name is David Chatsworth."

Hawkes nodded and then spoke to his sergeant.

"Search him for weapons, gently."

"Yes, sir." N'Kwasi rumbled.

Chatsworth had the feeling that the huge black 'soldier' would have preferred to tear his head off, there was something about the look in his eyes.

"I detect no weapons, sir." N'Kwasi seemed a little disappointed. Hawkes then spoke quietly into his headset.

"It appears safe, Your Majesty."

The COS heard that. Chatsworth wondered just who the hell was in that fucking UFO?

"Let's go, act dignified." Daniel said.

"Your fly's open," Ellen replied in a whisper.

"Very funny." Daniel checked anyway.

There was something about the teenaged boy who was walking toward the COS that conveyed a sense of power, a sense of royalty. There was no doubt in the man's mind that the boy was the one in charge. And what about that beautiful blonde mini-amazon at the boy's side? Lieutenant Hawkes made the introductions to Chatsworth.

"Sir, His Most Imperial Majesty and The Lady Ellen." And then, "Your Majesty, I present Mister David Chatsworth, Chief of Staff to the President of The United States."

Daniel offered his hand, it was taken.

"I'm afraid that I...we are at a loss here," Chatsworth began, "what do you...?"

"We owe an apology for this intrusion, We mean no harm at all. We are here to ask your assistance in locating a person who was transported to this time and place through an accident. His name is Sir Ian Murphy."

At this point Chatsworth decided that he would be resigning very soon, if he survived this nightmare.

Morehead, Kentucky, 2002

"Look out!" Ian screamed.

"I'm awake!" Helen also screamed. In truth she had fallen asleep at the wheel, only the oncoming semi's air horn had saved them.

At least they were both now completely awake.

"We need to stop and rest!" Ian correctly observed.

"No shit!

The sun would be up in another two hours. Where to hide?

Boskin's Motor Inn had seen far better days. A trio of two chickens and a mule could have rented a unit if they had the cash. Helen had the cash.

"My brother has the flu, we need a place for him to rest."

Cash on the counter stopped any questions about the girl's age or relations.

"Number six, check out is in twenty-four hours. Leave the key in the door."

"Thanks."

There was only the one bed. At least the sheets and towels were clean.

"What are you doing?" Helen demanded.

"Going to bed, I'm tired." Ian had started to undress, sleep was all he had in mind.

"Then keep your underwear on!"

"Sorry." Ian had stopped trying to understand this place in time.

Helen had started to make further objections but Ian's soft snoring told her that she was perfectly safe with this odd boy. After a while both of them were asleep back to back. Helen woke up a couple of times, it was sort of nice to have a warm friend so close. For the first time in too long she didn't feel alone.

The White House, 2002

"How was Ian injured?" Ellen demanded.

Chatsworth was getting in deeper by the minute.

"Apparently he was struck by a city bus in San Francisco, an accident. He wasn't seriously hurt, he was released from the hospital the next morning."

"Then where is he?" Daniel also demanded.

"Well, this is awkward. The weapon he was carrying apparently discharged at the hospital, the authorities were called in."

"And?" Daniel's eye's were starting to narrow a little.

"The FBI undertook an investigation, it involved an interrogation of Ian...Sir Ian."

"What is the FBI"? Ellen asked.

"The Federal Bureau of Investigation. It's a law enforcement organization. Then CIA took over the case."

"CIA?" Daniel asked rather sharply. These acronyms were getting tiresome.

"Central Intelligence Agency."

Daniel had finally had enough.

"Where is he right now?"

"We don't actually know at the present, he escaped from the facility where he was being....detained." Chatsworth was wondering if these refugees from a Star Wars movie would now simply vaporize him.

"Why would he feel any need to escape? And why was he being held against his will?"

Daniel's very quite questions told the man that this was the moment of truth.

"Err...We aren't entirely sure at the...?"

"Are you at least attempting to locate him?" Daniel hissed.

"Of course, we..."

Daniel interrupted the perspiring bureaucrat.

"We'll be back."

Morehead Kentucky, 2002

Helen was awake and watching the fuzzy motel television, Ian was just starting to come to life. What Helen saw unfold on the network news broadcast raised her pulse and caused her to dash to the window for a peak through the shabby drapes.

"Get up!" Helen wanted to shout but only managed a loud whisper.

"Huh?"

"You're on the news, dammit! We both are!"

"What?" Ian finally sat up while rubbing his eyes.

"The whole damn country is looking for us!"

The whole damn country was indeed looking for them. The fact that the mustang was parked out of sight of the street was the only thing that had kept them from having uniformed visitors. The motel clerk being at least partially brain dead was also helping. The television told them more than they really wanted to know, at first.

The stolen Volvo had been found. Burger flippers at the Macdonald's where the Volvo had been left had remembered seeing a blond boy and a red haired girl get out of the car. A blue Mustang was reported stolen, the same two kids were seen loitering around the Zippy Mart. More UFO's were reported over the nation's capitol and the Mojave Desert, described as being similar to those seen over San Francisco. This last item was of the most interest to Ian.

"Daniel!"

"What?" The girl turned to look Ian, now what?

"I think he's found a way to get here, to look for me!" Ian was almost floating above the mattress.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you everything, then if you want me to leave I will." Ian said.

"Why would I want you to leave, after all the shit we've been through?"

"Because you'll think I'm insane."

"Try me."

Ian told her. Everything.

"It does explain why you're such a hopeless geek." Helen did believe her weird friend. They were still in all of the trouble that there was.

HMS Thunder, in orbit at N35467

"Pest, I need your help." Daniel could see no other way, was he right to even think of doing this.

"I know. Let's go get Ian." Alex's simple answer was all that Daniel needed.

East of Lexington Kentucky, 2002

How they had gotten this far was beyond explanation. The flashing red lights behind them in the early evening dark told them that good luck had it's limits.

"Oh shit! Oh shit!" Helen shoved the accelerator all the way to the floor, Ian reacted as expected.

"What is it? Slow down!"

"Cops!"

Ian finally looked behind them, apparently everything in Kentucky that had red lights on the roof was following them.

"Oh shit!" Ian was getting into the spirit of things.

"What do we do?" Helen had started to lose all of her former bravado and was moving into panic. A wall of red lights in the far distance ahead of them didn't help any.

"We have to stop! Daniel will find us, but we have to be alive when he does!"

The girl eased off the gas, the pursuing state troopers pulled up close and then alongside them. Before they finally stopped Ian had a very important question for Helen.

"Do you want to come with me?"

"What?"

"Daniel will find me sooner or later, he won't leave without me. Do you want to come? I want you to!"

The Mustang finally halted as the girl looked at the boy she had come to care a great deal for. There was nothing more she wanted than to stay with him.

"Yes. Hell yes!" Her kiss sealed the deal.

"Driver! Step out of the car with your hands behind your head!"

You know the rest of that routine.

The White House, 2002

"They have them, Mister President! In Kentucky!"

"Are they all right?"

"Yes, they stopped without much of a fuss. They're taking them to the police station in Lexington." Chatsworth decided he might not resign, not just yet anyway.

