

## *MAN: The Awakening*



# *Man:*

THE AWAKENING

By  
*Romualdas Drakšas*



**Strategic Book Publishing**  
**New York, New York**

Copyright © 2009

All rights reserved – Romualdas Drakšas

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the permission, in writing, from the publisher.

Strategic Book Publishing  
An imprint of AEG Publishing Group  
845 Third Avenue, 6th Floor - 6016  
New York, NY 10022  
[www.StrategicBookPublishing.com](http://www.StrategicBookPublishing.com)

ISBN: to follow

SKU: to follow

Printed in the United States of America

Book Design: Rolando F. Santos

# Contents

<i>Part I</i>	
The Opponent.....	1
<i>Part II</i>	
Interest Aroused.....	19
<i>Part III</i>	
Alliances .....	57
<i>Part IV</i>	
The Harats.....	97
<i>Part V</i>	
The Scout's Success .....	109
<i>Part VI</i>	
The Trial.....	129
<i>Part VII</i>	
The Dvarvan's Mission.....	185
<i>Part VIII</i>	
The Advice .....	201
<i>Part IX</i>	
The Return.....	209
<i>Short Stories</i>	
Don't Chase God Up A Tree .....	217
The Writer .....	227
Almost The Same .....	235



## Part I

# *The Opponent*



FOR ALMOST ten minutes, the young man had been watching the tall woman gaze out the window, lost in her thoughts. Several times he had started opening his mouth to ask, Elena, when are we going to start? —but each time he hesitated, and ultimately kept quiet. Recently awakened, he had not yet shaken some of his weak traits, such as impatience or aimless hurrying, but he had at least learned to control and keep from expressing them.

Meanwhile, the woman's thoughts quickly succeeded one another and were promptly forgotten, like stormy ocean waves crashing against the shore. Despite her composed nature, Elena began losing her cool. The reason was simple—she had no idea how to begin her narrative.

"I'm not much of a writer," she thought anxiously. "And he . . . he definitely thinks too highly of me. I have to record the history of mankind's rise and glory. What glory? There are still too few of us. Besides, the few who have awakened—most of them aren't even on Earth. They're on Eduron, or on the Planet of the Ants, or fighting in another galaxy. Fighting—how I'd love to dive into the dizzying turmoil of battle! But I can't. As soon as Ardas invited me to talk, I could sense that I'd be stuck on Earth for a long while. 'Elena,' he said, 'I have a task for you.' That's how it started. I would have to write a book. The book, intended for future generations, was to tell the true history of the awakening of mankind. Although, honestly, I believe my writings will serve other races as much as humans. Those others—the Isans, Sidargans, Demurgs, Dvarvans—have been spread throughout our galaxy for thousands of years. There are so many; I don't even know where to start. It's hard to organize my thoughts properly. At least I won't have to publish it myself. I received a secretary to help me. He has just awoken and hasn't even regained his powers yet, but he'll still be able to help. I know; I'll start with the Isans, specifically the time the Second Isan Clan Leader's young son Iskik asked his father to let him duel a human. That'll be an excellent starting point for our history.

"Secretary, let's begin. Write: 'The planet Eduron...'"

•••••

## ***The planet Eduron. The Second Isan Clan's domain.***

IMPRESSED, the other warriors applauded for nearly five minutes, which in itself represented a noteworthy accomplishment. Masters of the duel themselves, the warriors of the Second Isan Clan's elite forces honored their colleagues with applause only on the most exceptional of occasions. The young warrior had demonstrated dazzling speed, remarkable strength, and precise technique in defeating three experienced and battle-hardened opponents in less than a minute. He had reason to feel proud of himself. And yet, cognizance of the fact that he had not faced the most powerful and dangerous foes tempered his pride. Iskik, the warrior garnering everyone's praise, knew he could defeat most Isans or Sidargans, but that wasn't enough for him. He wanted a dangerous—even mortally dangerous—enemy. He wanted to face a Human.

"My time has finally come," thought Iskik. "Now is the time to ask my father to allow me to fight a Human. Only then can I demonstrate that I am worthy to succeed him. My father will try to talk me out of it, as he always has. But this time I will not back down. I have to make a name for myself, and I have to do it without further delay." With unwavering resolve, Iskik hurried to his father's personal office where, ten minutes later, he would start a conversation that would alter not only the fate of the human race, but of numerous races throughout the galaxy.

"Are you sure that's what you want?" his father asked. "I mean, you understand how dangerous that is. You're not choosing just any being—you're choosing a Human. Pick a Sidargan instead; conquering one of them would also gain you recognition as a warrior. Or, at the very least, does it have to be a male Human, especially one whose powers are in full bloom? Take an old man, a child, or at least a female. That's still dangerous, but it's better than a male."

"Yes, I know, Father, but I don't want to just become a warrior. I want to become a great warrior, the pride of the entire clan. You know me and you know my powers. I've been studying for the last thirty years,<sup>1</sup> so I'm stronger now than ever. You know I'm practically stronger than any of your soldiers. I have to do this. Besides, you've seen the target. He's not a warrior. In fact, he's never even killed."

"That's true, he's never killed. But trust me; I've been watching him, watching how he moves. I've seen the power he demonstrates to others. You are strong. But none of us has ever vanquished a Human warrior, and many of our bravest have even died fighting their children," the father skeptically reminded his son.

---

<sup>1</sup> Any mention of time or other measurements is described in Earthly terminology purely for the reader's reference.

"I know. I've seen the recordings of all the battles. They delayed too long. They let the Humans get rid of their inhibiting shackles, become aware of their power, and feel the very reason they were created blossoming within. I won't make any such mistakes. The target may be strong, and he may excel at games of marksmanship, but he is not a fighter. We have observed his work. They call him a history teacher. His job consists entirely of oration, with no physical activity involved. And we have watched him at home. He improves his body physically for no more than an hour per day. We once observed him acting more physically in a group, but chasing and tossing some kind of round, bouncing object is hardly an activity worthy of a man or a warrior. He will break. The program won't have a chance to activate; the reaction won't reach its maximum before I finish him. Just think, Father: I will have vanquished a male Human whose powers are in full bloom. Do you think anyone will then dare object to your declaring me as your successor?" he contended hotly.

"I fear for you, my son. After all, you know why they exiled that race. You know the history. Every rational being in this galaxy is lucky that only a thousand of them got free, and, more importantly, that they ended up on a planet that placed such restrictions on them that by the time they realized this fact, they could no longer escape. You also know why Humans were created and how they scared their creators. I will tell you what only the heads of the clans know: after some of them broke free and escaped, it was decided to destroy all the remaining specimens. Nonetheless, the last hundred individuals banded together and hid on the planet Ligia. Today, by agreement of the Rational Beings, the planet is constantly surrounded. We have their world under a perpetual barrage of debilitating rays. After three attempts to land on the planet, all we've been able to achieve is to prevent those creations from entering the cosmos and to prevent their population from reaching the critical limit. Currently, a few hundred of them inhabit the planet. They are not operating under full power, although it's still more than the ten percent those on the Inhibiting Planet enjoy."

"Father, what happened to the five whom we failed to vanquish even with the help of the Demurgs?"

"The Demurgs are their creators. Although they paid dearly, they managed to preserve certain control codes. Applying separate commands to each of the five Humans, all victors over their opponents, the Demurgs convinced them to cease destroying everything and join their compatriots on Ligia. Today one of them serves as their leader."

"But if they're so strong, why weren't Humans awakened and used when the Sidargans invaded? Entire races of Rational Beings were destroyed. Ten suns exploded before we stopped them and achieved balance," reasoned the son.

“The Union of Rational Beings thought about doing so, but the Demurgs confessed that they couldn’t fully control their creations. The Humans would have stopped the Sidargans immediately, but then who would have stopped them? To stop the aggressors would have required awakening at least ten thousand individuals, but then nobody would have been able to keep them from returning to the Inhibiting Planet and leading their entire race to freedom. You know that the inhibitors only begin to work fully after six orbits of the planet’s satellite around it. In that time they could open any number of space gates and take everyone to another suitable planet. Do you have any idea how many Humans exist today? They outnumber the members of our clan sevenfold. Upon awakening, they would take over the galaxy in fewer than ten years, and we would all become their slaves, if we even survived.”

“I wasn’t aware of that. But the target here is a lone Human. I will vanquish him and become your successor, Father, as head of the clan.”

“All right, my son. The battle and inauguration will take place in half a year. I will summon the clan’s advisory board, and also assemble the elite forces and the security robots. And I’ll warn the Demurgs so that at least ten of them make the journey. For your part, go prepare. I will summon Iskin for you, as he is the only one who has vanquished an adult male Human, albeit an elderly one.”

“Iskin? Father, I’ve always wanted to train under him! I can’t wait!” exclaimed the son.

“Good luck, my son. I depart tomorrow. We’ll meet again in a few months. Meanwhile, my warriors will seize the target and bring him to Eduron, where all the great battles take place.”

As he walked off, the young warrior felt his heart fill with joy. He had been dreading this conversation. His father could have forbidden him from fighting the Human and thus shattered young Iskik’s dreams. For years, he had aspired to defeat the universe’s most dangerous creature and thus become the most respected warrior and clan leader in the Isan nation. Not only did his father, the Leader of the Second Isan Clan, not insult him; he agreed to the battle despite having serious doubts. Most importantly, he sent Iskik to study under the greatest of all warriors.

## *The planet Eduron*

“It seems I haven’t aged and am still a great warrior,” thought the prominent Isan as he marched down the street. “That poor Sidargan who challenged me last month is still trying to recover. What an idiot. He should have known that nobody has defeated me, and it’ll be many years before anybody does.”

Every one of his Isan peers would unhesitatingly concur with these thoughts. This great warrior alone was worthy of becoming the leader of the elite forces of all the clans. Iskin knew he was the Isan race’s best fighter, but even he would not have dared enter a battle against a male Human whose powers were in full bloom.

“Iskik’s plan reeks of insanity,” contemplated the old warrior. “If he weren’t the Clan Leader’s son, his peers would absolutely ridicule him. Of course, the kid is weaker than I am, but he’s still strong. Then again, does that even matter? Iskik would need fifty more years of training before entering battle with a Human. Even if the awakening doesn’t fully occur and the inhibitors don’t fully disappear, the target should regain at least half of his energy and physical abilities—and that half is more than the clan’s best warrior has. In fact, it’s more than the best warrior in the whole Isan race, or even the entire Rational Union. Iskik thinks that if he’s significantly bigger than the target, he’ll have a chance to win. The Clan Leader’s young son can win only in the event that the target is totally unfamiliar with martial arts on his planet and if his reaction speed and intelligence rate no better than average. Otherwise, the battle will end sadly for Iskik. And if the Human turns out to be more intelligent and the awakening occurs more quickly, the battle could end sadly not only for Iskik, but also for everyone in the vicinity. Luckily, I, Iskin, will stand by his side with the best of the elite forces and the Demurgs. These beings created Humans in their own image, granted them various powers, and expected them to serve obediently as invincible warriors in combat against the other Rational Beings. However, the result turned out far differently. The Demurgs could only control their creations in part, and even then only when the Humans were alone, not when they combined their powers with each other. But maybe with this target everything would be okay? The odds of that seem slim. Nonetheless, I have no alternative. My Clan Leader has ordered me to mentor his son, and I, the great Iskin, will fulfill his wish. I will show my young pupil all my secret moves, using not only the two-headed pole arm sickle,<sup>2</sup> but also the hands and even the head. On the whole, Iskik’s a good kid with lots of potential. One day he’ll become worthy to take the place of the Clan Leader. I will be the first, if everything goes well, to pledge my loyalty to the new Clan Leader. If only everything goes well...”

---

2 A medieval weapon consisting of a six-foot pole with C-shaped sickles attached to both ends.

***Earth (the Inhibiting Planet), 29 June 2015 C.E.***

He was in a great mood. Classes had ended, and vacation had finally started. Students probably had no idea how much teachers looked forward to vacation. In addition, his mood was bolstered further by the overdue arrival of summer. Cool, rainy weather had ruled the first half of June, and the weather had just recently started to improve. Ardas, a youthful thirty-something history teacher, was looking forward to his favorite time of year. Feeling better than ever, he was pondering whether to get his friends together for a pick-up basketball game or go to karate practice in the evening. Once a member of his tiny country's national karate team, he now competed for fun, hoping to stay in shape rather than seeking to advance his athletic career. Despite his mostly cerebral line of work and the fact that he was no longer twenty years old, he still had much of his speed and flexibility; he could still dunk a basketball and do the splits. Ardas was a competitor, but he wasn't a fighter. He didn't like war, or harming people, or even fights, although he did grow up in a neighborhood where a man's ability to fight made him an authority figure in the eyes of his peers. A peaceful man, he was nonetheless resolute and strong-willed, capable of protecting himself without demonstrating aggression. This was the individual Iskik had chosen as his opponent.

Ardas cheerfully stood by the flowing river and watched the ducks splashing around by the banks. The scene's awesome serenity and mesmerizing beauty enveloped him. Rich green grass, lush from the rainy spring; an azure sky; and the brownish, rushing waters of the river all contributed to an incomparable view. Ardas was a romantic. Having picked out a secluded spot, he could spend hours enjoying nature and observing wildlife. This day was no different. Other than the ducks, not another living thing came into sight, and total serenity presided over all.

However, Ardas only thought he was alone. For the past few minutes, an Isan team responsible for presenting this target at the battles on Eduron had been observing him. Convinced of the lack of unnecessary witnesses, the visitors began their mission. The human felt neither fear nor pain, nor did he, in truth, feel anything at all. The last sight Ardas saw before losing consciousness was a white light as the rushing water blurred into a haze. As the river flowed onward, the man alongside it disappeared. If another person had been watching, she could never have comprehended how someone standing on the banks of the river could seemingly vanish into thin air.

•••••

"It's hard to relate what Ardas felt at that time. I have an idea of how I would have felt, but I can't even imagine the very first awakened person's reaction. Unfortunately, Ardas himself only gave a dry account of his first hours

on Eduron. But we'll have to rely on it, no matter how dry and uninformative it may be."

"Secretary, continue with, 'The planet Eduron . . .'"

•••••

## *The planet Eduron*

HE awoke in an unfamiliar white facility. The first thought to enter Ardas' mind upon regaining consciousness did not differ much from what anybody in a similar situation would think: Where am I and what just happened? This preceded a second, more specific thought, which manifested itself in a habitual behavior, that of fumbling around in the dark for his glasses. Although the shackles on his hands hindered the search, Ardas soon realized that he no longer needed his glasses, as he could see just as well without them. Having grasped this new state of affairs, Ardas wasted no time in taking advantage of his improved eyesight and began intensively scanning his surroundings. It was only when he had turned his head to the side that he saw what appeared to resemble a bear wearing clothes, or the Predator Ardas had recently seen in a science fiction movie. Standing nine feet tall, the being calmly watched the prisoner get his bearings, then snarled softly at him. Gradually, the strange sounds become clearer, and Ardas, still recovering from shock, realized that the being was speaking and that the guttural communication was directed at him. As the growls gradually turned into comprehensible words, he discovered what was helping him decipher the coarse noises: a plain metallic box somehow attached to the top of his head. The being mumbled something about a battle in which Ardas should feel honored to take part and then about his being escorted into the arena. He was still in shock and doing everything he could to contain the panic beginning to sweep over him. As a result, most of the creature's rasping went in one ear and out the other. Eventually he calmed down, but rather than finding himself in a familiar, peaceful state, he felt a surge of energy come over him, as if something was focusing his thinking and sharpening his senses. Ardas began to feel a force within him unlike any he had ever experienced. This sensation continued to evolve, granting him inexplicable self-confidence even in these, the most unfamiliar of surroundings. Ardas made no effort to resist the guards escorting him into the arena, where they removed the shackles from his hands upon arrival.

The arena resembled those of ancient Rome in both size and appearance. Various beings filled the grandstands, mostly the same bear-like creatures but also a smattering of humanoid faces. Ardas understood that he was not on Earth but wondered how he was still breathing. He had no way of knowing that his body had immediately adapted to its surroundings, or that all humans were programmed that way so that they could fight on whatever planet their creators, the Demurgs, chose to send them.

But thoughts on the feasibility of breathing quickly vanished. A giant Ursidor—the name Ardas had created for the creatures resembling grizzly bears—was stumbling directly at him. Its movements weren't swift or agile, but they clearly revealed the creature's aggression. The human had no idea why he was being attacked, but such considerations immediately became irrelevant as his fighter's instincts, honed over twenty years of training, took over. Rather than wonder why or how, Ardas took the unprovoked attack for what it was and started defending himself. The Ursidor started the battle by waving a long pole sharpened at both ends. To Ardas, this action seemed absurdly slow, and he had no trouble ducking the first swing. In his opinion, he was moving at a normal speed, far slower than when he used to prepare for the world karate championships or used to earn spending money participating in underground, no-rules ultimate fighting competitions. In those days, his hands were fast enough to perform the old trick often seen in movies, where he could grab a coin from another person's palm faster than the other could clench his fingers around it. Yet even these, the slower movements of an amateur athlete, proved several times faster than those of the Ursidor, and Ardas quickly found himself standing behind his aggressor's back. With an effortless jump in the air, Ardas landed a textbook yoko geri flying kick directly between his opponent's shoulder blades.

The course of the battle surprised the human. The kick, which in Ardas' opinion any well-trained opponent on Earth could have withstood, drove the giant Ursidor fifteen feet forward. A roar erupted from the grandstands, followed soon thereafter by the sounding of an alarm. The fallen creature, ignoring the unsettled masses buzzing around him, stood up and tried to attack again. But with each passing moment, its movements increasingly reminded Ardas of slow-motion television. Having easily evaded the Ursidor's thrusting spear, the man again brought the giant to the ground, this time with a roundhouse kick to the lower leg. With the beast down, Ardas grabbed its weapon with his right hand and ripped it from its giant paws.

In the blink of an eye the arena gates opened to several other Ursidors, in Ardas' opinion some kind of bodyguards or security forces, as well as a team of metallic arachnids. The fallen creature, seeing his opponent distracted, sent a weapon similar to a discus hurling, but Ardas had plenty of time to recover and avoid the projectile. He then attacked the spear he held in his hands, cracking its shaft in half with a swift chop. When the first of the oncoming creatures got to Ardas, it didn't even get one swing at the human before receiving a two-fisted blow to the chest. The next attacker, a step behind the first, earned a flying kick to his face. As before, despite the creature's physical stature, the elevation necessary for this maneuver seemed effortless to Ardas. The fight's impending conclusion seemed clear to all. With each passing minute, Ardas felt stronger and more agile. He no longer felt awed by his powers or by the languid pace of his opponents. Nor was he shocked to learn of another unexpected power: the ability to control objects from a distance by telekinesis. By the time the last robotic

spider attacked him, Ardas smashed it into the ground without even touching it. As for his original opponent, the human easily picked the beast off the ground by its clothing and hung it on a pole in the middle of the arena floor, leaving it to flail its limbs in a comedic display of desperation. Then the Demurgs entered...

•••••

### *From the recollections of the great warrior Iskin*

I, the great warrior Iskin, stood by my Clan Leader and surveyed the arena. The Human seemed calm. He offered no resistance as we removed his shackles. It was clear that he was in a haze of shock and fear. The subject was glancing around but otherwise doing nothing. At that point, I thought that Iskik had a chance. The young warrior entered the arena and immediately attacked the Human. Moving quickly but guardedly, the clan leader's son left no doubt that he was a true warrior, in control of his body, both swift and strong. The first blow of the spear should have been fatal. Iskik's move was sudden, powerful, and balanced, using the full force of his body. What followed was precisely what I had feared. The Human easily ducked, spun around his axis, and then stood behind Iskik in the blink of an eye. It all happened with a pace unmatched by any known warrior in the Rational Union. But there was still hope. The subject may just have been lucky. Nevertheless, I could see the Clan Leader's expression change. He feared for his son. Everyone knew how merciless Humans were. The last glimmer of hope then vanished, as the Human swiftly and gracefully jumped and struck Iskik in the back with a powerful kick. The move was executed absolutely to perfection. At that point, I understood that the young warrior's opponent was not only familiar with the art of combat; he was a superior warrior, perhaps even a master. The subject's awakening was progressing at an alarming rate. We had to declare an emergency and rush to the aid of the Clan Leader's son. The Clan Leader was fully aware of the situation. He wasted no time delivering a war cry and ordering the emergency alarm. Security officers released our robots while my elite forces stormed the arena. I myself descended to the arena floor even though I knew we had almost no chance of containing the raging subject. This wasn't the first time a Human had awakened more quickly than expected and become uncontrollable during a battle. I didn't get a clear view of the Human destroying the first robot, but what little I did see told me that my participation in the fight would not achieve anything. The subject was much faster than even my best warriors. He became stronger than anybody the clan had in its ranks. Yet these developments were nothing compared to the subsequent turn of events, as they were enough to stop me dead in my tracks. The subject raised the final security robot in the air without even touching it. Clearly, the awakening had occurred, and from this point, the Human's powers would inevitably advance. Only two possible courses of action remained: destroy the subject by aerial bombardment or hope that the Demurgs could contain him. What confounded me the most was

that the Human did not kill anybody. He defeated and disabled every warrior I threw at him, yet he sent none to their deaths. The subject easily lifted Iskik onto a pole and left him hanging there, thus mocking the young warrior, but he refrained from seriously injuring the child. The Human showed no desire to kill; he was capable of mercy. Then the Demurgs entered...

•••••

Ardas saw them. They seemed almost as human as he was. They may have been slightly taller, leaner, and paler, but basically the same. Upon their arrival on the arena floor, Ardas began hearing strange voices, or rather, sensing the words in his mind without actually hearing anything through his ears. The voices were coaxing him to calm down, to spare the Ursidors' lives, and to bow to their leader. Yet, as Ardas didn't feel upset, he couldn't understand the request to calm down. Nor had he any plans to kill anyone. As for the third command, however, this was perfectly clear to him, and he had no plans to comply. The voices were starting to annoy him, so just like that, Ardas decided he would no longer hear them. And, as if on cue, the voices faded to silence. This result caused a greater commotion than even his initial kick. The humanoid creatures grew even paler, joined hands, and, after a momentary pause, hastily retreated to the grandstands.

•••••

### *From the recollections of the great warrior Iskin*

I returned to my leader. The knowledge that his son's life was no longer in danger had visibly pacified him, and he now observed the scene with more interest than apprehension. Obviously, he would have preferred not to see his son displayed as an object of ridicule, but this desire deferred to such principal priorities as his son's health and safety. The Demurgs approached the Human. Everyone knew how the pale ones operated. In only the rarest of cases could anybody defy their voices. In the past, even Humans accepted their thoughts and suggestions without even realizing it. Now all ten of the fair-skinned beings had stopped a few paces from the Human and directed their gazes at it. The Earthling was supposed to lower its head and bow before the Clan Leader. This instance, however, wasn't unfolding according to plan, and the Demurgs were becoming unsettled. In fact, all of the spectators in the grandstands were getting nervous. If the Demurgs were to fail to contain the Human before the awakening process concluded, destroying this subject would require the sacrifice of many lives. The Demurgs joined hands in order to unify their powers. Nothing should have been able to resist. Yet the Human continued to stand there, not even considering obeying them. The awakening had progressed more quickly than usual, while the Demurgs were powerless to control the subject—and both the Clan Leader and I knew it. His decision would determine whether our pilots

would take to the skies and, using long-range weapons, attempt to destroy the culprit responsible for the battle's unpleasant outcome. One fact captivated my attention: the Human didn't want to kill. Perhaps we could reason with it?

I shared my thoughts with the Clan Leader and received his permission to try communicating with the unusual creature. Meanwhile, a phenomenon was occurring on the arena floor. While the Human was not conceding anything to the Demurgs, he wasn't attacking them either. It was nice to see someone teach those arrogant snobs a lesson. They finally understood what they had created. I was becoming more confident that the subject wished to communicate. He would not be killing Iskik, my warriors, or the Demurgs. Destroying it by sheer force was, for now, no longer an option. The leader needed time to decide how to save his constituents and impair the Human. Armed with a translation box, I descended with hopes of negotiating.

•••••

As soon as he took the box, Ardas realized that the device was no longer necessary. He could now understand what the Ursidor was telling him and what the creatures in the grandstands were yelling. This realization was but one of many small epiphanies he experienced that day. Such developments no longer awed him. All that interested him now was some time alone to mull the day's events. Ardas therefore started the conversation without even waiting for the box. He expressed himself not so much in words as in thoughts, an act that further surprised the creature standing before him.

"Who are you? Why is everyone attacking me? More importantly, where am I and what is going on here? And finally, who are those badgers who keep trying to get into my head?" he asked directly.

"I see the awakening is progressing quickly. I'll answer all your questions, but only after you answer mine. Are you preparing to kill your opponent?" asked Iskin, gradually calming himself in the aftermath of the battle.

"Why would I kill him?" inquired Ardas, amazed. "He has done nothing to me. Besides, why would I want to kill anyone or anything? If I got attacked again and had no other choice, maybe I'd have to, but otherwise I don't see the point. What's all this about, anyway?"

"We'll continue this conversation somewhere else, not in the arena," said the Isan, pondering what he had just heard. "Someone will lead you back to the room you were in when you regained consciousness and provide you with nourishment, similar to the diet we have observed you eating. I'll inform the Leader that his son will live, and then come see you. Then, I promise, I'll tell you everything you want to know."

"If you think you're going to lock me up, you're mistaken," warned Ardas somewhat more sternly.

"Nobody will even try to lock you up. You are free. This is only a suggestion. When I tell you everything, you'll be able to choose whether you want to go home or go anywhere else. All your wishes will be carried out."

The man turned around and headed toward the exit. Iskin watched him leave and wondered whether he was making a mistake even talking to the human. Simply destroying the subject, he noted, might be wiser. On the other hand, there was a fairly good chance of peacefully sending him to Ligia to join other such subjects. Having finally made up his mind, the warrior turned and headed toward his Clan Leader.

••••

"My Leader, I feel we need to tell the Human everything and give him two options: return to Earth and forget everything or travel to Ligia to join the others. We could even let him bring some others from Earth, other Humans he feels close to."

"Any other options?" inquired the Clan Leader.

"We could lead him out to a field, bring in the fighter pilots, and try to destroy him."

"Would it work?"

"I don't know," admitted the old warrior truthfully. "The more we've attacked him, the more the awakening has progressed. We've learned from the Demurgs that the subject has discovered the power to control energy found in his surroundings. Theoretically, he'd have enough energy to form a shield and attack our forces. Obviously, the Isan battleships would withstand such an attack, but destroying this Human could mean destroying the entire planet. I like this planet. It'd be a shame."

"It'd be more than a shame," shot back the irritated Clan Leader. "This planet has brought sizable profits to the clan. Destroying the planet would mean weakening the entire clan. Iskin, are you sure that he won't go berserk and attack us? This isn't a Rational Being we're dealing with. Can we even be sure of anything?"

"I don't know. We can try. If we can't reason with him, we'll somehow put him on a ship and destroy both the Human and the ship beyond the planet's boundaries," suggested Iskin.

"And we'd be able to do that?"

"Probably," answered the warrior, despite not being entirely convinced. "He is alone, and he won't have enough energy to protect himself. The plan should work. But let's not hurry. First, let us try to find out whatever we can about him. In the past, the Demurgs have always separated us from the awakened

ones. With this subject, they won't be able to do anything. We'll refuse to hand the subject over to the pale ones, using the fact that he doesn't want to associate with them to our advantage. And the Demurgs will no longer be able to force him to do so."

"Fine, Iskin, take whatever you need. You have the authority to act in my name as my right hand. From now on, your commands are mandatory for all members of the clan, so long as they don't conflict with mine. However, be aware that with greater power comes greater responsibility. If we don't deal with the Human and we suffer great losses, you'll be held accountable. So try to control it somehow," ordered the clan leader authoritatively.

Iskin understood everything perfectly. This moment would decide his long-term fate. Handling this assignment well would mean significant career advancement. Otherwise, it could mean his head. And these considerations seemed especially unpleasant, considering he had no idea how to put his ideas into practice.

"How should I deal with the Human? I don't suppose you'd have any advice?"

"I don't know. This was your idea, so do your own thinking," answered the Leader of the Second Isan Clan.

"I understand, my Leader. Your will shall be carried out," Iskin declared as he prepared to leave.

"Oh yes, and Iskin," the clan leader stopped him. "Thank you for saving my son's life. Try to protect his honor as well. Use the information net to spread the word to the members of the clan about what a grand battle took place between my son and an awakened Human male combatant. Don't emphasize how the battle ended. Emphasize that he held his own against such an invincible opponent and survived. I will speak with Iskik more seriously. By the way, perhaps he could join your elite forces? He has much to learn before he becomes my successor," he said, emphasizing the words by looking the old warrior in the eyes.

"I understand, my Leader. I like Iskik. He's brave, although maybe inexperienced. I'll do everything in my power," agreed the old warrior without hesitation.

His concerns allayed, the Clan Leader relaxed, and the stress that had hindered his movements finally faded away.

"Good, Iskin. Go," commanded the Leader of the Second Isan Clan somewhat more calmly.

...•••

Ardas was acclimating to his surroundings surprisingly well and had just finished eating his meal, an entrée accurately resembling steak and potatoes in appearance, taste, smell, texture, and substance. He felt completely calm.

"I see you've calmed down somewhat, Human," began Iskin, having hurried to visit the Human after talking to the Clan Leader.

"I have. Why be stressed? I'm only concerned about my loved ones. They'll be worried and looking for me," Ardas confided his uneasiness.

"Don't worry about them. If you wish, we'll return you to the same location and the same point in time from which we took you."

"Somehow, I can tell that you're not lying. Later you'll have to explain how you intend to do that. For now, I'd like to get answers to the questions I gave you earlier."

"Agreed. I'll tell you what I know. If you want to know more, I'll take you to the information center. The Leader has decreed that we keep nothing from you, because only by having all the information will you be able to make a decision."

"I'm glad to hear that. Let's start with your name and what's going on here," suggested Ardas.

"Human, I go by the name Iskin. I serve as the leader of the elite forces of the Isan clans and as an advisor to the Clan Leader."

"My name is Ardas. Now tell me where I am, and why am I here?"

"I'll start with why you're here. According to our tradition, a mature male clan member can be considered a warrior only after he has defeated a dangerous opponent in an honorable duel. The more dangerous the opponent, the more the warrior's status rises. Iskik wanted to face a very dangerous—perhaps even the most dangerous—opponent in order to become the Clan Leader's undisputed successor. Thus, we kidnapped you and presented you in the arena to fight the Leader's son."

"But if he needed the most dangerous opponent, why did he choose me? Earth is full of guys both stronger and faster than me. He could have chosen some master fighter."

"A master fighter would quickly have become an invincible opponent for the Isans. Iskik wanted a very dangerous, yet conquerable, male in the full bloom of his powers, not a warrior or a master fighter," explained Iskin.

"But why a human?"

"Wait, don't rush me," the Isan warrior cut him off. "I'll spell everything out in order for you." He proceeded to relate who the Humans really were, when they were created, and what their creators hoped to achieve.

Perhaps due to the shock of recent events, or maybe because of the changes he was undergoing, Ardas was able to hear out Iskin's narrative fairly calmly. Even ten years later, he could repeat everything word for word.

"Due to its unstable nature," Iskin began, "Earth emits a certain ray that affects all living organisms. These rays foster genetic mutations. Therefore, life on Earth evolves unbelievably quickly. For this reason, your planet will be able to sustain life almost permanently. Organisms there evolve and adapt to practically any living conditions. This is equally true of microorganisms and the largest creatures. Yet these rays affect Humans uniquely. Over time, they smother Humans' cerebral activity and energy levels. Inhabitants of Earth use no more than one tenth of their abilities. The effect of the rays is barely noticeable at first and doesn't become fully apparent until half a year, according to your time calculation scale, after one arrives on the planet."

Today, these facts seem like common knowledge to most humans, but back then they were newsworthy enough to flip Ardas' entire worldview upside-down. In contrast, the next part of the story didn't leave as great an impression on the human. "We humans are strange creatures," Ardas thought, recalling his first conversation with Iskin. "Why do I always place more importance on that which concerns me? At that time, I concentrated on what Iskin was saying about humans and Ligians, and almost completely ignored the part of the story about the Sidargans — which later proved the most important part. As Iskin then put it, 'Almost twenty thousand of your planet's years ago — you'll find the exact date in the information system, if you're interested — the Sidargans invaded our galaxy. At first, nobody paid them any attention. We thought they'd be happy with a few peripheral systems, or maybe that they'd war with some civilization not belonging to the Rational Union. However, events transpired a bit differently. Over the course of almost a century, they took over close to one hundred and fifty solar systems, or several hundred planets. Of these systems, ten could sustain life and three featured basic civilizations. One of these three even featured rudiments of an advanced empire; it had strong defense capabilities and controlled seven planets. The Rational Beings had already contacted this civilization and suggested it join the alliance, but it refused. In fewer than ten years, the Sidargans had exterminated every last member of this civilization. Only then did we realize what a danger to the galaxy had arisen. We started a war and suffered a major defeat in the very first battle.'"

•••••

"Interesting situation they've got here," thought Ardas as he watched the Ursidor exit. "Now I'll have to clear a few things up, and then we'll see. I don't

think I'll be rushing back to Earth or charging headlong to Ligia. I'd love to talk to the Ligians. I wonder if there's a way to do that without meeting in person. I'll have to learn more about my abilities. Then, when I'm fully ready, we'll see if it's really such a great idea to have humans under this kind of control. I don't think we Earthlings will be locked down much longer."

## Part II

# *Interest Aroused*



***Demurg territory. A planet in the White Circle. 02 July 2015.***

“MY Lord, there is no doubt. We checked everything. Genetically, the Human is an exact copy of one of our original creations.”

“Check everything again,” demanded the Circle Lord. “I don’t need any mistakes or misunderstandings. So far, no object we’ve come across has ever represented a genetic copy of one of the originals. Of course, while researching Earth and its inhabitants, members of the Red Circle theorized that, even on a planet as unstable as Earth, a genetic repeat is likely, but I find that hard to believe. How did you arrive at that conclusion?”

“We took a strand of hair found after the battle and analyzed its DNA. Comparisons with existing data indicated an absolute match with the genetic makeup of Treagon, the 128<sup>th</sup> sample ever born. Then we researched what location the Human arose from. We studied everything the Red Circle has gathered about Earth’s history. After analyzing the object’s ancestors’ migration patterns, we compiled all the data from all our research and arrived at an indisputable conclusion. The individual the Isans have really is an exact genetic duplicate of one of the original Humans. For this reason, it will prove useful in our research on how to eliminate the Humans’ inborn resistance to our mental influence. After we finish our experiments with this subject and correct the flawed Human gene structure, we’ll be able to create a new batch of perfected Humans. As for that wasteland Earth, with its mutants who aren’t even fit for research, we’ll simply destroy it.”

“I like this plan. But before I inform the other Circle Lords, I have to be certain about everything you just told me. Tell me in detail everything you learned from your historical research.”

“Yes, my Lord. Here’s a summary of all our research. As you know, the planet Earth is unique. Its distinctive rays result in rapid mutation among all living organisms found there. Of the original batch of Humans who escaped our care, the group that arrived on Earth ended up there quite accidentally. The planet was fit for them to live on. That is, they had little difficulty adapting to

living conditions there. Besides, the planet was far from the center of the galaxy, making it an ideal place to hide and wait for their numbers to grow and the weakened members of their group to recover. By the time they realized the planet's effect on them, it was too late. They no longer had the ability to open long-range teleportation gates and escape from Earth. Over a relatively short period, at least by galactic standards, Humans spread throughout the planet and almost completely destroyed the hominid group that had previously been evolving there.

