

ONE

Jaw sagging, Richard Pinn watched the woman drift out of the crumbling inner wall. The apparition was not human, but one of his own vanished race. She wore a white blouse whose sleeves were richly embroidered with tiny brown and green fish. *Me'Aukin Totemic symbols*, he realized. The woman's diminutive slender figure was enhanced by a hip-hugging green skirt that swirled around matching evergreen trousers. She had shoulder-length black hair sweeping around a narrow nose and thin lips. Large doe-like eyes seemed to burn with an inner torment. "Jamie?" he whispered.

"Rick?" Andrea's voice came from over his shoulder. The freckled archeologist walked next to him, dusting dirt off of her rumpled red plaid shirt. "Um...Jamie's back up at Kenner's Basin and you're staring at a wall."

"I'm looking at a Me'Aukin woman in her late thirties." Rick blinked his eyes, but the vision didn't go away. His hallucination turned, paused, and looked over her shoulder at him.

"*Meora Co'Oden*," she whispered. "*Tanee, th'repes me'oke, du'tene Weth*." Turning, the image vanished into the wall.

"She just said that her name's Meora from the Family Tanee of Clan Weth." He looked at Andrea's widening eyes. Rick gave an uncertain laugh. "I think I just saw a ghost."

"I think you're getting out of here," Andrea replied with a stricken look.

Rick put a gentle, yet firm, hand on her arm. He felt far more fascinated than terrified. "It's all right."

"All right?" She pointed down the hall with her light. "You stand there like you're in a trance, and tell me it's all right that you just saw a ghost?"

"I don't know what the hell I saw," he replied, moving down the hall after the specter. "I do know that she was heading toward the dome room. It could be a hologram."

"That I couldn't see or hear?" Anguish pulled at Andrea's lips as she stepped in front of Rick and turned to block him. "This place is dead, Rick! No activity...nothing!" Her voice softened. "You so badly want to find them, don't you?"

He took a deep breath. Andrea stabbed to the heart of his desire with her usual accuracy. "Okay, maybe that's more of what's going on here."

"You think?" Andrea snorted. "Your race slaughtered all the humans trying to share this world with them, then ran off leaving you and Jamie stuffed in a jar for a few centuries. That's enough to make anyone want to see things."

Rick gave the wall a skeptical look. "Just the same, I've hardly got a history of hallucinating."

"No, but you do have a history of empathic, and possibly even telepathic, episodes."

"Only in those experiments with Jamie back at the Institute...which I'd like to forget, thank you."

Andrea nodded slowly. "Well that, at least, makes some sense to me. Ghosts don't. Jamie's not another world away now. This could be some sort of subconscious communication between you two. Something new that's manifested since you two parted ways."

He gave a thin smile. "The only thing communicating between us is how much we can't stand each other's company." Rick gestured down the hall. "Let's just head down to the dome room. That's where she seemed to be headed."

Rick stopped and tapped at the wall with its green-and-blue texture. Its mottled appearance, upon closer inspection, displayed subtle geometric patterns. "This whole place is made out of Stone," he said, his own theories on this ghost woman taking shape. "You've said you'd been trying to pry secrets from this stuff. Maybe we just found one."

Andrea gave the wall a speculative rap with her knuckles. "Everything here is inert, Rick. Just one solid piece of dead nano-tech. Engineering degree or not, I haven't figured out how to apply power to even a section of Stone, let alone conjure spirits with it. Interstar would've dumped me months ago if you hadn't convinced me on a double major in archeology."

They turned the corner into the Circle Hall's main chamber. It reminded Rick of a large theatre in the round, with a circular central stage. Across the room, clumps of tall grass gained footholds in the rubble of the ceiling collapse. The musty smell of lichen-encrusted stonework rose in his nostrils as he looked up through a shaft of sunlight.

"So much for chasing ghosts," Rick said, his voice echoing. He was not sure if he preferred the disappointment. "Let's open that hatch in the cryo-chamber room."

"I was afraid you'd say that," Andrea groaned. "Rick, it's just a hole. All the cryogenic stuff they found you and Jamie in was pulled out long ago. By the way, Jamie sends her congratulations on your new job."

"Happy to hear it," he replied with a nod. There was no reason to begrudge his Me'Aukin counterpart a pleasantries or two, provided Jamie kept her distance. "How's she doing these days? Not stealing any more freighters in hopes of finding the clans, I trust?"

"Colonel Jay buried that little fiasco under a pile of money," Andrea said with a chuckle. "It helps having Me'Auk's first governor as your foster father."

"Well, we each have our own way of finding our past."

"As Colonial Curator, you'll at least be doing it legally," Andrea snickered. "You really want to stare down a hole, then follow me." She indicated a square of blackness where wooden doors had long since succumbed to the elements.