"So now what the hell do we do?"

The President's question went unanswered by everyone in the Situation Room. The next move was up to the 'visitors'.

N35467

"It's shothere!"

"Slow down, Pest." Daniel knew his sister was excited, her speech always gave her away.

"It's hot." She repeated, slower this time.

"Yes it is, but we won't be here very long."

"What's that?" Jeremy was along too, parting the two children was not even considered. The boy was pointing at a small, four-legged blur running across the stone plaza, it looked like a hairless rabbit that had been dipped in acid. Daniel had started to pull his revolver out, one of the marine sentries beat him to it and the 'rabbit' exploded into a reddish cloud.

"Some sort of local nasty that made it through the fence. This isn't a very nice place."

Daniel's explanation wasn't really needed, both Jeremy and Alex had already figured that out.

There would be four Falcons escorting the shuttle this time, perhaps they weren't really needed but it felt right. Daniel ordered two surveillance drones attached to weapon racks on the shuttle, they might make communications with whoever had Ian easier. Extra jump seats were installed for Alex and Jeremy, Daniel would hold down any heavy accelerations during this trip. The shuttle would have Ian's invincible shield, they should be safe.

But was Ian safe?

Lexington Kentucky, 2002

"I don't know what you've done kid, but I've never seen such a shit storm in my entire life!" Detective Lieutenant Walsford was having the first 'sit down' with Ian. At least they had taken off the handcuffs, Ian could never look very menacing even if he tried.

"What have you done with Helen?" Ian was worried silly over his feisty companion, he cared about her in a way that was new to him.

"She's in the women's section, she's fine. That is if being charged with grand theft auto and aiding a federal fugitive is fine. Can you tell me why the FBI and CIA are interested in you?"

"I could but you wouldn't believe any of it, what's the point?"

Walsford tried another approach.

"Where are you from, anyway, I can't place that accent of yours?"

"It's a long way from here, light years even."

At this point another detective called Walsford out into the hall.

"What is it?"

"The White House just got off the phone with the watch commander, they say to treat the boy with kid gloves." Sergeant Wallace was obviously impressed.

"Are you shitting me?"

"Not this time."

"Christ! What about the girl?"

"Same thing. Smile and be nice, and stand by."

"For what?"

"They didn't say that."

"What about the fucking TV idiots outside?"

"No comments to the press, no access to the kids."

What the hell was going on?

Walsford shook his head and went back in to resume his seat across from Ian.

"You can tell me now, I think I'll believe it."

"No, you won't. Can I see Helen now?"

"Sorry, it's against the rules. She isn't being harmed. No one is going to hurt either of you."

"A very good friend of mine is looking for me."

"Who's that, kid?"

"You wouldn't believe that either but things might get very exciting around here if I'm still here when he does find me."

"What are you saying, kid?"

"When he gets really mad about something it's better to be someplace else."

With that Ian stopped talking altogether.

East of Cape Charles, 2002

"Are you two all right?" Daniel looked over his shoulder at Alex and Jeremy, they seemed to be enjoying things a very great deal.

"We're fine!" Alex grinned. "Ian is that way, he's sort of mad. He's worried about Helen!" Alex was pointing in a generally westerly direction.

"Talk slowly! Who's Helen?" Daniel and Ellen exchanged questioning looks at this revelation.

"Ian's girl. They like...they like each other a lot."

Neither the Emperor, The Lady Ellen nor Captain Pak could think of a response to that. It was time to follow Alex's directions.

The White House, morning 2002

"I understand. No response is authorized unless they initiate hostilities." The President was starting to really hate the Red Phone.

"They're back?" Asked Chatsworth.

"Yes. Five radar contacts this time, coming in fast from the east."

"What do we...?"

"Nothing for now. What can we do?"

Over Washington, D.C. 2002

The glass merchants would honor this day. Fourteen-hundred knots at an altitude of only three-thousand feet broke windows and shattered nerves in a four-mile wide swath across the nation's capitol. Inland the poultry population would cease laying for three days.

"It's not that farther that way!"

"Alex! You have to speak slowly!" Daniel's harsh tone had the right effect.

"I'm sorry. Ian is a long ways, ahead of us. Please don't be mad."

Daniel almost dissolved at the shuttle's controls, he could never be mad at her.

"I'm not mad at you Pest, I love you. Just remember to talk slowly, it's important. What you are doing is very important."

"Okay. I love you too."

Lexington Kentucky, 2002

"What have you done with Ian?" Helen had gone ballistic some time ago.

"Cool it, missy! You are in a world of trouble already, don't you make me get physical!"

Officer Clarissa Brown was not a person to be antagonized, she weighed one-ninety in just her underwear and you really didn't want to see her in her underwear.

Outside of the police building there were news media satellite trucks and hair-sprayed reporters for a half-block in either direction. Some of the more intelligent reporters had finally put two and two together after the usual leak from a White House staffer. The boy inside the police building was somehow tied into the UFO panic, but how?

Over Eastern Virginia, 2002

"Are we getting close, Pest?" Daniel and everyone else were starting to have doubts about the small girl's abilities.

"We're more...we're more than halfway. I don't know how many miles that is."

"That's okay, Pest. What can you tell about how they are?"

"They're still mad at the people there, it's a jail place. There's lots of people there."

The mention of a "jail place" infuriated the Emperor, The Lady Ellen didn't take the news too well either.

Lexington Kentucky, 2002

Detective Walsford had given up trying to get anything else out of Ian, his counterpart had about the same success with Helen, even with Officer Brown in the room looking menacing. The crowd of local citizens outside the police building had continued to swell, all of the news trucks signaled that something very important was going on but no one seemed to know just what it was.

The watch commander, Captain Jack Donant ('Donuts' behind his back), received another

call from the White House.

"They say that radar is tracking five high speed 'objects' heading our way. They say to give the boy to them if and when they get here."

"Who the fuck is "them" and "they"?" Walsford was getting a very queasy feeling in his stomach.

"The White House said that they weren't entirely sure."

"Well that's a big fucking help! Are they God-damned martians or something?"

"I sort of got that impression that they might be," Donuts replied.

Outside there was a lot of jockeying for position among the news types. Patricia Wilkins worked for one of the local stations, she had a reputation for being able to get past police lines and had a nasty left elbow to get her to the front of anything. She was also 'perky'. News producers liked 'perky'.

"Just stay with me for Chrissakes!" Patricia went through a lot of cameramen.

"Bend over and you'll see how close this Sony can get." The cameraman muttered to himself.

"What was that?" She made a mental note to get this latest moron fired.

"Nothing. I'm right with you."

A few people in the crowd caught just a glimpse of something flashing overhead, three seconds later the sonic shock wave arrived. Five seconds after that the panic set in. Inside the rattled police building Ian had a very large grin on his face.

"Turnaroundturnaround!" Alex yelled.

"What is it?" Daniel demanded, not quite as loud as his sister.

"Ian'sdownthere! Wewen...we went past!"

Daniel alerted the escort Falcons that they had arrived and then commenced a wide turn while slowing to subsonic.

"Come up here beside me, Pest."