"Every succeeding generation of Humans adapted to different living conditions and thus lost the abilities of prior generations," the speaker continued. "Gradually, significant superficial differences arose between individual persons, including skin color, skull structure, height, and genetic make-up. Currently, there are four main Human races. In each of these, depending on the individual, Humans function at between seven and eleven percent of their capabilities. Once they settled on the planet and eliminated any potential rivals, Humans began creating their civilizations. Some of them even reached a fairly high level of development. In a few cases, Human civilizations advanced so much that they even tried to travel between their solar system's planets. Some advanced by developing technologies, others by accentuating the recovery of inborn Human abilities. Forty-eight thousand Earth years ago, a civilization of black-skinned individuals succeeded in recovering forty-five percent of Human capabilities, including levitation, teleportation, and telekinesis. Further development of this civilization could have resulted in a full recovery of all powers on Earth, or in an escape from the planet. Luckily, a stray asteroid ended such efforts. All significant advances made by the civilization were lost, and its members were no longer able to withstand the planet's destructive effects. Five of the most advanced Human societies died out this way. Specialists from the Red Circle had created the last of these during the war with the Sidargans, after the Rational Beings granted them permission to experiment.

"This city was called Atlantis. Having found a few individuals genetically similar to the first Human examples, the specialists made alterations, accentuating physical strength and appearance while limiting cerebral acuity and resistance to mental control. As you know, the Atlantans were almost ten feet tall and unbelievably strong, but they easily gave in to our mental influence. The Red Circle currently has several thousand Atlantans, descendants of those evacuated during the civilization's destruction. Atlantan expansion faced the strongest resistance from a nation uniting the white-skinned Humans, a nation which ultimately stopped the Atlantans. Over the course of history, this nation has divided into many. However, to this day its nucleus remains, a people genetically, culturally, and even linguistically similar to their ancestors. We believe that there is a high probability of finding a genetic duplicate of a member of the original gene pool within these descendants. Our object is a member of this nation."

“Do the Isans know,” asked the leader, “what kind of a Human they have as their guest?”

“They don’t suspect a thing.”

“Do the Sidargans have any idea?”

“Their mental and emotional activity cannot be measured by physical indicators,” explained the Demurg to his leader. “As you know, the Sidargans spy on us, just as we observe them. It is therefore likely that they suspect something, but I can’t give you an exact answer. We can’t break through their shields.”

“I see. I’m heading to Eduron to take back the Human from the Isans,” the Circle Lord announced. “Choose ten of our top masters to accompany me. Contact the Red Circle and ask for one hundred of their Atlantan warriors. And inform the other circles of this new information and our future plans. This is all to be done within the next twenty-four hours. Go.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“It looks like there’s a chance of achieving our forefathers’ Great Goal of uniting the galaxy under our leadership,” thought the White Circle Lord as he watched the members of his circle leave. “If everything goes according to plan, we’ll grab the Human before he regains all of his powers. I’ll take care of the Isans. Our research will reveal the secret of the original Humans’ disobedience. Then, once we eliminate the errors in the subjects’ genetics, we’ll create a truly invincible and obedient race. We’ll destroy Earth and all of its mutants. Then, nobody will be able to oppose us—not the Sidargans, and not that asinine Rational Union, always getting in the way of the Great Goal.”

•••••

### ***Sidargan-controlled space. 03 July 2015.***

“WHY have you called us together, sister? What has happened that requires our vast experience to solve?” inquired one of the fifteen assembled Sidargan leaders. Together, these, the most experienced Sidargans, decided the most pressing matters affecting the entire race. More trivial matters were left to the Sidargan Council, comprising fifteen hundred experienced queens.

“Esteemed sisters, as you know, my hive and the group of hives assigned to it are the closest ones to the domain of our greatest enemies, the Demurgs. For some time now, they’ve been ineffectively trying to follow us. Obviously, we’ve had considerably more success observing them. The Demurgs can’t even fathom our metaphysical abilities. They can’t even penetrate our shields. So while scanning their White Circle, we came across a fairly unsettling development. The Demurgs think they have discovered a weapon against us.”

“What? When? Talk to us, sister,” the other queens exclaimed.

“As far as we know, it is a Human.”

“A Human as a weapon? We’ve investigated that possibility repeatedly,” one queen explained doubtfully. “The Demurgs can’t control Humans and fear them even more than they fear us. We debated whether it’d be worth it to send our forces and destroy that Human planet, but we decided that the losses would be greater than the benefits. The Rational Union guards the planet and won’t easily let us near it.”

“I think everything has changed this time. It seems this Human genetically matches one of their originally created samples. By conducting research on this Human, they can find errors in their creations’ genetic code and fix them to create obedient and invincible subjects.”

“Why bother? Wouldn’t it be easier to simply create a new subject according to the old specifications and then research it?”

“It appears the Demurgs are worried they might make a mistake. The desired characteristic, resistance to mental influence, might not appear in the new subject. In order for this trait to activate, they’d have to create a whole group of subjects. Usually when Humans find themselves in a group of others similar to themselves, they begin to act differently. The Demurgs fear that they may not be able to control a group of Humans, so they’d rather not risk it. The existing subject has already demonstrated resistance to mental control. Thus, they don’t need to create a whole group. They can research this one subject and not have to worry about controlling a large number of them.”

“Do the other Rational Beings know?”

“It appears that they don’t.”

“In other words, they’re creating subjects in order to fight not only us, but the other Rational Beings as well. It seems the pale ones are again hoping to achieve, as they call it, their ancestors’ Great Goal.”

“Dark Sister, you researched Humans. Will they pose a threat to us if the Demurgs succeed with their plan?”

“They could,” replied a voice from the back of the congregation. “If the Demurgs succeed in creating at least one hundred thousand individuals, they could push us back to our mother galaxy.”

“What do you have to say, Great Sister? You alone remain in the mother galaxy and lead the resistance against the occupiers of our home, the Dvarvans,” the meeting’s leader asked a Sidargan queen on the other side of the room.

“So far we’re holding our own,” she replied. “The Dvarvans aren’t pressing like they used to. We’ve overcome their strategy of creating black holes, and

we've been able to put up enough resistance. The hardest part has been dealing with their ability to change their appearance and body structure. Our warriors have trouble killing creatures who look just like them. Fortunately, the invaders have spread throughout the galaxy more than they had before and are no longer as unified. We now face attacks from only a small part of their forces. But it's still hard. If all of us were to return to the mother galaxy, the Dvarvans would decide that we once again pose a threat, and then they'd all attack us. There's no way we could withstand that."

"Dark Sister, perhaps you could advise us on what to do about the Humans?"

"We have two options. Under the first option, we would prevent the Demurgs from kidnapping, researching, or killing the Human, and then we'd destroy Earth. Or, we could form a union with the Earthlings, first by making contact with this particular subject and then by using him to reach them all," answered the queen, drawing on her experience researching Humans.

"The Ligian Humans refused to cooperate with us, so why should the Earthlings act any differently?" asked one of the assembled queens.

"We'll reveal the Demurgs' scheme to the Human," suggested the meeting's organizer. "He will want to protect Earth and will agree to form a union with us. We'll offer him assistance in awakening some of the Humans, with the condition that, after they defeat the Demurgs, they'll travel to our mother galaxy to battle the Dvarvans."

"You think Humans would have a chance to defeat the Dvarvans?" asked the Great Sister doubtingly, based on her experience fighting for the mother galaxy.

"Yes," interrupted the Dark Sister, esteemed by her peers as an expert on Humans. "Potentially, they have great strength. Besides, Humans are not reluctant to kill those who look like them."

"Sisters, I recommend choosing the second option," suggested the queen leading the discussion. "Do all of you agree?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Yes." One after another, each Sidargan leader gave her approval of the plan.

"Advise us, Dark Sister, on how to implement this plan," requested the queen leading the assembly.

"We shall summon a group of mercenaries and have one of the young queens who doesn't have a hive lead them. Then we'll use a mental bond to

link her to the warriors, and we'll send them by indirect routes to Eduron as a delegation to the Isans. When she arrives on Eduron, the young sister will get in contact with the Human and convince him to form a union with us."

"This plan will put a strain on our resources, but I think it's worth it," noted the meeting's organizer. "When can we start?"

"Right away," answered the Dark Sister. "The chosen group must leave for Eduron tomorrow. I'll choose the warriors and the young sister myself. Does everyone agree?"

"Yes, Dark One. We have faith in you," the others responded unanimously.

"Something still concerns me," the meeting's initiator added. "I have a strange feeling that we are being watched, but the observer keeps slipping away and remains invisible. It's not the Demurgs. Could a third force in this galaxy, someone more powerful than the pale ones or even us, have as little difficulty with our shields as we have with the Demurgs'?"

"Who could it be?" asked one of the queens.

"I don't know. If we all focus, maybe we'll catch these uninvited guests."

•••

## *The planet Eduron, 03 July 2015*

ARDAS decided to try again. He had lost count of how many attempts he had made to separate from his body, become strictly a spiritual being of pure energy, and then return to his physical state. Finally, he realized why he wasn't succeeding. While still on Earth, Ardas already comprehended that his body and spirit were closely interconnected. His body obeyed him, always and everywhere. On Earth, Ardas could raise or lower his body temperature and create or reduce physical pain. Yet in extreme, life-threatening situations, his physical body took control.

This time, however, the affinity between body and spirit were hampering his efforts. Every time he started to feel separation and thought that he was about to reach a metaphysical state, his body panicked and brought Ardas back. After the battle with Iskik, Ardas trained every day. He had no trouble controlling his internal energy. Without any apparent sign of effort, Ardas could strike any object within thirty feet of him with an energy blast. He had also learned conscious, controlled telekinesis—the ability to control items from a distance. And once he understood telekinesis, he easily demystified the principles of levitation, and could hang in the air for long periods of time or move and change direction in midair. Yet he still couldn't manage to separate himself from his body. Of course, if Ardas had had a teacher, that would have been a completely different story. Instead, he was forced to teach himself using a trial-and-error method.

This time, despite the poor start, Ardas decided not to abandon the attempt. He willed himself to calm down, then resolved to again try convincing himself that everything is controllable. Ardas changed his pose from the comfortable and relaxing lotus position to one of the karate kata stances, a pose which placed great strain on his leg muscles. Once his body's full attention focused on the work its legs were doing, he tried to dissociate himself from his body and the exercises it was preoccupied with. Finally, it worked. His body no longer fought him. He felt in control of it, as during a routine workout. Ardas had succeeded in rising to a metaphysical state, yet at the same time he could feel his physical essence perfectly.

From the metaphysical world, everything seemed different. It was the same room, yet at the same time its energy, its lines, and its space had changed. But before Ardas had finished observing and comprehending everything, he felt a glowing figure beside him interrupt his efforts.

"Hello," stated the being as it gradually morphed into a human shape.

"Who are you?" asked Ardas.

"I'm a human from Ligia. Perhaps you've heard of my planet. I've been watching you for awhile and waiting for you to enter the metaphysical realm so we could talk."

"What, we couldn't have talked without my leaving the physical world?"

"We could have, but that would have distracted you and impeded your attempts. Besides, the Demurgs or Sidargans might have noticed, and I don't think we need that kind of attention," the Ligian explained.

"Why do you think the Demurgs are dangerous? I've met them. They seem like no big deal."

"You have met some casual observers, but you haven't met the Circle Lords. You may yet get that opportunity. The White Circle Lord, escorted by ten master warriors and a group of Atlantan soldiers, is on his way to this planet to kidnap you. They'll arrive tomorrow," the Ligian explained in a calm, consistent, tone.

"What do they want me for? Besides, I doubt they'd succeed. I read about their circles and Circle Lords in the information system. The Isans note that the Circle Lords are the strongest ones, but on the other hand, the Demurgs' strengths consist merely of mental influence and advances in genetic research. I think I'll be able to withstand their challenge," the human stated, revealing his self-confidence.

In fact, his newly acquired powers had made him overconfident, and he was beginning to see himself as the galaxy's most powerful resident.

"I doubt it," the Ligian answered, in an effort to quash any perception of invincibility. "The White Circle Lord is one of the strongest ones, and he's bringing ten of his master warriors. That group could take control of this planet's capital city and all of its residents in twenty-four hours. How could you challenge them? You're going to need help."

"Why are you helping me?"

"I'm a human," explained the Ligian. "I was born on Earth in 1848 C.E. in Germany, then kidnapped and presented at a public battle. I won my match because the awakening had already begun. Since they couldn't stop me any other way, the Demurgs convinced me to travel to Ligia. At that time I hadn't yet learned how to resist them, so I agreed."

"Humans don't live for two hundred years," Ardas challenged.

"Actually, humans generally can live almost forever and avoid aging as well."

"How? In the memories of others?"

"Not only in memories. Okay, I see I need to tell you a little more about human capabilities. As you know, when they created us, the Demurgs gave humans the ability to adapt to almost any environment at least partially conducive to life. Man could breathe almost any kind of air, so long as it was partially made up of oxygen. We were immune to radiation, and we felt no difference in atmospheric pressure between a vacuum and fifteen times that of Earth's sea level. Humans could adapt to life under water, breathing the oxygen that helps compose water. Naturally, humans also received one other trait necessary for survival in battle: the ability to regenerate cells. This meant that so long as the person didn't perish, all of his wounds would heal, and he would recover all of his injured or dismembered organs. This ability to permanently regenerate injured or dying cells resulted in, essentially, eternal youth. Man was genetically programmed not to age beyond twenty-five or thirty years, after which point each individual could regulate such variables as height, weight, and muscle mass. Humans were not dependent on food as an energy source, which is why the digestive organs were kept in an inactive state, and then initiated only if such a need arose. Man could draw energy from various sources: the sun, the planet's electromagnetic flow, and so forth. Digestive organs existed only as a contingency measure for situations where no other sources were available.

"From their first day on Earth, humans were susceptible to the planet's rays, which began impeding their abilities and increasing the rate of genetic mutation. But that wasn't the worst part. On Earth, all large organisms live symbiotically with bacteria. Bacteria play a valuable role in human physiology, aiding digestion and helping the body adapt to its environment. Prior to losing most of their abilities, humans had had little need for bacteria, so they destroyed

them. With each generation on Earth, however, more people became subject to the symbiosis. It became impossible for man not to use his digestive system, which, aided by bacteria, began to work on a constant basis. Dietary nourishment thus became man's primary energy source. Gradually, the ability to consciously draw on other types energy disappeared. Earthly bacteria are crafty, in that they not only encourage the digestive tract to function, they also feed off the energy produced by such work. This factor, coupled with the continued loss of their abilities, meant humans lacked the energy necessary to ensure cell regeneration. Partial tissue regeneration remained possible, but even this capability varied by the individual. Humans continued to mature until twenty-five or thirty years old, yet this period was no longer followed by a state of stable, eternal youth. People began aging. The last of the original group of humans, the strongest member of that group, passed away well after reaching the age of fifteen thousand years. After that, life expectancy dropped sharply. As recently as the age of the Atlantans, members of our race lived to be three hundred to four hundred years old, depending on the individual. Occasionally, some lived to be nine hundred. After a catastrophic asteroid impact that wiped out the Atlantans' civilization, the Earth's rays became even stronger and life expectancy declined again. Today, any changes in life expectancy rates are relatively insignificant."

"By that logic, if every catastrophic event causes the Earth's rays to become stronger and man to enjoy fewer abilities, each succeeding human civilization should become weaker. I don't think you can say that about modern human civilization," Ardas protested.

"For your information, your great civilization is the only one that has failed to settle on any other body in the solar system. In fact, it hasn't even managed to land on one!"

"What, the moon isn't considered a body of the solar system?"

"The only thing your esteemed people accomplished in the moon's entire history was to fly there, circle it, and then barely fly home. Then, when they returned, they pulled off the biggest con of all time. Not a single human set foot on the moon. At that time the feat was technically impossible, and these days it would be too expensive and risky. Skeptics have revealed the photographs and video footage to be obvious forgeries, and they've shown that the ship's computer wouldn't have been able to make all the necessary calculations accurately, but they've never addressed the question of fuel. Has anybody thought about how much fuel would be necessary for a spaceship of that age, using the limited technology available at the time, to fly to the moon, land on it, take off, and return to Earth? There wouldn't have been room on the ship for anything other than fuel. Think about the ships that were orbiting Earth at that time. How could it be that they managed to take off and achieve orbit but didn't have enough fuel to do anything more, and yet a ship traveling to the moon had enough fuel to land there and then return to Earth? The answer is simple: it couldn't,

because the moon landing never happened. In space, ships don't use much fuel. We can assume they used this fact to their advantage to fly to the moon and back, but there's no way they could have landed and taken off again," the Ligian explained.

"So the moon landing," Ardas asked incredulously, "was fabricated? How do you know all this if you've been living on Ligia since the nineteenth Century?"

"That's not all I know. This human civilization has a reputation for elaborate charades and disinformation. As for how I get my information, that's simple. As you can see, I travel through a metaphysical plane. Since the Rational Beings follow every step taken by humans on Earth, we observe everything the Rationals do and learn everything they learn. Besides, I myself often visit Earth in a metaphysical state, so I'm fairly familiar with all the planet's major events."

"Okay, you've convinced me. But then I have another logical conclusion. It seems to me that if a person regains his powers, he should regain the ability to avoid aging."

"That's correct. You should know that humans don't just exist on a physical level. But we'll get to that later. Let's talk about the Demurgs. Don't forget—they're coming for you," the Ligian redirected the conversation.

"What's the best way for me to beat them?"

"Good question. I'll try to help. Listen up. Man, like any other being, can be hypnotized only when he chooses to be. He has to believe, either consciously or subconsciously, that the person hypnotizing him has that ability, and he has to choose not to resist. That is, he has to focus his attention as directed and has to find peace with the idea of being hypnotized. If you reject the belief that they can hypnotize you and refuse to direct your undivided attention where they tell you, they won't be able to affect you at all. The best way to do this is to never look a Demurg directly in the eyes, and instead to focus on his appearance as a whole. If you have to fake it and appear hypnotized, focus on their eyelashes and always think about something. In your head, mock their appearance or solve math problems. Whatever you do, don't attack them immediately, because they'll be expecting that. Pretend you're being influenced by them and wait for their warriors to let their guard down, then attack. Use primitive, hand-to-hand combat rather than thoughts or energy. And go for the Circle Lord first. If he's not functioning properly, the others will become vulnerable, because in one move you'll have cut off all of their mental links. Then you'll be able to fight the other members of the contingent. You can deal with the Atlantans however you want. As for the Demurgs, I recommend using physical means. In that department, you have a major advantage over them. Once the mental links are destroyed, the Isans will be free of the Demurgs' influence and will join the battle on your side.

I can't think of another race that would cherish its honor and freedom as much. The Isans will not forgive the Demurgs for their mental coercion."

"Should I kill the leader?"

"You decide. He could hold more value to you alive, but then you risk the possibility of him recovering too soon. Decide for yourself what to do."

After a moment, Ardas finally asked the question that had been preoccupying him: "Can I visit Ligia now?"

"I wouldn't recommend it. Ligia is being blocked. The Rationals devote a lot of energy to demarcating our energy channels. They don't know about the one I traveled on yet, because we've masked it well, but they could find it at any moment. If you get stuck on Ligia and can't get back, your body will die in a few hours."

"Why?"

"You merely tricked your body and left it turned on. When the muscles become exhausted, the body will naturally protect itself and relax them. The body won't be able to maintain the stance you left it in. It will then notice that the spiritual being is missing, and your body could die."

"So every time I go into a metaphysical state," inquired Ardas dejectedly, "I'll only have two hours to travel?"

"Not necessarily. I recommend leaving your body as soon as it falls asleep. You should be able to will it into a merely physical sleep. Then you'll be able to wander for a long time," the Ligian advised.

"What are you hoping to achieve here? Are you sure you don't have any personal interests? I feel like you're not telling me something. If you're not upfront with me, we won't be able to agree on anything."

"My interest is for you to awaken mankind. Not everyone. You decide how many. Show them man's place in the universe. I'm tired of all these beings treating humans like dolls or beasts. You can do it. Elevate the Earthlings, and we'll help you. I have to hurry before the Sidargans or Demurgs notice me. We'll meet again and talk then. Return to your body."

"Thank you. I'll try to do what you've said, but I don't know if I'll be able to. We'll see. I'm off to prepare for tomorrow now. Good bye."

•••••

## ***The planet Eduron, 04 July 2015***

"HUMAN, the Clan Leader is summoning you," an Isan warrior ordered. "Now!"

"Okay, I'm going," Ardas responded without turning around. "Tell him I'll be right there."

"And so, it has begun," thought Ardas as he prepared to head toward the Clan Leader's chamber. Escorts were already waiting for him. Assembled in orderly lines outside his quarters, fifteen red-skinned, ten-foot-tall humanoids with elongated foreheads were joined by several Isan warriors. Ardas immediately noticed that the Isans were acting unusually, in that their eyes seemed dead and their actions constrained. The red-skinned ones, on the other hand, seemed downright regal. Some of them held energy guns. Ardas had seen the Isans with similar devices earlier. Others held elaborate, curved swords, while the energy guns hung on their backs. Each of them wore light yet solid armor, which the human could tell was strong enough to withstand a close-range shot from a high caliber gun. Their helmets resembled those of the ancient Greeks. At the front of the lines stood the leader, the only one who appeared to be unarmed. Yet his hands were shining, so Ardas knew that at any moment the leader was prepared to form a pair of energy swords or strike him with a blast of energy. The red-skinned beings' eyes appeared bright green. Their glances and contemptuous smiles indicated unlimited faith in their own powers. This cockiness infuriated Ardas, for he had never liked arrogant individuals. Their leader appeared to be just that.

"Let's go, little one. The Lord is waiting for you," growled one of the warriors. "I don't even know why the Lord went to the trouble of coming down here. We could have taken a trite thing like you by the scruff of the neck and brought you to him."

"I was wondering the same thing," Ardas replied. "I'd go to see this leader of yours voluntarily. There was no need for him to send his pipsqueak messengers. Or maybe you guys aren't suitable for anything else, so he found you an activity. You know, on Earth we have a bird called a peacock. Its feathers are bright and colorful, but the bird has no use. That's what you remind me of."

"Keep talking, earthworm, keep talking. If the Lord lets me, I'd rip your tongue out."

"Want to try, painted man? When did they get a chance to dip you in paint? Is that a decoration, too? It's too bad you don't know anything about painted Easter eggs. You'd find a lot of similarities with yourself."

"Enough, pale one," the warrior fired back, visibly angered. "Are you going to go on your own, or will I have to drag you?"

Ardas began deliberating whether to teach his escorts some humility, but before he could decide what to do, the situation changed considerably. All around them, several close-range teleportation gates opened, and a group of pitch-black creatures emerged. Their swift attack was directed at the Isans, who were tied up in the blink of an eye, and the Atlantans. Nobody paid any attention to the human, although Ardas got the impression that the attackers were protecting him against the others. He didn't need the protection, but at the same time he wasn't about to get involved in the fight if he didn't have to. Instead, he withdrew several feet away and observed the proceedings calmly.

The attackers were slightly over seven feet tall, and they had two legs, two arms, and a tail with a sharp, bony outgrowth on the end. Ardas noticed that this outgrowth served as a useful weapon in close-range combat. The attackers wore no armor apart from the transparent helmets protecting their heads, although the bony structures covering their chests and backs served as ideal shields. Ardas recognized them as Sidargans, based on what he had read in the Isans' information system. The invaders moved swiftly and effortlessly. Their three eyes, arranged in a straight line, ensured a superior view of their surroundings. Initially, the Sidargans were each armed with two short swords and a razor-sharp, eight-edged star, which they had fired at their opponents before attacking them. The group included at least thirty Sidargans. Nonetheless, the Atlantans were holding their own. In spite of the surprise attack and the quick defeat of their Isan allies, the Atlantans kept their composure. One of them had been decapitated by a flying star, but the others were healthy and immediately on guard. Their leader in particular fought admirably; he used an energy blast to deflect five of the flying stars and then created a temporary force field that slowed the Sidargan attack for a few seconds. That move gave the Atlantans enough time to regroup and assemble in a circular defensive formation, wherein each warrior protected the comrade to his left.

"Run, Human," sounded a voice in Ardas' mind.

"Hello," Ardas replied verbally. "Great, another group of rescuers. Why should I run? And what are you Sidargans doing here?"

"The Demurgs are our enemies. They want to capture you and use them for their experiments so they can turn Humans into a race of slaves and destroy Earth. The enemy of our enemy is our friend. That's why we want to help you. So run, Human. Run to us."

Ardas thought these words were starting to sound like commands. "Relax; I'm not going anywhere," he answered. "There's no need to rescue me, although for some reason your offer does make me feel like the most valuable asset in the world. If you want to help me, you'll have to agree to my conditions. Agreed?"

"What are your conditions?" inquired the unknown speaker.

"Keep the Atlantans busy for a minute and then retreat. In the Clan Leader's chamber, try to distract the White Circle Lord somehow to keep him from concentrating all his attention on me. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"I have a feeling that after these events, the Isans will request the Council of Rational Beings to assemble in order to bring charges against the Demurgs. Ask to participate as witnesses, and offer some kind of suggestions about eternal peace or cooperation. Reveal the true reason why you left your galaxy, and ask for assistance."

"What do you know about that?" asked the voice, clearly surprised and slightly irritated.

"I know enough to convince me to join your side."

"If we do this, what's in it for us?" inquired the voice, this time sounding more curious.

"Hmm," the human thought silently to himself, "what could I offer you?" After pausing briefly to think it over, he answered, "The humans as allies in the battle against your enemies."

"The humans are asleep."

"I promise you, not only will they awaken, but they'll pay their creators back for all the hardships they've had to endure."

"Okay, we'll help you," replied the Sidargan after pondering the matter briefly. "Carry out your plan."

"Great. I have to go see the Clan Leader now," the human said, ending the conversation.

Meanwhile, the battle continued. The Atlantans clearly displayed superior fighting skills and teamwork, but the attackers outnumbered them and used this fact to their advantage. At the time Ardas headed out, three Sidargans and one Atlantan had fallen, and a few other Atlantans had sustained serious injuries. After one last glance toward the battle, Ardas turned and jogged off in the direction of the Clan Leader's hall. His calculations required him to arrive there exactly one minute after the conversation ended. As he ran, he saw groups of Isan warriors hurrying toward the battle. If everything went as he'd hoped, the Sidargans would retreat before the Isans joined the fray.

The plan worked. At the one-minute mark, Ardas slipped past the guards into the Clan Leader's throne room. There, he found a curious situation. The Leader sat on his throne with empty, brainwashed eyes, while around him stood his personal bodyguards, Iskin's elite forces, and the old warrior himself. There were at least one hundred Isans, although all of them seemed unnaturally tense,

appearing almost frozen. Before the clan leader stood the Demurgs, who turned to watch the human enter. The White Circle Lord led them. Next to the Demurgs and along the walls stood fifty Atlantans, obviously prepared to fight.

“I see. Okay, then, let’s begin,” mumbled the human as he advanced toward them.

•••••

### *From the recollections of the great warrior Iskin*

I had never been so humiliated. When they arrived to see the clan leader, we welcomed the Demurgs as guests. Unprovoked, they attacked us and froze my elite forces and the leader’s bodyguards. I felt paralyzed. Although I could see and comprehend everything, I could not move a single finger. Thus, I angrily watched events unfold as a powerless bystander. The White Circle Lord seized control of my Leader and several warriors. The Leader of the Second Isan Clan became a puppet, controlled by the Demurgs. No Isan will ever forget this. An insult like this can be redeemed only with Demurg blood. After taking control of the warriors, the pale ones sent them and a group of fifteen Atlantans after the Human. I suspect that they were planning to kidnap Ardas, then get rid of us and blame everything on the Human. But they underestimated the Earthling, just as we had before.

Even before the Human arrived, the Demurgs seems unnerved. Something wasn’t right. From what the Atlantans were saying, I understood that the Sidargans had shown up and attacked them. I didn’t know which Sidargans had come, but I had a feeling they could be the same ones who had arrived yesterday on a commercial mission and had settled in a nearby city. At that point, my expectations brightened that the Demurgs’ insidious scheme would fail.

Not long after this point, the Human entered the hall. He came alone, unaccompanied by the Atlantans. The Human seemed calm, as if he knew exactly what he was doing. After pausing by the door for a few seconds, Ardas ran toward the White Circle Lord and shouted, “Help me, my Lord! The Sidargans are here, and they want to kidnap me. Take me in and protect me!” I was amazed. That didn’t seem like Ardas. It was then that I had my first encounter with one of man’s most developed characteristics: deceitfulness. Earthlings are perfectly capable of comprehending such concepts as honor and conscience, but they use these guises only when they find it convenient. We didn’t know this, just as the Demurgs didn’t. Everyone was fooled. The Atlantans laid down their arms and allowed the Human to run right up to the White Circle Lord. Standing nearby, the Demurg masters relaxed. Perhaps the Lord could have seen through the charade, but something was interfering. Seemingly worried, he was glancing around the room, as if some other invisible beings were among them, undetectable even to

him. The Human was allowed to come too close and took full advantage of this error.

What followed shook me to the depths of my heart. The action unfolded so suddenly that within a few minutes, one after another, the White Circle Lord and the strongest Atlantans had succumbed to Ardas' blows and lay unconscious. Only Tugor, the galaxy's best-known warrior, and his troops managed to put up some prolonged resistance after they appeared following the unexpected skirmish with the Sidargans. But even he proved no match for the Earthling. Ardas didn't fight according to any rules, and those who tried to follow some kind of code of conduct in fighting Ardas simply impeded their own efforts. Soon Tugor fell to the floor as a giant oak chopped down by a lumberjack's axe and lay on the ground with broken legs and arms, unconscious but alive.

The White Circle Lord awoke just in time to see Tugor's defeat. After glancing around the hall and observing the battle, he understood the hopelessness of the situation. If he had had all of his strength, he might still have changed everything and achieved victory. Instead, he could only hope to save his remaining subjects and himself.

"Stop the battle!" cried the White Circle Lord. "I beseech the Clan Leader and plead for him to end the battle. We surrender and demand a trial."

"Stop the battle," ordered the clan leader. "Iskin, convey my orders to the troops that they are not to kill the surrendering Atlantans, but are to disarm and arrest them. As for you, pale one, tell us what kind of a trial you dare demand, you rotten, despicable, honorless creature. You are nothing to us. You mocked our hospitality. You . . . scheming, death-deserving thing. Only your blood can redeem my soiled honor. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Yes, I am guilty of all that you say. But it should not be for you to judge me, Clan Leader. You are blinded by anger, and thus you don't understand that we are actually trying to save all the Rational Beings from a horrible danger. I demand that the Rational Union hear my case. I have already ordered my warriors to surrender. We put ourselves in the Isans' hands until the day of the trial," the Demurg leader sullenly uttered.

"You are in no position to demand anything or offer yourself to anyone," fired back the Isan clan leader. "My clan will hold you and your followers until our court decides your fate. I will summon the Clan Leaders to a summit. There we will decide what to do with you. Engrain this in your memory and tell anyone who will listen: from now on, the Human is our guest of honor. Any attempt at encroachment will lead to war. That is my word and my warning as Clan Leader. Do not ever forget these words."

"You are making a mistake by trusting the Human," the Demurg protested.

“Silence! The only mistake I made was trusting your honor. This conversation is over. Disarm, shackle, and escort them out of here. They are to be guarded by five hundred of the best warriors, who are to keep permanent watch over the prisoners’ cells. Tell my son Iskik to contact the other twelve clans and to tell them that the Second Clan has been attacked and requests assistance. I wish for the summit to take place within seven days’ time. And send me a physician.”

The battle was over. I, Iskin, relayed the clan leader’s orders to the warriors. The Atlantans all surrendered. Meanwhile, the Human had finished the battle unscathed. His fighting ability both amazed and scared me. More than once, I later asked myself how the Atlantans would have fared if they had faced not one, but ten such Humans. Ardas had also scared the Demurgs; that was plain to see. The Human’s final words, which he whispered to the White Circle Lord as he was being led away, turned this seemingly powerful Demurg even paler. Yet it was doubtful that this fear would last long. Demurgs seldom give up on their plans. The pale ones may have failed this time, but they have also learned from their mistakes. Next time, I felt, Ardas would have trouble fooling them again. And in a duel of the minds against the Demurg Lord, the Human could even suffer defeat.

•••••

### *Eduron. The prisoners’ cell. 05 July 2015.*

“WHITE Lord, why did you order our surrender? You could have escaped from that enemy-infested hall. We would have backed you up. My guards had protected the ship fairly easily. I led a group of fine warriors that I could have guided past the Isans guarding the way out,” a young Atlantan, head bowed in respect, said to the injured White Circle Lord.

“Perhaps, brave Dir, perhaps, but what would we have gained from that? By fleeing, we would have lost even greater numbers. This way, everyone lived. The Isans won’t kill us, and furthermore they’ll be forced to hand us over to the Rational Union for trial. I have already contacted the Yellow and Red Circle Lords. They’ll make every effort to ensure that this happens,” the Lord answered.

“But what then? Why go to trial if we could have won, snatched the Human, and escaped?”

“I will use the trial to prove how dangerous the Human is, and that he should therefore be handed over to us, his creators. We couldn’t have won, and we certainly couldn’t have, in your words, ‘snatched’ the Human. Don’t forget, several dozen Atlantans and five Demurg masters perished in the battle. I was too weak to help. Tugor and Taron, our two remaining leaders and our best warriors, were not able to fight either, although they did survive. We no longer had the means to put up a fight or escape,” the lord patiently explained.

"How could the Isans have defeated these two warriors? They were both my equals in power and ability. We were the three best Atlantian warriors this year. How many Isan warriors had to attack each of them at once to do such damage?"

"You haven't heard? You haven't talked to the members of their regiments?"

"No, the first thing I did was rush to your side, my Lord."

"The Human was responsible. He did this alone, without any help, in individual duels. And they were quick. None of the fights lasted longer than half a minute."

"The Human, that pathetic bug. Even the weakest warrior should have been able to take the Earthling by the neck and rattle it a bit if it resisted," the young Atlantian yawned in disbelief.

"I see, Dir, you have much to learn. Humans were created to be machines of war. You warriors are strong and you control your internal energy masterfully, but this foe is every bit your peer in these respects. Besides, the Earthling controls his mental energy well and understands the principles of personal space transport. We Demurgs granted Humans every trait necessary in battle, all the best characteristics we found throughout the universe. But we made a mistake somewhere. The Humans didn't obey their creators. You don't know the history of Earth at all. In the heyday of Atlantis, its citizens faced the strongest opposition from their fiercest enemy, this Human's forefathers. Although the Humans' average height was seven feet while yours was ten feet, and although your people were physically superior, it was not uncommon for Humans to prevail in battle. Granted, the ancestors of both Atlantians and Humans were the same. But later, the Demurgs of the Red Circle began to care for the Atlantians, granting them more civilized traits. They also eliminated some of the Humans' inherent characteristics that were, in the Demurgs' opinion, completely unacceptable. Thus, wild Humans remained primitive and uncivilized, but also resourceful and persevering, warriors. Ten Humans like this one, working together, would conquer every Atlantian on this planet without any help from the Isans."

"I had no idea, my Lord. I see this Human worries you."

"Quite a bit. It has too much self-confidence. Can you imagine, as I was leaving the hall, the Human challenged me to a mental duel, which should take place after the trial," the White Circle Lord recounted angrily.

"You will defeat it!" exclaimed the youngster, fraught with enthusiasm and endless faith in the Demurgs.

"I think so," answered the Demurg, pleased to hear such emotions. "The Human is strong but inexperienced, while I have been training my entire life. I

think I'll win. Another thing is bothering me as well—it seems the Sidargans are helping the Earthling. I felt them in the hall, and that's why I didn't recognize the Human's ploy in time. It felt like they were purposely trying to interfere with my thoughts. And then there's that inexplicable attack on Tugor's warriors. Could the Human and those creatures from the next galaxy be working together? I'll ask my brothers, the other Circle Lords, to observe the Sidargans more carefully.

••••

### ***Sidargan-controlled space. 05 July 2005.***

"WHY did you agree, sister?" asked one of the most experienced queens of the young Sidargan, recently returned from her mission on Eduron.

"Honorable, most experienced sisters, I had no other choice. My orders had no effect on the Human; they are resistant to our effects. I couldn't take it by force. The only option left was to agree to its conditions and then refuse to carry them out. My assignment was to ensure that the Human didn't fall into Demurg hands. After weighing my alternatives, I decided to risk it," the young queen explained, squirming.