Rick watched as Andrea threw open the cover hatch with a loud clang. Pulling out a flashlight, she shined it down. "Oh *shit!*"

Rick peered in. Her light played across a spiraling staircase. "Don't remember that in the simulation."

She stared at the steps like they were a weaving serpent. "That's because it wasn't there." Andrea pushed Rick back and slammed the hatch shut. "We've got to get out of here. Now!"

Rick frowned. "You hear whispers?"

"What whispers?" She tapped at her helmet. "Steve. Steve? *Major god-damn Keller, answer me!*"

"Digger," the Major's voice answered with immediate concern. The accent was Earth Australian. "What's up?"

"Something's happened up here. We've a newly built stairs in the old borehole where they found Rick and Jamie. Rick's also...experiencing weird things. Remember what we talked about earlier?"

"Sounds like it. Get out as fast as you can."

"Get out?" Rick said, unnerved by her growing panic. "What's wrong with you guys?"

"Something you've never faced in your simulations...and don't want to!"

He joined her in a scramble for the exit. "What exactly were you two talking about?"

"Jamie swore she saw a bunch of stuff around Clan Weth's ruins." Andrea came to a halt at the corner of the entrance, quickly peeking her head outside before continuing. "We talked about the significance of the same thing happening to you here at Clan Maedan."

"Preset triggers might explain why we were left behind, Andrea. You sure we shouldn't investigate this first?"

"Hell no," she snapped between breaths. "Run for the rover...and I do mean run!"

Rick dashed after her, happy to have traded the business suit he wore at the earlier press conference to a practical brown shirt and worn jeans.

Andrea slid to a halt halfway across the outside plaza, dirt kicking up around her boots. She twisted around and dove into a pile of weeds and debris to their left. Getting more anxious by the second, Rick joined her with equal speed.

"Steve," she whispered, her voice going up an octave. "There's something moving between us and the rover. God, I don't believe this is happening!"

Rick forced a swallow down his drying throat. Andrea was right. There was motion between two broken columns near the yellow all-terrain vehicle. This was no ghostly figure, though he wished it were. What he saw instead was the hood of a camouflaged oval shell roughly twice the size of a serving platter. It bobbed silently through yellowed stalks of high weeds. He had seen pictures, but never thought he would witness this first hand. "It's a Me'Aukin mine."

"It's not supposed to be here," she said, shaking her head. "This place is safe. It's always been!"

Trying to keep his own wits and voice steady, Rick used his helmet microphone. "Major, we've got mine activity up here." Rick glanced around for some kind of cover, spying a dark space beneath a tilted slab of wall they passed earlier. "We're heading for shelter."

"Don't move, you won't make it," Steve answered. "We're on the way. Get as low to the ground as you can, Doctor."

Rick motioned to Andrea, only to find her staring over his shoulder. He turned around and froze, afraid even to take a breath.

It stood on the trail they just traversed, the lethal relic poised on camouflaged machine legs like a large walking clam. Rick moved to keep between it and her. Blunt twin barrels tracked him from an aperture between the upper and lower shell.

"You're Me'Aukin," Andrea said in a slow careful voice. "Try speaking with it."

Rick swept aside a lock of black hair so that it would get a clear look at his large dark eyes. Roughly equal to his four-foot-three height, the mine held him in its sights. He raised his hands so it could also see his unusually long fingers. Another part of his mind noted the remarkably good condition of the artifact, considering its age. An odd thought to die with. "*Mathell.*" Was the thing even intelligent?

He gave a start as a pair of leaf-colored serpentine manipulators uncoiled to either side of its guns. "*Cor'them,*" spoke a hollow voice from its speaker. It took an expectant step back. He could almost sense the impression of menace it conveyed. Artificial life?

Rick glanced to his left, where the north valley stretched out into a blue haze. Dots appeared through the mist, climbing rapidly. Very rapidly--with flashes erupting beneath their angular hulls. "Andrea, down!"

The mine leapt back into the brush, firing bright bursts of energy skyward in a succession of sharp reports. Rick pushed Andrea beneath the slant of intervening wall and dove after her as everything lit up in a pink flash of violence. Heat and pulverized rock lashed them from multiple concussions. The whine of engines rose over the cacophony of energy weapons that struck like selective lightning.

Wide-eyed, Rick watched a hand-sized green sphere bounce and roll next to their hiding place. It spun to a stop before Andrea's panicked face. "Don't move!" it instructed.

"Steve?"

"Don't move!" The command was punctuated by another flurry of weapons fire coming from the ruins.

The first snub-nosed transport dropped through the smoke of grass fires. Its side hatches disgorged a squad of heavily armed Exploratory Corps marines. Soldiers dove around them, heavy rifles clattering against rocks in a defensive ring. One of the larger marines slid next to Rick. He raised his visor to display a heavy-set jaw beneath strikingly blue eyes and a blond crew-cut. "Don't bloody move until I tell ya!"