Strong hands unbelted the small girl and soon had her safely standing beside the shuttle's command seat. Lieutenant Hawkes had a firm grip on both a grab bar and Alex.

"Slow down!" Alex was pointing at a distant building, there seemed to be a large number of people and vehicles surrounding the place.

"Ian's in there!"

They had indeed arrived.

On the ground people were starting to run in all directions, the media included.

"Come on, let's get the hell out of here!" Perky's cameraman was ready to bolt.

"You stay right here with me you fat sack of shit! Whatever the fuck those things are they're coming here! Signal for a network live feed! How does my hair look?"

There was a wide lawn area between the street and the police building, Daniel decided to land there and have the Falcons orbit overhead. Patricia Wilkins and her cameraman were of course closest to the shuttle when it touched down.

"Sweet jumping Jesus!" Were Perky's first and last words to the network.

"Extend the shield past those two people," Daniel gestured to the the woman and the man near her who was holding something on his shoulder.

"Yes Sire. Is that a weapon he has?" Pak asked.

"It'sa.. It takes pictures," Alex said.

"I believe they had some sort of vid apparatus then, or rather now, Sire." Hawkes explained.
"Ah. I see. Perhaps they can be of some help then. Deploy your men, Lieutenant."

The shield had blocked the wireless link from the camera to the station's van, the camera's internal tape continued to record.

"We are outside of police headquarters....this is the most incredible sight." Perky was as close to a loss for words as she ever had been, that is to say not very close at all. "Some sort of aircraft has just landed on the lawn here, it just hovered for a moment making a low rumbling noise. I can't see any jets or whatever propels it.... It's as big as a city bus. There are some smaller aircraft circling overhead, they seem to have only very small wings and you can just hear a sort of howling sound from them."

Inside the police building events had not stood still. Detective Walsford had taken one long look out of the shattered windows of the second floor and then went to get Ian.

"I believe that your ride is here."

Ian just nodded, he knew what a sonic shock wave sounded like.

"Helen's coming too, where is she?"

"Kid, I have the word to turn you over to whoever or whatever is out there, not your friend."

"I'm not leaving without Helen!"

"Yes you are."

With that the six-foot three Walsford simply grabbed up Ian and slung him over his shoulder. Walsford had no wish to keep the people (if they were people) outside waiting any longer than needed.

"Hellllennnn!" Ian's scream was lost in the general uproar in the police headquarters.

"Identify yourselves!" Lieutenant Hawkes and Sergeant N'Kwasi had done this sort of thing once before.

"Pa..Patricia Wilkins. I'm with Fox News Lex..."

"And him?" Hawkes interrupted, pointing at the camera man.

"Manny. Manny Garcia."

"The device he carries?"

"It's our news camera."

"Vid?"

"Video, yes."

Hawkes spoke once more into his headset, it seemed to be safe. Once more the Lieutenant had to make proper introductions as the Emperor and The Lady Ellen approached.

"Your Majesty, this is Patricia Wilks.."

"Wilkins," Perky corrected.

"Patricia Wilkins, Your Majesty. The gentleman is a Mister Manny Garcia."

Even the pain in the ass reporter had to pause when the title "Your Majesty" finally registered. But he was just a boy! Was he royalty?

"Your Majesty?" Perky asked with some sarcasm.

"His Most Imperial Majesty, Emperor of The New Empire, Protector of Mankind," answered Hawkes. "Do not be impertinent, madame!"

Daniel finally asked the important question.

"We are only here to collect Sir Ian Murphy, it is believed that he is in that building. Will you assist Us in this matter?"

This confusing meeting was interrupted as Detective Walsford carried a protesting Ian out of the front entrance to the building.

"Ian!" Daniel and Ellen both shouted.

Hawkes spoke into his headset, the shield was pushed out further and Ian and his captor were also inside the barrier.

A good portion of 2002's humanity was watching this all unfold, for every reporter there was a different version of what was occurring. A young Emperor from a distant future dashed to embrace his lost friend, a sister ran to embrace her lost brother.

An enormous black Imperial Marine Sergeant shoved a cannon in Detective Walsford's ashen face.

Perky finally just shut up.

"Ian, you nitwit!" Daniel had his friend in a rib cracking embrace.

"God, I am so sorry for this mess! I never meant..."

"Are you all right?" Ellen demanded.

"Yes... They have Helen, they won't let her come!"

"Alex mentioned Helen, who is she?" Daniel asked in a quieter tone.

"She helped me, she doesn't have any family. We..."

"Love each other?" Daniel finished what Ian was unused to saying.

"Yes."

"Then we will not leave without her."

Daniel looked around for a moment, settling on Detective Walsford.

"Who is he?"

"A constable of some sort," Ian answered, "he isn't really a bad guy, just sort of thick-skulled."

Daniel motioned for Sergeant N'Kwasi to bring the petrified man over to them.

"Move," rumbled N'Kwasi, "and be respectful to His Majesty."

"His Majesty?" Walsford, like everyone else, was having some trouble adjusting to this. Especially with a howitzer of some sort poking him in the middle of his back.

The Emperor studied the detective for a moment before speaking.

"You are detaining a girl, Helen..."

"O'Conner." Ian prompted.

"Helen O'Conner," Daniel continued, "release her immediately."

"I don't have the authority to do that," Walsford tried to explain, "she has broken the law, several times."

"What laws?" Daniel asked.

"Stealing a car, that's grand theft. Aiding and harboring a federal fugitive. Several other minor counts."

"She was merely helping Sir Ian." Daniel was starting to lose what patience he might once have had.

"Sir Ian?" Walsford asked, his smirk didn't help matters any.

"Yes. Sir Ian is an Imperial Knight and should be shown some respect, not treated as a common criminal." This didn't seem to register with the man.

"She is a minor and a felon. Like I said, I have no authority to release her to you or anyone else."

"I see." Daniel's eye's had narrowed once again, never a good sign. "You have five minutes to release her, if you fail to do so We shall use force to take her."

Before Walsford could protest Daniel motioned Ellen and Ian to follow him back to the shuttle. The detective found himself under close guard, any thought of escape was ridiculous .

Once inside the shuttle there was another reunion as Alex and Jeremy wrapped themselves around Ian.

"IanIanIan!" Alex squealed with joy.

"Hi Sweetpie, Hi Jeremy."

"Alex led us to you," Ellen explained, "she told us about Helen."

Ian nodded in understanding as he knelt to embrace both children.

"Let's get Helen!" Alex said in a blur.

"How?" Ian looked at Daniel.

"Perhaps one of the surveillance drones, Sire?" Captain Pak offered.

"Agreed. Let's locate her exactly, maybe they'll decide to release her by then."

By now the city's mayor and police chief were on hand to second guess every decision. No one seemed to want to take the responsibility for turning the girl over to these 'people', indeed they had no authority to do so. The heated argument in the chief's office was interrupted by shouts and a crashing noise. The drone had arrived.

A standard armored surveillance drone was tubular in shape, three feet long and one foot in diameter. Both ends of the device tapered to diamond hard points, it's small but powerful drive unit could push it through a foot of concrete.