"The Human could have lost and died," noted one of the assembled queens.

"I had already interacted with it and had seen how strong it was. It could have lost, but our assistance ensured its victory. I provided the impetus for it to battle the Demurgs," the mission leader justified.

"What did you do to the White Circle Lord? How did such an experienced master fail to see through the Human's plot?"

"Using the power you provided me, I ventured to the Isan Clan Leader's hall in a metaphysical state and hovered on the very edge of Demurg cognizance. If the Lord had directed all of his attention to me, he would have noticed and challenged me to a duel, where I certainly would have lost. If his attention had been solely on the Human, he would have seen through the thinly veiled trick. But instead, the Demurg did neither of these. Hence, the Human had a chance to defeat the White Circle Lord, and he took advantage of the opportunity," she explained enthusiastically.

"Brilliant idea. For such a young sister, you acted cleverly. You will deserve promotion in our hierarchy. The males you took to Eduron shall form the foundation of your hive. You may go, brave sister."

"Thank you, most experienced rulers," the young Sidargan bade farewell with poorly suppressed glee.

“Well, sisters,” continued the Dark Sister, who was still considered an expert on all Human affairs by her peers. “It seems that all ended well. Now we have to ponder the Human’s offer to cooperate.”

“What exactly does he want?” asked one of the gathered queens.

“It has asked us to send representatives to the Rational Union’s tribunal to testify to the Demurgs’ aggression, reveal the true reason why we left our mother galaxy, and offer the Rationals eternal peace.”

“Why should we do that? We have fought for so many ages, only to now offer peace? Our numbers will soon reach a level appropriate for a large-scale war!” one of the queens, known by her colleagues as the Large Sister, angrily exclaimed.

“Actually, in my opinion, the Human’s suggestion has merit. We have the opportunity to turn all the Rational Beings against the Demurgs. In court, we’ll explain that the main culprits behind these Human-related incidents are the pale ones, and that they continue to work toward their Great Goal. The Rational Beings haven’t forgotten these goals any more than they’ve forgotten their wars with us. Once we tell them about our galaxy, they’ll see a new enemy against whom we should all unify. Besides, eternal peace never lasts forever. Something always happens. The Humans would make fitting allies for us. We’d send them to fight in the mother galaxy. I think Humans would manage to amaze the Dvarvans, and with these creatures’ help, we might be able to take back our home.

“Those are simply our wishes. Can we trust the Humans? If they really are as bloodthirsty as they seem, maybe they’ll want to conquer the entire galaxy,” sounded one angry voice.

“I don’t think so, honorable sister. They are only seven billion. They won’t manage to swallow the entire galaxy. We now have an opportunity to reclaim our mother galaxy and demean the Demurgs without losing a single member of our population. What do we have to lose? After all, we’ll always be able to go back on our word by accusing the Humans of having an affect on us,” argued the Dark Sister.

“Perhaps you’re right, sister. What do we say, sisters? Shall we help the Human?” asked the same queen who had first sensed danger in the Demurgs’ actions and thus called for this meeting.

“I say we help!”

“Yes!”

“Yes!”

“Let’s help,” the fifteen participants replied unanimously.

“I propose we put the same young sister in charge, as she has already interacted with the Human,” added the Dark Sister. “We will supply her with everything she needs, and she can communicate our will to the Human.”

“Agreed,” sounded a unified reply from the assembly.

•••••

### ***Eduron. 07 July 2015.***

THE days since the Demurgs’ attempt to kidnap the Human had essentially changed his status. Ardas had become the Isans’ guest of honor. Every passerby on the street addressed him with the utmost respect, always bowing before doing so. The Human was no longer a creature or an object; he had become a respected comrade of the Isans.

Over the course of those three days, Ardas met with the Human from Ligia several times. Both of them had numerous questions for the other. Everything interested Ardas: the history of mankind, life on Ligia, man’s possibilities, the galaxy’s various races. The questions were endless. The Ligian barely had a chance to answer and quickly posed questions for Ardas whenever a chance presented itself.

During these conversations, Ardas learned of the results of all the experiments conducted about Earth. It turned out that Earth hadn’t always distinguished itself with the rays that now foster such rapid mutation. For many millions of years, Earth was the same as any other young planet, evolving similarly, developing an atmosphere, gradually cooling. Then life appeared on Earth. According to the Rational Beings’ theory, life there came about because of a grand ancient race, which in unknown times presided over the galaxy and spread the foundations of life wherever it could. Almost nothing was known about this race, but the Rationals continued to find their artifacts in various places. As far as anybody knows, every race in the galaxy has these unknown creators to thank for its existence. Although Humans came about later, when the Demurgs created them, life arose on Earth because of the efforts of this ancient race.

For his part, the Ligian was most interested in Ardas’ plans. While not agreeing with the Sidargan alliance, the Ligian acknowledged Ardas’ right to decide future courses of action, and focused on teaching the Earthling how to awaken his hidden powers. Over the course of those few days, Ardas learned to fully control close-range teleportation gates, familiarized himself with technical aspects of long-distance teleporting, and began to feel nearby objects and see their structure—the first steps toward gaining fully conscious control over the material world. The Ligian explained that every Human could learn almost everything quickly, but superficially. In order to master individual skills, he had

to devote the most attention to them. Only after acquiring one set of skills can a person strive for another set. For this reason, Ardas tried not to spread himself too thin, instead perfecting that which he already knew, then studying one skill thoroughly before moving on to the next.

Two days after the Demurg attack, the Sidargans contacted Ardas and pledged their assistance. He agreed to form an alliance with these creatures, accepting their help and promising to help win back the Sidargans' native territory in the future. Ardas could understand the Ligians' misgivings, but knew that he needed all the help he could get to awaken the requisite number of people, train them, and present them to the galaxy's races as their equals, a race to be respected, one whose opinions they should consider.

At the end of the third day, another frequent confidant of Ardas', Iskin, invited him to an upcoming meeting of the Clan Leaders. The human gladly accepted, for this was consistent with his plans and expectations.

••••

"Elena, what about Iskin? Don't tell me he forgot all his suspicions so quickly?"

"Secretary, your job is to record what I dictate, not ask questions. But I'll tell you: no, Iskin did not forget and did not believe Ardas that easily. Let's continue: 'In his time with the human . . .'"

••••

In his time with the human, Iskin tried to understand the entire human race. This creature fascinated him, but also scared him. The Isan was impressed by the man's power, ability to bravely meet danger, and unwillingness to kill unnecessarily. On the other hand, the human's clear, cold resolve unnerved him. Iskin had figured out that the Isans had become simply a means toward some goal. Although the human seemed friendly, Iskin clearly remembered his deception during the battle with the Demurgs. No Isan warrior would resort to such guile. They would bravely go forth into battle and die honorably. The human could have fought honorably and would have had a chance to win. Instead he chose treachery and deceit, then began fighting only when the moment was opportune. Iskin loved his nation and didn't want it to become a sacrifice in the name of some creature's goals. But these were only Iskin's misgivings, and he tried to forget them. Both the Clan Leader and he himself, along with most of their compatriots, had been saved from great disgrace and dishonor. The human had deservedly become the Isans' comrade and guest. That was the truth, although Iskin still could not calm or convince himself. He decided to stay close to the human and observe him. Then, once Iskin could confirm his suspicions, he would kill this dangerous creature. How to do that, Iskin had no idea. He was well aware that any attempt to harm the human would more likely result in his

own death. For this reason, he hoped that his fears were unfounded, the result of an old warrior's phobias.

Up to this point, Iskin's relationship with the Human consisted of frequent visits and displays of hospitality. The old warrior gladly agreed to show Ardas around the clan's capital and its suburbs. After a few walking tours, the pair took a flying car over the city's surrounding areas, a radius of several hundred miles from the center.

The human enjoyed the capital and the whole Isan civilization. Although the city's population was officially listed as three hundred thousand, often there were no Isans in sight. Thanks to the harnessing of anti-gravitational technology, a magnetic field flowed about thirty feet overhead, winding through the city not unlike a river. The field transported compartments for both goods and passengers from station to station, where the field would temporarily disappear, allowing goods to be offloaded and travelers to disembark. The system worked effectively and distinguished itself for its economy, as it required almost no supplemental energy resources. As for travel throughout the planet, the Isans had built a comprehensive network of teleportation gates. The planet had no highway network and, accordingly, no terrestrial transportation. Defense forces patrolled the planet in aerodynamic flying machines that relied on anti-gravitational magnets for elevation. The Isans were fond of sleek, aerodynamic shapes, possibly because their own appearance wasn't too streamlined or graceful. Both the capital's minarets and its terraces, featuring indigo pools and hanging gardens, awed Ardas. The city's skyscrapers resembled grand castles, connected at various levels by pedestrian bridges. Ardas especially liked the city's hanging gardens, where Isan families came for recreation. When he was not sightseeing, he decided to spend his time on Eduron learning more about the principles of anti-gravitation and about how close-range teleportation gates worked.

•••••

***Isan-controlled space. The planet Artoris, belonging to the First Isan Clan. The Clan Leaders' summit. 12 July 2015.***

"TELL us everything, Isanas, honorable Leader of the Second Clan. What happened? Your subordinates sent us a report on the Demurg attack. We found the news unsettling."

"Honorable Isar, Leader of the First Clan, honorable Clan Leaders. Let me recount everything I saw and share my thoughts on those events. I've spent a lot of time thinking about why the Demurgs did this and what we should do about it. It all started with my son Iskik's inauguration as a warrior. As an opponent, we chose a Human, a male whose powers were in full bloom."

“Ooooo, how dangerous,” exclaimed one of the Isan leaders.

“Yes, honorable Leaders, I agree,” the Leader of the Second Clan admitted. “We were hoping that a male who wasn’t a warrior and who distinguished himself on Earth as a peaceful person wouldn’t have time to awaken. Besides, Iskin himself trained my son, and victory over a Human would allow my son the chance to become my successor. In order to avoid anything unexpected, I invited Iskin’s special forces to protect the arena and a few Demurgs to control the Human. Could I have expected failure, in your opinion?”

“Your expectations were logically founded,” noted the Leader of the First Clan, the largest Isan clan. “We know what Iskik is capable of. And we view Iskik’s guidance very favorably. I think we all agree that your actions did not provoke the Demurgs’ aggression. Please, continue what you were saying.”

“Iskik fought the Human and quickly lost. The awakening started immediately. The Earthling turned out to be a fighter, one who had extensively trained his body and will. He defeated Iskin without any apparent effort. Then he easily overwhelmed three defense robots and the special forces sent to help. The Demurgs tried to control the Human, but he was able to resist their influence. We were most amazed by the fact that the Human didn’t kill or even seriously injure a single opponent. Iskik survived and suffered only minor injuries. Only his self-confidence was damaged, which in my opinion can be fairly useful at such a young age. The fact that the Human refrained from killing kept me from a full-fledged attack on this subject. My warrior Iskin opened negotiations with the Human, and he backed down. Do you agree with my decision not to destroy the Human?”

“Your actions were logical and well-founded. They did not provoke the Demurgs’ aggression,” the clan leaders responded unanimously.

“The Human began to study,” the Leader of the Second Clan continued. “I assigned Iskin to watch over him. The awakening kept progressing further. We kept calm only because the Human agreed to either fly to Ligia or return to Earth, and showed no further aggression. A few days later, two delegations arrived on my planet: the Demurgs, led by the White Circle Lord and accompanied by Atlantan warriors, and a Sidargan commercial mission. We housed the Demurgs in the capital and the Sidargans in a town nearby.”

“Which Demurgs composed the delegation, and who was in command of the Atlantans?” inquired one of the Isans.

“Besides the White Lord, all of the Demurgs were White masters,” explained the Second Clan’s Leader. “Three warriors led the Atlantans: Tugor, Taron, and Dir.”

“Ooo! This year’s three best Atlantan warriors! Any one of them is stronger than ten of our warriors. And White masters? The Demurgs were obviously

preparing for aggression, and no action of yours provoked them. The Sidargans agreed to stay somewhere other than the capital?" the First Clan's representative asked in astonishment.

"Yes. The Sidargans didn't cause any problems."

"Interesting. Tell us what happened next," the audience insisted.

"The Demurgs came to me immediately after landing. They divided the Atlantans into several groups. Dir headed a group who stayed to guard the ship. Others were spread around my palace. The majority, meanwhile, led by Tugor and Taron, joined the Demurgs and came to my reception hall. Without saying a word, the White Circle Lord came to me and began a mental attack. The others stood in a circle and froze every warrior in the hall. I resisted and tried not to give in, but this was a Lord, and a strong one as well. The White Lord took complete control of me and a few other warriors. A group of my warriors, under the Demurgs' control, and fifteen Atlantans, led by Tugor, were sent to retrieve the Human."

"Isanas, is there any chance that you insulted the White Lord? Did you say anything that could have annoyed him?" asked the Fourth Isan Clan's Leader, known for his diplomacy.

"We didn't even talk. He attacked me immediately."

"That is dishonorable and low," another delegate responded. "The Demurgs' attack was unprovoked and premeditated. How did the incident end?"

"Soon thereafter, the Human appeared. It came alone, without escort. The Earthling tricked the White Lord, attacked him unexpectedly, and quickly defeated him. He also killed several Demurg masters. Ardas freed my warriors and me. A battle ensued, which we certainly would have lost if not for the Human. The Earthling defeated Taron first, then Tugor, when he arrived a minute later in the hall with his warriors. Then the White Lord recovered and decided to surrender. He is now my captive, while I declared the Human my guest and promised to protect it."

"Your promise is sacred and we will respect it," the Leader of the First Clan declared solemnly. "Isanas, you were correct. The Demurgs deserve our revenge. Only one minor consideration can stand in our way. Demurgs from the Red and Yellow Circles are actively spreading the idea amongst the Rational Beings that the Human is responsible for everything, and only a Rational Union tribunal can clear up this mess. We have already received a request from the Rational Union to agree to the tribunal and to refrain from belligerent activities against the Demurgs. In the event of war, they will support the pale ones. It's your decision, Second Clan Leader. If you say 'Let there be war,' we will all back you—honor outweighs death. But that could be the final Isan battle."

“Understood, my fellow Clan Leaders. I promised the Human safety and protection. He could refuse to go to the tribunal. My obligation is to help the Human and ask for war. I cannot go back on my word,” the Second Clan Leader asserted.

“We agree, Isanas. Let us ask the Human of its opinion.”

“Guards, summon the Human, but do so politely,” one of the Leaders ordered.

••••

Ardas, Iskin, and a few Isan warriors stood in the waiting room. In truth, “waiting room” didn’t properly describe the enormous hall, capable of holding several hundred Rational Beings, adjoining the First Clan Leader’s chamber. Nonetheless, this term best described the room’s function. In addition to Ardas and the Isans, several delegations of various Rational Union races waited. Standing out among these was a yellow-clad Demurg with his entourage of genetically modified Alorans. These were fairly interesting creatures, greenish with a height of about five feet. They had two hands, two legs, no tail, flat faces without a nose, two eyes and, protruding from their heads, two strange appendages which served as their auditory organs. Also, something similar to a vine or a large snake wound around the Alorans’ right arms. Iskin would later explain to Ardas that these were symbiotic organisms the Demurgs artificially created and genetically combined with the modified Alorans. The serpentine attachment served both as a weapon and, when necessary, as a rope or extension of the hand. The creature held on to its host’s arm with its tail. It was almost seven feet long and had an elongated head, from which it could spew a strong acidic liquid up to seventy feet. This acid could eat through any natural protection known to the Rational Beings and through most artificial shields. Isan shields were no exception. The Yellow Circle Demurgs created this breed of modified Alorans and used them as their personal warriors. There were no more than two hundred thousand of them, yet they were almost equal to Atlantans as warriors. The modified Alorans lacked the Atlantans’ strength, yet they were faster and had quicker reflexes. On the other hand, they couldn’t control energy as the Redskins could. Thus, in a duel, the Atlantan would have to take advantage of this trait; otherwise, the Aloran would win.

Aside from the Demurg and his delegation, Ardas noticed a group of yellow creatures similar to larger lizards. According to Iskin, these were Griks, unrivalled as military intelligence officers but useless as warriors. Their most useful trait was the ability to change their skin color and blend in perfectly with their surroundings.

Next to the Griks, another equally impressive race waited. Each individual was almost fifteen feet tall and weighed at least two tons. The entire body, even the top of the head, was covered in rippled muscles. Iskin introduced them

as the Druars. Their strength was legendary among the races of the Rational Union. Moreover, their muscles were so hard, they often seemed more solid than the Isans' combat shields. Yet inasmuch as the Druars' strength was the object of everyone's awe, their lack of reaction speed and agility had become an inexhaustible source of humor and amusement among the Rational Beings. They moved slowly and awkwardly. Still, duels between Isans and Druars usually ended in a draw. The Druars could never catch their Isan foes, whose attacks had no effect on the giants. In real battle, these creatures were irreplaceable whenever the need for physically difficult labor arose, but as enemies they did not pose an especially dangerous threat.

Ardas curiously glanced around the hall, observing the various Rationals until an arrogantly smiling face before him rudely and aggressively interrupted both his thoughts and his conversation with Iskin.

"Stand up, you silly, hairless thing! I want to talk to you," one of the Yellow Circle Lord's escorts ordered. The words were clearly directed at the human, whom the Aloran was staring down from about fifteen feet away.

•••••

### *From the recollections of the great warrior Iskin*

I stood patiently with the Human in the First Clan Leader's waiting room. The Earthling seemed amazingly calm, and fascinated by the various Rationals assembled in the room. I answered an endless barrage of questions about the modified Alorans, Griks, and Druars. The conversation progressed peacefully and amicably until that haughty Aloran, the head of Yellow Demurg security, rudely interrupted us.

"Why should I talk to a puppet of the Demurgs? And why should I stand up? Even when I'm sitting, you're barely as tall as my eye level," the human answered, just as rudely. It was clear that Ardas had become upset, but the Aloran, not realizing this, began a dangerous game of life and death.

"Shut your slobbering mouth! I'm challenging you to a duel. You have insulted me and my entire race."

"How could I have insulted you? You have already accomplished your mission in life. As I understand it, the primary reason you and your race exist is, from the day you were born, to scare others with your appearance. Is it really possible to insult such a shrimp any further? You want to challenge me to a duel? Do you think an ant can challenge a leopard to a duel? I'll answer myself, so that you don't have to devote all of your mental abilities to the question: it cannot. And you are no more than an ant to me, an ant I can stomp on whenever I wish. So either attack me or get out of my sight, for if I have to stand up because of you,

I'll rip that dear growth off your little arm and whip your greenish hide with it. It's your choice."

Clearly, the human was purposely trying to rile up the Aloran. Of course, their conversation occurred mentally, without any spoken words, so such concepts as "shrimp," "ant," and "leopard" were translated by each listener differently, depending on experience and familiar analogies. On the Isans' planet they had similar creatures, which they envisioned instead of an ant and a leopard. It seems the Alorans' planet had something similar as well. The human achieved his goal. The modified Aloran went from greenish to a dark shade of olive, a clear sign of indignation. Nothing could have insulted the Aloran more than the reference to limited mental abilities and the threat to dismember his symbiotic offshoot, even though the human had thought of them instinctively, without realizing their true significance. Alorans generally were not known for their cerebral abilities, and they suffered from a minor inferiority complex as a result.

The Aloran chose to attack. To be honest, even to this day I find it hard to believe that some pathetic Aloran dared attack a Human. Such a crazy decision confirmed my low opinion of the race's intelligence. Suddenly, the symbiotic organism lunged forward, sprayed a large amount of acid toward the Human's face, and continued onward in hopes of penetrating the bewildered, acid-drenched human's brains. The plan was solid and executed both quickly and accurately. Had the Aloran been fighting an Isan or even an unsuspecting Atlantan, the strategy would have worked. Yet on this occasion, the opponent was a Human, one who had clearly been provoking and awaiting the attack. The blast of acid stopped more than a yard short of Ardas and fell harmlessly to the ground. A second later, the head of the symbiotic growth erupted in flames and, writhing in pain, immediately retreated. The Human, meanwhile, had not even lifted a finger yet. Once again, I felt what a dangerous creature sat next to me. Ardas had gained the ability to immolate objects simply by force of will, and he no longer needed to raise his hand to send an energy blast.

Of course, the Aloran's reaction deserved praise as well. Despite the pain the symbiotic organism was transferring to him, the Aloran immediately recognized that his plan had failed, and reached for a small firearm hanging from his side. However, once again, this move was not quick enough. Hardly had the modified Aloran touched his weapon when he found the Human standing directly next to him. One punch to the chest and the Aloran found himself on the ground thirty feet away. His ribs, chest muscles, and internal organs reduced to mush, the Aloran died on the spot. The symbiotic organism continued squirming next to its host's dead body for a short while, until it finally burned to death.

"Don't you dare!" the Human yelled at a nearby Demurg. "I'm getting sick of this. You failed to force your way in before the duel, you failed during the duel, and you'll fail now. Stop trying, or I'll strike back. Believe me: the same fate your servant suffered awaits you, too, after you forced him to attack me."

The Demurg seemed lost. His attempt had not succeeded, and to make matters worse, the Human revealed what he had tried to everyone.

"I didn't force him to do anything," the Demurg answered worryingly. "I tried to control him, but he wouldn't listen. The Alorans are independent types, and I am not responsible for one individual's insanity. He refused to obey me and attacked on his own, an act he paid dearly for. Forgive me, Human, if you felt aggression from me. All of my thoughts were directed at preventing the Aloran from doing anything crazy. I apologize to you and to our hosts for my companion's actions. I hope you will not blame me for them."

"I will not," answered the Human. "Let's put this incident behind us. In the future, keep in mind that I don't wish to take anybody's life and am absolutely horrified by killing. Every Rational Being's life is sacred to me. Humans can be faithful allies of the Rationals, even protectors if necessary; just don't attack or provoke us. More than anything, I hope that no arguments or disputes arise among the Rationals because of me."

The Human's easy victory in the duel and the words that followed had left an impression on all of the Rationals. Seemingly, they no longer knew what to think. On the one hand, they had seen an invincible warrior and a creature mortally dangerous to everyone; on the other, an individual who preached about the sanctity of life and showing peace and respect toward all Rational Beings. The words seemed sincere. They had apparently affected the Demurg, who stood absorbed in his thoughts, as well as the other Rationals and even the palace guards, who, led by the head of security, had belatedly hurried over to settle the conflict. Only I, Iskin, remained unsettled. Could we believe his words, or was this another of his tricks, the sincerity another act in his play? Maybe he was speaking the truth. After all, no Rational Being could lie so sincerely and convincingly. Could it be that this was another of the Human's talents? The thought would never have crossed my mind if not for the battle with the White Lord in the Second Isan Clan Leader's chambers. On that occasion his lies were just as convincing. If the Human can really do that, how can we tell when he's speaking the truth? A creature such as this one could strike you in the back at any time, couldn't he?

The security guards soon interrupted Iskin's anxious thoughts when they politely invited Ardas to join the First Clan Leader and the others at the summit. Iskin joined them as the human's escort.

•••••

"Come, Earthling, join our Clan Leaders' summit," the Leader of the First Clan announced. "We need your opinion, but first tell us what happened out in the waiting room."

“Nothing special, honorable Leader. Some crazy Aloran decided to attack me. I suspect he was influenced by a nearby Demurg.”

“The Demurgs have mocked our hospitality once again,” one of the participating Clan Leaders announced in a disappointed voice. “Earthling, will you be bringing formal accusations against him?”

“No,” Ardas responded resolutely. “Let’s leave that to his conscience. He didn’t succeed, anyway. Let’s just say that the Aloran thought up everything and then died as a result of his lunacy.”

“I’m impressed by your mercy, Human,” the Leader of the First Isan Clan replied, somewhat amazed. “Nonetheless, we shall not be hosting the Yellow Circle Demurg delegation, and shall send them home. Let them realize that we understand everything. Tell me, Earthling: what, in your opinion, should we do with the White Lord and his Atlantans? We have two choices: either try to punish them ourselves, an action that could provoke a large-scale armed conflict between our nation and the Rational Union, or hand them over to the Rational Beings’ general tribunal. To tell you the truth, we’re feeling a lot of pressure from the other Rational races to hand over the White Circle Lord to the tribunal. After the Demurg escapade, known to everyone assembled here, the Leader of the Second Clan promised you protection and declared you a guest. We cannot argue with his word; however, in the Rational Union’s tribunal they could debate the question of whether Humans are dangerous, in which case we would no longer be able to guarantee your safety. For this reason, the ultimate decision rests with you. Whatever you advise, that’s what we’ll decide.”

“I understand, First Clan Leader. When would the Rationals’ tribunal start?” asked Ardas, still undecided. He weighed all the risks he might encounter if he declined the Isans’ offer of guaranteed safety, then mulled the actual benefit of such a sacrifice, one which the Isans would appreciate as highly noble and generous.

“By your time standards, nine months. By that time, the Rationals must present to the tribunal their representatives, who must then familiarize themselves with the case.”

“I could manage without your protection, but I would still need your help.”

“Whatever you need, just ask, resident of the planet Earth.”

“I’d like to ask the Leader of the Second Clan for a small plot of land not far from the capital, where I could build a house and I could continue to train, familiarize myself with this environment, and prepare for the tribunal. I’d like the tenancy to last for a period of no less than a hundred years, and for the plot to serve as my private domain, where other residents of the planet would not be allowed.”

"This is a strange request, but if the Leader of the Second Clan agrees, we will concur," the First Clan Leader shrugged—by local custom a sign of great amazement.

"I'll agree, but I view the request as equally strange," Eduron's host replied. "How much land will you need, Human?"

"Not much, enough for a few Isan houses and some leftover land for a yard."

Ardas explained his request as calmly as he could, although deep down he felt his body boiling with excessive emotion. One thought kept racing through his mind: "If only they don't suspect anything and don't doubt my intentions. It could get very uncomfortable if they start asking for more details about my purposes with the land."

"That's all? The conditions work for me. You'll be able to choose a plot that fits your needs," the Second Clan Leader responded, nodding his head to his colleague from the First Clan.

"Is there anything else you need, Earthling?" one of the Clan Leaders asked.

"I'll need your support during the trial. I plan to ask the Rational Union's tribunal to allow one human from Ligia to join me until the time comes for me to return to Earth. That person will be my mentor, will always live next to me, and, I swear, will return to Ligia when I leave for Earth."

"We understand your desire for a companion from your own race. We shall need to discuss this request. If we do what you ask, what is your advice on the question we asked earlier?"

"I wouldn't want the Isans to suffer because of me, thus I unhesitatingly recommend that you agree to the Rationals' general tribunal. Please understand that the requests I outlined are necessary in order for me to guarantee my own protection against further Demurg infringements. Of course, if they appear to you to be too audacious, I'll do my best to protect myself on my own, and will not insist that you fulfill my requests. My recommendation will remain the same regardless. The most important thing is that my hospitable hosts, the Isans, do not suffer," Ardas explained grandly, perhaps even overly dramatically. He had already learned that the Isans, like most of the other Rational races, were greatly impressed by grandiose declarations, assurances, and oaths. Nobody among them could ever imagine anyone breaking such a promise. "You naïve fools," thought Ardas to himself. "You don't have the slightest suspicion that my words are merely psychological pressure."

The human's statement made an even greater impression than he had expected. The friendly and respectful atmosphere radiating from the Isans

and their Clan Leaders toward Ardas was physically palpable throughout the room. The rulers unanimously decided to aid and fully support their guest. They promised to implement all of his requests without delay, and swore that the Isans would not allow the Demurgs to have access to him or harm him in any way. Even Iskin was impressed, and he deeply suppressed any thoughts of the human's deceitfulness. Only an honorable and brave warrior willing to sacrifice himself for others could, in the Isans' opinion, make such a gesture. Each Clan Leader wanted to personally thank Ardas and promise him his clan's full support. Several hours went by before Ardas, accompanied by Iskin, left the summit. The Clan Leaders invited the representatives of the Rational races, relayed Ardas' agreement to participate in the Rational Union's general tribunal, and declared their decision to transfer the Demurg White Circle Lord and his accompanying Atlantans to the tribunal. In particular, the Clan Leaders emphasized their resolution to defend the human and refuse to hand him over to the Demurgs. They let the Rational Beings' representatives clearly understand that the Isans would defend the human, even if that meant risking war with all the other races of the Rational Union. The Rationals objected neither to the Isans' words, nor to their refusal to grant the Yellow Circle Demurg an audience. Everyone remembered the human's actions and words from the waiting room, and so most of the representatives had already decided to relay to their leaders all the favorable impressions the human had left with them. The Isans' decision to hand the White Demurg over to the tribunal was met with widespread relief and joy.

•••

### *From the recollections of the great warrior Iskin*

I led the Human from the leaders' summit. For some reason, Ardas seemed troubled, as if trying unsuccessfully to remember something.

"Iskin, let's move to the side for a bit," the Human suddenly requested. "Remember, by the north entrance to the palace, where we were gazing at the First Clan Leader's gardens before the summit, a few guards were standing? I'd like to spend some time with them."

I agreed. The Clan Leader had appointed me to serve as the Human's escort and protector. Besides, I myself wanted to spend more time with the Human and get to know him better. Thus we immediately headed toward the palace's northern entrance. I thought that Ardas wanted to see the gardens again. The First Clan Leader's gardens were out of the ordinary. Even on Eduron, we didn't have anything similar. Trees and other plants of various types grew next to each other on three levels, while slowly moving escalators connected these levels. Between the trees, vines, and shrubs, a variety of rare creatures brought from other planets milled around. The Human and I had spent a few hours walking

around, observing the changing colors and the animals' routines. It seemed that Ardas had enjoyed the gardens quite a bit. But when we had reached the palace guards, the Human became somewhat rattled, even though he said nothing at the time.

The path to the northern entrance was not far. In front of the huge stylized doors stood the same pair of guards who had attracted Ardas' attention. The Human headed directly toward the tense guards. Standing several feet from these Isan warriors, the Earthling intently stared down both of them. It was a strange scene. The Human said nothing and attentively gazed at the standing guards, who clearly felt uncomfortable because of this attention.

"Who are you?" he suddenly asked the guard on the right.

"I am Rir, an Isan warrior and a guard of the palace of the First Clan Leader," the Isan replied meekly.

"You're not a guard. You're not even an Isan. So who are you? Will you tell me yourself, or will I have to find out by force? I see you have a decent mental barrier, but I can break through it, and you know this. So you'd better start talking."

I did not expect this from the Human. Ardas had accused an Isan warrior, one who looked and acted exactly as an average Isan warrior should look and act, of being an imposter. Had I not known this Human, I would have said it had gone crazy. But Ardas had never accused anyone without reason, so I simply stood there and observed.

"Warrior, protect me from the Human," the guard said to me. "The Human is acting as if he has lost his mind. Don't tell me you can't see that I am an Isan."

"The Human sees that which I do not. I will not protect you, because Ardas could be right," I said, all the while trying to observe whatever had raised the Earthling's suspicions.

I decided not to interfere. If this warrior were an Isan and Ardas had insulted him, the Human would answer to the Clan Leader and harm his relations with our race. If this warrior were an imposter, then it was imperative to learn his true identity.

"I'm asking you for the last time," the Earthling warned.

The warrior began unnaturally changing colors, turning yellowish. It seemed the Human's attempts to break the mental barrier were not in vain. I had never seen one of my apparently healthy countrymen suddenly begin turning yellow and changing shape. The creature (for even I now understood that this was no Isan warrior) started raising his weapon in hopes of shooting Ardas. Again, the Human reacted more quickly, for it had been expecting this attack and thus effortlessly knocked the weapon from the imposter's paw. I could see

that Ardas was trying to paralyze the foe and keep him alive, but without much success. The creature changed its structure and become a freeform, evolving mass in an attempt to break free. Ardas mentally raised the former Isan guard about three feet off the ground and held him there. The creature reached for the ground, but the Human raised him even higher. At that point, Ardas' antagonist realized the hopelessness of the situation, stopped struggling, and simply died.

"Rats!" exclaimed the Human. "He's gone."

"You killed him?"

"No, Iskin. He ordered himself to die. This fake Isan understood that we had caught him, and he refused to surrender. I couldn't hold him. I couldn't paralyze him. I couldn't even find any nerve clusters in his body, because everything in there was changing so quickly. Who was he, Iskin?"

"I don't know, Ardas. I've never seen anything like that. How did you know he was an imposter?"

"I felt different kinds of thoughts than the ones Isans usually have. Your thoughts have always been lucid and clear, while these were somehow unintelligible and cloudy. The first time we walked by them, I didn't know yet which of the two guards was projecting those thoughts. I didn't have enough time to figure it out then. We're lucky we still found him at his post."

"This time you felt those thoughts the same way?"

"No, this time I had more difficulty," Ardas recounted. "He suspected something when he saw us coming, so he made an effort not to think about anything. Although he didn't know how to think like an Isan, he was doing a perfect job of not thinking at all. I got some help from the other guard, who got scared and frantically tried to remember what he had done wrong. The creature did an absolutely masterful job of imitating the guard's behavior, but I sensed some kind of emptiness as well. When I tried to glance at his thoughts, I found a strong mental barrier."

"Obviously it wasn't too strong for you."

"It might have been, if the creature had kept his cool. I pressured him with threats, and he began to subconsciously give up. As soon as I broke through the barrier, he began changing and resisting. I ran out of time trying to understand his thoughts."

"I'll report this incident to the Leaders and then wait for a group of experts."

"Okay, Iskin, I'm going to my quarters. Let me know if you figure out anything about this creature. I'm a little worried about his abilities."

•••

The Isans moved swiftly and seriously. They sent the creature's amorphous remains to a group of the Rational Beings' experts, among them several Demurgs, known as unrivalled genetics specialists. Neither mental scanning nor genetic research produced any results. None of the experts had ever seen anything similar. Iskin, Ardas, and the second guard each told their versions of the incident three times. The experts interviewed everyone who had had any contact with the creature. The Rationals failed to draw any conclusions. Nobody could offer any practical suggestion how to recognize such creatures. Both military and civilian leaders feverishly debated how many such imposters could be hiding among the races of the Union. The human was equally interested in this problem, and tried to learn everything he could about the creature's characteristics.

•••••

A few days later, the Leader of the Second Clan and his entourage returned to Eduron. Ardas went with them. The return trip through space no longer made much of an impression on him. He had already seen everything on his way to the First Clan Leader. For this reason, Ardas spent most of the return journey with Iskin discussing the recent events and their significance on the Isans' future. Iskin calmed down, and his suspicions regarding the human diminished. The old warrior felt more relaxed and interacted with the human more personally, no longer trying to learn as much as possible.



## Part III

# *Alliances*



### ***Eduon, 15 July 2015***

“HELLO, Human. I see that you have fully mastered both traveling and interacting with others while in a metaphysical state,” a Sidargan representative greeted Ardas.

“I’ve been waiting for you to show up. I didn’t want to travel beyond the planet’s limits. The Demurgs are watching Eduon—I can feel it. It’s too early for them to know my abilities,” the human responded.

On the other hand, he failed to mention that he didn’t want the Sidargans to know about all of his capabilities, either. Ardas not only took pleasure from the new abilities he was acquiring on a daily basis, he also sought to improve them as much as possible. The days when he had had trouble separating himself from his physical body were long gone. Now, whenever he wanted, the least bit of effort sufficed to will his body into a trance-like state in order to allow him to enter the metaphysical world. Likewise, the slightest redirection of his attention could light or extinguish a flame, raise objects off the ground, or even elevate his own body. His control of energy, both his own and the environment’s, had surpassed that of any Atlantan, while his mental abilities rivaled those of a Demurg master.

“We wanted to tell you, Earthling, that the Sidargans have agreed to become your and your entire race’s allies, and will help you gain independence. We will rescue ourselves from the Rationals’ tribunal and help you effect your mission. I have been appointed as the one responsible for this issue, so you can tell me any requests you have for the Sidargans. First of all, we’d like you to reconfirm that the Humans will indeed help us regain our home galaxy.”