"Glad you got here, Major," Rick replied, recognizing the Australian twang in the soldier's voice.

"Hopper's on the way," Steve replied with a quick nod. "When it gets here, the two of you run like hell." He looked over Rick's shoulder. "Digger, you okay?"

"Scared shitless," she gasped. "What'd you expect?"

Steve gave a rasping laugh. "You're not alone. Get ready. Here comes the rest of our bunch."

Another rectangular military ship set down nearby, the hopper skids crunching heavily on the plaza rubble. Its armored passengers piled out to form a living shield between Rick's hiding place and the first transport. The dagger shapes of gun ships shrieked overhead.

"Go! Go! Go!"

Rick grunted as Steve literally picked him up and charged with Andrea into the lime green interior. Dropping him on the deck, Steve slammed the hatch door shut. "Lift this bucket!"

Rick barely had time to strap in before they rose in a roar of droning engines. Through the windows, he could see columns of smoke rising around the rotunda. Marines swept outward in a determined skirmish line.

"You okay?" Steve asked Andrea as she clung to him. "You hurt?"

"Just scared," she shuddered. "We're all right. We're fine."

The officer's blue eyes turned on Rick like cold ice. "What in hell did you start down there, Doctor?"

"I don't know, Major," he answered. Rick's jaw tightened in anger and frustration. "This place was supposed to be cleared, remember?"

"It was until you showed up!"

"It's not his fault," Andrea broke in. "Steve, it's not anybody's fault."

"It's our fault for exposing him to whatever's been waiting down here." Scowling, Steve slammed his helmet back against the bulkhead. "Eight months away from Opening Day--and this happens! Damn, we should've known better than to pull off this publicity stunt."

"You warned the Colonel that it was too early to bring colonists in," Andrea said. Her voice softened into a more reasoning tone. "Maybe now he'll listen to you."

Rick peered out a small porthole for what he feared would be a final glimpse of Clan Maedan's mist-shrouded spires and domes. Clouds covered his view of the two valleys as the craft sped away. Had his hopes been left behind as quickly?

He took several deep breaths, trying to reign in his own shaking nerves. "We can't turn our backs on this." He looked over at Andrea's ex-fiancé, who looked like the modern day rendition of Earth's ancient Vikings. "Major, we may have discovered new construction, the significance of which is staggering to say the least. Maybe those mines were just programmed to guard it."

Steve didn't take his eyes off Rick as he spoke into his helmet. "Captain Shelly, what did you find in the hole?" He nodded as a distant response was given. "Copy...stairs. Nobody goes in. Get Alpha Company out here with all the trimmings. Nothing stays upright that isn't ours--you know the drill. I'm headed for Kenner's Basin. Keller out."

Andrea put a hand on Steve's armored shoulder. "I know what you're thinking, damn it. Give us a chance first. Please! This could be a find of historic significance."

Rick's eyes narrowed. "Just what are you thinking, Major?"

Steve folded his arms with a scowl. "No offense, Doctor, but history takes a back seat to people's lives. I don't want to repeat what happened to Weth any more than you, but this site's got to be cleaned out if we're going to make Opening Day. If I can do it without cratering the place, I will."

Rick was horrified that the man would even consider such an act. "Then you don't mind a little risk-taking on our part? Let's turn this thing around now and let Andrea and I earn our pay. Your team can back us up."

Steve shook his head. "That's not my decision to make, but I'll see what I can do." He grabbed a handrail to lift himself up to the flight deck, then hesitated. Steve's eyes looked over Rick's shoulder at Andrea. "You really want to go back there?"

"Don't even doubt that, Steve," she replied. "I'm not going to fold just because a couple mines pop up."

The Major gave a nod. "I understand, hon, but my orders are to keep you two safe. That comes first."

Andrea let out a breath after Keller disappeared up the stairs. "Colonel Jay will let us go back. He has to."

"You keep calling him Colonel. Jay did resign from the EC in order to hold office, didn't he?"

"Sort of. Everybody's still in the habit of calling him by his former rank. I suspect he likes it that way, too."

"Would he really destroy that site? Because of a few mines?"

Her voice lowered. "He's not governor yet, Rick. That's the problem. It takes this place becoming approved as an official colony first. He's already blasted Weth. I can't look at Steve without being reminded of what they did to the only intact Me'Aukin city we had. That pretty much tore the bottom out of our getting married." Andrea buried her head in her hands. "Clan Maedan's always been dormant. *Always!* I've camped out in those ruins for weeks on end."

Rick closed his eyes, wondering how long it would be before she started blaming him, too.