"She's up higher!" Alex said as Corporal Li controlled the probe from it's portable command unit in the shuttle. Li was the squad's expert on the device and was very good at his job.

The device floated down the ground floor hallway, a low humming noise made it seem all the more menacing. People got out of the way.

The White House, 2002

"They have demanded that the girl be turned over to them, Mister President. They threaten force if she isn't given up." Chatsworth reported with some resignation in his voice as he hung up the phone.

"They have no authority to do that, no one does without at least a court hearing." Added the Attorney General.

"No," agreed the President, "but I rather think they have the force to do so."

Lexington, 2002

"A dead end, Sire." Corporal Li reported. The drone had reached the end of the hall, there were no stairs or means to proceed upward.

"Punch through the floor, we're wasting time!" Daniel ordered.

"Yes, Sire."

Li pointed the nose of the drone straight up and as the expression goes, punched it. Concrete and floor tiles shattered and flew in all directions as the device erupted from the floor below. Officer Clarisa Brown was heard to shout "Oh Lordy" several times as she fled down the hall to the stairwell.

"That door! That door!" Alex was pointing at one of the small detention rooms, it had a metal door with small window in it. Helen's face appeared in the tiny window.

"That's Helen!" Ian added to the excitement.

"Warn her away from the door, Ian. Use the loudtalker." Daniel said.

Li handed the voice pickup to Ian and pressed a small button on the control unit.

"Helen! This is Ian! Move back away from the door as far as you can!"

Helen heard that, so did most of the building. Li moved the drone slowly up to the door and began pushing. The metal door creaked and groaned for a moment and then snapped its lock bolt, slamming open. Helen was visible against the far wall, unharmed.

"Don't be afraid of the drone, Helen!" Ian told the petrified girl.

"O....okay. If you say so." Her voice seemed small and tinny as the drone's audio pickup relayed it back to the shuttle.

"How do we get her out? The drone can't do too much to protect her." Daniel asked.

"Sire, let me and my men do it, it's what we get paid for." Lieutenant Hawkes requested.

The Emperor nodded in agreement, he wanted to go himself but knew that he must remain safe this time and let others take the risk.

"All right. Ask for volunteers, do your best not to harm anyone in the process."

"Of course, Sire!"

Ian told the girl to stay put, the menacing looking drone humming softly in the doorway made that an easy instruction to obey.

Lieutenant Hawkes had his pick of men, they all had volunteered. Sergeant N'Kwasi would be on point, or rather right behind Detective Walsford

"Take us to the girl," N'Kwasi ordered, "any trouble and you will cease to exist."

Walsford took the giant marine at his word and nodded quickly in agreement. The detective and the ten marines moved easily through the polarized shield (you can leave, returning is a lot harder). The Chief of Police and five officers decided to try and block their way and stood in the doorway to the building.

"Halt right there!" The Chief and his men had so far not drawn their weapons, lucky for them.

"Stand aside, we have no wish to harm you." Hawkes replied calmly.

By now the chief and his men were beginning to question the wisdom of their decision to not release the girl. The weapons these space pirates were carrying were altogether too large.

"A small demonstration, sir." Hawkes looked around for a moment before speaking to his sergeant.

"That unoccupied silver vehicle, fire your beam rifle at it."

"Yes sir!" N'Kwasi had hoped for something to shoot at (or someone).

Chief Harmon's pride and joy was his new silver Mercedes, he had made a very good 'deal' on it in return for some awkward legal problems the dealer had being made to disappear. The jewel of German auto engineering exploded in a fearsome blast as the energy from the beam rifle found its gas tank. The car's trunk lid landed a half block away.

Hawkes turned to the stunned peace officers. "I suggest that you reconsider. The same thing can easily be done to this city."

"F..follow me." The Chief had indeed reconsidered.

Helen was sitting crouched on the small bunk in the detention room when they reached her, the drone still standing guard in the doorway.

"Miss O'Conner, my name is Lieutenant Hawkes. My men and I are her to escort you to Sir Ian." Hawkes was rewarded with a crushing hug from the terrified girl, she was crying.

"Come along Miss, time is critical."

"Thank you," Helen whispered, "thank you so much!"

Outside the renewed panic over the exploding Mercedes had subsided, media crews were once more edging towards the police building. Daniel had Patricia Wilkins and her cameraman summarily ejected from the shielded area.

Lieutenant Hawkes wasted no time, Helen had to trot to keep up with the marines that surrounded her on all sides. There were no incidents during the trip out of the building, people with badges tend not to be total fools. As soon as Hawkes and his men along with the bewildered Helen were aboard the shuttle Daniel ordered the ramp closed. Ian and the girl were reunited while a smiling Emperor looked on, Ellen had a few tears in her eyes at the sight of her brother's joy.

"Is everyone accounted for, Lieutenant?" Daniel asked Hawkes.

"Yes Sire, no casualties, all present."

"Very good, 'Captain'. Let's get the hell out of here."

"Indeed, Sire." Hawkes smiled, newly promoted.

The White House, 2002

"They've taken the girl, Mister President." Chatsworth reported.

"Was anyone hurt?"

"Apparently not sir, they did fire some sort of weapon at an unoccupied car as a demonstration of their intent."

"And?"

"They threatened to do the same to Lexington if the girl was not handed over."

"Where are they now?"

"NORAD has reported that they are on a reverse course at the present, only much faster and climbing."

"So they seem to be leaving, then?"

"Yes Mister President, it would seem so."

"Thank God."

N35467

Helen O'Conner had spent the return flight to the Cape Charles area tightly in the arms of Ian. The girl was almost in shock from the events of the day, that and finding herself in a spacecraft of some sort surrounded by nasty looking soldiers. The little girl who held onto her free hand seemed to have a calming effect on Helen, until the shuttle suddenly found itself light years away in the dark of an alien night. And in a distant time.

Chapter Six

The A'Chon

The marines had disembarked into the warm and humid darkness, only the Emperor and his family remained aboard. Helen was having a hard time of it.

"Where the f..where are we?" Helen was trembling as Ian held onto her.

"It's sort of hard to explain," Ian tried to anyway, "this is the planet I told you about, the time I told you about. We'll be going home to Earth very soon, you are safe. We are together."

"C'monHelen. It's okay." Alex's words helped the most.

"All right kid, I'm sorry to be such a pain."

"If Ian approves of you Helen, then so do we," Daniel explained, "you're with family now, a weird family but a family indeed."

A guard of honor had assembled quietly outside the shuttle, Professor Hyde and Commander Wilkes stood at the foot of the ramp to greet the Emperor. Helen stood holding onto Ian, wondering just who the black haired boy with the green eyes really was.

"Why are those two men bowing to him?"

"Because he is mankind's Emperor," Ian explained, "he is my best friend and the absolute ruler of the New Empire. In private he will be like a brother to you, in public you must show him the proper respect and address him as 'Your Majesty'."

"But he's just a kid, like us." Helen whispered.

"Yes he is just a kid, but not like us."