“Well then, I officially declare that I, as the humans’ representative, promise to use every possible means at the humans’ disposal to help the Sidargans battle for the return of their home galaxy,” affirmed Ardas as grandly as he could, considering that such orations were becoming routine. He continued to marvel at how all of these creatures placed such emphasis on what form declarations took. “Does such a promise work for you?”

"Yes, we are very satisfied."

"Whom will we be fighting?"

"You have already met one of our enemies on the First Isan Clan Leader's planet," the Sidargan explained, immediately arousing Ardas' curiosity.

"I was just about to ask you about that creature. Who was he? As I understand it, you had already met him or his kind before?"

"Yes, you encountered a representative of our enemy. They are called the Dvarvans, although we gave them this name only to help us distinguish their individuals from one another and their race from other races. Essentially, they are formless balls of protoplasm, capable of assuming any shape or appearance. Each Dvarvan, while he is still alive, has only two permanent organs, their cerebral and pulmonary centers, yet they are capable of altering the shape of these organs as well. We believe that Dvarvans and Sidargans have some genetic commonalities, because these two permanent Dvarvan systems are almost identical to ours. But this is merely an assumption that nobody has proven yet. Dvarvans can only assume the appearance of a creature or object with which they have had direct contact, such as long periods of interaction, experimentation, and observation, because they need to acquire as much information as possible. This preparation takes a long time, which leads us to believe that the Dvarvans have been busy on the Isans' planet for no less than two or three years."

"How could they hide here if they couldn't yet assume the Isans' appearance?"

"They could have taken the shape of trees or primitive animals. There are only two ways to unmask a Dvarvan. Either you can recognize their thoughts or lack of thoughts relative to the object they are imitating, or you can scan the imposters' bodies to determine whether the two permanent organs are present. During our long war with the Dvarvans, they posed only as male individuals, because they couldn't replicate a constituent part of a unified consciousness, and so whenever they tried to join a hive, they were easily recognized," the female Sidargan explained.

"Are there a lot of those Dvarvans?"

"There are several times more Dvarvans than Sidargans. They do not age, so they can die only because of external physical effects. If captured, they can easily commit suicide."

"I've noticed. How do they reproduce?"

"They divide. Once during their lifetimes, their permanent organs split and the Dvarvans divide their biomass."

“So when they imitate something, they’re limited to their existing mass, right?”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right. They are restricted by their mass. Dvarvans can stretch and compress their bodies, but at the same time they alter their body density. They cannot add to or subtract from their bodies even a single particle.”

“Besides Dvarvans, are there any other more dangerous creatures in your galaxy we might encounter?”

“No. We lived on the very edge of the galaxy. The Dvarvans have occupied all the space around our solar systems. For this reason, we believe that in our galaxy Humans would only have to fight these creatures. Is there anything else you’d like to know about them?” the Sidargan inquired.

“I’d like you to transfer absolutely all the information you have to my account in the information system on Eduron. Can you do that?”

“Yes, easily. The Isan information system is completely unprotected. Or rather, the inhabitants of Eduron think their information system is very secure,” smiled the female Sidargan. “Is there anything else you’d like?”

“Yes. I need a planet suitable for life, somewhere in a sector of this galaxy that you control. Ideally, the planet would feature hostile life forms.”

“Why do you need an entire planet?” the Sidargan asked, amazed.

“I don’t. I just need a place to establish a base,” Ardas explained patiently. “The humans will be transported from Earth to one of the Rational Union’s planets, where I have already selected an appropriate location. There, they will undergo a full awakening, psychological preparation, and training course. On the planet you provide, they will receive their final training and there, far from the Demurgs’ eyes, we will establish the main base for awakened humans. From there we will launch all our operations in the effort to free your galaxy.”

“We have a planet like that. But it’s dangerous. A small hive, comprising about two hundred thousand individuals, has been trying to survive there. They’ve been having a lot of difficulty. In any case, there’s plenty of room on the planet. But how will you transport the Humans there?”

“I believe you can mentally transfer a full panoramic outline of the planet to me. I will select an exact location and designate it for a set of long-range teleportation gates. People will use them to move from the initial base to the main one.”

“For that, you’ll have to merge with the common Sidargan consciousness and communicate directly with the female who rules our hive on that planet, which we call the Planet of the Ants. Do you think you’ll be able to? It’s dangerous,

because your identity could melt in a consciousness foreign to you. If that were to happen," she warned, "you'd feel you were one of the Sidargans, and you would no longer consider yourself a Human."

"I think I'll be okay. I'm not going to do that now, but rather when I'm ready. Will the merger go through you?"

"Yes."

"Why is your Planet of the Ants so dangerous?"

"Some sort of an inexplicable brain, one hostile to the Sidargans, rules a group of large ants on the planet. Not only are they twice as big as you are, Human, but they are both savage and resilient as well. These ants attack the hive there by every means possible. A lone ant can easily bite the strongest Sidargan in half."

"Then how do you withstand their attacks?"

"We borrowed the technology for energy barriers from the Rationals, laid a system of traps, and coated our walls with a material that keeps the ants from climbing up them. Besides, we have a large arsenal of small and large arms, plenty of explosives, and, most importantly, the hive members' dedication and self-sacrifice. But that brain is very resourceful. It doesn't allow the ants to utilize any technology, but it leads them so ably that they manage to harm the members of the hive quite a bit even without any special equipment. If the attacks don't cease, the hive will be wiped out within this decade."

"Why don't you help them?" he asked, meanwhile thinking that humans would never allow some brain to exist on a planet where they themselves had settled.

"We tried to send reinforcements, but the more warriors or technology we sent, the more resourceful the enemy became. A few of the elder queens believe that the brain is simply toying with the Sidargan hive, and if we try to fight seriously, it will reply with the same."

"Have you thought about destroying the planet?"

"It'd be a shame," the Sidargan tried to explain the whole situation. "It could still prove useful, for example, as a training ground. That hive's warriors are the strongest among all the Sidargans. I think any of them could tangle with an Atlantan and win. They might even be able to stand up to you."

"We'll see. I think we'll take care of those little bugs," the human smiled. "This planet suits my needs. I have one more request as well. During the trial, if anybody asks your opinion, please support my request to allow one human from Ligia to leave. Until the time comes to act, that person will serve as my teacher."

“When will that time come?”

“I think my actions will start achieving results in a few years. At that time, I think, there will be about one thousand awakened humans. Later, everything will snowball from there.”

“How many Humans will you need to start battling the Dvarvans?”

“Probably about twenty to thirty thousand. Be forewarned that the battle with the Dvarvans will only start once the humans entrench themselves in this galaxy. That could take as many as ten or twenty years.”

“Understood. We’ll be waiting and helping you. Good luck.”

The human returned to his body.

“Everything will turn out fine with the Sidargans,” Ardas thought. “Now I just have to make arrangements with the Ligian and continue to train intensively. Looks like the plan is moving forward. Well, we’ll see. For now, I’m going to get some sleep. These metaphysical journeys wore me out.”

Of course, Ardas could go months without sleeping, instead drawing energy from his surroundings. But he was used to sleeping every night, and besides, he enjoyed this habit.

•••••

### *The Red Demurg Circle’s domain, 19 July 2015*

“GREETINGS, White Circle Lord. It’s good to see you again. How did the Isans treat you?”

“Thank you for your concern and your efforts regarding my welfare, Red Circle Lord. Their behavior was fine, especially after the Human agreed to hand me over to the Rational Union’s tribunal. Yesterday they released me and the Atlantans from Eduron. Perhaps you know if they’ve gotten settled? Your Atlantans are good warriors. If not for the Human’s tricks, we would surely have won.”

“They’re good, but not good enough. Yes, they’ve gotten settled and everything is fine. Word has spread, and they’ve become quite popular among their peers. They’re very thankful to you for your support and patronage,” the Red Circle Lord responded, somewhat displeased with his subordinates. “I’m becoming convinced that we made a huge mistake in creating the Humans. We have problems with the Earthling, and they seem serious. I fear that things may not go our way at the trial.”

“Tell me more, Red Lord. I’ve been somewhat out of loop. What did the Yellow ones do that caused the Isans to be so in awe of the Human?”

“A mediocre master and his modified toy soldiers tried to test the Human. As far as I know, he ordered a modified Aloran to attack the Earthling. Meanwhile, while they fought, he decided to overwhelm the Human mentally. Nothing good came of that. The Human not only figured everything out, he also flipped everything around so that now we look bad and he looks like the embodiment of peace. The Circle Lord sent that Yellow master to the deepest hole in their territory, so that he has plenty of time to think about his unnecessary initiative.”

“The Human is smart and crafty. Have you heard how he tricked me in our battle? I truly believed that it wanted to surrender; it seemed that sincere. Did you figure out what was interfering with me on Eduron?”

“The Sidargans. That fact disturbed me tremendously. The Sidargans have shown that they are somewhat stronger than we had thought. Only now have we noticed their mental activity, and only because all the Lords have combined their powers. And another thing—it appears that the Sidargans have been communicating with the Human fairly actively. As far as we could tell after listening to part of their conversation, those creatures have formed an alliance with the Humans. They have already proposed a truce with the Rationals and asked for permission to speak at the tribunal.”

“The Human can interact with others while in the metaphysical realm?”

“Very easily. In this area its abilities surpass even ours. And that’s not all. Two other powers have been interfering as well. We have identified one, the Ligians. It turns out they are even stronger in the metaphysical realm than the Sidargans. We detected them completely by accident,” the Red Circle Lord explained.

“We have to try to influence the Rationals.”

“It won’t work, White Lord. The Sidargans and, apparently, the Ligians have been successfully blocking us. We maintain some influence only in our territory. Besides, we have to work carefully, because if the Rationals were to realize what we’re doing and remember our Great Goal, all of our influence might not suffice to control all of the Rational Union’s races. We’d have to fight the entire Union, and we’re not ready for a war that big.”

“How can they block us? That would require all the strongest Sidargan females to band together and devote their entire common consciousness for that purpose!”

“It seems that’s precisely what’s happening. Besides, the involvement of the Ligians greatly strengthens the Sidargans’ position. As we understand,

the Sidargans have ascertained the Ligians' abilities, but, with the Human as intermediary, they have agreed to cooperate. Apparently the Sidargans, the Ligians, and the Human have common goals," the Red Circle Lord shared his apprehensions.

"Have you identified these goals?"

"We've tried. Every last member of the Blue Circle joined together in an effort to comprehend the situation. As you know, they are the strongest mentally of all of us. Even they failed. They came up with only fragments of some thoughts and conversations. I think the Human decided to awaken the Earthlings and promised to form an alliance with the Sidargans. Then the Ligians joined the agreement. The Sidargans are preparing for war, for which they need the Humans' help."

"Whom will they fight? Who could be that powerful, that the Sidargans would need the Humans so badly? They, if I understood correctly, even decided to declare peace with the Rational Union. If they wanted to wage war against us or against the Union's races, they wouldn't invite such an uncontrollable force as an ally. There are already enough Sidargans now to start a successful campaign against all the Rationals," the White Circle Lord said in bewilderment.

"You are correct," agreed the Red Lord. "But we recently learned of another interesting fact. On the First Isan Clan's planet, the Human identified and attempted to capture a fake Isan, who avoided arrest only by committing suicide. The Human failed to prevent him from doing so."

"What do you mean, a 'fake Isan'?"

"I mean exactly that. Some kind of creature, composed entirely of protoplasm, exists, who can copy any subject's appearance and behavior. Evidently, it can imitate both live beings and inanimate objects. The Human recognized the imposter by noticing strange thought processes uncommon for an Isan. If the Human can recognize the creature, so can we. But scanning all the Rationals wouldn't make sense. There could be an infinite number of those creatures. Every tree could appear to be a camouflaged alien. We may find that they can copy not only appearance and behavior, but extraordinary abilities as well. Opponents like those could hold their own even against Humans."

"So you think the Sidargans had already encountered these creatures, and now they're assembling allies to fight against them?"

"Could be. But the Human, I think, has somewhat grander plans. Seemingly, they include a conflict with the Demurgs," the Red Circle Lord answered.

"So the Earthling decided to settle matters with us first, then help the Sidargans. I think he has too much self-confidence."

“Perhaps. Or maybe we’re still underestimating him. If he succeeded in leading at least a million of his brethren from the planet’s traps, and then controlling them, they could accomplish a lot. They could put all of us, even the Rationals and the Sidargans, in our proper places. The question is, how will he effect all that?”

“How many Humans live on the Inhibiting Planet?”

“Almost eight billion,” the Red Circle Lord answered.

“Wow. In a critical situation, we’d have eight billion very powerful enemies. I think that, rather than pondering how the Human plans to awaken the others, we should try to destroy him and his entire planet. They pose a somewhat more real danger than those abstract aliens the Sidargans are fighting. Let them fight. Once we destroy the Humans, we’ll have a chance to think about the formless creatures.”

“I agree, White Lord. To tell you the truth, everybody else has arrived at the same conclusion except for the Green Circle. But its Lord will follow the others and help however he can.”

“The Green Circle has always been known for its diplomacy and peaceful ideas. They even understand our Great Goal differently. It’s important that the Green Circle follow everyone else. Has anyone thought how to put these ideas into effect?”

“The Yellow and Brown Circles have suggested creating a modified Aloran, Atlantan, Demurg, and cyborg hybrid. They have calculated that such a creation could defeat a Human. It is inadvisable for us to do battle with the Inhibiting Planet ourselves. The Blue Circle recently discovered a previously unknown, technologically advanced civilization. The Rationals still don’t know anything about it. At the moment, the civilization’s leadership is partly under our control. By the end of the year, the Blue Circle will control the entire civilization and then, a year later, send its members to fight the Humans living on the Inhibiting Planet. The Rationals will be unable to interfere, because neither the Humans nor the newfound civilization belong to the Rational Union. There will be no proof of us being involved in the attack on Earth,” explained the Red Circle Lord. “That situation will resemble our present one, where we cannot prove that the Sidargans, the Ligians, and the Human have an agreement.”

“Good, I like it. I’ll be preparing for the trial. Should the need arise, I will always allocate all the resources at my disposal, and as many White Circle members as our common plan will require.”

“Excellent, White Lord. All the Circle Lords have pledged to do the same. For now, that’s enough serious talk. Let’s have some fun. I promise that in my domain, your body and soul will definitely recover.”

***The Andromeda Galaxy. Dvarvan-occupied space. 22 July 2015.***

CHRZ was as happy as a Dvarvan, as the Sidargans called them, could be. He was a researcher on a small planet. At first he pretended to be a tree, and conducted research on herbivore animals passing by. Then he became a predator and lived among similar animals for a long time. Occasionally, Chrz would return home and participate in a general convergence, where he learned all of the society's latest news. The others considered Chrz strange. Only a strange character could choose an individual name or participate in the reserve intelligence program. Chrz truly differed from the others. He valued individualism and sought to understand his surroundings. Most other Dvarvans spent entire years in a pile, squirming in a giant mass. Chrz had no interest in such a life. He decided to become a scout and to choose a name as soon as he began to understand the surrounding world. Having reported his decision to the scout caste, he began reserve intelligence training. In truth, the training was more like a psychological examination. The program offered him various lifestyle options: the military, education, the technicians' caste, government, and life outside of the caste system. Furthermore, he learned about advantages of each of these options compared to the constant dangers that come with life as a scout. But the trainers were honest, for they also told him that, as a scout, he could satisfy any curious desires he might have and familiarize himself with new concepts, objects, and experiences. For these reasons, scouts made up the most respected caste. Everyone always listened to their opinions.

An unquenchable thirst for knowledge tormented Chrz. He truly was different from the others, and despite any dissuasions or difficulties, he was steadfastly committed to becoming a scout. The young Dvarvan easily completed his training and passed all the tests. He then enlisted as a reserve member of the intelligence corps, meaning that when his turn came up, he would receive orders for his first mission. Now it seemed that his time had come. Chrz felt a calling. Something or someone had descended onto the planet and invited him. Based on the information ingrained in him during his training, Chrz knew that this was indisputably a scout's invitation. Only scouts could feel it, and only scouts were obligated to respond. Guided by the calling, the Dvarvan turned into a large, swift, flying predator and unhesitatingly departed on his journey. The trip did not last long. Chrz completed it in less than a day. The calling originated from a rock in the middle of a field. Nobody other than a Dvarvan could have understood that a rock in a field could be a live Dvarvan scout. Such a rock could stand for years, even centuries, and, unrecognized by anybody, collect any type of information.

"Greetings, Chrz," the rock addressed him. "I've been waiting for you. You got here quickly."

"Greetings, Inviter. I am ready and await your instructions."

“Good, Chrz. Excellent. I have much to tell you. A long journey to another galaxy awaits you. Your destination is a planet the locals call Eduron. Creatures called Isans reside on the planet. I cannot describe everything in words. Merge with me and draw the information you’ll need.

During this merger, Chrz learned more than he had during his entire life. He assumed all of the information that both this scout and an unknown scout who had died earlier had accumulated. Chrz saw the Isans, felt their physical structure and thoughts, and familiarized himself with their home planet. The deceased scout had spent two years before he could figure out the Isans and become one of them. Then he spent two more years successfully advancing his career and collecting essential information. Everything seemed to be going well. The scout had become a guard at the local leader’s palace and could eavesdrop on the leaders’ conversations and plans. Nothing forebode his death. The Isans did not suspect anything and had no chance of accidentally discovering his true identity. He kept his distance from the Demurgs. Besides, the scout had already learned to deceive any Demurg lacking the status of master. Then, suddenly, a hitherto unknown creature appeared on the planet. Walking by, the creature recognized the scout and tried to capture him. Chrz saw the whole scene by the Leader’s palace as if he were in the deceased scout’s place. He felt the scout’s confidence and will to fight, feelings which then turned to doubt and fear. Chrz experienced the panic that resulted once the deceased scout understood he had lost, the gloomy comprehension of his impending death, and his steadfast resolve to terminate his life’s journey and send one final message to his superiors. The creature that had recognized the Dvarvan was called a Human. It differed from the Isans, and the scout had not had time to familiarize himself with it. Although the Human didn’t seem to want to take the scout’s life, it was clearly in a hostile mood. The Dvarvans received the scout’s final message. They understood the danger the Human posed, but they couldn’t be sure whether this creature would act antagonistically toward the Dvarvans or whether they could interact in a civilized manner with him and his kind. For help, the Dvarvans turned to one of the four surviving Creators who lived in the mother galaxy. However, it turned out that the Creators had not created the Human and had no information about him. Thus, the Dvarvans decided to send a scout to the planet Eduron, from which the Human had come. The scout had orders to become an Isan, travel through Sidargan space via scout bases that resembled the solitary citadels of male Sidargan mercenaries, and arrive at his destination several days later.

Chrz had ten days to prepare. He felt anxious. This was to be his first real assignment. He had finally become a real scout.

“Finally,” thought Chrz, “I know where the road of life is going to lead me.”

The youngster had reason to believe as he did. Scouts had a reputation for stability and, living amongst their research subjects, often continued a single

assignment for decades. Chrz now knew what he had to do: arrive on Eduron, adapt there, and collect as much information as possible about the Human and his native world.

•••••

### ***Eduron. 12 September 2015.***

ARDAS devoted all of his time to learning and gathering information. He had become thoroughly familiar with the Isan technology that allowed one to control gravity and open close-range teleportation gates. After studying intensely for a month, he was able to draft all the necessary plans and provide all the necessary calculations required to produce this equipment. Some time later, Ardas could create the technology that controls space teleportation gates and gravitation, using materials found on Earth and ensuring the technology would work under Earth's conditions. Having finished this stage of his education, Ardas spent the next month perfecting the processes of traveling and interacting in a metaphysical state and controlling long-distance teleportation gates. His primary purpose was to prepare for the merger with the common Sidargan consciousness and avoid melting in it. Also, he needed to open teleportation gates on the planet they had suggested and then fully control them. The education went slowly. Ardas' only teacher and advisor was the Ligian, with whom he had developed something similar to a friendship. Only recently had the Ligian revealed that his name was Tomas. When asked why he had kept his name secret for so long, the man from Ligia explained that on his planet, they had a tradition of only telling their names to true friends.

"To tell you the truth," the Ligian clarified, "in our community everybody knows each other's name, but they never reveal their names to strangers."

Ardas thus understood that the Ligian also considered him a friend. This news was welcome, because life among strangers could be draining, and only his clear goal provided Ardas with the strength and resolve he needed. Naturally, Tomas would have served as a better teacher if he could have taught Ardas in the physical world. At present, he could only provide necessary information and point Ardas in the right direction with his advice. Everything else Ardas had to achieve on his own.

Despite the friendship with Tomas and the difficult education that took up most of his time, Ardas often found himself absorbed in moments of contemplation and melancholy. He feared for the humans, but he also didn't trust them. One day, finally, Ardas decided to share his apprehension with the Ligian.

"I don't know, my friend. I'm concerned. Maybe you can ease my concerns."

“Talk to me, Ardas. I’ll try to help. For some time now, I’ve noticed you have a heavy heart. What are you concerned about?”

“I’m worried about the humans. I’ll awaken them, starting with those close to me and then my countrymen. But what’s going to happen after they awaken? I won’t be able to control them, nor would I want to. They may completely disagree with my plans, and they may have their own interests. What if they decide to play God, turning arrogant and cruel? Earth is full of bickering states, groups that war with each other. Even among my countrymen, there’s a potent saying: three Lithuanians, four parties. So even within my country, people are not unified and can often oppose each other. Several groups of humans could form throughout the galaxy, fighting with each other and with those around them. This dilemma perplexes me, and it’s dampening my resolve.”

“Ardas, you still don’t know anything about humans,” the Ligian tried to calm him. “None of that is going to happen, really. You already know that humans were created to be war machines that had to obey their creators. In order to ensure their effectiveness, humans had to be unified at all times and not conflict with one another under any circumstances. For this reason, when designing them, the Demurgs placed the highest priority on unity between the members of the race. Demurgs are always unified, never feuding amongst themselves. They have no traitors or sell-outs in their midst. You are the same. Although you don’t know it yet, humans have the same kind of common consciousness as the Sidargans and Demurgs. A current connects all individuals, much like the Internet on your planet joins computers. You can dive into that unifying system at any time, find warmth or solace there, contact anybody, or learn anything. Why do you think you immediately trusted me, while I immediately concurred with your plans? Upon awakening, humans are drawn to one another, become unified, and always agree with one another. All decisions made in the common consciousness are made collectively. You are now the first awakened one and have made a decision for the future of the humans. All that you have decided will not be open to debate. They will follow you and always help you. All of you will make future decisions together, and every newly awakened human will accept them as naturally existing rules of behavior, open to neither debate nor alteration. After that, each new member will participate in making decisions. Humans have leaders and superiors who rise to their positions naturally, based on the strength of their character. But these leadership traits manifest themselves only in that the leaders’ opinions carry more weight. No single human imposes his opinion on another. All decisions are communal, and if an individual disagrees with the majority decision, he expresses his own opinion but always implements the commonly accepted resolution. Humans are simply programmed to work as a unified team.”

“Why isn’t it the same on Earth? Did we lose our common consciousness quickly?”

“During the first ten years on Earth. The first humans on Earth lost the common consciousness, but they maintained unity for the time being. Conflicts began after about ten generations, when the planet’s rays, mutations, and symbiotic bacteria neutralized even this, the strongest and hitherto most inherent human feeling. Yet as soon as humans awaken, they immediately regain that sense of unity, and all it takes is two individuals to create the common consciousness.”

“Does distance have any effect on the common human consciousness?”

“No, distances then become irrelevant. You could join the common Ligian consciousness; however, that would require you to make physical contact with a member who wished to lead you into it. The slightest touch, even a handshake, would suffice. Yet as a member of the Ligian consciousness, you would have to renounce your plans, and that wouldn’t be good. That’s why I think you should awaken the humans, form a larger consciousness, and then have the Ligian common consciousness eventually flow into yours. If it’s alright with you, I’m not going to lead you into the Ligian consciousness.”

“That’s fine. You have calmed my concerns. I have only one more question: how can I avoid becoming a part of the common Sidargan consciousness?”

“Your abilities are becoming stronger, and I think you’re already capable of resisting. Most importantly, always comprehend your true identity, and that the environment you find yourself in is foreign to humans. Remember your status as a guest, and that not everything around you is acceptable to you. Always uphold your pride in your race and in yourself, and look down upon foreigners. Then the common Sidargan consciousness will never be able to suck you in, and you’ll never mentally become one of them. You will simply have the ability to interact with a counterpart Sidargan, nothing more. Whenever you want, you’ll be able to cut off contact and return to where you were before,” the Ligian explained.

“Well, I’ve always had a high opinion of the human race, and have never lacked self-confidence,” Ardas smiled. “I think I’ll succeed in disassociating myself. Thank you, my friend. I think I’ll finish preparing over the next five days, and then try contacting the Sidargans.”

“We’ll be with you and will help you remember who you are. Have no fear; you’ll succeed.”

The conversation calmed Ardas down. He felt sure he would keep his identity in the common Sidargan consciousness. Ardas cared immensely about the unity of the human race, and the fact that such unity was not only possible and plausible, but also likely, provided him with further strength to carry out his goals. Doubts no longer plagued him. He became secure and calm.

Soon Ardas finished settling in at the site the Isans had provided, where they spent the past two months building a house that met the human’s requirements and taste. As they had promised, the Isans unconditionally transferred perpetual

rights to the plot he had chosen near Eduron's capital. Although the lot was not yet fenced in, Ardas used all possible means to keep anyone from watching him inside the house. The Ligians helped him however they could. Along with the Sidargans, they continued to try to ensure a strong mental barrier around the planet. The Demurgs could neither see nor hear what Ardas or anyone else on the planet was doing.

•••

### ***Eduron. 18 September 2015.***

EVERYTHING was ready for the merger. Using all of the elder Sidargan queens' powers, the young female was able to open space teleportation gates in the inner courtyard of Ardas' home, an area the human had specially constructed for such purposes. The Sidargan was young and had not yet reached her maximum size, yet she already appeared twice as big as the male members of her race. Despite her dimensions she moved nimbly, and after teleporting she easily regained her coordination. Having stopped in the middle of the courtyard, she turned her solid black eyes toward Ardas.

"Are you ready, Human?"

"Yes, completely. What should I do?"

"Simply take my hand. After that, we will lead you ourselves."

Much later, after making several voyages through the Sidargan common consciousness, Ardas would easily be able to tell each individual apart. But during this first trip, the only thing he felt was darkness. At first it was pitch black, then fraught with shadows. The hazy shadows made the human feel uncomfortable, so he turned his attention to himself and his own feelings. As soon as he did so, a light penetrated the darkness, the rays radiating from Ardas himself. The Sidargans saw him as a blinding flame in their infinite gray sea of consciousness. This flame appeared foreign to them, just as they seemed foreign to Ardas, the flame's source. The human did not let in the whispers or the polyphonic background that permeated these creatures' common consciousness. If he were a Sidargan, the whispers would have become conversations that he could take part in, while the polyphonic background would have become information that he could use. He would have been able to see various lines connecting the hives. Every Sidargan member of the consciousness could follow these lines. The human neither saw them nor wanted to see them. He placed all his trust in the female before him, who unwaveringly led him straight to the hive from the Planet of the Ants.

Ardas thought to himself, "Why is everyone so apprehensive? How could I become one of them, when they are so foreign?"

The journey along the connecting lines ended as suddenly as it had begun. One of the lines led the two travelers to the orbit of an illuminated planet. Ardas understood that this was not the real planet's orbit. They had simply reached the common consciousness of the hive from the Planet of the Ants and thus saw and knew that which at least one member of the consciousness was seeing or had seen. The planet was amazingly similar to Earth. However, Ardas was much less interested in the planet or the Sidargan city there, than in the ceaseless war raging on this amazing heavenly body.

•••••

"You know, secretary, I once asked Ardas why he paid almost no attention to the Sidargan city and was only interested in their wars. 'First you must know your enemy,' he answered. 'Only then comes a time to study the environment where battles will take place.' To this day I'm not sure if he's right."

"Elena, do you want me to record these words?"

"Of course not. These are my thoughts, which are totally unnecessary for future generations. Write, 'The ants that constantly attacked . . .'"

•••••

The ants that constantly attacked the Sidargan city did so in ingenious ways. They dug below walls, attacked in endless streams in an effort to overwhelm the defenses by sheer numbers, or hid behind wild creatures—driving entire herds towards the city for that purpose. One attack even included an approach by sea. With each new assault on the city, the ants demonstrated something new and unprecedented.

The war between the Sidargans and the ants raged without the use of weapons of mass destruction. At the very beginning of the conflict, the brain that ruled the planet had contacted the Sidargans, and announced that they would be allowed to use only weapons that would not harm the actual planet. That is, weapons that had residual consequences—such as radiation—were banned. The planet's brain also set limits on the strength and radius of explosive weapons. Any mission against the ants had to manage without any explosive materials. Inviting other Sidargan hives to the planet was also prohibited. Reinforcements could arrive only in the form of lone male mercenaries. For its part, the brain promised to use only ants, to renounce all advanced technologies, and to refrain from using other means available to it, such as earthquakes or tidal waves, which could wipe out the entire Sidargan colony in the blink of an eye. During the duration of the war, the brain vowed to act only as the ants' teacher and advisor.

Sidargans on the Planet of the Ants grew up as warriors from infancy. They grew to be bigger, stronger, and faster than other representatives of their race. These warriors knew no fear and never avoided battle, yet at the same

time they acted carefully and responsibly. Their every move was calculated and purposeful. Every aspect of the city was geared toward countering the ants and surviving. Battles were brutal; annual fatalities included large numbers of both mercenaries and local warriors, and the amount of technological loss seemed endless. If not for constant help from other hives, the colony would not have survived. Despite such difficult circumstances, the planet's Sidargans fought on and refused to give up.

The hive's queen hoped that the Humans' arrival would reduce the number of casualties. Any reduction in the Sidargans' loss of life at the expense of Human victims would be welcome. The queen knew nothing of Ardas' species, and assumed that reports about their powers were exaggerated. She simply expected that they would serve as offertory meat.



Ardas was shown an open space next to one of the bunkers. He understood that this plaza had been designated for teleportation gates, while the bunker would provide accommodations for the humans.

"Well," he thought, "this will do for now. Later we'll see where the humans live and where they open the teleportation gates. The locals don't seem very friendly. That's okay, I only need to awaken one hundred people, train them, and transport them here. Then we'll establish our own city and our own gates. But first I'll have to visit this planet in a physical form and spend some time with the locals, both the Sidargans and the planet's mysterious brain."

Having noted the location designated for the teleportation gates, Ardas decided that he had spent enough time with the Sidargan common consciousness, and disconnected from it.

Disconnecting was similar to turning off a television set. The images suddenly disappeared and Ardas found himself back in his body on Eduron, in the courtyard of his house. Next to him stood a twelve-foot-tall female Sidargan, who also returned to her body.

"You are cautious, Human. During the journey you were completely withdrawn. I tried to talk to you, but I could sense that you were not letting in any foreign thoughts."

"What I saw was enough. I didn't need any more information. Why did the local Sidargans dislike me? They all seemed hostile," Ardas inquired.

"See, the Sidargans on the Planet of the Ants and their queen hold themselves to be the chosen ones, the finest representatives of their race, unrivalled engineers and warriors. Of course, that's all true, but at the same time they're also the most arrogant Sidargans you'll ever meet. Not only does their queen not trust me, she mistrusts even the most experienced queens. She obeys the experienced queens'

order, but she thinks their opinion of you is flawed, having been formed without the necessary battle experience, which only she and the members of her hive have. The hive's males feel the same way. So be careful; when you arrive on the planet in a physical form, they're going to test you," the young female warned.

"And what is your opinion of me?"

"I don't know. Maybe she's right, and with one effortless swipe of my paw there'd be no more little Human?"

As she said these words, the young Sidargan raised her impressive five-pronged claw. Without budging, the human calmly observed the Sidargan. The female quietly moaned, then her raised paw effortlessly drooped down. Her other paw refused to obey her either, while her dangerous tail seemed powerless to rise off the ground, instead squirming around her legs. The Sidargan teetered, her legs no longer supported her, and only an inexplicable force kept her from falling. At the same time, something was forcing her to bend forward until her head ended up at the same level as the human's head. Ardas stared the Sidargan coldly in the eyes, which showed both fear and anger.

"Now you see what a human can do, doubting one. I have the Sidargans figured out and can kill any one of them simply by disturbing the balance of his or her internal energy. If you don't understand what happened, I'll tell you. I basically blocked your main neural ganglions. Your brain worked as usual, you understood everything, but you couldn't do anything. A fairly refined method, don't you think?"

"Let... me go, Human," groaned the Sidargan. "That doesn't mean that you are physically stronger than me."

"Well then, let's try another experiment," Ardas answered, agreeing to continue the game. "I'll let you go, then you take my hand in yours and try to move me from where I stand. You can pull as much as you want or try to lift me up or do whatever, okay?"

"Okay, we'll see what happens to that swagger after I flick you to the corner," the Sidargan shot back, prematurely savoring an easy victory.

The Sidargan's belief in her abilities was not unwarranted. While the female was not the greatest fighter, physically she was stronger than three males of her race or four Isans put together, let alone the one tiny Human standing before her. As soon as she felt control over her limbs return, the female Sidargan used her right paw to grab the Human's outstretched right hand and pull with all her might. Pulling a solid, century-old tree would have proved as futile, or perhaps even less so. The Human never budged, and his elbow never straightened out. Seemingly, he didn't even notice her efforts. When she tried to lift the Human, the young queen felt even more amazed, for she couldn't even lift his hand. Ardas continued standing calmly, arm extended, as the Sidargan tried with all her

might to pull the hand in every direction. Suddenly, the female felt her arm twist with such force that she lost her balance, flew over the Human, and crashed to the ground. Yet the Human wasn't done with the poor Sidargan. With one hand forcing her head down to the ground and the other clutching her tail, Ardas had his skeptical foe pinned and unable to move at all.

"You still think you're stronger than me?"

"No, Human. I see that no one could match you."

"Good," Ardas replied, letting her go. "Tell all the others who might crave a fight about this. I don't want any unnecessary casualties."

"Of course, Human," she muttered, and without another word, stepped through the open teleportation gates.

"Silly little creature," thought Ardas. "With the planet's energy vein that runs directly under this yard, I could stop a train, let alone some twitching Sidargan. But it's a good thing that wasn't an Atlantan. He'd surely see the planet's energy and would use it himself. Such tricks definitely wouldn't work with him. But, on the other hand, I could focus on other things. They all have their weaknesses."

•••

### *Eduron, that same day*

CHRZ was having some success, yet at the same time he wasn't. Having successfully traveled to Eduron, the Dvarvan enthusiastically dove into his assignment. First, he became a tree. His options had been limited, because the information his predecessor scout had provided included details only about a certain type of tree, a predatory animal, and the Isans themselves. Chrz decided that by becoming a tree and settling alongside the road to the Clan Leader's palace, he would easily find out everything from passing Isans. Having easily mimicked a tree, the Dvarvan successfully got settled near the busy road leading to the palace. Yet over a month went by, and he was having no luck learning anything. While the planet's inhabitants paid no attention to the tree and Chrz faced no danger, the exercise resulted in no benefit, either. Not once did he see the Human, while the passing Isans discussed neither the Human nor his species. The Dvarvan heard countless stories, both happy and sad, about the Isans' lives but nothing, alas, related to his assignment. He had to do something. His strategy to become a tree clearly was not working. But becoming a local inhabitant posed dangerous risks. For a new, never before seen, Isan to show up at the palace and start asking everyone about the Human would be unrealistic. Chrz felt as if he had reached a dead end. And yet precisely then, just when the Dvarvan was prepared to take a risk and become an Isan, he heard what he had been waiting

for all along. One morning, a pair of guards passed by discussing the Human's house. The house seemed strange to them; Isans would never build anything of the sort. Chrz understood that the Human had settled just outside the city and lived in an unusual home dissimilar to the locals' accustomed style. Now the Dvarvan knew exactly what he needed to do. He would imitate the predatory animal he had learned about and search the territory within the radius of a single day's journey from the city. The feat might take some time, but it was possible. The tree disappeared, melting into a formless mass, which then gradually began to reform as a fanged, quadruped creature.