Helen and Ian needed baths and clean clothes, everyone did. That could wait a little while until they were on board Thunder. The sooner they were off this nightmare of a planet the better. Before they left for the flagship the Emperor had some words with Professor Hyde and Commander Wilkes.

"You are to close down your research operations here. This planet is under embargo until what has been discovered here can better be understood."

"But Your Majesty, so much has yet.." Hyde didn't get to finish.

"We are sorry, Professor. There is too much power here and you, Sir Ian and everyone else do not know how to control it. Study what you have learned, in time perhaps you will better know what to do with this place."

Hyde knew in is heart that the Emperor was right. They still had no real idea about what forces were at work here.

Aboard HMS Thunder Helen was still in cultural shock, the vessel's chief medical officer had finally been consulted. After a long hot bath, food and clean clothes the girl was put to bed with a light sedative. So was Ian (in a different bed).

The Imperial Flagship was preparing to leave orbit for Earth when the A'chon starship blinked in from non-space.

It was a spherical vessel, dull blue in appearance with no visible markings or features.

It was forty miles in diameter.

The propulsion systems on Thunder shut down and refused to respond.

A message then appeared on Thunder's main tactical screen.

"Explain your presence on this world."

"Get His Majesty to the bridge, now!" Admiral Harker barked.

"He's asleep sir, what..?"

"Then drag him out of bed by his heels if need be! Get him here!"

The Emperor was not amused. He did manage not to shoot the ensign who had been sent to fetch him.

"Your Majesty, forgive me but you are needed at once on the bridge!"

Daniel, by reflex, had his pistol in the ensign's face.

"Explain!"

Ellen was awake by now and trying to make sense of what was happening.

"Daniel, what..?"

"Your Majesty, there is an unidentified vessel now in orbit, it is enormous. Our propulsion systems have been frozen. Please Sire, you must come to the bridge!"

Daniel shook of the effects of a deep sleep and started to pull on some clothes.

Now what was happening?

Once on the bridge Daniel took one look at the main viewscreen and the message on the tactical screen.

"Get Sir Ian up here, now!"

"Yes Sire, at once." Admiral Harker replied.

The same ensign who had fetched the Emperor then took off to rouse Ian.

"Is that the only communication from them, or it?"

"Yes Sire, they seem to be able to control our systems at will. We can find nothing amiss in propulsion or here on the bridge, systems just are not responding to any control inputs."

"Good God," Daniel said softly, "then they have us at their mercy. What about the shield?"

"It's down and will also not respond, Sire."

Ian arrived bleary eyed and with mussed hair, he too soon became fully awake.

"Shit." Ian's comment pretty well covered everything. "They know English," Ian also observed.

"We must respond to the message," Daniel decided. "Any ideas as to how we can and what to say?"

"Try the normal com links," Ian suggested, "if that doesn't work then perhaps flashing lights or smoke signals."

"All right, but what to say?" Daniel looked around the bridge for advice, Admiral Harker offered his opinion.

"Do as the message asks, Sire. Simply tell them why we are here."

"Okay, open a channel and We will do just that."

At a signal from the communications officer, Daniel answered the alien vessel's message.

"Greetings, this is His Majesty's Starship Thunder in orbit above the survey planet designated as N35467. We are engaged in peaceful exploration and research and mean no harm."

Nothing seemed to be happening, Ian asked if perhaps they might have different communications systems. Then the message on the tactical screen changed.

"This world is Ai'kon. You trespass here."

Daniel paused before replying, perhaps an apology was in order.

"We thought this world abandoned, We apologize for our trespass, it was in ignorance and not ill intentioned."

That seemed reasonable.

"Is the human speaking a being of authority?"

Daniel looked at Ian before answering, as if not knowing what to say next.

"Yes?"

Ian was standing very close to the Emperor when they both simply vanished from Thunder's bridge.

"Shit!" Daniel and Ian swore as one person. It was very dark wherever they were, only a polished ebony floor could be discerned. In all directions there seemed to be only more darkness. The air was cool and dry and had a very faint musky odor.

"Well, here's another fine mess we're in," Ian whispered.

"You have a talent for understatement."

A very faint clicking sound spun them around to look in the same direction.

"What the fuck was that?" Daniel asked softly.

"Dunno, it seemed to be moving."

"This is not good."

"No shit."

More clicking sounds, this time closer and behind them again. Then the level of light started to increase, Daniel and Ian could now make out the source of the clicking. It was an A'Chon (or more properly an Ai'kon).

"Oh my!" Ian did indeed have a talent for understatement.

The alien had six walking legs, each ending in a hard shiny point on the polished floor, that explained the clicking. The Ai'kon was about three feet high and perhaps eight feet across (it was mostly legs). Small jointed manipulating 'arms' extended in front, what had to be eyes were on four constantly moving stalks extending above the center of the alien's back. Gratefully there was no mouth visible. A fine grey fur seemed to cover it's entire body. It looked like some sort of overgrown crab/tarantula/mouse.

The creature was holding a small, box-like object in it's hands claws-fingers.

"Remain still....please." The box the alien was holding was the source of the almost human voice, it sounded like a little girl actually. The alien seemed rather nervous, or at least it seemed that way to Ian and Daniel. Maybe they always acted this way?

Daniel finally found his voice.

"Hello."

So what would you have said?

"Hello, human." The little girl voice sounded sort of silly by now.

"Why have you brought us here?"

"For examination."

That didn't sound too good.

"It is considered very...impolite to take a person against their will." Daniel had to search for the right words.

"You have violated an Ai'kon possession. You are denied politeness."

Daniel took a short step toward the alien as he started to speak again. The creature skittered backwards perhaps twenty feet, it seemed frightened.

**"Remain still...please."
"Sorry. I did not mean to alarm you."
"What is your designation?"
"Do you mean my name or title?"
"Yes. Both."
"I am Daniel Grayson, Emperor."
"What is your companion's designation?"
"His name is Sir Ian Murphy, he is my advisor and friend."
"We have observed humans before, you are few in years?"
"We are young, yes."**

The alien said nothing further and moved back another ten feet. In a blink Daniel and Ian were suddenly in another place, it was a blinding white circular room of some sort. There seemed to be no doors or features of any sort. Even the floor was snow white.

**"Shit!" They both said it again.
"How are they doing that?" Daniel demanded, his eyes aching at the change in light levels.
"Someone once said that any sufficiently advanced technology will be perceived as being magic. Or words to that effect." Ian replied.
"Then they must be very advanced." Daniel decided.**

When Daniel and Ian vanished from Thunder's bridge Alex had snapped awake and then started to scream.

**"IananDaniellananDaniel!"
Ellen was second to her side, Jeremy was already holding on to her.
"What is it? What's the matter?"
"TheytookIanandDaniel!"
"Who did? Slow down!"
"The spider people!"**

**"Remove your coverings." The little girl voice seemed to be coming from all directions.
"What?" Daniel asked with some indignation.**

**"Remove your coverings."
"No!"
"You must comply."
"And if we don't?"
"You will be compelled to obey."
Daniel and Ian exchanged glances and started to comply.**

**"I feel like a fucking lab rat," Daniel whispered.
"Me too," agreed Ian, "this is getting very scary."
They dropped their clothes and boots in untidy piles on the mirror smooth floor, the clothes simply vanished.**

"Shit!" They both felt far more naked than just the mere absence of clothing could account for.