•••••

### ***The Planet of the Ants. 19 September 2015.***

BSB was one of the most experienced Dvarvan scouts. After four years on the Planet of the Ants in the guise of a Sidargan, he had become the most respected and valued mercenary and the strongest Sidargan warrior on the Planet of the Ants. This result was to be expected. Dvarvans had been created as beings with huge energy potential, and, furthermore, they were capable of consciously using this potential. For this reason, Bsb had a major advantage, in terms of energy, over any Sidargan. The Sidargans, of course, did not know this. To them, Bsb was simply their strongest warrior and the leader of the mercenaries, a soldier unwilling to join the common consciousness or become a member of the Ant Planet's hive out of faithfulness to his former hive.

Upon arriving on the planet, the Dvarvan had contacted its Creator, who lived on the planet and controlled it. The Creator stamped the scout with a mental mark that only he could recognize, making ants that felt the mark's effect docile toward him. In exchange, the Dvarvan informed the Creator of all the details that the latter could not learn himself, among other assignments. On the day that the Human visited the planet through the Sidargan common consciousness, Bsb sensed change on the horizon. He couldn't join the common consciousness to learn all the details, because then everyone would realize that he was not a Sidargan. The scout was left with one course of action: to speak with others and ask them questions. Because of his lofty position, Bsb could carefully pose inquiries not only to other leaders, but also to the hive's ruler herself. In this way, he learned who had visited in a metaphysical form and when they would return. Having learned what he wanted, Bsb hastily prepared for a scouting mission. No one suspected anything, because he had often left for such trips alone and always returned with valuable information.

As soon as he stepped into the forest that began beyond the city's valley, Bsb encountered a species of the giant ants specially developed by the Creator for the transmission and reception of sonic information. Because he feared being

overheard by the Sidargans, the Creator could not contact Bsb mentally, so he communicated through this specially created ant.

“Stop. It is safe here. Tell me what’s happened,” the Creator said through the ant.

“Something has made me uneasy,” said the Dvarvan scout. “Some kind of a creature, called a Human, visited the Sidargans through their common consciousness. The most experienced Sidargan rulers feel that the arrival of the Human and others like him will not only decide the battle on this planet, it will also allow them to win back their mother galaxy.”

“Those creations of ours, the Sidargans, are a restless bunch. I must say that that was a useless experiment, for we got no use out of them. Instead of becoming their mother galaxy’s defenders, they decided to expand towards the galaxy’s center. Such expansion by these belligerent, defiant creatures surely would have provoked our Great Enemies to defend their creations, which live in that galaxy’s center. Luckily, we have you, the true defenders. Anyway, I’m rambling. What kind of a creature is this Human, and where did he come from? I could not find it in my database. We didn’t create it, and our Great Enemies haven’t been to this galaxy, so they could not have left any creations of their own. So where is he from?”

“I don’t know. So far I haven’t had any luck with that question. The local Sidargans don’t really believe in his powers. They think Humans will serve them usefully as war meat, to plug the holes where they’d be sorry to lose local warriors. He will be visiting the planet in a physical form in seven days. Then I’ll be able to learn more,” Bsb explained to the Creator, known as the “planet’s brain” by the Sidargans.

“Don’t bother. I’ll contact it myself and learn everything. Okay, in seven days I’ll launch a massive attack on the city. I think the Human will help the Sidargans and reveal his capabilities. Then I’ll determine what to do with this creature,” the planet’s brain decided. “Most of all, I’m concerned by the experienced queens’ faith in the powers of his species. They don’t have a reputation for naiveté or lack of intellect. In other words, they have some basis for being confident in their belief. You didn’t inquire with your own brethren back home about Humans?”

“I did. They didn’t know much,” the Dvarvan replied obligingly. One of our scouts was detected by the Human on a planet controlled by the Isans, and had to commit suicide in order to avoid capture. So the Human really is stronger than us. Now another scout has set out to Eduron. So far we haven’t heard anything from him.”

“Then the Human is staying with the Isans, yet he gets along perfectly with their enemies, the Sidargans. Interesting,” the Creator pondered aloud. “Okay, the plan remains as I described. In your intelligence report to the Sidargans,

inform them of an increase in the number of ants. Speculate that an attack is imminent. Let them prepare; it'll be more interesting."

"As you wish, Creator."

Upon returning to the Sidargans, Bsb reported witnessing ant colonies swarming in the forests around the city. The scout expressed his opinion that the ants would attack the city within ten days. Holding a high opinion of the Sidargan in question, the hive's queen wasted no time ordering preparations for the city's defense. Bsb also received another order. When the Human arrived, he was to challenge it to a duel in order to test its fighting abilities. The Dvarvan was not excited about this assignment. He remembered well how the Human had detected the scout on Eduron, and he had no desire to meet the same fate. Yet he couldn't disobey the order, either.

•••••

### ***The Planet of the Ants. 25 September 2015.***

THE teleportation gates opened precisely where Ardas had foreseen. This marked his first attempt to open long-range teleportation gates, and its success was vitally important to him. He saw this as yet another step toward the realization of his goals.

Immediately upon stepping through the gates onto the Planet of the Ants, Ardas encountered four rows of waiting Sidargans. They did not seem hospitable. Each one had personal weapons ready. "Looks like I'll just have to prove something once again," Ardas thought sullenly.

"Follow me, Human. The queen is waiting," a Sidargan, stepping forward, ordered without any introduction.

Ardas had no plans to refuse. He nodded and followed behind, surrounded closely by no fewer than thirty of the black creatures. The procession marched to the queen's personal quarters, which were located at the very top of the city's main building. Ardas had anticipated seeing a hall of similar size to the one he had witnessed on the First Isan Clan Leader's planet, yet what his eyes actually gazed upon amazed him. The room was not large. Clearly, the queen was less concerned about luxury than about the practicality of defending her facility. Every aspect of the city's construction reflected attention to the constant threat it faced. The queen's chambers were no exception.

"Come closer, Human," the queen stated. This invitation was clearly challenging, without the least bit of respect. "We'd like to know how you could be useful to us."

Ardas noticed that the bulk of the procession stayed in the corridor leading to the hall. In the room stood twelve warriors, of which one seemed strange to him. The impression was as though the unusual one reasoned—or attempted to reason—as a Sidargan, but his mental background differed, almost reminiscent of the strange creature that killed itself on Eduron, the one the Isans called a Dvarvan. The mental background emanating from this warrior seemed almost a cross between one common of Sidargans and the one he felt with the Dvarvan scout.

“How could this thin-hided little thing be of any use to us? Throw it out the window, my queen. Allow me, I’ll do it myself,” exclaimed the odd Sidargan.

“Again, the same thing. Don’t tell me everybody needs a lesson or you won’t settle down. I guess I’ll grant you the opportunity to learn,” Ardas scowled. He disdained arrogance, especially since he now encountered it so often. “How could I be useful to you! With all due respect, you’re not formulating your questions correctly,” fumed Ardas.

“You are insolent, Human. Nobody speaks before me like th—,” the queen did not get a chance to finish.

“Shut up, you overgrown reptile. I’ll say worse things yet. I see I’ll find neither hospitality nor respect here.”

The queen was both stupefied and furious from such an insult. This creature had to beg for permission to settle here, but instead he dared yap so audaciously.

“Guards, seize that thing!” the queen managed to command.

The guards tried to apprehend the Human, but suspended as they were in the air, failed. Every last Sidargan in the room found himself hovering five feet off the floor, unable to move. Their weapons, ripped from their hands and sheaths, tumbled to the ground. Across from the guards, the queen found herself kneeling, her limbs paralyzed and her head bent. She was unable to speak, although Ardas could clearly read her thoughts, full of fear and rage.

“Now, I see, we can talk calmly,” Ardas continued. “As I was saying, Your Majesty, you asked incorrectly. Your question should have sounded as such: why do you deserve my countrymen’s aid in ridding this planet of ants? The answer is, you don’t. Neither you nor your sandbox wars interest me. My people need a base planet, and this one suits that purpose well. I have no preference whether to settle within the city or beyond its limits. If we had settled in the city, we would have helped your cause, but now, I don’t think we’re going to do so. I’ll head out immediately to find a suitable location in the suburbs. The most experienced queens received my word that I would help them win back their mother galaxy. I shall keep my word, if they keep theirs. You and the members of your hive do not interest me. I have not promised you anything, and, after today’s arrogant

display, I don't intend to. We will not be entangling ourselves in your war with the ants. If they attack, we will simply defend ourselves and do nothing more. So don't expect any help. I shall now release both you and your warriors, but all of you should bear in mind that any display of aggression will lead to a quick, but painful, death. If anybody's interested, one human could destroy your entire city with all of its defenders. And I have one more bit of news for you, queen," Ardas stated, once again scrutinizing the strange Sidargan from head to toe. "You have a Dvarvan spy among the warriors in this room. I'll let you figure out which one."

Bsb became scared. How did the Human manage to find out? For the Dvarvan had learned to copy even the Sidargans' thoughts almost perfectly. Only someone with at least the mental abilities of a Demurg master could decipher his secret. The Human smiled at him. Now Ardas was sure, for the creature's fear had betrayed him, but he wasn't ready to hand him over to the queen. Letting her figure out which of her subjects was the imposter would keep her busy. The Sidargans, suddenly released, collapsed to the ground, while the queen did the opposite and sprang up.

"Human, I will not allow you—," the queen's words were again cut off, this time by warning sirens.

"The ants are attacking, my queen. A massive attack on the city," the lookouts announced.

"To your stations. As for you, insolent one, you can come with me to the observation deck," the queen declared derisively. "From there you'll be able to get an eyeful of the beings you plan to defeat so easily. We'll discuss your behavior later," the queen, having quickly collected herself, added.

Nobody needed to repeat the Sidargan's orders. They immediately hurried to their battle stations. Both Ardas and the hive's ruler went up to the observation deck. "Oh, yeah, the Sidargans are definitely concerned about security," the human thought, observing the steel walls, measuring three feet in thickness, that separated the deck from the ruler's chambers.

The lookouts weren't mistaken; the ants were attacking the city. From the queen's gaze Ardas understood that this attack differed tactically from previous ones. Ants appeared from every direction. They moved in even rows, of which Ardas could count ten. Each row rolled before it a boulder, ten feet in diameter and apparently made of a local material reminiscent of clay. Beyond those rolling the boulders, a sea of ants sprang from the forest. The first rows were already two and a half miles from the forest, yet there was no end in sight to the mass of bugs following behind. New ants just kept appearing from among the trees. There were already millions of them and still no indication that the deluge might wane. Within moments, the first rows reached the city's first line of defense, a series of traps and pitfalls. The ones rolling the boulders fell into traps, perished

in acid puddles, and incinerated in scintillating flames. Yet the toll was fairly limited. The reason for the boulders became clear. It turned out that they were perfectly suited for plugging open pitfalls, covering acid puddles, and blocking fountains of fire. The boulders neither melted in acid nor burned up, and they seemed to stick to the edges of the planet's giant craters. They became bridges over the traps, over which the main army could march practically without any losses.

The queen gave the order to fire at will. Rockets fired skyward and the sound of high-caliber weapons pierced the air. Ardas noticed the first Sidargan mistake of the battle. The rockets and weapons were aimed not at the masses but at the ants rolling the boulders, where the explosions caused little damage. Shrapnel simply stuck to the boulders rather than strike the ants hiding behind them. The ants rolling the boulders were not in a continuous mass, and they had effective shields, and reinforcements from the main wave quickly took over for the ones who did perish. Only when a shot hit the boulder directly did the strategy prove effective. On those occasions, the boulders vaporized and the ants lost their protection. This method eliminated five entire rows of the ants pushing boulders, but the others successfully continued toward the city.

Once they reached the five hundred-yard barrier, the automatic ray guns engaged. In Ardas' opinion, the Sidargans should have targeted the last rows of ants pushing the boulders and the first rows of the main pack, thus separating the two. By causing a rift of at least thirty minutes, it would have been possible for Sidargan warriors to attack the sparse rows of boulder ants and destroy their rolling defenses. Then the principal group would have arrived at the city walls with huge losses, or at least immeasurably greater ones than at present.

The queen, dissatisfied with the results, decided to abort the strategy and save ammunition. Unlike the ray guns and their practically inexhaustible energy source, such large-scale shooting cost the city a third of its ammunition reserves. "At least she's doing the right thing in this case," thought Ardas. "They can resume shooting when the main assault begins." As one would expect, the ray guns also failed to cause the requisite amount of damage. The boulders routinely served as perfect shields. Despite the ants' suffering significant losses, these shields proved immensely beneficial to the attack, considering how great those losses could have been. Soon the first ants reached the city and leaned their boulders against the walls. Having lost their cover, most of these leading ants died, but the second and third rows soon followed. The boulders' rolling masses then piled on top of each other. The boulders, it turned out, stuck to the city's walls and served as a ladder for the attackers. In the past, the ants had used the bodies of their fallen comrades, piling up large mounds and using them to climb over the walls. Now that was no longer necessary, because in some places the boulder pyramids reached more than half the height of the walls.

At this point, it became clear that the boulders also helped protect the ants from yet another of the Sidargans' weapons. Every 30 feet, circular saw blades would emerge from the wall and slice up any attacking ants or their equipment. On this day, however, the first two or even three rows of blades were getting stuck in the boulders.

A second wave of ants surged forward, carrying massive trees and containers full of some kind of liquid. This second wave of ants suffered greater fatalities. The ray guns, unimpeded by any cover, simply mowed down the attackers. Yet any fallen ant immediately gave way to another, and they had no shortage of reinforcements. Ants had filled the entire clearing outside the city, and new hordes continued to spill out of the woods. "Now should be the time to start firing rockets again," thought Ardas, but the hive's queen held her course. Next, the ants planted their trees into the pyramids of boulders and poured their mysterious liquid on the remaining saw blades. The liquid proved so viscous that it slowed the blades down to a halt. From that moment, the main throng of ants joined the offensive. To this point, the Sidargans had not suffered a single fatality, while at the base of the outer wall lay the bodies of thousands of ants. Yet this figure numbered incomparably less than the ants' death toll in past attacks. One after another, the mounted ray guns came under attack. Upon reaching them, the ants either dismantled them or covered them with the same gooey liquid, which also eclipsed the weapons' optical sensors. From the tops of the fortifications, where thick masses of combat robots and Sidargan warriors awaited, an array of bullets rained down and rivers of acid and burning tar flowed, yet none of it could stop the turbulent sea of ants.

The first throngs of ants reached the tops of the walls. Sidargan warriors gripped their two-headed polearm sickles or double-edged swords. Each of them had an energy shield that provided excellent protection against the ants' mandibles and sharp spurs. Of course, this shield was of little use if an ant threw the Sidargan off the wall. Besides, a shield had enough energy for one hour of continuous use, after which it required recharging. Another drawback was that one could not fire ray guns while using the shields, because the weapons would distort the shields' energy.

The wall seemed absolutely covered in ants, which kept climbing ever higher. They destroyed the first robots and threw the first Sidargan warriors down to their deaths. In the face of deadly peril, the defenders showed neither fear nor panic. They fought bravely, chopping off the enemy's limbs and heads, but they were clearly outnumbered on the wall. By the human's estimate, the mass of ants would take over the wall within twenty minutes. It seemed the queen understood as much. She ordered her tanks to attack.

Initially, this command confused Ardas—until he saw the result. Half a mile from the city, the Sidargans kept combat vehicles, similar to tanks, hidden on underground platforms. Huge gates opened within the ground, crushing the

ants that had been crawling on them, and 80-ton monstrosities, covered in ray guns and projectile cannons, joined the battle, crushing impediments under their caterpillar tread. Circular saws on each tank's front, sides, and rear prevented the ants from climbing aboard. They moved forward shooting, slicing, and crushing the enemy, leaving a trail of corpses in their wake. Seemingly, the tanks simply had to turn toward the city and crush the assailants from behind.

But the ants had an answer. Out of the woods, snapping the thickest tree trunks, a multitude of modified ants emerged, equal to the tanks in both size and weight. They outnumbered the Sidargans' battle vehicles two to one. Covered in bony armor capable of withstanding a direct rocket strike, they were spitting acid that burned through the tanks' armor. A fierce battle raged as endless numbers of infantry ants died attempting to climb on the tanks and destroy their weapons. Direct hits to their poorly protected legs incapacitated two monster ants. Elsewhere, a discharge of acid burned through a tank's casing, killing all thirty Sidargans within. Initially, for every destroyed tank, two or three monster ants and an absolute mountain of infantry ants fell. Later, as the number of tanks decreased and their ammunition and energy waned, the number of fallen ants, both monster and regular type, declined. The tanks' attack was doomed to fail. It only delayed the final assault on the city's walls. Although the ants were lacking requisite reinforcements, this effect appeared temporary. Yet on the other hand, it seemed, the planet's brain was not commanding the monster ants as well as it could have and failed to speed up the destruction of the Sidargans' combat machines. The assault on the city stalled somewhat, but it would probably return to full force in a few hours, for the tanks seemed close to exhausting their means.

And yet, the queen then threw another of her military's units into the fold, this time the air force. "About time," thought Ardas, as he observed a hundred fighter jets attack the infantry and monster ants. At first it appeared that the aerial attack would prove enormously successful, but the ants could counter this weapon as well. A swarm of modified airborne ants rose out of the forest. On par with the jets in both size and maneuverability, they were somewhat slower and armed with the terrestrial ants' same acidic fluid, which they could spew quickly from fairly long range. What the flying ants lacked in capability compared to the Sidargans' jets, they made up for in quantity. The frenzied battle now filled both the air and the ground. Each Sidargan pilot took on three foes and still managed to fire at targets below. For every downed fighter plane, the ants gave up three or even four of their own. One Sidargan pilot crashed his damaged ship straight into the unprotected leg of a monster ant, thereby taking out the enemy in his final act. "Another mistake," thought Ardas, watching the aerial battle above the clearing. "They should be flying above the city, where the surface-to-air defense system could help them."

An hour later, the battle was becoming sluggish. No more than ten Sidargan tanks were continuing their attempt to break through toward the city. The 30

remaining jets were no longer able to provide the tanks with cover to ensure a safe retreat to the city. Ants already controlled a small portion of the outer wall. Despite their selfless sacrifice and ample reinforcements, the Sidargan warriors were no longer able to hold the wall. The ants also suffered enormous losses, yet they considered this cost justifiable. New hordes kept streaming from the forest, and the clearing still appeared teeming with ants. It seemed the planet's brain had decided to stop playing games and destroy the city once and for all.

Similar thoughts filled the queen's head. She pulled another trump card from up her sleeve. The queen ordered her planes to return to the city and her tanks to stay in their places. Then she ordered another massive attack of rockets and explosives. This time, the shots proved considerably more effective. Explosions and fragments rained down on the entire area from two hundred yards to two miles away. The lone exception was an area of several hundred square yards where the remaining unharmed tanks assembled. At the same time, a large contingent of Sidargan reinforcements arrived at the outer wall and helped take back the occupied areas of the wall and repel the offensive. After an hour of such hell, not a single ant remained alive in the area under fire. The flying ants retreated beyond the forest. Not one monster ant survived the assault. The six remaining operational tanks successfully arrived at the city and, after guards opened the gates and fought off the few ants that tried to enter, returned to safety.

However, the attack did not cease. New hordes of ants flowed out of the woods. The clearing again filled with ants, and a new wave swarmed on the walls. "I think my estimate may have been incorrect," thought Ardas. "It seems the planet's brain has called on every ant it has, but nevertheless, the battle is still going to last longer than I had thought."

The Sidargans had no plans to surrender. They defended the outer wall for twenty more minutes before the queen commanded them to retreat. Antigravitational bridges appeared between the walls, allowing the Sidargan troops to flee to the second wall and leave the first for the ants. It now seemed only a matter of time before the invaders entered the city. Shooting constantly, the Sidargans tried to keep the ants from entrenching themselves on the first wall. The second wall's ray guns activated. Giant catapults appeared on the third wall, firing massive rocks and burning tar onto the infested clearing. But the ants kept pressing. They filled an acid moat between the walls with boulders and corpses. Thus the boulders served yet a new purpose as pontoon bridges, allowing a new horde of ants to attack the second wall. Having smeared an adhesive on themselves, the ants climbed upward until they stuck, perished, and then served as stairs for the others. As before, the ants reached and destroyed one automatic ray gun after another. After a few hours, the Sidargans retreated again and left the second wall to the ants.

A few more hours later, the invaders had scaled the third wall and had begun close-range combat on it. The swarms of ants no longer poured out of woods, and instead only an occasional cluster appeared. It appeared that the Sidargans only had to wipe out the final reserves of bugs, but this challenge proved too much for them. Within an hour, the Sidargans abandoned their final barrier, and the fighting moved into the city. The bunker's ray guns awakened, the few leftover tanks rejoined the fray, and the warriors entrenched themselves behind barricades.

The queen understood that they would lose the city in a matter of hours. "At that time, everyone will assemble in the main bunker and the buildings below it, where I'll activate the force field," pondered the queen. "Then the planet's brain will utilize energy-devouring ants, which we have encountered in past attacks, and then, once our force field is out of the way, it will commence the final attack. Sooner or later, the ants will destroy our weapons and gnaw their way inside. This final stage of the battle will end with the death of every last Sidargan. The brain, despite sacrificing its entire army, will have accomplished its goal. But why? What happens after that? It could have destroyed the city in other ways. All of these sacrifices had another objective behind them. Perhaps it wanted to test the Human? Then it would have to facilitate such a possibility, yet there was no way to force the Human to fight. You can't threaten him or compel him by force. Maybe I should swallow my pride and ask?" For the city's sake she was ready to do anything, including begging or even giving up her own life.

"Human, I'd like a word with you," the queen uttered.

"I thought you would. In fact, I even have an idea of the subject matter. By my estimates, in a few hours the only building you'll control will be this main bunker. By that time, at least twenty thousand Sidargan will have died, and as far as I can remember, that's a fifth of your subjects. Heavy losses," Ardas noted, somewhat mockingly. "I'd put your odds of surviving at about ten percent. But I do have to compliment the city's defense system. If not for such a well-planned and large-scale attack, as well as a few mistakes on your part, you could have defended yourself."

"Human, stop it. I'm begging you. Is there any way you can help us? Save my nation. I'll be your slave forever. I'll obey your every command. Just help us."

"I can help. See, I don't think this whole spectacle is on display by accident. The planet's brain used an awful lot of resources. I'm guessing that the fact that the infantry has stopped flowing out of the woods means that that's all the ants under its control. The brain sacrificed all of the airborne and monster ants, and now it's still willing to offer up the last of the infantry. Why? If this is a game, why drag it out to such a drastic conclusion? To destroy the city, it could have done so much more easily, for example by disconnecting your energy or by

flooding you. Why the battle? The answer is simple: it waits for a response, one that it could evaluate. What kind of a response can you offer? None. You've tried everything, even primitive catapults. Then the response can't come from you. And other than you, the only one here is I. That means it knows about me and is waiting for me to act. It doesn't know everything, but enough to get interested. Who could have provided it with such information? The Sidargans? Doubtful. The only other one on the planet who could have known about me is the spy I found amongst your own. Then the Dvarvans are allied with the planet's brain, and maybe even with others of its kind, if any."

"I came to the same conclusions," the queen replied, observing Ardas. "I think the battle will continue, and if you don't help us, the Sidargans will die. If you get involved, it will calm down."

"Or it will destroy me," agonized the human.

"I doubt it. You'd represent quite a challenge for it. It will want to interact with you, see what you're made of, and experiment a little."

"I wouldn't do that if I were it. When you see a threat, you eliminate it."

"It doesn't see a threat. It is the ruler here. No one can defeat it, and it knows that. It is simply curious. If you convince it that researching your kinsmen would prove advantageous for it and that you will lead them here, it will release you. But I warn you, it senses untruth and reads thoughts well."

"Perhaps I should disappear from this planet immediately?"

"Then we shall all die. The decision is yours, Human," replied the queen, at peace with her hive's fate.

"I can't stand things like that. Why do you have to appeal to my conscience like that? All right, I've wanted to chat with that know-it-all for a while. I'll help you. But remember, you owe me, and if the need arises, you are obligated to support my people and me whenever I ask. Do you swear?"

"I don't know what that means, to swear, but I'll do something different. I will let you into my brain and remove all barriers. You can make me your slave, and I'll carry out all your commands," the Sidargan offered.

"I'm not going to start with such activities. I'll leave the matter to your conscience, if you have one. I've told you my wish. If you can, you'll fulfill it. If not, so be it. Okay, I'm starting."

"Wait, Human. Which of my subjects is a Dvarvan? Is he alone?"

"The leader of your mercenaries," replied Ardas without looking back. "Let's begin."

From the bunker, which stood directly over the planet's energy line, a beam of energy shot skyward. More accurately, it shot not from the bunker itself, but from the outstretched hands of the human, who was now standing on the building's roof. Upon climbing to a height of fifty yards, the beam exploded and a giant wave spread outward. Because the energy beam stood flush with the city's walls, its wave had no effect on anybody within the city and merely swept away those climbing the walls. One explosion was enough to clear all the walls of ants. The Sidargans, inspired by this support, went on the offensive and began slaughtering all the ants in the city. Fifteen seconds later, a second energy beam fired upward. This one rose higher, and its wave moved at a sharp angle, killing those ants found just beyond the first wall.

All told, the human managed to release ten energy beams, each with a different altitude and each releasing waves of various trajectories. After the tenth wave, which decimated ants over a mile from the city, the human felt the energy line he had been using close. Ardas then felt the planet's brain beside him. Clearly a fan of special effects, the brain this time appeared in the form of an ant's face hovering above the clouds. The human understood that the image simply represented a projection of the brain's thoughts, while the brain itself hid elsewhere.

"Greetings, Human. I want to talk to you a bit," spoke the ant's face, still hovering above the Sidargan city.

"I was waiting for you to show up," Ardas replied casually. "What do you say we end this skirmish? You call off the ants, I'll come out of the city, and we'll talk normally in the shadows of the forest."

"A strange suggestion, but an interesting one. We can even make a ritualistic ceremony of our meeting. I see I'm going to have fun with you. Come, or even better, teleport to the edge of the clearing. We'll talk. I'll let the Sidargans live. After all, who breaks their favorite toys before they're bored of them? The ants will not attack anymore. They're retreating. I'll wait for you at the clearing."

The human observed the ants leave the clearing. They did not care whether they attacked or retreated; they simply followed the brain's orders.

"Thank you, Human," said the hive's queen. "I will always support you. Good luck. Whet its interest—only then will you manage to leave here."

"Thanks for the advice," smiled the human. "I think we'll meet again."

With that, Ardas opened the short-range teleportation gates, stepped forward, and found himself on the edge of the clearing. There were no live ants there, only corpses of bugs. Of course, they weren't piled up as high as near the city, but the numbers were still sizable. Both the hundreds of shredded ant corpses and the earth, carved up by countless explosions, clearly showed what hell had occurred here during the Sidargans' bombardment. Now, it was peaceful. Birds,

or their equivalents on this planet, began chirping again. If not for the evidence strewn about, one would never suspect that a battle had just occurred here. This time the brain did not use any special effects. Instead, it began communicating with the human mentally.

"I'm glad you've decided to visit our planet. And I'm even gladder that you didn't try to run after our first conversation. In truth, I wouldn't have let you open your teleportation gates. You would not have escaped."

"I had no plans to run away, brain. Your invitation to chat seemed so cordial that I simply couldn't refuse. You wanted to know something?"

"That, which I wanted to know, I can see for myself. You are like an open book to me."

Ardas felt himself being examined, but he refrained from constructing any defenses. First, doing so would have been pointless, for the mysterious being was significantly stronger than the human. Second, such an act would have demonstrated fear and aggression.

"An interesting little work," the brain continued. "Clearly not of our construction, but the school is the same. You are similar to one of our examples of mid-level creation, the Demurgs, just significantly improved. We had some success creating the Demurgs and used their genetic base for quite awhile in creating other life forms. You are more advanced than them. Legendary energy, the power to transform your surroundings, control over space and time—you have some good programs installed. Who constructed you that way, and where is your home?"

"The Demurgs created us as war machines. Home is on a planet called 'Earth,'" answered Ardas, imagining his home planet and its surrounding space.

"I see. Neat little kids, those Demurgs. I must say, I've always liked them, and with this creation they've earned my respect. So you call that planet 'Earth?' What a horrible world. I have yet to see a place so unsuitable for stable life. Usually you choose a planet, you create life according to its conditions, and it flourishes there. But this is a mess. We match a life form to those conditions, but it goes and changes. Most species die out. The only course of action is to install an increased mutation and evolution factor. How have you survived there, and keeping your powers no less?"

"Yes, we manage to live there, but without our powers. We control no more than ten percent of our abilities," Ardas explained.

"So on your own planet you are weaker than the Sidargans, yet beyond its borders you're staggeringly strong? It'd be interesting to research this."

"I could provide you with such an opportunity. I ended up on this planet after an agreement with the Sidargans, who allowed me to establish a human colony here. I'm preparing to return to Earth, gather a group of humans, open long-range teleportation gates, and bring the whole group here. Here they would awaken and revive their abilities, and this planet would become our new home. If you, the planet's brain, will allow us to settle here, we will not object to your experiments and will satiate your curiosity however we can," offered Ardas, himself convinced of the truth of his words.

This offer thus demonstrated a human trait honed while living on Earth, the ability to lie and believe that same lie. Such people feared neither mind readers nor lie-detector tests. At such moments they spoke the truth, because their words represented precisely what they were thinking. One could say that such people managed to temporarily fool themselves when handling questions addressed to them. Ardas, too, enjoyed this talent. From childhood, through trial and error, he had developed this talent and learned to lie almost perfectly. Naturally, the planet's brain had no knowledge of these facts. It followed Ardas' thoughts and saw only that they did not contradict each other. Seemingly, the human was sincerely offering it the chance to bring in and experiment on a group of Earth's inhabitants.

"You've made an intriguing proposition. Listen, Human, why did you help the Sidargans? I see that you knew that I was awaiting your appearance, you foresaw what this appearance could have resulted in, and still you joined their side. You don't seem like a fool, and you rate your abilities realistically. So, why?"

"I had promised to help them, and I could not go back on my word. I couldn't run away and leave them to die."

"So if you promised me something, you'd carry it out just as sincerely?"

"Yes, of course. If I promised it, I'd do it. And if I saw that I couldn't, I wouldn't promise it. Humans cherish their honor. We have many examples in our history of a human committing suicide after failing to fulfill a promise," Ardas continued with his tales, at the same time recalling a few historical examples that matched his narrative.

"Interesting. I see that you are honest with me. What size of a group are you preparing to bring with you?"

"A small unit. I doubt I'll be able to gather many. We'd arrive directly on this clearing, then you'd direct us to wherever we could settle."

"Okay, your offer has captured my interest. I will let you go. You can return to where you came from, but promise you'll return with a group of Humans."

"I, Ardas, a human from the planet Earth, pledge to you, the planet's brain, that I shall return to this planet with a small group of humans and will present myself to you."

"Good, you can go, Human."

"Wait, can I ask you something? I too am curious."

"Ask."

"Why did you become so interested in me? What need did I serve?"

"Why the interest in you? All right, there's no harm in that. As you know, I also have the ability to view the past and the future. During one of my journeys to the future, a long time ago, when I first settled on this planet and wondered whether it would be safe later, I saw images that shocked me. I'll show you."

•••••

The tall, blue-eyed woman turned from her desk and, leaning against a wall, fixed her eyes on a group of children playing in the yard.

"You know, secretary, I think this was the critical moment. The Creator, without even knowing it, helped Ardas tremendously."

"By showing him a possible course of action?"

"Exactly," Elena confirmed, nodding her head.

"Plans like those are well and good, but don't you think the trial ended up the more critical moment?"

"No," Elena shook her blonde-haired head. "The trial was later. By then, Ardas knew precisely what and when to do. The conversation with the Creator became the fateful part of this whole history. All right, continue writing: 'Ardas saw events from the future, events that he too was destined to partake in. He saw a clear day on the same clearing where he stood now. In the distance, the Sidargan city loomed almost unchanged. Suddenly, the opening of giant teleportation gates shattered the calm. These gates were large enough for twenty people to emerge, which is precisely what transpired. In fact, waves of people continued to emerge from the gates, totaling much greater numbers. Ardas became aware that they numbered ten thousand in total.'

"Wait secretary, stop. Enough about battles and war, I'm sick of it. Simply write: The humans worked tactically, as if according to a predetermined plan. That could mean only one thing: that they were familiar with this planet and the foe that met them there. Despite all of the Creator's efforts . . .

"No, on the other hand, the rest is worth telling. I'll start from the battle's conclusion. Write: In truth, the Creator..."



In truth, the Creator didn't have a chance. After an hour, it understood that it had lost and surrendered the battleground. But by then, it was too late. If it had not been so stubborn and had returned to its physical self immediately after the first encounters with the humans, when it first realized the intruders' strength, things might have turned out differently. Instead, its retreat at this late point could no longer change anything. By that time, the intruders had already destroyed all of the Creator's creatures guarding the citadel and had taken control of the energy line running underneath. Upon returning, the planet's brain could only blindly defend itself using any sources of energy it had left. Rather than remaining on the conquered battlefield as the brain would have hoped, the main horde of humans followed the retreating Creator to a new conflict. By now, the humans' energy had far surpassed that of the brain. They merely needed to surround the brain and, as one unified group, tighten the circle. The brain was unable to attack any longer, for any offense would have resulted in holes in its defense.

But its awkward defending was of no use by now, either. One by one, the brain lost all of its energy sources, and then its internal resources became rapidly depleted. An hour later, it could no longer defend itself and was on the verge of death. All remaining internal energy served only to keep the brain alive. It found itself at the complete mercy of the humans' will. Cowering deep in its cave, the brain fearfully listened to the conquerors' approaching steps and awaited their arrival. A human figure sprang up before the brain. Ardas saw, from the brain's point of view, himself standing before a formless mass of protoplasm weighing no less than a ton and occupying a large part of the dark cave.

"Greetings, Creator," the human announced. "I've been wanting to meet you for a long time. You see, we'd heard a lot about you and decided to pay you a visit. Hope you don't mind."

Behind the human's back, a giant spear was threateningly forming out of air molecules. Two thoughts occurred to the planet's brain: "It seems they have no worse command of particle transformation than do I," and, "The end is at hand. What is he doing with that long, sharp thing?"

Here, the vision sent to Ardas broke off.

"What do you think about that, Human?"

"I think we were watching a future that will not occur."

"Why won't it occur? On the contrary, it seems very real."

"I see, brain, that you are not very observant," Ardas retorted. "Didn't you pay attention to what I said in the vision: 'Greetings, Creator, I've been wanting to meet you for a long time. You see, we'd heard a lot about you and decided

to pay you a visit. Hope you don't mind.' The man who addressed you had not yet met you. Otherwise, he would have said, 'Greetings, creator, thus we meet again.' I, as you can see, already know you. Therefore, only one logical conclusion remains—that by inviting me, you changed the future, and the battle we just saw will never happen."

"Good explanation, Human. I see that I have chosen wisely in inviting you here. Well, I guess you can be on your way. Just remember your promise."

"Wait, Creator, I have one more question," declared Ardas, unable to relax.

"Ask. It's quite fun talking to you. And I have too much free time, anyway."

"What are you? Do many of your kind exist? Tell me a brief history of your nation, if you could."