Two floating processions of tiny silver spheres, perhaps as big as peas, emerged from the far wall. One stream was moving sedately toward Ian, the other toward Daniel

"Remain still."

"Like hell!" Both boys started to back up but then something very soft and invisible grabbed them. It was impossible to move, breathing was all that either of them could do. That and scream.

The hundreds of tiny balls seemed to roll over their bodies aimlessly at first, like metallic ants. After a moment they dispersed equally from head to toe. Daniel and Ian only started screaming when the mirror bright balls began sinking beneath their skin. It should have hurt like all of hell but it didn't. It didn't hurt at all. There was no blood.

"Are you...are you all right?" Daniel panted, his fear subsiding a tiny fraction.

"Yes..no..I don't know! What's happening?" Ian had never been so rattled in his entire life.

"Remain calm." The little girl voice was back.

"What are you doing to us?" Daniel yelled.

"You are being examined."

"Well, stop it!"

There was no further response from the small voice. After about another three minutes the spheres began emerging from Daniel and Ian's bodies, this wasn't quite as bad as their entry had been. When all of the tiny orbs had disappeared back into the wall the soft force that was gripping the boys relented, both of them collapsed in shivering heaps to the floor. They moved to hold on to one another, as if to reassure each other that they were still alive. Then their clothes reappeared.

"You may apply your coverings."

"Fuck you." Daniel muttered as he slowly started to pull on his clothes, Ian seemed in a fog but managed to do the same. After some time they even managed to stand up.

Blink.

"Oh, God! Now what?" Daniel was getting really tired of all of this.

They were in yet another place. It was like a small coliseum, the 'Romans' were a thousand or so Ai'kon staring down at them. The lighting was dim once more. Maybe the aliens had evolved as nocturnal beings?

"Explain your presence on this Ai'kon world."

There was no way to tell who (or what) was speaking, not that it mattered.

"We have explained before, We thought that this planet was abandoned. You should have placed a beacon, a warning of some sort that this was your world. We have rules of conduct, if this was thought to be a possession of other people we would not have presumed to intrude here." Daniel decided that this cosmic finger pointing could work both ways. Perhaps his words had some effect, there was a very long pause before the little girl voice resumed.

"That is truth. Remove your presence from this world. A warning will be placed here."

Daniel and Ian started breathing again, maybe they would survive this place. Maybe

humanity would also.

"We will move with all haste to do as you wish, no human will trespass again on this world."

"The Ai'kon will observe your departure."

"May we use this misunderstanding to open peaceful contact between us?" Daniel thought that perhaps it would be better to be friends with these people than enemies.

"No contact is desired."

That was rather rude.

And then Daniel and Ian were standing on HMS Thunder's bridge. It took all of Daniel's self control to remain coherent as he gave his orders to the vessel's stunned officers.

"Evacuate everyone from the planet, at once!"

"Sire, what has...?" Admiral Harker started to ask a thousand questions.

"Get everyone off of that planet within the hour, don't bother with the equipment! Do it now!" Daniel's voice and eyes moved everyone to action.

Ian seemed to be in shock, perhaps they both were. Thunder's chief medical officer was summoned and decided that a physical exam was in order. On the way to the medical section there was a family reunion, including Helen.

"Where have you been." Was the most asked question.

"We...we were being examined," Daniel finally answered while holding onto Ellen.

"What? Did they hurt you?"

"No. They just scared the shit out of us."

"Alex called them "spider people, "what were they like?"

"Like big spiders."

The medical officer tactfully interrupted the hugging session and asked that they all move along to the medical section. More tact was used as the doctor then asked everyone to leave for a while so his two patients could be properly examined (again). Daniel explained the episode with the metallic spheres, the doctor gave him a look of disbelief.

"No, We haven't been drinking."

"Forgive me, Your Majesty. It just seems so very improbable."

"Imagine how We felt."

"Indeed, Sire. And there was no discomfort during this?"

"No, maybe that was the most frightening part of it."

A body scan revealed nothing added to nor subtracted from Daniel and Ian's anatomy, nothing at all seemed amiss. Ian seemed to be coming out of his dazed state, perhaps the prescribed shot of brandy had something to do with that. Ellen and the rest of the family were then readmitted to the room.

Thunder's Executive Officer entered the treatment area with a progress report.

"Sire, the last shuttles are departing the surface. Propulsion has come back on line, we have no idea at all why it wasn't responding."

"And the Ai'kon vessel?"

"It's still in the same orbit, Sire. No communications or activity."

"Tell the Admiral and your captain that the instant everyone is aboard and accounted for all vessels are to leave orbit for Earth."

"Yes, Sire. Everyone is very curious about what happened."

"Tell them that We will hold a briefing when We have rested and collected Our wits. The Ai'kon very much want us to leave, We think it best not to antagonize them any further."

"Yes, Sire."

The Ai'kon did indeed observe the Imperial vessel's departure. All of the abandoned human equipment and temporary structures simply vanished. The beasts of N35467 once more ruled the planet. Mankind got off lightly, the Ai'kon were a far older race, their technology had indeed advanced to the point of being magic.

The diverging track in the history of Earth that Sir Ian's mishap had created did not avoid a final calamity. The United States did make a peace of sorts with China, all to no purpose in the end. In 2011 a genetically engineered virus and a few madmen erased all of humanity and most of it's close relatives in the space of just four months.

Three years later the last primate died in the year 2014.

Intelligent life would take another twenty-seven million years to evolve again on the blue-green planet.

The octopus is an extremely clever creature.

Chapter Seven

Peace and Quiet

Ian and Helen were of opposite temperaments, there is some truth that opposites tend to attract one another. The girl was making a good adjustment to her new reality, although she was still overwhelmed at times by her surroundings and the power that she was so close to. She had also had found a friend and confidant in Ellen.

"You and Daniel were married just six months ago. Ian is the same age as you, I'm just three months younger, could we get married?"

Ellen knew that this question was coming, her brother and Helen seemed to be in hopeless love.

"You can, there is no law to say no." Ellen replied.

"But you don't think we should?" Helen could sense the hesitation in her new friend's voice.

"I knew Daniel for four years before we married, even so we have married very young, without the Church's blessing or even my fathers permission. You have only known Ian for two months now."

"So you think we should wait?" Helen seemed on the edge of anger, something that came quickly to the red haired girl.

"I think it would be a good idea, don't be mad at me."

"No, I'm not mad, not really. It's just that..."

"You love Ian so much," Ellen finished.

"Yes."

Sir Ian and the Emperor were having a similar discussion, Helen and Ian had promised one another that they both would bring up the subject of marriage this day.

"Helen and... We want to marry!" Ian awkwardly blurted out what he had so carefully rehearsed so many times in his mind.

Daniel put down the light target rifle he had been testing, he wanted to start Jeremy's small arms training with it soon.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, we are. Will you give us your permission, your blessing?"

Daniel felt very ill at ease, Ian seemed so very vulnerable at this moment.

"Ian, you do not need my permission or blessing, you know that."

"I know, but it's important to me to have it, can you understand that?"

Daniel nodded, he felt humbled that someone so close to him would ask such a thing.

"I do give you my permission and blessing, but..."

"But?" Ian interrupted, an edge in his voice.

"Ian, you know that all that I have to give is yours for the asking, there is nothing I could ever deny you."

Ian considered these words, he knew in his heart that it was true. Daniel had risked everything to rescue him from a distant time.

"You don't think we should marry?"

"I think that you and Helen should wait for a little while, learn more about each other first. That's just my own opinion, I owe you the truth about how I feel."

"I do love her," Ian said quietly.

"Then wait for a little while, Ellen waited for me when she could have had her pick of anyone." Ian did understand, it was very hard all the same. He squinted down range at the target and spoke to relieve the tension.

"You put two rounds in the white, are you losing your touch?"

Daniel looked at the distant target and shook his head.

"No. I had my eyes closed."

Helen had finally grown used to the casual nudity of the beach but her skin still needed a lot of protection. Have you ever seen a tanned redhead? The informality of the seashore was so very much in contrast with the ceremony of the royal court. You are perhaps wondering about Helen's past, her family? It's a common tale, a single mother, a father who never looked back. A sudden loss of that single mother. Life is hard.

The red haired girl had been so very overwhelmed at first, who would not be? She had her own rooms in the palace of course, like other newcomers she was almost afraid to touch anything. And the clothes! The jewels! But most of all she was so very happy to still be with Ian, the boy who had been so awkward and weird was an honored Imperial Knight in this time and place.

"I think that you and Helen should go to New Albion, visit with your folks. Let Helen and your parents get acquainted." Daniel spoke quietly while sitting with Ian, the rest of the beach party splashed in the light surf.

"Come with us." Ian urged.

"Not this time. Teach Helen how to plow or something. Get your mother to give her cooking lessons, that's most useful in a wife."

"I don't think she's cut out for farming or cooking." Ian laughed.

"No one's perfect." Daniel concluded.

"True."

Daniel changed the subject.

"I've been keeping secret tabs on Freddie, he survived basic training. He's at Camp Ferris

now for advanced arms training."

"Great!" Ian's face lit up at the news of his older brother. "Could we go visit with him?"

"I think the marines will accommodate us, we'll pop in unannounced so they won't have a big flap about the Emperor coming to visit. Let's just you and me go tomorrow, when he has some time off he can come here and have a good visit. "

"Do you know what unit he'll be in?" Ian should have known better.

"Of course, I'm all powerful you know."

"The Ai'kon didn't think so," Ian countered.

"Don't remind me."

Jeremy retreated from the warm surf and ran to plop down on the sand between his two young 'fathers'.

"They keep dunking me!"

"You have to watch out for females, Jer. They'll always gang up on you." Ian advised.

"That's the truth!" Jeremy agreed. The small boy had practically become an amphibian, his hair sun bleached and his skin tanned a dark brown. Both children had blossomed into noisy and happy youngsters, the memories of the "bad place" were fading now but were never to be forgotten.

"We are going to visit with Ian's older brother tomorrow, he's a marine now. Would you like to come? Just you?" Daniel thought it would be a good test of the boy's growing independence from Alex.

"Can't Alex come too?"

"Not this time, this trip is just for us men."

"Well..." Jeremy wasn't sure about this at all.

"It's just for the day," Ian added.

"All right." Jeremy's unsure answer was a very big step. How would Alex handle it?

The three females were suitably miffed when Daniel told them about the all male excursion set for the next day.

"He's my brother too!" Ellen objected.

"He's in the middle of a training course, there won't be much time to visit." Daniel explained.

"Later, when he has some leave time he can come here to the palace for a proper visit."

"This is just for us men!" Jeremy added with a grin.

"You're going too?" Ellen could see she was losing this small battle.

"Uh huh!" Jeremy seemed very smug about it now.

Alex was just smiling, she already knew. She always did. Everyone was now looking at the little girl. How was she going to take this separation?

"Have fun, Jermy!" with that she leaned over and kissed the boy on his cheek, the boy who had lived through hell with her.

This turn of events made everyone very happy.

Camp Ferris, Australian Continent

"Training Squadron five-charlie. They're supposed to be on the target designation course right now." Daniel explained to Ian as the unmarked shuttle came whistling in over the sprawling base. Escorting Falcons orbited the installation, the local traffic control wanted to know why.

"Empire arriving." Daniel's copilot, Captain Pak (yes) gave traffic control the news that always panicked every base commander.

A base chart and some data link searching by Ian located Freddie's unit, Daniel sat the shuttle down some distance from the training area.

"How are you doing?" Daniel asked Jeremy.

"I'm okay." Indeed the boy did seem okay. Daniel had outfitted him in a civilian flight suit of the proper size, Ian wore one also. The Emperor as always wore a black naval flight uniform devoid of rank insignia. Daniel did wear his pilot wings and that very famous pistol.

"Then let's go find Freddie!"

There was no need for much in the way of security here, the elite detail that was along for this trip fanned out and kept a good distance from the Emperor. The weather was as always hot, still it felt good to Ian to be out of the shuttle and walking on firm ground. Master Gunnery Sergeant Houghton didn't feel as pleased, then he never did.

"Center the marker beam properly on the corner of the building, that's it's weak point! Collapse a corner of a beam or column supported structure and the place is on it's way to being rubble!"

Marking targets for tactical fighter support was a part of every marine's training. Houghton had a talent for terrifying his students, he also had a talent for turning out well trained marines.

"Now who the fuck is that?" Houghton could see that one of the distant figures wore a naval uniform. Even at this distance they all looked like kids, one of them for sure. "Probably some navy pukes who can't find a place to piss!" Houghton's unspoken opinion didn't prove to be true.

"Squadron! Form ranks and stand to attention! Now!" Houghton was as close to panic as he ever permitted himself to be. The holy-shit, God-Almighty, in the living flesh Emperor was walking toward the sergeant and the marines now scrambling to form proper ranks. What in the world was he doing here?

At Ian's touch to his shoulder Jeremy slowed to allow the Emperor to proceed ahead of them. Sergeant Houghton and the squad bowed as one, then the marine snapped to attention and saluted, he held it until the Emperor returned the sign of respect.

"Good morning, Sergeant. Please have your men stand at ease."

"Squad! Stand easy!" Houghton, like all of those in his trade, had a voice that could shatter windows.

"Marine Training Squadron Five-Charlie is at your service, Your Majesty." Houghton knew the proper protocol, he could recite rules and regulations for hours on end if need be.

"Thank you, Sergeant. We apologize for this interruption, may We ask for the loan of Private Frederick Murphy for a few hours?"

"Of course, Your Majesty." Houghton didn't stop to analyze why the Emperor wanted Murphy, plenty of time for that later. "Murphy! Front and center!"

Freddie couldn't suppress his grin, he did manage to behave properly as a marine was expected to.

"Hi, Freddie!" Daniel smiled as he extended his hand to Ian's brother. Freddie decided that a handshake took precedent over bowing to the Emperor. Besides, it was Daniel!