"My, how curious you are. All right, I'll try to convey the essence of our existence. We came to being in this galaxy. Who our creators were, or whether we came to be by chance, we have never been able to learn, although believe me, we devoted endless amounts of time and effort to the question. Some even had thoughts of going back in time and observing our origins on our mother planet. Luckily, these thoughts remained unimplemented, for such attempts could have impaired causal relationships and altered our history. Our mother planet did not enchain us for long. As soon as we discovered the abilities you see now, we began traveling throughout the galaxy. Yet we needed some purpose. Initially, out of a calling to create, we began formulating new life. Then our purpose became more concrete. My race became interested in a parallel universe. If you don't yet know, our universe is not the only one. A plethora of universes exist, each one with a symbiotic, parallel counterpart. Gigantic energy canals interconnect them, and we had no way of breaking into these channels. The inhabitants of parallel universes are also tightly bound to each other. When an inhabitant of our universe dies, the part that you call a soul travels to symbiotic space by means of these energy canals. Likewise, before the birth or other beginning of existence of one of our universe's inhabitants, its soul travels via these canals to join the body. We managed to determine that the same soul could arrive and depart an infinite number of times. Some of the souls we observed made the journey between universes thousands of times, others just a few. As for what determines these differences, we were never able to determine. In spite of our efforts, we were able neither to break into the energy canals nor find a way to the symbiotic universe. Over and over, we created new life on the planet and observed as a new energy canal formed to join the planet with the symbiotic universe. We were equally unsuccessful creating our own such energy canal. When we tried journeying to another galaxy, we found a race no less advanced struggling with the same conundrum. This other race was also creating life forms, including several belligerently minded ones.

“In the other galaxy, we first created the Sidargans. They seemed prolific and pugnacious, perfect for guarding our borders. Yet the Sidargans let us down, leading us to create the Dvarvans. That effort represented the last time our creations got some of our own genes, minus a great number of abilities, obviously. Why would we want the competition that would inevitably have arisen from excessively powerful creations? As it turned out, the Dvarvans carried out their assignment impeccably. They kept both our Great Enemies’ creations and the Sidargans from foolhardy invasions into the neighboring galaxy’s center. In the long run, though, most of us felt disappointed in our inability to answer that fundamental question: what follows death, or what would we find in the symbiotic universe? A large number of us began to feel that the only way to learn anything would mean dying and then seeing for ourselves. Our numbers dwindled drastically. They dwindled further when we realized that our knowledge amounted to little, and that we represented only meager grains in the vast unknown. Some of my compatriots proved that the galaxy enshrouding us was merely an atom in some kind of a substance, while the universe was no more than a molecule comprising an assortment of atoms. We had come to discover the relativity of size. Similar universes and galaxies existed in a microscopic world, as well. Nobody knows how far this sequence of cells and universes stretches, or where it ends. Which is the largest, final universe, and who lives there? Does the sequence even have an end? These questions have remained unanswered. A comprehension of our own inadequacy confronted us. Some broke away and lived only to travel, journeying from galaxy to galaxy. They never returned. Perhaps one of my kind continues to travel endless distances today. Others chose planets and became gods there—I’m one of them, in case you haven’t noticed. The majority simply decided to move to the symbiotic universe. Now only five remain that I can contact: myself in this galaxy and four others in the next one. Presumably, a few are still wandering somewhere, a couple may have completely shut themselves off from the outside world, and some small group of three or four could still be carrying out their experiments. But I can only guess about such questions. My nation’s time has passed. I think in a million years there won’t be a single one of us left. So there you have the whole history, Human.”

“And what about your Great Enemies?”

“The same problems; the same fate. They, too, have no more than ten individuals left. Once they represented evenly matched foes, then later honorable partners. They always stuck to our agreements. Those were good times. I often remember our quest for knowledge, our possibilities to create. It’s an indescribable feeling. Now, I’m a lonely little deity of this planet’s ants, playing war with the Sidargan hive. You know, maybe you and your people will clear away my boredom. I’ll be able to conduct my research again. Perhaps I’d even succeed in modifying you somewhat. I think it’ll be interesting. Would you like to know anything else?”

“No, at least not now. Maybe later. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be on my way.”

“Of course, just remember your promise to return.”

“I’ll always remember,” asserted Ardas, opening long-range teleportation gates to his backyard on Eduron.

“Yeah... it almost caught me. That was close,” thought the human. “It’s a good thing it all ended well. I won’t be sticking my head in a noose like that anymore. But that Creator is a real pig. I won’t be forgiving that invasion of my thoughts, and that kind of humiliation. What a mangy dog. ‘What does that mean, Human?’ It means that I’ve now seen and understood everything I need to do. Idiot. That entire vision, that’s what I got out of today. You showed me everything yourself, even which wording to use. A mangy scoundrel, not a Creator. I’ll keep my word. Of course I will. You should have asked normal, concrete questions. I didn’t lie to you; I really will return, and with a small group, only ten thousand people.”

The thought brought a smile to his face. “After all, that’s not very many compared to the total human population. And I’ll greet you, you unhappy coyote, you toothless beaver. I’ll greet you, well, word for word as you saw in the vision. You can’t change the future. That would be disrespectful to the future. I could have fed that naïve being even more stories about humans. You have to understand that humans are different. Our history has featured sacrifice, and betrayal, and honor, and deceit. We’ve had everything. You can’t draw conclusions from one example. That nitwit not only did so, it also hoped to catch me lying. How could you catch me lying if I never told a lie that whole time? On the contrary, the facts at hand were a matter for individual interpretation. That’s okay, we’ll have more opportunities to chitchat. We’ll see who gets to conduct experiments on whom. ‘Perhaps I’d even succeed in modifying you.’ In your dreams. We’ll be the ones modifying you. All right, time to calm down. Everything’s still in the future. For now, let it live in its calm unknown and wait for me. I’ll come.”

...•••

### ***The planet Eduron. 28 September 2015.***

“SO you think it believed you?”

“It believed me, Ligian; it believed me. I saw it clearly. Then it released me.”

“Released you? Ardas, the Creator isn’t that naïve, is it? Although, I suppose you would have fooled anybody, even most humans, and certainly the Ligians.”

“Would I fool you too, Tomas?”

“No, you wouldn’t lie to me. Don’t you remember what I told you about awakened humans? They can’t trick each other, and certainly not as well as you did.

“Hey, have you heard anything about symbiotic universes?”

“Of course. We’ve come across the energy threads, or more accurately, energy tunnels, the Creator mentioned. We tried to break in, but without any luck. For a while we observed souls coming and going, but we didn’t have a lot of time or resources for that research,” the Ligian replied.

“Tomas, there’s one thing I can’t figure out. If I separate from my physical body and travel in the metaphysical state, why can’t I enter the energy tunnel, if my soul can enter after my death?”

“Ardas, there’s a big difference between your journeys in the metaphysical state and the liberated soul. You, even while traveling in the metaphysical state, always maintain a link with your body. When you end a trip, you can return from anywhere. The body brings you back as soon as you let it. After the body’s physical death, the soul no longer has that kind of reciprocal link. We believe that the severance of this link with the physical body activates a code or a program that assures not so much free access into the energy tunnels between symbiotic universes, but more of a magnetism that draws the soul into the energy tunnel. It seems that a deceased being’s soul basically gets sucked in, and only in rare cases, when for some reason it refuses to acknowledge the break of its link with the body or this world, can especially strong-willed individuals resist the pull of the energy tunnels,” the Ligian tried to explain.

“You mean ghosts?”

“Yes. We could call them that. Of course, these are extremely rare cases, but they have a theoretical explanation and we can trace them in practice.”

“And what do you think about my plan,” Ardas changed the subject, “to awaken the humans and teach the Creator a lesson?”

“I’ve already told you, every human will agree with you and help you. You represent the beginning of the common human consciousness. Each awakened person will accept your current plan without any discussion. As a friend, I can tell you that the plan is sound. That bighead could use a thrashing. And the Ligians will take part in this battle.”

“Thank you, Tomas. Now I must visit the Clan Leader. They have captured some sort of strange creature with an unusual ship in their cosmic space, and they want me to stop by and take a look. So I’ll talk to you later.”

“Until next time, Ardas.”

## Part IV

# *The Harats*



***The planet Eduron, the Second Clan Leader's palace.  
28 September 2015.***

"WHAT do you think of him, Ardas?" the Leader of the Second Clan inquired.

The human stood next to the Clan Leader and his guards and observed the creature standing before them. Immediately upon seeing the captured being, Ardas had trouble recovering. He had never believed in heaven and hell or devils and angels, but now his incredulity was wavering. Though he understood that the sight before him represented just another intelligent life form, the stereotypes that the Church back on Earth forced on every Christian, it turned out, were powerful and compelling. Ardas needed every bit of his will to convince himself that the sight before him, an almost perfect rendition of a stereotypical representative of hell, merely appeared similar to one, and nothing more.

Standing tall, even slightly taller than the Isans, the captive featured powerful shoulders and hands, an almost humanoid face with a pointy beard, and large ram's horns on its head. His hands, five-fingered as with humans, appeared stronger and more massive, even taking his larger proportions into account. Dark red in color, the creature gazed back at everyone with yellow eyes that had no iris. Because of this contrast, his eyes appeared to shine as brightly as torches. His legs were solid and straight, and their proportions in relation to the body were similar to a human's. The legs' only characteristic different from humans was the feet, which were large, almost completely round, and featured fifteen toes spread in all directions. Ardas settled down somewhat; the creature had no hooves or tail. The human didn't fear the being, but the similarities between ancient human myths or religious histories and the present image shocked him. This couldn't be a coincidence. Either mankind had already met these maroon creatures and the myths basically reflected man's collective memory, or humans were still to meet them, and the myths and legends represented horrifying expressions of foreboding.

The prisoner clearly appeared dangerous and did not seem afraid. His movements appeared as fluid and powerful as a tiger's, while his glance seemed

so piercing it could see right through everything. The human reached for the captive's thoughts and quickly retreated. Before him stood a murderer who reveled in the suffering of his victims. His entire mental background oozed with yearning to annihilate all lower or inferior life forms, which, in his opinion, were unworthy to even slither at his race's feet. Most interestingly, he included all those who did not belong to his race among these inferior beings. This was no honorable warrior, but rather a psychopath, possessed by a mania of killing. Ardas failed to discover anything more concrete due to an immensely strong mental block, the destruction of which would have immediately destroyed the captive's brain. The block did not seem natural, nor, in fact, did the creature appear to have any mental capabilities at all. In other words, someone else, someone capable of mastering the mechanics of mental warfare and control, was using the prisoner and seeking to protect the information inside his head.

"He is very dangerous, my lord. I know you want to suggest your son Iskik fight this creature. That would be very risky. Where does Iskik now stand in the elite forces?"

"He's third, not including Iskin," the Leader of the Second Clan replied.

"If you want to let somebody fight this prisoner, send the elite forces' best warrior. Don't risk your son. The duel could result in the warrior's death, because this red one is a hardened killer."

"Where is he from? We recorded the location of the teleportation gates through which his ship came, but they closed before we could trace where they had opened. Our specialists believe that the being is an experimenter who failed to open the teleportation gates correctly and thus arrived here. From all of our inquiries, we managed to deduce only that his race is called the Harats," the Leader of the Second Isan Clan explained.

"I cannot confirm or deny this. He has an excellent mental block, the penetration of which would deactivate the creature's brain, even though the prisoner has no mental abilities of its own. Someone else is taking part in this game."

"What do you recommend I do?"

"At first, appoint the best of the Sidargans who have come to take part in battle, and then, if you see that it's possible to defeat this being, send the top warrior from the elite forces," Ardas suggested.

"My warriors will not be happy."

"Better unhappy than dead. The Sidargan who fights will force his foe to reveal his abilities, but I don't think the Sidargan will win. Then you yourself will decide what to do. If the creature seems invincible, I myself will take him on."

“Alright, Ardas. Your advice has not let me down yet, and I don’t think this case will prove any different. Tomorrow, come to watch the duel.”

“Of course. I myself am interested what this red, horned Harat is capable of.”

...•••

### ***The planet Eduron. 29 September 2015.***

SLOWLY, the Sidargan circled his opponent. The Clan Leader had selected the very best of the Sidargan warriors who had come to participate in the battles on Eduron. Clad in lustrous black armor and a matching helmet, the male stood about 8 feet tall and was armed with a two-headed polearm sickle and a sword. On his legs he wore combat spurs, which the warrior could use to cut or jab the enemy. His tail stood upright in combat position. The Harat stood calmly and, out of the corner of his eye, observed his circling foe. He wore something similar to pants and shoes, but neither the head, nor the chest, nor the arms were covered. In his right hand, the Harat held a weapon that the Isans had found while searching his ship. The weapon appeared similar to an oversized pickaxe with a seven-foot handle. “It could be that that really is a pickaxe, not a weapon,” thought Ardas. “The Isans could have misinterpreted this tool’s function.” Yet even while armed so simply, the Harat seemed calm and totally self-confident. He even smiled, revealing rows of sharp teeth.

The Sidargan attacked. That this was an experienced warrior seemed clear. Having jumped high in the air, he struck with his polearm, tail, and spur simultaneously to various parts of his adversary’s body. This attack did not impress the Harat. Demonstrating stunning reflexes, he deflected the spear with a slight twist of his pickaxe. At the same time, the tail’s strike, aimed at the eyes, collided with the Harat’s swiftly lowered head and thick horns, which appeared solid enough to withstand not only the Sidargan’s tail but also a direct chop by an axe. As for the spur, the horned being paid it no attention, resulting in a slight gash of the midsection’s skin but no harm to the thick layer of abdominal muscles there.

In response, the Harat instantly extended his left arm and caught the Sidargan in midair. His left hand enveloped the opponent’s throat, which seemed well protected by armor and skeletal outgrowths. Here, the Harat demonstrated his true strength. While one hand held the Sidargan by the neck, the other threw down the pickaxe and punched the warrior in the chest. This blow pierced his armor, skeleton, muscles, and inner cavity, with his fist emerging out the foe’s back. Death came instantly, with only a series of convulsions continuing for a few seconds more. After pulling out his hand along with the Sidargan’s

heart, the horned creature turned to the hushed grandstands and roared. Ardas understood the message; the Harat was asking who would challenge him next.

“What do you think, Ardas?” asked the Second Clan Leader.

“That’s a physically strong creature. He will defeat and, probably, kill every one of your warriors. I think he would even defeat your five best warriors, but he has no mental or energy-based abilities. He would match up evenly with a modified Aloran, but an Atlantian would bowl him over in seconds. I think he believes in himself too much. Watch me reduce that self-confidence. For a better effect, I’ll fight only with his means.”

“Will you take a weapon?”

“No, I won’t be needing one. If I do, I’ll create one.”

The human appeared composed and sure of the battle’s outcome. As the city had been founded near the planet’s energy line (in fact, Ardas’ house stood directly above it), the human could calmly use almost unlimited amounts energy, which should suffice to defeat the arrogant Harat.

When he saw Ardas calmly approaching and recognized him as a new opponent, the Harat began to gargle loudly. The human understood that the crimson creature was expressing his exhilaration and contempt. Ardas stopped ten feet away. The Harat looked his foe over, gargled mockingly, threw down his pickaxe, and attacked . . . the very spot where the human had just stood. Ardas was already calmly standing behind the aggressor. Upon seeing the human again, the creature howled and, after spreading his arms, attacked again, expecting to grab his victim easily. Instead, the human did a somersault and elegantly jumped over the Harat’s head, ending up behind him again. Such a performance only enraged Ardas’ opponent. Deciding that the human was merely nimble but not strong, the maroon beast abandoned all defense and attacked again. This time, Ardas did not run away. The ten-foot giant basically jumped into an oncoming kick to the stomach and just as quickly flew backward fifteen feet, landing sprawled out on his back.

Only then did the Harat realize what he was dealing with. The red one stopped gargling and howling, stood slowly, stared down the human once again, raised his hands to his chest, and prepared for serious battle. Ardas slowly approached the discarded pickaxe, picked it up, and threw it to his opponent, as if to say, “Here, you’ll definitely need it now.” The Harat stopped playing the arrogant or superior one, taking the weapon and again attacking, only this time cautiously and not as recklessly. His blow was fast, aimed directly at Ardas’ temple. In terms of speed, it turned out, the Harat could have held his own against even an Aloran.

Yet the human was no Aloran. Having ducked and allowed the pickaxe to whiz past his head, Ardas immediately stood up and chopped the weapon’s shaft

with his hand. Because he had struck using the planet's energy line, he not only could have hacked a hard wooden shaft in half, he would have easily split the molecules of the most solid metal, as well. When the pickaxe's handle snapped, it seemed more like a toothpick than the solid weapon that had just withstood a spear's blow. After the chop, Ardas casually hopped backward.

One glance at the splinters in his hands, and the Harat understood that his journey through life would end there. He felt most upset about the fact that death would come at the hands of some little creature significantly smaller than him, a creature not even worthy of licking his feet. The Harat attacked the human one last time. Blind rage fueled this futile attempt. The human did not budge. He caught the Harat's arms, which were at least five times the size of his own, and, holding them by the wrists, began to slowly twist them. The Harat couldn't strike with his horns because Ardas held him at arms' length, he couldn't free his hands due to the tremendous force with which the human held them, and he couldn't kick with his feet from such close range. Furthermore, Ardas used his legs to block any attempt to kick with the thighs or knees. The Harat's struggle gradually became weaker, and his muscles could no longer withstand the stress and began to tear. Then, as fast as lightning, the human moved behind his foe and started breaking his arms backward, as opposed to forward as before. A loud snap rang out through the arena, then another. Both of the creature's arms, twisted out of their sockets, dangled limp besides his torso. Ardas struck the giant across the legs, knocked him to the ground, grabbed him by the horns, and dragged him across the dusty arena floor towards the Second Isan Clan Leader.

"He's learned his lesson. I think he'll prove easier to talk to now. My recommendation is to keep him alive in order to properly research and interrogate him," the human suggested after heaving his opponent toward the clan leader's loge.

"All right, Ardas. You performed splendidly. I enjoyed watching. Hand the being over to my warriors."

A few Isan warriors ran over to the silent Harat, lifted him roughly, and brought him inside.

"No Harat has ever had to endure that," thought the prostate alien. "Just wait. I'll live to warn the others. We'll find that race of midgets and slaughter them off. Our time will come. Now I must find out who they are and where they're from. Then they'll learn what Harat vengeance means."

•••••

## ***Demurg-controlled space. 1 October 2015.***

“THANK you, Lords, for agreeing to meet. The matter is fairly urgent, and we need to decide what to do next,” the White Circle Lord said as he opened the meeting.

“What’s happened, White Circle Lord?” asked the Green Circle Lord.

“You all, no doubt, know about the Harat Project. At the moment it is progressing more successfully than ever. All of the planet’s leadership is at our will. The few individuals who did not give in to our influence, or were too curious, have already been destroyed. Recently, we gave the Harat space gate technology, and the first attempt was made with a Harat pilot under our control. The planet is preparing for war. Our informational resources have already begun a massive processing of all the inhabitants. Another year or so and we’ll be ready for an invasion of Earth. However, we’ve hit an unforeseen snag. Our pilot miscalculated his coordinates and ended up in the Isans’ hands via a random teleportation.”

“It’s a good thing he ended up anywhere,” the Yellow Circle Lord interrupted. “He could have found himself beyond the galaxy’s limits. That Harat’s a lucky dog.”

“Maybe. It’s not quite clear yet. The Isans brought him to the planet Eduron and, on the advice of the Human, led him out to the battle arena.”

“Whom did he fight? How’d he do?” the Blue Circle Lord inquired.

“At first, against the best Sidargan on the Isans’ planet. The Harat defeated him in less than half a minute. After that, he had to fight the Human.”

“And?” the assembled Demurg Lords wondered. “Who won?”

“Who do you think? We should be proud of our creation. If only he weren’t dangerous to us. The Human won without even using his energetic or mental combat capabilities. This was an absolute mockery of the horned creature. He twisted off both of the Harat’s arms, knocked him to the ground, and dragged him by the horns across the entire arena. The Harat’s mood is frenzied. Their kind has never been so humiliated in all of history.”

“White Lord, what conclusions can we draw from this?” the Red Circle Demurg asked.

“They’re simple, my brother. We have to decide which of two possibilities is more realistic. The Harat will probably go mad and vow to get revenge by all available means. In that case, returning him to his home planet would be useful in terms of propaganda: we’ll present him as a victim and the Earthlings as treacherous bloodsuckers who are unworthy to slither besides the Harats and who dare humiliate this superior race. Or, he is scared and could begin to spread

panic. What do you think, Red Circle Lord? Lately you've been actively working with the Harats."

"I don't think he'll panic. Even if the Harat gets scared, he won't be able to stand that fear and will try to destroy its source. The horned ones are too arrogant and bloodthirsty. He won't stop until he dies or kills the Human, or at least as many other Humans as possible. Of course, we'll have to impress upon him and others that such warriors represent rare exceptions, while most Humans are soft, cowardly beings deserving unmerciful destruction."

"I agree," the White Lord responded. "I suggest we press the Isans and force them to hand over the Harat for research and interrogation purposes. Then we could produce a clone and present his corpse to the Rational Union as a prisoner who died during interrogation. Do you agree?"

"Yes," the Demurg lords replied in unison.

"Does the Green Circle Lord agree as well?"

"I don't have much of a choice. Several times already, I've told you my opinion that we should form an alliance with the Humans, help them awaken, and stop trying to control them. We should treat them as equals. Only the Black Circle Lord supported my opinion. The others view Humans as too dangerous, and besides, a creation cannot be equal to its creator. Humans must either serve or be destroyed. You decided to destroy all the inhabitants of Earth, with the exception of a few chosen for research, and capture Ardas, he being the most genetically similar to the original Humans. I will follow the majority's will and will help you in every way I can, but I will not change my opinion."

"Excellent," replied the White Circle Lord.

"How's it going creating an opponent for the Human?" the Red Circle Lord inquired.

"Successfully, so far. We expect to succeed in creating an equal rival whom we will fully control," answered the Yellow Circle Lord, who had been responsible for the project lately. "I think we'll be fully ready by the start of the trial. We may have as many as three warrior specimens."

"Well then, brother Lords, it seems we are moving forward," the White Lord continued. "How are affairs with the Sidargans?"

"Here, we are not having much luck. The Sidargans are cooperating with the Inhabitants of Ligia, and it's obvious they're helping the Human. During the trial, we should probably expect some surprises from them. The Human is protected from any kind of observation, and so is the planet Eduron. We can rely only on our spies and informants. But we won't be able to prove any cooperation between the Sidargans, Ligians, and the Human. They are too strong. But on the other hand, we've also been secretive. Besides, I'm disturbed by the fact that the

Human has seemingly been in contact with the Creator. So far, I don't have any further information about this development. As soon as I do, I'll let you know," the Blue Circle Lord explained.

"All right. We move on with our plans," confirmed the White Lord. "You all know your assignments. The Green Circle will work on freeing the Harat. Agreed, Green Circle Lord?"

"Agreed."

"Now brothers, let's end this talk about business and have some fun. I have prepared a variety of pleasant surprises for you."

In good spirits, the Demurg lords followed the White Circle Lord, the meeting's initiator and host.

•••

### *Meanwhile, in Sidargan-controlled space.*

"WE have news, sisters."

"What is it, Dark Sister? Enlighten us," various voices responded.

"The Human visited the Planet of the Ants. As we expected, the test with which the hive's queen tried to surprise the Earthling was not successful, but I was surprised by the queen's newfound attitude toward the Human. After the Earthling went to meet with the planet's brain and thus saved the hive's city, it seems this sister became an active supporter of the Human. She informed me that she wants to help the Human, and is prepared to leave the planet and travel with one hundred warriors to the Rationals' trial as our representative."

"If she leaves the planet, who will lead the local Sidargans?" one of the assembled females inquired.

"While she's away, the Sidargans will be alone. The planet's brain has contacted her and offered an armistice of several years. Obviously, the sister agreed," replied the Dark Sister, known as the Sidargans' ruler.

"Why is the brain behaving this way? In all of our history on that planet, there have never been any offers of truce," one of the sisters wondered.

"As far as we could gather, this was a result of its conversation with the Human. We tried to follow the conversation, but we failed to overhear all the details. For some reason, the Human promised to return to the planet. And there's another thing: the Ant Planet's brain is one of the Creators!"

"You mean, one of our own Creators?" clamored the Sidargan rulers.

"Yes, precisely. We had believed that all of them had died off. As it turns out, we've been mistaken," the Dark Sister stated gloomily.

"Then why does it attack us? We're its creations, almost like its children!"

"As far as we can tell, it's from boredom. As we had suspected earlier, the brain is basically playing with us. We're of no concern to it, or only to the extent that we can help relieve its boredom. It seems to have become more seriously interested in the Human."

"Can the Human stand up to it?" another participant asked.

"The Human can't, but the Humans can. From what I heard from our young sister, who had quite a bit of contact with it, the Earthling has concocted some sort of strategy and certainly does not plan to give in to the Creator. I think the Creator made a grave error in releasing the Human when it realistically could have captured the being," the Dark Sister explained.

"What should we do now? Should we help the Creator or the Human?"

"That's exactly what I want to hear from you. We have to decide whom to help."

"I say we help the Human," opined one of the Sidargans. "He will appreciate our assistance. The Creator does not value us and won't in the future, so why should we worry about it?"

"But it's our Creator," another Sidargan objected.

"So what? We are its creations, but it treats us like toys. We don't owe it anything."

"We owe it our lives," some others argued.

"All right," interrupted the Dark Sister. "We'll do what we always do when our opinions are divided—we'll vote. All those in favor of warning the Creator and refusing to help the Human? Three sisters. All those in favor of continuing to help the Human and not paying the Creator any attention? Thirteen sisters plus me makes fourteen. Those who disagree, will you go along with the majority?"

"Yes, of course. As always," answered the three Sidargans, though not in a particularly satisfied tone.

"Then it's decided. We continue to help the Human, and we send the Ant Planet hive's ruler to the Rational Union's trial. Agreed?"

"Yes," the audience responded unanimously.



## Part V

# *The Scout's Success*



***The planet Eduron. 28 October 2015.***

CHRZ finally got lucky. His good fortune happened quite accidentally. While hunting, he was running after his prey and soon found himself in a clearing, where he discovered a house matching the Isans' description of the Human's. He would not have even noticed the house if he hadn't accidentally found himself directly in front of it. Something was guarding the house's vicinity. Anyone walking by was redirected elsewhere. Any glance in that direction naturally strayed to the side, while the brain failed to record the view. The Dvarvan was able to fixate a view of the house only because his brain structure was dissimilar to that of the Isans', for the protective measures were meant to guard against curious locals. Now all he had to do was get inside, camouflage himself as a tree, and wait for the Human. But even this would prove more difficult than expected. The Human did not rely merely on mental security; he also used some sort of repulsive force field. Time and again, the Dvarvan circled the house, testing the strength of the force field. After fifteen consecutive failed attempts, Chrz heard a voice.

"I see you're not having much luck," the voice noted, "but you really want to get inside. Now what does a Dvarvan need from me? Come in. I'll remove the force field and we'll talk, if you agree, of course. I won't force you. If you don't want to, run along."

Despite his astonishment, the Dvarvan did not budge. The Human did not seem hostile or aggressive, so the scout saw no reason to run. Sneaking in later might prove impossible, so Chrz decided to accept the Human's invitation.

"All right, I'm coming, Human," the Dvarvan communicated telepathically. "Where are you?"

"I'm in the yard in front of the house. You'll see. I'm sitting on a bench in the gazebo."

"I'll be there in a second."

True to its word, the Human removed the force field. Jogging through the trees, fields, and a stream, the scout understood that the Human was no stranger to such concepts as harmony and beauty. Secretly, he hoped that this would not prove an aggressive race and that, after the Dvarvans' difficult war with the Sidargans, another such engagement did not await them. At least, Chrz had no such desire. After all, he was a scout, not a warrior, and his calling was to investigate, not fight. Perhaps some of his race's warriors would want to test the Human's powers, but Chrz was certainly not one of them. He felt the Human was sincere and meant him no harm. The scout had become accustomed to trusting his instincts. This trait represented one of the main characteristics of a Dvarvan scout—a finally tuned and almost unerring intuition.

The Human was sitting in the gazebo before the house, exactly as he had described.

"Come, Dvarvan, let's talk. Can you communicate mentally?"

"Yes, I can."

"What led you to me, Dvarvan? I see you've been searching for me. Or perhaps I should address you differently?"

"You may call me Dvarvan, because I have a very difficult name. I've been searching for you, Human, though I had not planned on talking to you. But that's how it turned out. I'd like to know what exactly you are and whether you pose a danger to us. Why did you kill the Dvarvan scout?"

"I didn't want to kill him. I tried to seize him, because I didn't understand who he was and why he resembled an Isan. I regret that. I don't like to kill or to watch anyone die. Had I known everything about you earlier, I wouldn't have given him up to the Isans without talking to it first," Ardas explained.

"We understood as much," admitted the Dvarvan. "Perhaps after our conversation, you will also learn something about us. What are you seeking, Human? Did you really promise the Sidargans that you would destroy us?"

"How should I put this," Ardas shrugged. "I didn't promise the Sidargans I would destroy you, only that I would help them return to their home galaxy. In my opinion, we'll be able to discuss that matter in more detail and find a solution useful to both of us. What am I seeking? Maybe I shouldn't tell you, but I will reveal a little. My primary goal is to awaken and free the humans. Do you know anything about humans, Dvarvan?"

"Nothing, Human. Neither where you're from nor what you are."

"I'll make you a deal. Can you read the Isans' language?"

"Yes," the scout replied.

"I'll let you into the house and give you access to the information system. You'll be able to read all about the humans and then ask me questions. I will answer them all, but then you'll have to answer mine. What do you think?"

"I agree, Human," the Dvarvan answered without much deliberation. "When could I start?"

"Become an Isan and let's go inside. You can start immediately. I see you guys are all business. You don't waste time. I like that."

"Another question, Earthling: why are you telling me everything like this? What's in it for you?"

"That's simple," Ardas explained. "I think right now we're deciding what we'll be in the future, friends or foes. I'd like you to make that decision based on all of the information. I hope we'll be friends. If I lied to you now, I think your race would figure that out in the future and would not trust me. Furthermore, the information I can get from you matters quite a bit to me. That will save me time and allow me to answer certain questions more quickly or make other decisions. You'd eventually learn everything about me anyway, whereas a failure on my part to collaborate could prematurely determine your opinion of humans. So right now, full cooperation with you is completely in my best interest.

"I see. If you'll excuse me, I'm going over to the woods by the house. I want to change my form."

Ten minutes later, the Dvarvan, now resembling an Isan, emerged from the woods and headed across the field toward the house. After heading straight to the room containing the terminal connected to Eduron's information system, Chrz went to work. Ardas glanced at the busy Dvarvan several times. "Apparently, these guys have insane endurance," the Human thought after noticing that the guest had been reading continuously for twenty-four hours without even shifting in his seat. Within a few more hours, the Dvarvan knew everything he could learn from the Rationals' information net. Actually, he was not able to learn everything. The scout had to rely on information collected by the Isans, because the Demurgs' security codes prevented him from hacking into their information system. Data collected by other races of the Rational Union was cursory and patchy. Chrz was not completely satisfied with his work, but at least he now had some familiarity with the topic.

"I'd like to continue our conversation, Human," the Dvarvan announced as he sat near Ardas in the same gazebo where they had talked before.

"By all means, ask. I assume our deal still stands? After this, you'll answer all of my questions?"

"Yes, it stands. First of all, I wanted to know what you plan to do next. Specifically, what will you do after the Rational Union's trial? If it's a secret, believe me, we won't even reveal this information to the Creators."

"All right, but first I want to clarify something. Could you please open up your mental background, because so far I can't break in. Your thinking is too foreign and different from anything I've encountered before. I will always need to know whether you're lying," Ardas laid out his conditions.

"Okay, I'll try to make my mental background as similar to the Isans' as possible. Will that suffice?"

"Yes, totally. Thank you. Now I'll try to answer your question. You see, once I awoke, I learned the humans' history, their purpose, and the fate that other races have planned for us. This news did not make me happy. I have always been a patriot of my nation and country. As it turns out, I care about mankind just as much," Ardas explained. "My plan is very simple. After the Rationals' trial, I'll stay for a while longer and study some more before returning to Earth, but I'll preserve the possibility of opening teleportation gates to Eduron or certain other planets. By periodically leaving Earth, I'll avoid any trapping effects. On my home planet, I'm thinking of gradually organizing and awakening people, then transferring them here or to other reserve locations. Once we have awakened enough individuals, we'll be able to require that others hold us in higher regard and stop treating us as toys or tools."

"What are your plans regarding the Dvarvans?"

"None, so far. I have no hostile position toward you. Though I'll have to help the Sidargans, I hope to do so through negotiations with you by forcing those aggressive creatures into rigid restrictions and forbidding them from spreading towards your galaxy's center. After spending time with one of the Creators, I know that your race has a mission of protecting our galaxy from races produced by the Creators' enemies. That's why you stopped the Sidargans, who could have provoked a massive invasion of foreigners. I can guarantee you that I will not hamper the task the Creators gave you, and will help you fully in that regard."

"What is your relationship with the Sidargans?"

"They help me. As I already mentioned, I've promised to help them, too."

"You spoke with one of the Creators. Was there a conflict between you?"

"No, we spoke peacefully. I promised to return to the Planet of the Ants and intend to keep my promise," Ardas answered.

"Well then, excellent. If we were allies, would you help us if the need arose?"

“Always. But I will not contribute to a war against the Sidargans. I’d like to decide any disagreements between your races by negotiation.”

“But why do you need all that? Why awaken the Humans? Think about it—you’d be the most powerful being on Earth. Millions would obey you. Every once in a while you’d jump to another planet to free yourself of the inhibiting traps’ effects, and then you’d return. You’d be the eternal ruler of Earth,” the Dvarvan revealed his vision of an alternate future.

“Interesting viewpoint, scout. I was thinking about that. But is that important? Do you think I’d be happy serving as the ruler of the world? Don’t tell me you didn’t consider the loneliness I would feel in that situation? Everyone I love or will love would die. I would lose all feeling, and I’d have neither friends nor comrades-in-arms. Those around me would no longer have anything in common with me. A man can be happy only when among those like him. I don’t need the kind of power that leads to hell. I need to lead a full life. To love and be loved, to have people close to me and not to fear losing them every moment—that’s what I want. That’s what most people want. When we got stuck on Earth, we lost all of that, and I’ve decided to return it to my people. While I won’t be able to help everyone at first, with time the circle of awakened ones will grow, until finally we’ll free all of mankind. Power, on the other hand, gets boring, as does anything else. I don’t need it.”

“So you’re not preparing to war with everyone?”

“Only if they attack us. I certainly don’t intend to enslave other races. We know too well what it means to be captive,” Ardas explained nonchalantly.

“This information satisfies me, Human. Now it’s your turn to ask.”

“Tell me about yourself and your nation. How do you change shape? What forms can you assume? How long does it take to transform? Can you imitate another’s way of thinking completely? Also, if you could, tell me about your nation’s social structure. Are there social groups? Do you have conflicts among you? How do you make decisions? I’ll try not to interrupt you.”

“I see I’ll have to tell you that which no other races know, except for us and the Creators. But a deal’s a deal.” The Dvarvan scout sighed as a true Isan would. “Our bodies comprise a seamless biomass with mutable internal organs. In our entire bodies we have only two permanent, although changeable in form, organs: our brain and heart analogues. They look different, but in terms of function they are identical to yours. The biomass, nimble in nature, can take on almost any form. We can imitate both solid and viscous liquids, but with one condition—our bodies must have full information about the imitated object. This information passes to us through physical contact with the subject. That is, we have to be touching whatever form we want to imitate for a fairly long time. During such contact, thanks to mutable organs on our surface, we analyze the

subject's internal and external structure. According to the clock you use, this process of collecting the required information can take up to twelve hours. The transformation itself takes less, up to a half hour, depending on the subject's complexity. Living beings represent greater challenges. We must familiarize ourselves not only with their structure, but also their habits and behavior, and for beings having a brain, peculiarities of speech, social status, and so forth. Where unknown races are concerned, usually a scout needs at least half a year to collect information sufficient for transformation. Only mass limits the transformation. Roughly 1,300 pounds compose our body mass. We can't entirely transform into a subject significantly more massive than us, for example weighing five tons, or one much smaller, say, weighing twenty pounds. The Sidargans mistakenly took us for body snatchers, but we've never been anything similar. We are simply imitators, nothing more. But we can't totally imitate thoughts. There used to be cases when scouts, after working in one location for a long time, could make their mental and emotional backgrounds very similar to those of imitated subjects, but you or any Demurg master would easily tell the difference. We made several attempts to join the Sidargan common consciousness, but these attempts failed for even the most experienced scouts. They always tell us apart, because we can't quite mimic the mental waves Sidargans emit or their thinking or feelings. If one Dvarvan acquires information, he can pass it to another through mere physical contact. In this way, we share any data that could prove necessary. Scouts can die, and sometimes they do so. Before dying, they send out a final mental impulse, thereby passing on all their collected information to other Dvarvans.