"Hello, Your Majesty."

"Let's wander off a ways and talk," Daniel said, "the Imperial Marines can spare you for a little while."

It took some time for Sergeant Houghton to realize that the Emperor had also shook his

hand too before walking off with Private Murphy. A little while later Houghton realized that Private Murphy was Sir Ian Murphy's older brother. Freddie had never told anyone about his brother or the fact that the Emperor was married to his sister, he had wanted to make the grade on his own merits. Eventually Houghton remembered to get on with the training of his squad, the newly minted marines had a lot of questions for the sergeant about Private Murphy. "It seems that Murphy is a friend of the Emperor, ask him about it! Now shut the fuck up and get back to your positions!"

Everyone got hugs, the Emperor included. Jeremy was picked up and almost crushed, Freddie had put on weight and all of it looked like muscles.

"So how was basic?" Ian asked.

"I kept hoping that I would just get it over with and die. Somehow I made it in one piece." Freddie's thoughts were shared by most marine recruits, usually within hours of enlistment. Most did make it, though.

"You've expanded," Daniel observed.

"The food isn't bad, there's lots of it. What have you two been up to?"

Daniel and Ian just looked at one another and smiled, then Ian answered.

"Freddie, let's just say that messing around with alien technology isn't always a good idea."

"The A'Chon?"

"Yes. By the way they are still around and very alive, we met some of them."

"No shit? There was nothing on the vids."

"Maybe the events on N35467 will be made public someday," Daniel explained, "but not for now."

"Bad, huh?" Freddie could see that they were reluctant to discuss it.

"Weird is the word. We'll tell you all about it when there's more time."

"How is the good sergeant over there treating you?" Ian asked, changing the subject.

"Old Grenade Balls? He's okay if you do everything perfect the first time, not too many of us do."

"Grenade Balls?" Jeremy giggled.

"Don't ask, kid." Freddie then inquired about Ellen and Alex.

"There's also Helen," Daniel explained.

"Helen?"

"Ian's girl. He's loopy in love with her."

"All right, Ian!" Freddie slapped his brother on the back, nearly knocking the eyeballs out of Ian's head. "Where did you meet her?"

"On Earth, a long time ago." Ian replied

"Really, how long? You've never said anything about her."

"About three-thousand years, actually. Courtesy of the Ai'Kon."

"That sounds too silly to be a joke."

"It does, doesn't it? Daniel as usual had to come and rescue my butt, Helen wanted to come with me, I wanted her to come also."

Freddie wasn't buying this and looked to Daniel.

"It is true, the device that Ian was researching transported him there by accident. It's a very long tale."

Freddie still seemed unconvinced, still he was happy for his brother that he had found someone to love.

"I'm hungry!" Jeremy, like all boys, had his own priorities.

"There should be an MFM (Mobile Field Mess, often referred to as a Mother F.. Mess)

arriving here pretty soon, if you all aren't too picky about what you eat." Freddie explained.

"I'll eat with anyone, even marines!" Daniel quipped.

"For that you have to sit next to Grenade Balls!" Freddie countered.

As if on cue a utility flyer hummed overhead and sat down in an open space next to the training course.

"Come on or they'll eat it all before we get there!" Freddie didn't have to ask Jeremy twice.

Sergeant Houghton and the squad of two-dozen marines soon found themselves having their noon meal with the Emperor. Seating was on the ground, at least it was dry. It was a singular and rare occasion for a bunch of lowly enlisted ground-pounders to sit in the dirt and rub elbows with mankind's ruler. Daniel put them at ease as best he could with small talk and questions about what exactly he was eating. Jeremy put them on their backs with laughter, he was sitting to one side of the fierce looking Sergeant Houghton.

"Sergeant, sir?"

"Yes, son?"

"Why do they call you "Grenade Balls?"

It was so very, very quiet for a moment as Houghton turned a beet red, then everyone erupted into howling laughter. Including the Emperor. Houghton finally managed a broad grin and some restrained chuckles of his own.

Jeremy never did get his question properly answered.

The base commander had finally ascertained the Emperor's location on the sprawling installation, his runabout landed near the Imperial shuttle. Most of the marine general's senior staff was with him.

"Can anyone please tell me why he's here?" General Coates had already asked that question about five times during the short flight.

"His Majesty is well known for showing up unannounced, sir." Colonel Strahan offered.

"Well, come on then, let's go see what he wants. I hope he isn't wearing that damned pistol!"

The Sun Palace

"HelenanEllen" as Alex called them had not been idle during the men folk's absence, both girls had been working on getting their small craft tickets, Ellen the longest. Ellen took the plunge and decided it was time for her to take the tests. Helen and Alex of course went along for moral support.

It was an age old process dating back to wheeled vehicles. Ellen stood dutifully in line at the government facility, she was as incognito as her plainclothes escort allowed and so far she had not been recognized.

"Fill this out then place the form in the test module. If it says you passed the oral exam it will return the sheet. Bring it back here." The bored clerk said the same thing dozens of times every day.

"Thank you." Ellen was as nervous as you might expect.

Ellen waved to Alex and Helen before entering the test booth. After properly filling out the information sheet she did as instructed and pushed the form into the slot below the vid screen.

"Question number one: What is the maximum speed allowed over uncontrolled areas?"

Ellen knew that one.

"Subsonic."

"Correct."

And so it went. There were one-hundred and nine questions, Ellen missed four and passed easily. Now came the hard part.

The clerk did a double take as she read the application sheet and the tests results the machine had printed on it.

"Ellen Grayson?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's me."

"Are you...?" The clerk could see who the girl was now that she paid attention, Ellen's face was to say the least rather well known.

"Yes. I'm hoping to surprise His Majesty if I pass today. He's away for the day."

The clerk stood and curtsied a bit awkwardly.

"It's a very great honor to serve you, Lady Ellen. I will arrange for a special..."

"Please, thank you. Let me wait my turn and don't make a special fuss. I would take it as a personal favor." Like her older brother, Ellen wanted to make it on her own merits.

"Very well, My Lady. If you would take a seat over there you will be called in turn for the practical exam. Good luck to you."

"Thank you."

Ellen's flyer was a practical four seat model, one of the security staff had flown it to the exam station. As the wife of the Emperor she could have had the fastest and most luxurious flyer made. Practical was easier to control and didn't attract attention.

The flight test examiner did recognize Ellen even before he took her application sheet. He would have passed her if she had flown into a mountain. As it turned out Ellen did very well, thank you! She did not share her twin brother's lack of piloting aptitude, this would do little for Ian's self-esteem.

"How was Freddie?" Ellen hugged 'her man' as he stepped down from the shuttle.

"He's good, more than good!"

"Great! How does he look?"

"Bigger. Lots of muscles. He ate a tree for lunch."

"When can he get some time off?"

"Four weeks, then he has ten days off. What have you three been up to?"

"Oh, not much. I did get this today." Ellen held her 'ticket' under Daniel's nose.

"OhmyGod! Was anyone hurt?"

Whack!

"Shit!"