"Our organizational structure is not complicated. Dvarvans fall into several groups: thinkers, scouts, warriors, engineers, and a few others of lesser importance. Some of us don't belong to any group, and simply help form our society. If a need arises, members of society become individual supplements for the other groups. During our war with the Sidargans, more than half of our society served as warriors. Scouts are developed from volunteers having suitable aptitude. They probably represent the most respected group in our society. The most esteemed members of each group make the most important decisions together. Dvarvans always decide matters unanimously. We have never, in all our history, experienced a conflict between us. Next, we coordinate all decisions with the Creators. Their opinions are often decisive. The Dvarvans will never forget who granted them life and will never be ungrateful to the Creators.

"I've told you everything, Human, or do you want to ask anything else?"

"Thank you, Scout. This information is very important to me. I don't think we have hostile intentions toward each other and can cooperate. What do you think?"

"If I agree to cooperate with you and send the others such a recommendation, what would you want from us and what could you offer?"

"I'd like information. And I'd offer, as I said before, every possible type of assistance in implementing the objectives the Creators assigned you," Ardas explained calmly, without hurrying. Then he thought:

"Sometimes this creature acts like a child. I have to repeat the same thing three times."

"What information do you require?"

"Various kinds. First, I'd like to know more about the Harats. I suspect that you have not encountered this race either, but you could ask the Creators. Besides, I have a plan for which I would need your help personally."

"What kind of help?" the Dvarvan inquired skeptically.

"You see, an Aloran ship landed on Eduron today. They came to take the Harat currently in the Isans' possession. The Clan Leader has asked me for my opinion on what to do with the creature. I could concur with the Isans' idea to hand the Harat over to the Demurgs, but I have a suspicion that the pale ones have something to do with this mysterious race. So the plan would be such: I would lead you unimpeded into the Aloran ship, where you could imitate some part of the ship's interior, for example, an armchair. In this way, you would travel to the Harat's planet (I think this is where he'll be presented) and learn everything about this race's purpose," Ardas explained.

"This is a complicated assignment for a scout. My mission was to learn everything about you."

"And you've completed it perfectly. This would present a new challenge for you. From what I remember, you are not an experienced scout, and such missions would increase your skill and usefulness to your society," Ardas reasoned, observing the scout.

The Dvarvan contemplated briefly.

"That really is a pretty interesting suggestion." After some initial doubts, the scout agreed, asking, "How would you get me into the ship?"

"Easily. I would ask the Clan Leader to tell the Alorans to disembark and allow me to check the ship. As motivation, I'd use my suspicions of a relationship between the Demurgs and the Harat. Then I'd carry you onboard in the shape of some object. You would look around the ship and decide what form you should assume. Then the rest would be up to you."

"The odds of success are fairly good. I agree. When do we start? I'll pass on my recommendation to cooperate with your race along with my newfound information tonight," the scout, impatient to begin the greatest mission of his young career, said.

"I'll talk to the Clan Leader today. We can head to the ship tomorrow, before it leaves. Go back to the information system and find plans of the Aloran ship and details about the equipment inside. I'll soon inform you of this ship's exact name and number. You'll be able to find everything about it in the information system."

"All right. My current form requires Isan food, because my internal organs are Isan and function accordingly. Do you have anything edible?"

"Yes, guests visit me often. Come, I'll show you."

Chatting amicably, the two headed to the dining room, where Ardas retrieved a feast fit for an Isan out of a special refrigerator.

•••

### *Eduron, the next day.*

CHRZ observed the busy Alorans and the calm Harat. Everything went according to plan. The Isan Clan Leader allowed the Human to inspect the ship and carry a box inside, all without any questions. Apparently, the Isans treated the Earthling's opinions and suspicions quite seriously. Chrz, in watching the planet's inhabitants interact with the Human, could not help but feel the same respect and friendliness the Isans showed toward Ardas. The Dvarvan made note of this fact. In his opinion, such behavior meant either that the Human was a trustworthy and honorable friend, or that it knew how to deceive masterfully. Yet the scout did not sense that the Human seemed two-faced. It really seemed to want to help the residents of Eduron. The Human convinced Chrz himself to be an ally. But the scout somewhat doubted whether other Dvarvans and the Creators would make the same decision.

Once onboard, the plan evolved even more easily. The night before, Chrz had already decided to get rid of one of the cockpit chairs and assume its form. It took the Dvarvan only fifteen minutes to study the chair's structure, surface temperature, and rigidity, and another fifteen to become the same kind of chair in place of the other one. After wishing the scout success, the Human bade farewell and removed the chair the same way as it had gotten the Dvarvan into the ship—by using telekinetic powers to fly it through the air. Ardas told him about telekinesis, but for the Dvarvan the concept remained a mystery that only the Creators and, as he now knew, the Human controlled. Of the entire demonstration, the scout most enjoyed the part when he got to elevate. Imitating a box and floating after Ardas, controlled only by the Human's will, Chrz enjoyed every minute. Now he understood why other scouts enthusiastically exchanged stories of their experiences imitating airborne creatures. It turned out that receiving general information about flight did not nearly measure up to flying. The Dvarvan had no need to talk to the Human any more, for they had

already discussed everything the night before and any frivolous chatter would have to wait for a more appropriate time.

Chrz was not alone for long. When the Alorans and the Harat boarded the ship, they did not notice anything different. Not even the pilot, who sat in the bogus chair, suspected anything. Chrz took pride in his actions. Though not an experienced scout, he was enjoying an amazing run of success. Observing the setting, Chrz remembered another one of the Human's explanations. He had never wondered why he could see and hear his environment perfectly, even when the object he was imitating had no sensory organs. As Ardas had explained to him, at such times he was surveying his surroundings from a metaphysical state. Apparently, the Dvarvan could monitor sights and sounds without leaving his physical body, doing everything while in the metaphysical state, thus avoiding drawing attention from even the most experienced Demurg Circle Lord.

The Harat appeared calm. Chrz sensed a huge wave of relief and, at the same time, an equally strong hatred toward the Human. It did not seem that the Harat had found himself among strangers. He interacted actively with the Alorans, asking about the latest news from home. Likewise, the Alorans appeared to know the passenger well. Scuttling around the ship and thoroughly checking for surveillance devices, the Alorans recounted events on the planet Harat and answered questions about Earthlings. Their answers lacked a lot of specifics. Clearly, they knew little about Humans. One pilot told of the Human's fight against a modified Aloran, a duel that took place several months ago. The Harat listened attentively, but the Dvarvan could tell that the horned creature wanted to know much more. Not having found any surveillance equipment or other foreign objects onboard, the Alorans livened up noticeably and began preparing for takeoff.

"It's starting," Chrz thought, sensing the rising ship's vibrations.

...•••

### ***Dvarvan-controlled space. 31 October 2015.***

CONFUSION spread among the Dvarvans. After receiving the scout's information and his recommended course of action, they did not know what to do. First of all, scouts rarely got involved in decisions, and such recommendations did not represent standard procedure. Second, scouts always displayed impartiality in their evaluations, while this time the Human had clearly made an impression on the youngster. The Dvarvans were not used to making rash decisions, but here their scout had resolved, on his own initiative, to start a new investigation and to help the Earthling. Of course, everyone recognized the importance of his collected information, and it balanced out the unorthodox methods Chrz used to gather it. The decision-makers could hardly reprimand the young scout after he had

accomplished his assignment so well. But agreeing with his recommendations and rushing into an alliance with the Humans would mean breaking with a long-standing Dvarvan tradition of not hurrying to make decisions.

Besides, differences of opinion arose between castes. The warriors felt that they did not need the Humans' assistance, for they could easily fulfill their calling themselves. On the other hand, the scouts, motivated by solidarity and the opportunity to learn more, supported their representative. The thinkers' caste, meanwhile, thought that allies as strong as the Humans would surely prove useful, and fairness dictated paying for such an alliance with the scouts' research. Regular members of Dvarvan society cared little for such matters, and they did not involve themselves in trivial problems like alliance formation. The Dvarvans also asked the Creators for their opinion. After discussing the question with the ruler of the Planet of the Ants, the Creators replied that they would not oppose a temporary Dvarvan-Human alliance but would leave the final decision to the Dvarvans. Also, the Creators transferred all the information about the Harats that Chrz had requested.

Ultimately, the scouts' opinion proved decisive. The thinkers, recognizing that their control over information would grant them the greatest role in the new alliance, agreed with the proposal. The engineers neither participated in the debate nor expressed a clear preference. Other castes agreed with the thinkers. Alone as the minority, the warriors refused to alter their stance as opponents of the alliance, but they agreed to work together with the other Dvarvans and, if they need arose, to help the Humans. Soon thereafter, all the scouts received the information Chrz had collected, as well as orders to help the Human in every way possible. Hence, the Dvarvans became allies with the Humans.

•••

### ***Eduron. 28 January 2016.***

"GREETINGS, Iskin," Ardas hailed the veteran warrior. "You wanted to meet with me?"

"Thank you for stopping by, Ardas. I really need to speak openly with you. I'm restless and full of doubt. I can't hide my thoughts from you any more."

"Tell me what happened, Iskin. What are your doubts about? Tell me everything." The Human tried to calm the shaken Isan warrior.

"I doubt you and the other Humans. Sometimes you seem so honorable, friendly, and sincere—basically the type of being one can always count on. But other times, I think that all of that is just an act, because in truth you are a crafty creature, capable of lying and deceiving remarkably. Perhaps you simply plan on freeing your people from your planet's traps and then conquering the whole

galaxy, while you turn the Isans into faithful slaves. Tell me, Human, the real truth. What are you: a loyal friend or a devious liar?"

"You have a good intuition, brother," Ardas thought. "What am I going to do with you now? I could finish you. Your heart would stop and not even a dog would bark. But such an authoritative warrior could prove useful later. I guess I'll have to start using mental force on the Isans sooner than expected. If only you knew how close to the truth you've stumbled. The Isans don't matter to me. You're useful only as an instrument for freeing the humans, and if this goal requires sacrificing every member of your race, so be it. Okay, we'll talk, work on your brain, instill trust and respect for Humans and endless friendship toward me. You'll offer your head for us yet, and you'll even lead others joyfully to their death, fighting for the interests of humans. Of course, if everything goes well, we won't need all that."

"I understand you, Iskin," Ardas replied in a slightly muted voice. "Tell me, why do you see me as crafty?"

"Don't be mad, Ardas. Maybe I'm wrong. Explain that battle with the White Circle Lord. There you acted very deviously. You pretended to surrender and then attacked," recalled the old warrior, his head hung in shame.

"I think, Iskin, that you don't know humans very well. I'll tell you two stories. One is about a group of 47 samurai, who lived in a country on Earth called Japan over 300 years ago. These warriors swore their allegiance to their longtime master. By order of the country's ruler, their master received the death penalty for drawing his sword in the ruler's palace, an act strictly forbidden by law. As it turned out, this honorable warrior drew his sword because of a palace servant's taunts and insults. The master had refused to pay the palace servant a bribe for palace etiquette lessons, so the servant mocked him whenever he could. One day, the warrior ran out of patience. The country's ruler understood everything, but he couldn't retract his own law. He had to sentence the warrior to death. At the same time, the ruler also punished and banished the deceitful palace guard and ordered the punished warrior's servants not to seek revenge against the person who insulted their master. But these 47 samurai preferred to die than live without honor and let someone soil their master's memory. After searching for a year, they found the servant and slew him. Knowing that the country's ruler would sentence them to death, they decided to take their own lives and die honorably, that is, to die having fulfilled their duty to their master. All 47 samurai committed suicide beside their master's grave, but they never broke their vow of allegiance to their master. You see, Iskin, humans are honorable and always seek to keep their word, even if doing so costs them their lives."

Iskin listened, and his doubts melted like snowflakes on a hot day. The Human's words seemed so convincing, while the speaker appeared friendly and

understanding. This story became almost sacrosanct for Iskin. He now believed that Humans were honorable and noble. Ardas continued to speak.

"The other story, Iskin, concerns a tribe of warriors called the Mongols. They lived 800 years ago and conquered a large part of Earth. These warriors had excellent military tactics and used them ideally. At the beginning of every battle, some of the Mongols attacked the enemy, while the others laid an ambush. The attacking horsemen appeared realistic and savage, but after a while they began to flee. Opponents thought that the Mongols were scattering and hurriedly chased after them. When the opponent's orderly ranks fell apart, these horsemen turned around and, joined by the reserves, attacked the disorganized enemy. Even my countrymen have suffered from such Mongol attacks. That, Iskin, is called military tactics, not deceit. You used a similar strategy against the Sidargans. One must differentiate between war against one's enemies and behavior with one's friends. You can defeat a foe by outsmarting him, but you must always act faithfully and openly with your friends. The Demurgs were my enemies, with the Atlantans they outnumbered me, and I could not engage them without any trickery. The Isans are my friends. I will never fight against them. People living on Earth have lost their abilities and their sense of community, but most of them have remained honorable. You have observed me and should agree that awakened humans are not aggressive. We are peaceful creatures desiring to live in harmony. If the humans awakened, they would not fight amongst themselves and would help their friends. I'll tell you the truth, Iskin. I don't want to lose everything I've gained while on Eduron, so when I return to Earth, I'm thinking of constructing teleportation gates linking my native planet with my house on Eduron. Every few months, I'd secretly return to Eduron and regain my powers. I want to help my people on Earth end war, famine, and disease."

The Human explained everything so sincerely and openly that Iskin became rattled. Ardas trusted him fully and acted justly, because Iskin would never betray him. All of the veteran warrior's doubts disappeared.

"Those silly thoughts," thought Iskin, upset at himself. "How did they even arise? What nonsense! The Human has explained everything. I must help Ardas at all times. From now on, I resolve to keep all secrets, defend the Human, and even offer my life for such a great warrior, if necessary."

Iskin steadfastly decided to deem Ardas a friend, and to silence anyone who spoke poorly of his friend. Actually, such talk came only from the Demurgs. But the Demurgs were a whole different matter. None of the Isans had forgotten the pale ones' Great Goal. Who knew if they had abandoned their former intentions or were simply waiting for the right moment? If necessary, Iskin would stand shoulder to shoulder with the Human in battle against the Demurgs.

After speaking for a few more minutes, Ardas and Iskin parted ways. On his way back, Ardas felt horrible. He took no joy in what he had done. Using

mental force to make someone a friend did not represent an ideal solution. Of course, the mental influence had taken a subtle form. He did not break Iskin's will, instead imparting certain words with increased importance while repressing other thoughts. Even an experienced Demurg master observing Iskin would not sense the presence of mental influence. Still, his actions involved mental force against another thinking creature, a necessary but unpleasant evil. Ardas calmed down only by considering the problems this warrior could have caused if he had followed through with his suspicions, and by envisioning what kind of a future would have then awaited Iskin.

•••••

### ***Eduron. 12 February 2016.***

"NO, you're not doing it right, Ardas. I'll try to explain everything in more detail," the Ligian offered. "How do you think this chair differs from that rock?"

"In the structure of the molecules and the ties between them."

"Correct, you understand that much. That's how you've been changing the form or complexion of objects. But don't you think the same applies to air?"

"Maybe, but how can I discern air molecules and change their structure if I can't see them?"

"You're simply not looking in the right place. Don't focus on the big picture. First of all, distinguish a spot from its surroundings and look only on it. Once you've done that, imagine the movement of air particles. They look exactly like a rock's molecules, only their structure differs a little. When you succeed in distinguishing a point, demarcate and separate the entire plot you need. Then, once you feel and see the atoms of air in that plot, begin altering them. You know what molecules of iron or rock look like, so change the structure of the air molecules into iron or rock molecules—you decide which. You have enough energy to do it. Later, give the altered molecules form and shape, and create bonds between them to give the object the solidity it needs. Don't try it now; it won't work at once anyway. Use the experience you already have in transforming objects. Try again later, when I'm not around. For now, tell me about the Dvarvan. Did you learn anything new from him?"

"No, nobody got in touch with me. You didn't find out anything?"

"We're trying, but there are too few of us. We have to devote all of our energy and attention to the conflict with the Demurges. They're using great resources in an effort to break through the shield that the Sidargans and we have around this planet. It seems their entire Blue Circle has unified for this purpose. How are your plans going?"

"Not bad. A week ago I finished equipping the secret house. Your lessons on the transformation of materials really helped. I created a repellent signal and added an energy barrier. There's enough energy for everything, as long as I lay it out in the right directions. No living being on this planet will even come close. Yesterday I looked, and I already saw a few people there, only about two or three so far. I don't want to get too involved, or I could run into myself there."

"You mean—"

"Yes. I mean, my plan has started in motion and I've succeeded—or, more specifically, I will succeed—in going to Earth. But who knows; everything can change at any time. I think that so far this means that, if everything continues to go according to plan, the awakening process will begin very soon. Why don't you want to go into the future and look?"

"We can't, and nobody can. Time travel is possible only within very limited windows of time."

"Why such restrictions? What do you mean? I read about it. They discovered the principle a long time ago. Theoretically there's no difference in how far in time you travel; only the amount of energy used matters. Don't tell me the Isans lied to me and their information system has incorrect data."

"They didn't lie to you," the Ligian sighed. "Theoretically, yes, you're right, but practically speaking, most time travel fails. Almost all trips of over ten years don't work out, as do absolutely all instances where individuals plan to not only observe events, but also participate in them somehow. Researchers can't explain these results. Why, in totally identical circumstances, does one trip succeed while another does not, and why do those trips that might result in altered historical events always fail? For example, during the war with the Sidargans, we could not travel back in time by a day or even an hour, even though we devoted extensive material resources to try to go back and warn the Rational Union about the Sidargan threat. The Isans will return you to the past as they promised. I think this will happen for two reasons. First, they won't change anything in the past. It'll seem that they just dropped you off and then left. So far, not a single such journey has disappointed. Second, I think that this is destined."

"What are you talking about? Don't tell me you have no better explanation than the hand of God?"

"I don't know about the hand of God, but I do have a theory. Remember when you spoke to the Creator about the fact that everything is conditional and that they eventually, after much research, realized their own insignificance? You said yourself that you liked the theory about universes within universes. And the existence of parallel universes is no longer subject to debate. So let me lay out what I think about everything that's happening. That is, if you're interested, of course."

"I'm listening. I find this all very interesting. Back on Earth, similar ideas and theories always interested me," Ardas recalled. "Continue. Maybe I'll even find a weakness in your reasoning and discuss it with you. I haven't argued with anybody in a while."

"Well then, I think that we are all just toys in someone's game. All of our actions are regulated, and all of our events have been planned. Someone gave us our apparently free will only as an illusion. The Creators had their purpose, and the Demurgs had theirs. Maybe the humans' creation and their further conditioning represented the Demurgs' primary *raison d'être*. The pale ones still don't understand why they failed with the Human Project or where we got our ability to resist the Demurgs' will and seek independence. They prepared for the project, they calculated everything, and then suddenly it failed. Why? What went wrong? Maybe helping you represents the Isans' reason for being. How did their tradition of baptizing warriors through battle with other races, especially humans, come about? Perhaps the humans' escape to Earth was predetermined? Think about it. Otherwise, I bet the human population would never have exceeded one million. What persuaded the Creators to leave the source of the mutation fostering rays on Earth, and generally, why did exactly such a planet come about, and why did the Creators suddenly decide to spread life throughout the galaxy? Maybe all of that was planned beforehand, as were the Creators' Great Enemies and so forth. The odds of the kidnappers choosing you were one in seven billion, but it happened. It happened at the right place at the right time. Someone else might not have been able to awaken the humans or come up with the necessary plan. Your own actions might be fated and controlled. Don't you think these arguments suffice?"

"First of all, those aren't arguments; they're guesses," countered Ardas. "Perhaps you've heard of such a concept as chance. If probability theory holds that the odds of a given event happening are, for example, one in six, and that if we roll the dice, every sixth time we'll roll a one, reality won't necessarily play out that way. The dice could land that way all six times or none of the times. We can't ever say anything for certain; an element of chance always remains. My contention is just as impossible to prove as your diatribe about universally predetermined actions and us as puppets. Maybe we should start praying to these unknown individuals? And another thing: why single out humans? For what purpose?"

"Well, as for praying, you know perfectly well why that sometimes helps on Earth. When people yearn for something, they divert their energy in that direction. They subconsciously control that which they've actually had since birth. In that way, people's desires can materialize, certain events can occur, and, most importantly, one person can influence another's energy. Miraculous recoveries and the like occur under the same principle, but you don't need to pray. Merely gathering yourself and focusing your thoughts and desires suffices. Prayer was created as a means to help concentrate and shut out extraneous thoughts.

Some religions, for example Buddhism, propagate meditation instead of prayer, but these alternatives are really two different paths toward introversion and concentration. So we don't have to pray to those unknown individuals. It's too early for that. I won't dispute that my arguments are really guesses, but neither observations nor history can dispute those guesses."

"Nor can they confirm them!"

"Yes, you're right," admitted the Ligian. "But what if all that is true? Then we are just puppets. You asked, 'why humans?' I think, allegorically speaking, that someone is preparing for a giant chess party and is now just creating the pieces."

"And which piece do humans represent?"

"I think the queen is being formed now. Can you even imagine what seven billion fully awakened people working together could do? That's an unspeakable force. If they wanted to, they could sweep away other races in the blink of an eye. How do you think they would fare in a war against the Demurgs?"

"It wouldn't be much of a war. I think we wouldn't need that many people to simply take the sun from a Demurg solar system and throw it over to another system. If they wanted to fight, the Demurgs wouldn't even last twenty-four Earth hours."

"That's about right. That kind of a human population could easily extinguish suns, ignite others, or toss entire solar systems from one place to another. All other races would be like worms before us. Humans could definitely serve as the strongest piece in this game."

"Then I have another question. Chess, as you know, involves two players, both of whom start with equal pieces. If humans represent one queen, which race is going to play the queen's part on the other side? In that case, we're not the only ones created for such a purpose, and sooner or later we'll meet our analogous rivals."

"That's right, Ardas. Only I think that sooner or later we'll meet someone before whom we'll seem like worms."

"Maybe you're right. But maybe somebody is underestimating who humans are and what seven billion fully active people working together can do. Sometimes worms defeat beings much stronger than them. I think you and I will see how this plays out, but in the meantime I feel more at peace thinking that you're wrong, and that the most important factor in our lives is good old chance. But when the time comes, I think I'll change my mind, and together we'll search for those possible puppeteers. For now, I'm going to try materializing an object by transforming molecules of air again. Watch me and let me know what I'm doing wrong."

“Okay, Ardas,” smiled the Ligian. “Begin. You still have much to learn. To tell you the truth, we can learn to travel through time without any machines. Some of us have succeeded, but the limitations remain as I’ve described.”

“Let’s not worry about that,” Ardas dismissed the suggestion. “Watch, I’ll try again.”

The friends began training again. As always, the Ligian participated while in a metaphysical state, because so far his physical body couldn’t abandon the planet Ligia.



## Part VI

# *The Trial*



***Eduron. 13 March 2016.***

“HOW did your lesson with the Human go, son?” the Second Isan Clan Leader asked.

“I really enjoyed it. Every time, he reveals something new. During the last two lessons, Ardas taught me a method of fighting known on Earth as Aikido. Its gist is to get one’s foe off balance using only his energy. When fighting in such a way, even the weakest warrior can defeat a much stronger one. We’ve already learned a few moves. Watch, Father,” explained Iskik, unable to hide his emotions. “The opponent strikes with his hand or his weapon; it doesn’t matter. Our strategy used to be based on parrying the blow and leading it to the side, and so forth. But the Human suggested a new concept,” Iskik explained, exhibiting the moves as he went. “Rather than blocking the strike, you catch the enemy’s hand like so, and continue its movement, turning your body easily. In that case, both your energy and his work in the same direction, so your opponent either loses his balance or tries to lean back. If you lead his hand further, you’d turn your wrist like so,” Iskik demonstrated. “Then the foe would flip over or fall to the ground. If, in an effort to maintain his balance, he leans back or suddenly pulls his arm back, you simply encourage that movement and continue it in the same direction. By pulling his arm and continuing his movement, you can easily break the enemy’s hand using his own energy. If he leans back, you can knock him over.”

“I see this is a fairly effective method of fighting. But does this technique always work? What did Ardas say?”

“No, Father. The Human explained that this method proves most effective when defending against a physically stronger opponent but has very little use in attack. If an Aikido master were to meet a true master of striking technique, a warrior controlling his energy well, capable of throwing lightning quick punches, retracting them, and changing the direction of a blow at any time, Ardas thinks the Aikido master would lose. The Human explained that a true warrior has to know several martial arts, chose the best technique from among them, know

how to both defend and attack, and use whichever art is necessary at a given time.”

“I see, son, that Ardas’ lessons have made an impression on you. How has Iskin reacted to them? He’s not upset that I asked the Human to teach his elite warriors somewhat?”

“Definitely not. I think Iskin has nothing but admiration for the Human. He considers Ardas a friend and an exemplary warrior for others to follow. But Iskin’s loyalties have not changed. I believe he’s faithful only to you and the clan.”

“If I ordered him to kill Ardas, would he agree? What do you think?”

“Father, if you gave such an order, Iskin would try to talk you out of it, perhaps even offering his own life instead. But if you required it, he would carry out any order you gave. Are you seriously considering killing the Human?” asked Iskik anxiously.

“No, Son, definitely not. Ardas has helped us a lot, and we owe him for rescuing our honor. I would protect him from any infringement, and I think he would likewise protect the Isans. Before this meeting you said that you wanted to ask something of me. Ask. You accomplished your initiation perfectly, won all your duels, and are now a true warrior and my successor. What would you like?”

“Let me go to the trial along with the Human and Iskin’s elite forces.”

“I’d rather not, Son. I was thinking about that. It’s very dangerous. I think the Demurgs will attempt to kidnap the Human or destroy him. They’ll bring Atlantans and modified Alorans with them. I received a message from the Rational Union’s tribunal that they have permission to bring an entourage of 90 escorts of each kind. The trial will feature the White, Yellow, and Red Circle Lords, each accompanied by no fewer than ten masters. We have permission to bring only 100 security warriors, and only my clan’s representatives can participate. I’ve decided that Iskin will lead the mission, and he will select the best warriors. We may have allies there, but that will only complicate the situation.”

“What allies?”

“My spies, living among the Alorans, report rumors that the Demurgs fear the Sidargan mission. Apparently, the pale ones are well aware that the Sidargans support the Human and that they will try to defend him,” the Second Clan Leader explained.

“How big is the Sidargan mission going to be?”

“Also 100 warriors, plus a hive’s queen—and not just any queen or regular warriors, but the queen of the hive from the Planet of the Ants and her best soldiers. Have you heard anything about this planet, Son?”

“A few times. Several years ago a mercenary from the Ant Planet happened upon us. If you remember, he easily defeated all of our warriors and told us about a planet with an endless war. They were fighting giant ants controlled by some kind of brain who ruled the planet. As I understand, they are the best Sidargan warriors.”

“That’s correct, Son. And the ruling queen has resolved to leave her warring planet and her remaining children without such vital leadership. The Sidargans are determined, and I think they will defend the Human with all available resources.

“Might a new war begin?”

“Maybe; maybe not. But if a conflict over the Human arises between the Sidargans and the Demurgs, which side will we support: the Sidargans, as defenders of the Human; or the Demurgs, as members of the Rational Union? It appears that in the event of a conflict, most of the Rational Union races would support the Demurgs, but they would try to avoid a war with the visitors from the next galaxy. What should we do? If we support the Sidargans, we will have protected our honor, but we will also have become allies with the Rational Union’s enemy. But if we stand with the Demurgs, we will have preserved the Union, but by forsaking everything that we value: hospitality, thankfulness, a warrior’s honor, and an Isan’s given word. What would you suggest, my successor?”

“Father, if you betray the Human, your followers will not understand you. A ruler who tramples honor cannot lead the clan. I understand your doubts. By supporting the Sidargans, we risk the lives of the entire race. Perhaps a ruler’s honor represents an appropriate sacrifice for his clan’s survival. But I don’t think so. We are warriors, thus we have a duty to act as warriors—we must act honorably to the end. Besides, let’s hope the situation doesn’t end in war. You said yourself that the Demurgs fear the Sidargans,” Iskik reasoned.

“You’re right, Son. Our thoughts concur. You will truly be an able Clan Leader,” the father rejoiced. “But now you understand how dangerous it could get there. Besides, I received a few more reports from my spies that the Demurgs are trying something concerning our planet, but without any luck. They are encountering interference from something more powerful than just the Sidargans. What powers have collided? Who could be mightier mentally than the Demurgs and oppose them so successfully? Maybe the Human knows? Perhaps I should ask him?”

“I don’t think so. The Human should tell us about this of his own accord. If he knows but does not tell us for some reason, we must respect his will.”

"I agree, Iskik." Then the Second Clan Leader proceeded cautiously, asking his son, "Why do you think that your participation would be useful?"

"Think about it, Father. I, as the Clan Leader's successor, would serve as the mission's leader. If the threat of combat arose, the Demurgs would know that harming my delegation or me would mean starting war with all the Isan clans. But if they killed Iskin or his warriors, they could pin the blame on disobedient Alorans or Atlantans. The Isans won't start a war over that; killing the Demurgs' guilty servants would do. If they killed me, they wouldn't get off so easily, and the pale ones know it. I think my presence would help avoid an open conflict. Besides, if the need arose, my alliance with the Sidargan queen would seem more impressive in the Demurgs' eyes, and they would think twice before entering battle."

"Your arguments are fairly solid. I'll think about it, son. You have brought joy to my heart by maturing as you have. I think next year you'll be able to become the capital's ruler."

"Just as you once were, Father?"

"Yes, exactly. Now I must speak to Iskin about which warriors he has selected. What will you be doing?"

"I'm going to search for information about the Ant Planet's Sidargans and their hive's ruler. I think it will come in handy later."

"That a boy, Iskik."

"My boy has finally grown up," the Clan Leader thought, his gaze following his son. "Twenty more years and I'll be able to hand over the clan's leadership to him. I'll become his advisor and will be able to relax, just as my father and grandfather had done. Iskik will be a good Clan Leader, maybe even better than me. His mother would be very proud if she were alive. It's too bad she didn't live to see this day. For the time being, Iskik will worry about the city's affairs and prove that he can be a ruler. I don't want to let my son go on such a dangerous assignment, but I guess I'll have to. We'll see what the Human says. If I allow Iskik to go, I'll have to ask Ardas to protect my son."

With these troubled thoughts, the Clan Leader, escorted by his bodyguards, slowly crossed the yard.

•••

***Rational Union Headquarters. The Central (artificial) Planet. Site of the Rationals' tribunal. 15 May 2016.***

THE journey to the Central Planet did not seem long to Ardas. In general, with long-range teleportation technology, no journey within the galaxy's borders could seem long. Only the availability of energy resources could limit teleportation duration and distance. The Isans' great battle ships, meanwhile, had such vast resources that they could instantaneously jump from one edge of the galaxy to another. The only difficulty the Isans could experience would be in setting the correct coordinates for the jump. Without the necessary coordinates, a teleporting ship could end up in the path of a star or a planet, resulting in an especially disastrous end. The Rational Union justified such risks only in extreme circumstances and developed a teleportation gate network, which was really nothing more than a set of fixed coordinates for long-range teleportation and a system of beacons warning nearby ships of impending danger. In order to prevent two ships from accidentally teleporting to the same place, the Rationals equipped all ships with a warning system that exchanged information with the beacons and linked all ships preparing to teleport, determining the sequence of jumps. The complex program incorporated all aspects of the process. It simultaneously controlled the beacons and synchronized and instructed ships leaping through space. Signals emitting from the beacons, sent via the same teleportation principle, didn't move through space; they essentially sliced right through it, reemerging in physical space only beside a ship. Each Rational Union ship also featured equipment attracting the moving signal. Once sufficiently far from the ship, the signal would again slice through space and appear only when another ship would draw it in. With the help of such technology, the Rationals could receive information sent from anywhere in almost real time, in fractions of a second, or, in extraordinary cases, in a full second. The Rationals' system easily dealt with this rare error, so the odds of an incident during teleportation approached zero.

Ardas, in awe of such a network that allowed the Rationals to receive information at the same rate as Sidargans or other races with a common consciousness, thought about people's naïve attempts to search for radio signals sent from outer space. The Rationals had long ago stopped using radio signals, while other races had never used them. They represented an ineffective, cumbersome, and extremely inconvenient method of transmitting information. Any race capable of cosmic travel had to have, at a bare minimum, the technology for communications spread by solar waves. More advanced races refused to use solar wave networks or utilized them only for short distances. The widespread standard had long ago become signals slicing through normal space using teleportation technology. Any race noted for its intelligence literally could not reply to Earth's radio signals because it did not use such primitive technology. Such a network might still have remained on the outskirts of the galaxy, on planets considered technologically prehistoric, but Ardas knew nothing of them.

The entire journey consisted of flying beyond the limits of the system controlled by the Second Isan Clan and waiting in line until they could safely jump to the vicinity of the Central Planet, where a great commotion was brewing. Every Rational Union member race was sending their representatives and observers to the tribunal. Furthermore, individual curious onlookers and missions from various social and political groups headed to the Central Planet as well. Waiting in line, therefore, took up the majority of the trip's duration. While the Isan ship waited, Ardas tried to ask Iskin why they couldn't just open teleportation gates directly onto the planet's surface. Then, instead of flying somewhere in ships, they could simply step from one planet to the other. Iskin did not fully comprehend all the subtleties of teleportation technology. He had only heard that the complicated procedure aimed to avoid even a minute theoretical danger to the planet. Thus, so long as a possibility existed of an explosion resulting from two pieces of matter colliding in the same place, the location of all such teleportation gates would remain a safe distance from the planet.

Finally, the wait ended. After completing the jump, the Isan ship merged into orbit around the Central Planet. Comparable in size to Earth's moon, the artificial planet adjoined an old star in the center of the galaxy, orbiting it. The Central Planet served as general administrative, martial, and, when necessary, judicial headquarters. Only service personnel, delegation members, administrative staff, and their assistants inhabited the planet, along with a special force of cyborgs that protected the planet. Their construction consisted of the genes of several races, using the most advanced technology available to the Rational Union. The average cyborg warrior stood over seven feet tall, with a weight of 650 pounds. Its image resembled that of a large Aloran combined with an Isan and a Demurg. All mechanical enhancements lay hidden under layers of skin and fat. Each cyborg boasted equipment enhancing the senses, arm and leg servomotors allowing it to jump thirty feet in the air in Earth-like gravitational conditions, a bioplastic skeleton, and muscular reinforcement. Essential inner organs hid within the skeleton, well protected from any external conditions. A cyborg without any armor could withstand a direct hit from a medium-power energy weapon, without serious harm. These guards were not programmed, yet mental influence could have an effect on them. Ingrained orders compelled them to seek to keep the peace on the Central Planet and carry out the orders of the Rationals responsible for the planet's safety. While serving their duties, the cyborgs experienced a fulfilled life. Their loyalties lay entirely with the Rationals, and any thoughts of independence were foreign to them.

The Rational Union had no general civilian or military governance. Such institutions arose only temporarily, in the event of some threat or other need. The planet's administrative personnel resembled intermediaries between Rational races and lacked any real power to govern. Each race of the Union had representatives on the Central Planet, who both facilitated communication between their superiors and the administrative personnel and provided

necessary information to other races or to the planet's personnel. The planet had no ruler or any form of government. Technical personnel were responsible for the planet's living conditions, while the security force handled safety. Living conditions appropriate for the various races of the Union varied little. As they had all resulted from the Creators' creative process, their origins lay in common principles and, often, base materials. Minor challenges such as slight differences in oxygen concentrations and gravitational forces compared to their native planets proved to have simple solutions. The planet featured conditions suitable to the majority of races, for example a gravitational force equal to one and a half times that of Earth's. Ardas felt comfortable on the Central Planet because his organism automatically adapted to any environmental conditions. Although the Isans had a slightly more difficult time, they used special masks to ensure a proper air composition.

The Isan ship landed at a giant spaceport that Ardas, based on his view from above, estimated to measure four hundred square miles. As Iskin explained, the Rationals needed such a large spaceport so that, in case of war, it could house reserve or defensive warship squadrons. The city itself seemed remarkably diverse. Ardas noticed Demurg domes, Isan hanging gardens, and gleaming Grik pyramids. Because the planet lacked native flora, each race decorated its premises and territory with its favored plant life. Each race was also responsible for controlling the spread of such plants and for any negative consequences that could arise as a result.

The Isans' Central Planet representative welcomed the entire delegation upon arrival. Everyone agreed that the human and his escorts would stay in the Isans' facilities. The Rational Union's trial would begin in four days, giving Ardas time both to prepare for the trial and to familiarize himself with the planet. Having inquired about the Sidargans, he learned from the Isan representative that they had arrived several hours earlier and had decided to reside onboard their ship through the end of the trial. The Isan who greeted the delegation distributed maps detailing the short-range teleportation gates that served as the planet's passenger transportation system. This system had been designed magnificently. About five or six hundred yards separated each gate. Complex equipment controlled each gate and maintained a constant link with the other gates, almost entirely preventing the chance of any accidents during teleportation. Ardas became a quick believer in the system's advantages during the two minutes it took him to enter his routing, wait for the destination gates to free up, and travel from the spaceport to the Isan facilities—a distance of five hundred miles. The planet, especially its transportation system, made a tremendous impression on the human. He made note of many details he hoped to use later on his native planet.

•••••

### ***The Central Planet. 18 May 2016.***

IRL, a member of Iskin's special forces selected for the journey to the Central Planet, was especially proud of this accomplishment. He alone had managed to rise to the special forces despite not having come from a noble background and thus lacking a name that began with the syllable "Is." Nobody in the farming village where Irl grew up believed in his chances. Only the best of the best made it to the special forces. Membership in the special forces meant appraisal as a warrior of the highest order. Iskin did not play favorites. He took the most talented regardless of their social status, sons of esteemed warriors or simple country people. But usually, warriors' sons, prepared and trained from childhood for a life in battle, became better soldiers than provincial youths who grew up working the land.

Irl, by nature, had the talents to fight well. The occasional lesson in martial arts sufficed for the army to accept him, upon his moving to the city, and then, after four years of intense work, to stand out among his peers. Before accepting Irl, Iskin organized a demanding tryout for him. Irl fought various foes, displayed his weaponry skills, withstood extreme temperatures, and endured massive physical loads before finally gaining acceptance. Only one thing worried Iskin when he finally decided to take Irl. Unlike his comrades from distinguished families, Irl lacked the psychological preparation necessary to withstand extrinsic mind control, and thus could not resist mental influence as easily. The Demurgs could break every Isan, but influencing Irl would require considerably less effort. Having carefully researched the Isan delegation upon arrival, the Demurgs quickly discovered the weakest link, and two White Circle masters wasted no time exploiting it.

Irl had been experiencing nightmares for three straight nights. Though he dismissed the first instance, by now he was suspecting something serious. Each time, the dream continued further. The narrative started the first night, and now he was again experiencing its continuation. This time, Irl saw the death of the planet Eduron. The Humans had taken control of all the Isan leaders and forced them to fight the Rational Union, led by the Demurgs. The Isans had become the Humans' slaves. Every uprising ended with the mental enslavement of new individuals, until every last leader had become a marionette. The Isans warred with the Demurgs, the only ones the Humans still feared. The other Rationals supported the Demurgs, while the Sidargans allied themselves with the Isans. A great war began, drawing in other races not belonging to the Rational Union. But such races usually backed the Demurgs. There were too few Humans, and they could not defend against the attacks of all the allies. The Sidargans were crushed and driven from the galaxy, while the Isans were also losing. Irl saw the death of his friends, as well as of the Leader of the Second Clan and his son, whom the troops genuinely loved. During one of the battles, Irl was injured, but before losing consciousness, he saw his village destroyed and his loved ones killed. The

Humans were responsible for everything. They did not agree to give in to the Demurgs or live on their own planet. The Humans used the Isans as live shields against enemy cannons, not caring about them in any way. Every race sustained millions of casualties. Yet the Humans did not lose a single person during the entire course of the war. Only their aides perished. Somehow, Irl knew that this war would begin five years after the trial on the Central Planet. He understood that he had to stop the Human. Something told him that killing Ardas would prevent the war from starting, and save the Isan race. Such thoughts lingered even after he awakened.

“What if these dreams are the truth? Maybe it’s a warning,” he thought. “What if I, Irl, had a chance to save everyone? If I’m right, then this fighter from the middle of nowhere will rescue his entire nation. If not, then nothing will change. This Human means nothing. His death would only improve Isans’ lives, and everyone could breathe more easily.”

Irl did not know where such thoughts came from, and, in truth, he did not even think about all that. He made up his mind. The Human had to die. Only that way would the Isan race be saved. But having decided as much, he did not rush to kill the Human. Irl was no fool. He had seen Ardas fight, and knew that he had no chance against the Earthling. Only a stealthy strategy, then, would work. Ardas trusted the Isans and saw no reason to keep his guard up against them. Irl would have to approach him from behind and stab him in the back without warning. This was dishonorable and no warrior would act that way or even consider doing so, but Irl was no longer thinking about honor. His thoughts focused only on rescuing his nation from the monsters he saw in his dreams. With his mind made up, the warrior waited for the right moment.

A short while later, Ardas stopped by the building where the Isans were staying. He hoped to have a few words with Iskin, who was overseeing his warriors’ physical preparations. The Human paid no attention to Irl standing behind him, and chatted casually with Iskin. Irl recognized his chance to save his nation. The young warrior approached Ardas from behind. It seemed that Ardas did not notice him. The Earthling continued speaking with Iskin, but something appeared to distract and unnerve him. Irl did not know that the Demurgs were helping him and using the same trick against him that the Sidargans had used against the White Circle Lord, diverting Ardas’ attention from Irl as much as possible. The warrior simply had to strike—he was an arm’s length away from the Human—and so he did. He stabbed accurately and surreptitiously, striking directly from the sheath without lifting his weapon. It should have been a masterful, stealthy blow. The Human would not have been able to block the attack. In fact, he didn’t. Nor did he need to. Irl managed only to draw his dagger and nothing more. His body became paralyzed. Something was holding him by the neck and forcing him to the ground. Before his eyes, Ardas’ cold green eyes stared back, as if directly into Irl’s soul.

“I had felt your hatred, but now I see that it wasn’t yours. Some other force imposed it on you. Before I drive those intruders from this Isan’s head, I want to give them a message. You lost because you didn’t deafen Irl’s anger toward me. I felt that anger as soon as I stepped inside, so none of your efforts could have distracted me. Now at the trial, both this Isan and all of the witnesses will testify to your guile and your attempts to kill me and take control of other intelligent beings. I think this example will convince the court that you have not given up on your plans. And now I’m going to free Irl,” Ardas exclaimed angrily.

After these words, Irl lost consciousness. He regained it a few moments later and immediately knew that the Demurgs had possessed him and tricked him by showing him a false future. Irl understood that Humans represented his race’s only hope in battle against the Demurgs, who hoped to control the Isans. The hatred he now felt toward the Demurgs exceeded the hatred he had felt earlier toward the Humans. The latter gave way to deep allegiance and respect. Irl became Ardas’ faithful disciple, who would unhesitatingly offer his own life for the Human. This time Ardas did not hold back. Irl was not his friend, and, besides, the Human had no time to work subtly. Maintaining this warrior’s free will would have required time and a gradual abolishment of the Demurgs’ influence. Ardas could not allow himself such a luxury; thus he had to invoke crude pressure, drastically reforming Irl’s thought process and imposing his will on him. Doing so proved easy, because the Demurgs had already broken the young Isan and made it impossible for him to resist any mental influence. Having swayed Irl his way, Ardas gave him a consciousness block that would turn the warrior into a walking vegetable if anybody tried to eliminate the Human’s influence.

Nobody else felt anything. They understood only that the Demurgs had taken control of Irl and saw the Human free him. A few explanations by Ardas sufficed to fire up the entire Isan delegation with outrage toward such Demurg behavior. As the delegation’s leader, Iskik immediately informed his father and the other Clan Leaders of the incident. Infuriated, the Isans once again expressed their gratitude and support to the Human, as well as their resolve to help him at any cost.

The Demurgs accepted their setback calmly. They had tried, gambled, and failed. As for the Isans’ testimony in court, the Demurgs saw no reason to fear it. They had prepared a perfect justification for their actions, and the number of such incidents would not make any difference. This episode affected neither their primary plan nor any ancillary plots. At first glance, this lone attempt could not have any bearing on future events, but Ardas thought otherwise. In his opinion, the throw of even the smallest pebble could unleash a major avalanche.

•••••

"We've finally reached the trial, secretary. I'm still mulling your ideas about the critical moment that allowed Ardas to realize his plans. Perhaps you're right; the tribunal's verdict determined at least as much as the meeting with the Creator. I think we need to depict the trial in detail."

"Stop, Elena," the secretary objected. "Think about it. Who's going to be interested in the trial? I understand the importance of the verdict, but the process? Who cares about the process? That's going to bore your audience. You should write about the conclusion, and that's it."

The woman pondered for a long while, staring out the window toward a point on the horizon.

Finally, she replied, "We'll do it like this. I'll choose only the most important and interesting moments from the trial's process. We'll leave out the trivial parts, and, if anybody's interested, they can read about them elsewhere. Write, 'The Central Planet...'"

•••••

### *The Central Planet. The first day of the Rationals' trial.*

THE Rationals, or at least the individual representatives, were fond of pomp. Single representatives from each race composed the tribunal and, in Ardas' opinion, they took excessive pride in their responsibilities. All of the justices, clad in matching colorful robes, sat on an elevated platform in chairs, reminiscent of thrones, adapted to each race. Other participants had to raise their heads to observe the proceedings, presumably giving rise to some degree of reverence toward the judges. Ardas had learned ahead of time that the court's decisions required a majority vote, with the Chief Justice serving as the tiebreaker, if necessary. Because the tribunal comprised twelve judges, the Chief Justice's role gained added importance. For more than a hundred years, tradition dictated that only a member of the Vabarian race served as Chief Justice. This race had a reputation for objective and logical deliberation. The Rational Union's best mathematicians and thinkers came exclusively from this race.

This Chief Justice offered an interesting appearance, at least from the human's point of view. A two-armed, two-legged creature (the Creators favored such a combination for some reason), it bore a resemblance to a human only from a distance. The Vabarian's face resembled a hybrid between a cat and a rat: an elongated head, hirsute with thick, short hair; a pointed nose; and slanted, bright yellow eyes. He stood somewhat awkwardly, and only upon closer inspection did Ardas realize why. Vabarians, it turned out, had not one set of knees, as do humans or Isans, but two, each bending in an opposite direction from the other. Later, the human learned that this anatomical structure makes Vabarians unrivalled vertical jumpers. They could jump 30 or even 35 feet in the air. Around

the creature's head, a special ring protected it from any kind of mental influence. Similar rings shielded the heads of the other judges, as well.

On the first day, at least in Ardas' opinion, nothing interesting happened. The Isans brought their accusations and showed excerpts from the Demurgs' attack on the Second Isan Clan's planet. Ardas did, however, find the observers' reactions to the events on display of greater interest. The events' recreation began with the pale ones' arrival on the planet and ended with their surrender, and the Isans presented all of the captured images together to give the court a complete picture. Utterly calm, the Demurgs had closed themselves off from any extraneous thoughts. The Sidargan queen and her contingent curiously observed the events, professionally critiquing the fight scenes. Clearly, the Earthling's fighting style was making an impression on them, yet they also liked the Atlantan warriors, whom they had not hitherto encountered.

The judges watched the affair with poker faces. Their protective rings prevented Ardas from peeping into their thoughts. Meanwhile, the participants who held observer status did not hide their emotions. Depending on each race's emotional nature, some members expressed their anger loudly, others quietly. None of the representatives of the Rational Union's diverse races had forgotten the Demurgs' Great Goal, and the scenes on display further reinforced these memories and the phobias associated with them. Other than the participating Demurgs, all of the observers supported the Isans and the Human. For some, their earlier knowledge of the Human consisted only of Earthlings' reputation as decent warriors. Therefore, the viewing public felt no animosity toward Ardas, and actively celebrated his and the Isans' victory. In particular, the Demurgs' surrender resulted in a strong ovation. The judges did not use any means to try to bring the court order, because if the need arose, they had the ability to isolate themselves and the other participants from any surrounding noise. Thus, as soon as the emotional outbursts began, a protective, soundproof field activated. Observers could then hear everything the justices or parties said, but their noise made no impact on the court. The public's mood did not affect the Demurgs at all. They seemed perfectly prepared for everything, and simply waited to have their say.

Somewhat more memorable on the trial's first day proved Iskik's declaration of his father's and the other Isan Clan Leaders' will. It sounded something like so: "The Human, known as Ardas, is hereby declared a guest of honor of the Second Clan and, concurrently, of the entire race. The Isans will defend him everywhere and at all times, will offer him any sort of refuge necessary, and will provide him with all possible assistance. Any infringement on this Human or any attempt to force him to act against his will shall be met with hostility by us and shall result in the maximum response possible. Furthermore, any decision by this tribunal regarding the Human shall be implemented only with the agreement of the Human."

After these words, even the face of the Isan judge showed emotion. He was a member of the Second Clan and his Clan Leader's word was sacred. But on the other hand, he had to stay objective and might have to, if necessary, make a ruling that could lead to war between the Isans and the other Rationals. A great uproar arose from among the observers. For only the second time in history, the Isans had declared a member of another race their guest of honor. Everyone comprehended the seriousness of the matter. The Isans reverently held to their notion of honor, and this announcement amounted to the declaration of an ultimatum to the Rational Union. It affected the Demurgs no less. They had not anticipated such a pronouncement. Of course, they had expected that the Isans would defend the Human and would side with him, but the Demurgs never thought they would go this far.

The declaration stunned everyone so much that the court decided to adjourn until the following day.

...•••

### *The Central Planet. One hour later.*

"WELCOME, Red Lord," the White Circle Lord greeted his colleague. "How was your journey?"

"Greetings to you, too, White Lord. The journey was fine. More importantly, how did you fare in court? Did you succeed in ensuring a moral advantage?"

"It's too early to tell. Influencing the judges won't work. We already tried, unsuccessfully. Besides, the Isans acted unexpectedly. We knew they would support the Human, but we didn't foresee them declaring him their guest of honor or resolving to enter into armed conflict over him. For now, we'll stick to the same strategy and see what happens next. How is the implementation of our plan going?"

"Not bad," the Red Circle Demurg replied. "The group will arrive today. Tomorrow we'll be able to begin active measures. The Human likes to go for walks in the evening. I think we'll take advantage of that. Besides, tomorrow will offer the most benefits from a political standpoint. After everyone hears our representative's opening statement, their minds will be set against the Human. If we succeed in kidnapping him, which, to be honest, we must succeed in doing, we'll announce that the Human feared being unmasked and fled. The Rationals will believe us and even declare a hunt for him. If we only manage to destroy him, we'll call it the work of an angry mob of Rationals. Either way, he loses."

"How many members in the group?" the White Lord asked.

“The two most important ones and three Atlantans. I personally chose the best Redskins. You know them. They joined you on the mission to Eduron. All the experts’ analyses predict a ninety-eight percent chance of success.”

“Why aren’t you sending more Atlantans or Alorans?”

“Based on battle simulations, we realized that the participation of additional weak fighters only gave the Human added chances to escape. We’re sending all the others to the barricade platoon to defend against possible Isan or Sidargan attacks.”

“Understood, Red Lord. What about preparations for our second plan? What did the Yellow Lord say? As far as I know, he’s still intensely busy with the Harats.”

“We spoke before I left for the Central Planet. He asked me to tell you that everything is good. Active measures will begin no later than a year from today. He plans on coming to the Central Planet before the tribunal announces a verdict. Then we’ll be able to discuss matters directly. Too bad we can’t interact in the metaphysical state. It’d be much easier.”

“You yourself know, Red Lord, that eavesdroppers would be able to listen in on us then. It’s better to meet physically. Then at least we can feel confident that our defenses suffice to ensure secrecy. I keep wondering—what if we fail to effect either plan? What are our chances in open battle against the Isans?”

“Good question. The Greens simulated the situation somewhat. If the Isans use protection against mental influence, their might equals ours. And if the Sidargans help the Isans while the remaining Rationals aide us, we’re equal again. The Humans’ influence represents the deciding factor. It’s unclear how many Earthlings will be awakened and what they’ll do after that. Simply put, the future is very cloudy. We’ll have to think hard about whether entangling ourselves in such a war would be worth it.”

“Where else can we find allies? I’ll send a few of my groups of people, accompanied by Alorans, to search for unaffiliated races. Maybe we’ll find something worthwhile. But what do you say we stop talking about business? Come, Red Lord, let’s relax a little,” offered the White Circle Lord as he led his Red Circle colleague to a recreation and banquet facility where a prepared meal awaited.

•••

### *The Central Planet. The next day.*

ARDAS took his place at the tribunal not far from the Isan representative. This time, the number of observers had increased to some extent. Overflowing from

the courtroom, they caused a noisy tumult, but the judges paid them no attention. The justices appeared as calm and stoic as the day before. They leisurely took their seats, thereby demonstrating their importance, and then, after a short wait, began the session. The Chief Justice again chaired the proceedings.

“This session,” the Chief Justice announced, “is now open. The Demurg representative may make his opening remarks.”

“Honorable justices, dear participants,” the Demurg began. “Yesterday we heard my opponent’s, the Isan representative’s, excellent speech and his resonant and grave declaration. I, guided by logic, should, in hopes of avoiding possible negative consequences, deny the White Circle Lord’s guilt and excuse his and his escorts’ actions. But I won’t do that.”

The courtroom erupted. After this pronouncement, the onlookers all stirred and took to loudly discussing the shocking development. It even took Ardas by surprise. Were they really admitting their blame and agreeing to the Isans’ demands?

“There is no use in denying the obvious,” the Demurg representative continued. “Once upon a time, when we joined the Rational Union, we pledged to be open and honest in all our affairs with other members of the Union. Now we want to reveal the whole truth, even dating back to our time of discord. Yes, the White Demurg Lord did everything the Isan representative said yesterday. I, as the representative of all Demurgs, apologize to both the honorable Iskik and to the entire Isan race for the offense and other harm committed. After my remarks, the White Circle Lord will wish to have a word on this matter. Only one question, an essential one, remains: why did he do so? Why did the Demurgs risk starting a war they would indisputably lose? Think about it. The Demurgs risked the existence of their own race and did so consciously. There ought to be a serious reason for this. Can there be a more serious reason than the safety of the entire galaxy and the races that inhabit it? From the moment this Human first appeared, a deadly danger has threatened us all,” the Demurg stated, finally pronouncing the speech’s key statement.

It was a masterful move. The observers all subsided and intently watched the Demurg representative. Only the judges showed no signs of emotion. Iskin smiled ironically (that is, if revealing his long fangs could be considered a smile). The Isan representative listened attentively and scribbled something.

“Now, I will tell you the true history of the creation of man,” the Demurg continued. “During the time of our conflict with the Rationals—”

“Excuse me for interrupting,” uttered the Isan judge. “When speaking of this conflict, you have in mind the war you started to achieve your Great Goal, correct?”

“The Isan couldn’t resist,” thought Ardas. “One seemingly innocent question, and the entire effect of the Demurg’s speech faded away. It’s a good thing he asked.”

“Yes, honorable justice. We have already admitted our mistakes, and I would like to use a less divisive term,” the Demurg explained, clearly annoyed. “So then, during the time of our conflict with the Rationals, we decided to create a perfect warrior, in fact a killing machine, subordinate and obedient only to us. You have heard this history, but you don’t know certain circumstances, which I will now reveal. Humans comprise a mix of genes from all the Rationals, and even some other races of the galaxy. Thus, Humans received all of your best qualities. This fact you also know, as you know that they can fight better than any other inhabitants of this galaxy. But you do not know what powers they actually possess. For example, Humans have the ability to dictate their internal energy absolutely. No other native of this galaxy can control his or her physical body and its energy resources like that. Nor can any other race’s physical bodies regenerate or adapt to environmental conditions as those of Humans can. These creatures have access to control over their surroundings, including telekinesis; levitation, that is, the ability to eliminate a planet’s gravity; management of short-range teleportation gates; and sway over environmental energy. Man, as a combatant, when functioning at full power, would match no fewer than five thousand fully prepared and technically equipped Isans, the finest Rational warriors.”

These revelations made a serious impression on the observers. Ardas was also surprised. “The Demurgs rate humans highly,” he thought. “But is the number of warriors rivaling one human really relevant?”

“But that’s not all,” the Demurg continued. “Humans work together and can combine their abilities. As the number of individuals increases, their power grows exponentially. As you know, calculations have provided the critical mass of Humans inhabiting and defending a planet, beyond which number all of the current Rational armed forces could not defeat them. We’re talking about a mere five thousand individuals. One hundred thousand Humans could easily overthrow the entire Rational Union, while two hundred thousand could destroy all life in the galaxy within a year.”

Again, a commotion arose among the observers. The effect the Isan judge’s question had achieved gradually evaporated.

“But that’s not all. Humans master the art of mental coercion better than Demurgs. They can not only defend easily against external influence, they can also manipulate or even fully control any Rational. All Humans have this capacity, and Ardas is no exception. We have offered into evidence proof of all Humans’ abilities. Undoubtedly, we do not fully know about this particular Human’s potential, but we can guess. Most of you have already heard about this Human’s first battle on Eduron. At the time, this subject had just awakened

and had received no training, but he not only overwhelmed the Isans and their security robots with ease, he also defied ten Demurgs. What he could do now, after having so much time to perfect his skills, nobody can imagine. You may be thinking, 'So what if the Humans are like that? Having allies like those would prove useful, so let's make them our supporters.' I respond that this is impossible. Furthermore, I'll reveal that which we have never reported in the past. The Humans escaped not just because we could not control them. These creatures fled because they learned of our plans to destroy them. From the moment they appeared in this world, Humans demonstrated immeasurable aggression toward all other reasoning beings. They cannot stand even the mention of competition. All intelligent life forms existing besides them must either perish or become their slaves. Why do you think we ended the war and realized the futility of our goal? Humans showed us the error of our ways. Their aim to enslave or destroy others expressed itself one hundred times more intensely than our errant goal foresaw. Even then, the Demurgs recognized what a danger threatened the entire galaxy, and they tried to neutralize the menace. We failed. The Humans escaped and became captives of the Inhibiting Planet. It seemed enough that the Rationals were observing this planet and preventing the Humans from breaking out. We've all heard about the rampant wars there. Not having found whom to attack, this race now destroys itself. Seven billion now populate their planet. If they gain their freedom, all of us will die or become their slaves. The creation of mankind represents the gravest Demurg mistake, and to right it, we are prepared to offer all of our lives."

Now every last observer sided with the Demurgs. Man seemed to them like the most menacing monster. Only the Isans and Sidargans, it seemed, had not lost their faith in Ardas.

"Now it remains to explain why the White Circle Lord resolved to such action," the Demurg representative continued.

"I was just about to ask you the same thing," the Chief Justice interrupted. "We have learned how dangerous humans are, but we still don't know why you attacked the Isan planet and this particular Human."

"Yes, honorable Chief Justice, I will certainly answer this question. After the Human's initial battle on Eduron, the White Circle Lord received information that this Human genetically matched one of the original specimens who had escaped. That meant that he was very powerful and would awaken more quickly than usual. And, with time, he could take control of the hosts who took him in. I ask the honorable court, do you not find it strange that for this Human, the Isans are suddenly prepared to war with all of the Rationals? What force compelled the Clan Leaders to make such a decision, and were they even working under their own will? Knowing the power and potential of the original specimens as I do, I highly doubt it," the Demurg offered, further strengthening the observer's bias against the Human. "The White Circle Lord decided to act as quickly as

possible and, before it became too late, destroy the Earthling to prevent him from awakening his clansmen. For this reason, partly out of panic, he used such unjustified means. If the honorable Chief Justice will allow, I would like to grant a word to the White Circle Lord, who will explain the mentioned events in greater detail and will formulate our requests."

"So be it," the Chief Justice agreed. "The White Lord may continue the remarks. Members of the court will have a chance to ask questions later."

"Honorable justices," the White Circle Lord began. "I would like to supplement our representative's speech by revealing my experiences from the moment I resolved to stop the Human at any price. As you know, several days after the Human appeared on Eduron, I learned of the genetic match between him and one of the original Human specimens, specifically Treagon, the subject born 128<sup>th</sup>. This individual distinguished himself in his extraordinary strength of will, stubbornness, and aggression. He was one of the leaders of the original Humans, seeking to subordinate others to do his will. Having learned these facts, I realized a horrible truth. Once awakened, the Human could plan to awaken his clansmen and, in carrying out his plans, could first subdue the Second Isan Clan Leader and his advisors, then subjugate all the remaining Clan Leaders. Time was limited, so I had to take resolute action in order to preempt this catastrophe. As you see, I lost. Yet I lost not because I was weaker than the Human at that moment, but because, constrained by circumstances, I could not prepare my mission adequately. Now I have seen my apprehensions about the relationship between the Human and the Isans justified. Also, if the court will allow, I'd like to make a declaration dedicated to all the Isans who have not yet fallen under the treacherous Human's influence."

"My, how many declarations we have in this legal action. Well, go ahead. After all, I can't allow some and deny others," the Chief Justice replied.

"In the name of myself and all of the White Circle Demurges, I apologize to the Isan race and especially the members of the Second Clan. I swear that, at the successful conclusion of my mission, I would have immediately freed all the Isans under my control, explained the situation, and placed myself at their mercy. Likewise, I solemnly declare that now, as then, I have resolved to sacrifice mine and my circle's lives in order to avoid and eliminate the threat that this Human, called Ardas, poses to all of the galaxy's races. Now, having admitted our guilt, the members of my circle and I hand ourselves over to the mercy of the Isan Clan Leaders and accept any punishment from them, with the condition that they agree to be checked by the Demurges, the foremost mental influence specialists, in order to clarify whether or not this Human has coerced the Isan Clan Leaders."

"I've got you now," the White Demurg ruler thought. "If you refuse, you'll raise suspicions that you really are mental captives. But if you agree, my

specialists will do everything they can to get you to recognize the Demurgs as your masters.”

“Furthermore,” the Lord resumed, “on behalf of all the Demurgs, I would like to ask you to hand over the Human to us to research, so that we can determine how to battle this menace in case they ever manage to free themselves. That is all, honorable justices.”

“I’d like to ask you a question,” countered the Isan judge. “Why, before taking such drastic measures, did you not warn the Second Clan Leader? Maybe you would not have needed to use any force?”

“We simply didn’t have enough time for that. The Human awakened quite rapidly. Isans, as you all know, do not trust Demurgs, though unjustifiably so in my personal opinion. They would not have believed me, and by the time they scrutinized the evidence, the Human would have had time to prepare. He was already very strong then, and we had to attack him by surprise. Only in that way could we have expected success,” replied the White Lord confidently.

“Thank you. Does anyone else have any questions?” Since nobody heeded the invitation, the Chief Justice continued, “We will deliberate the Demurg request at another time, after hearing out all the other participants. For now, we will adjourn until the same time tomorrow.”

Ardas smiled to himself. The Demurgs had made an excellent effort. All of the observers feared and avoided him, while they felt sorry for the Isans. It almost seemed strange that nobody had yet declared war against him. Suddenly, another idea came to Ardas: “I think I need to scare the Demurgs a little more.”

He approached the White Circle Lord, smiled, and whispered in a tone that nobody else would hear, “How many humans do you think it would take to snatch the sun from the White Circle’s controlled solar system and transfer it over to the Yellow Circle’s system? And after that, how many White and Yellow Demurgs would survive? Think about that. These questions could become very relevant for you soon.”

Having left the speechless ruler, Ardas smiled and left the courtroom.

•••••

### *The Central Planet. A few hours later.*

AS he did every day about dusk, Ardas strolled through the city and pondered the day’s events. He did not like the Demurgs’ unexpected suggestion to research the Isans. Both refusing and agreeing would mean defeat. Agreement was out of the question, because the Clan Leaders would treat that as the most serious insult, and besides, doing so would pose a critical danger. The Demurgs could

subject the compliant Clan Leaders to their will and Ardas could do nothing to defend them. Fortunately, not a single Isan began doubting him or gave in to the Demurgs' deceptive words. The Sidargans, as far as he could tell, also remained faithful to the agreement. Much would depend on his speech the next day, and he had prepared an oration no worse than the Demurgs'. The observers' opinions had to change again.

Like any other evening, Ardas walked past a square about half a mile from the Isan compound. This time, however, the square immediately seemed unusual. It was somehow calm, without anybody in sight (an unusual occurrence for the Central Planet). The only exceptions stood 30 feet away, five clearly hostile figures. Ardas trusted his own abilities tremendously and opted not to flee. This lofty opinion of himself seemed to the other races very similar to arrogance. Even after his close call on the Planet of the Ants, Ardas continued to believe in his own invincibility, and this belief would almost cost him his life.

Ardas came closer and recognized three of the individuals. Standing before him, he saw three of the same Atlantans—Taron, Tugor, and Dir—who participated in the attack on Eduron along with the White Circle Lord. He had already fought and defeated the first two, and though he didn't know the third, he had no doubt that, should the need arise, he would overpower him just as easily. The remaining two figures did not resemble Atlantans. They seemed more similar to black men, of the same height, construction, head shape, and body contours. Only their deeply set eyes and their four arms differentiated them from humans. Their musculature resembled that of mythological gods, while their attitude clearly testified to their dormant inner energy. But Ardas had no fear, for he had fought creatures that similarly radiated power many times and had always come out the victor. Why should this case prove any different? Calm even in the face of inevitable engagement, he slowly and confidently approached the waiting pack.

All five attacked him at once, and only then did Ardas realize the gravity of the situation. Working together, the Atlantans cut the Human off from the planet's energy resources. He could use only his body's energy, while all his attempts to control the environment's energy failed. Truth be told, Ardas had no time to experiment. The four-armed creatures attacked so suddenly and moved so swiftly that he had to focus all of his attention on fighting them. His opponents controlled their internal energy masterfully and matched the human both in this respect and in terms of speed and power. If Ardas had not spent his entire life fighting, he would not have been able to defend himself as long as he did. His favored trick of elevating foes into the air had become ineffective. The attackers were winning. While the Atlantans prevented Ardas from accessing the planet's energy, they transferred their own energy to their teammates. Their participation in the battle was limited to occasional energy blasts at the human and to restricting him from moving or using energy-based tactics. Ardas could not form teleportation gates because he lacked sufficient time. Nor could he

levitate, for the Atlantans were offering too much interference. Only one option remained—direct physical combat until he thought of something better or a superior opportunity presented itself. To top it all off, the Demurgs seemed involved in the fight as well. Something was attempting to break through Ardas' mental defenses and instill a desire to surrender.

The four-armed creatures moved surprisingly quickly, but they clearly lacked fighting experience. Often, for example, they got in each other's way. By moving around, Ardas successfully used one of the attackers as a shield against the other. But other times, turning to avoid one foe's punch would lead him into the hands of the other. Ardas again tried using his opponents' energy to his advantage. He avoided a punch by an upper right hand, turning his waist and head at the last moment to dodge the blow, then reached for the arm as it went by. Ardas had used the same technique on Eduron against an Atlantan, but this creature turned out to be nimbler. Here, the advantage of having four arms became obvious. Having missed with his upper right arm, the being immediately punched with his lower one. Not only did Ardas fail to grab the upper arm, he barely managed to block the lower one, then the other two arms, and finally the knees. And having jumped backward, he then only just evaded a head butt from the other foe. Ardas' counterstrike, too fast for the eye of an Isan or even an Atlantan, met a deflection that required no visible effort. Had the four-armed individuals had just a bit more experience, the human would not have lasted ten minutes. Instead, he managed to avoid the attackers and parry the occasional Atlantan energy blast while throwing a few opportune punches himself.

After avoiding an oncoming assailant for the fifth or sixth time, this time by jumping over him and even attempting an unsuccessful kick in the process, Ardas ended up behind both of his opponents. This meant a slight chance of turning the course of the fight, which to this point was creeping toward an unsuccessful conclusion for him. Rather than attack the four-armed foes, Ardas rushed at Dir, the Atlantan who had not fought him to this point. As soon as he realized the imminent threat, the Atlantan formed an energy spear and used a strong, sudden stab to meet the oncoming human. Ardas did not even try to change his course, instead falling to the ground and rolling directly between the Atlantan's legs. Since the Atlantan stood three feet taller than Ardas, the latter accomplished the maneuver easily. Caught off-guard, Dir lost sight of Ardas. The human had long since discovered what type of energy the Atlantans used to form force fields. He created a beam of conflicting energy, repelling that of the red giant, and, almost unhindered, struck his foe directly in the family jewels. The blow absolutely crushed the Atlantan's reproductive organs and shattered his pelvic bone. Only because of a large amount of timely mobilized internal energy did Dir survive. But the battle had ended for this warrior. He now had to devote all of his energy to staying alive and to healing his wounds.

The two remaining Atlantans reacted instantly. They formed an energy wall that would have taken Ardas ten to fifteen seconds to destroy. That much time

would have sufficed for the four-armed creatures to catch up to him. His escape plan had failed, and the fight continued. Ardas knew that repeating the trick would not work. Dir had not known the human's potential, so he had lowered his guard. The other two Atlantans, on the other hand, had already encountered their adversary and did not intend to repeat their comrade's mistake. Besides, such blows required a fair amount of Ardas' internal energy, and wasting it like that would drain his resources in a matter of minutes. The human turned toward the assailants, and suddenly a smile came to his face. He had thought of another trick, this time meant for the four-armed creatures.

Ardas did not wait for them to reach him. Taking advantage of the Atlantans' preoccupation with the energy wall, he flew over one of the four-armed attackers and ended up between them. Lifting large objects and flying them to the battleground would have required too much time, and the Atlantans would have interfered with such an attempt anyway. But out of the Redskins' sight, he could lift the sand below his feet and sling it at his attackers' eyes. That's exactly what he did. The four-armed victims never expected such guile. Both of them found themselves temporarily blinded by the sand. Although this lapse lasted no more than five seconds, this proved enough for Ardas to take another rival out of the equation. Jumping back, he used both feet to kick the enemy's knees. The structure of the four-armed being's legs, identical to a man's, could not withstand the accurate and forceful strike, nor did the creature's internal energy suffice. A force that great would probably have crumbled a giant block of concrete. If the four-armed foe had reacted in time, he could have at least concentrated his internal energy at the point of impact to try to absorb the blow. Instead, the warrior could neither walk nor stand. He no longer posed any threat to Ardas.

The human now faced only three opponents, but his strength was waning as well. Enraged, the other four-armed attacker came after Ardas, striking with every part of his body. In addition to his arms and legs, he used his head, hips, and even shoulders. Ardas watched his challenger's skills improving before his eyes. This creature, it turned out, had the ability to learn stunningly quickly, although the human still had enough strength left to hold his own. Ardas withstood the most unexpected blows, even managing to counter a few times. He fought more intelligently than the creature. On one occasion, he threw a punch to the head while simultaneously kicking the legs. Other times, he would guide oncoming punches to the side and immediately strike his opponent's exposed body. Still others, Ardas threw two punches at once and undercut his foe's legs, or spun around and kicked low while punching high. The Atlantans could no longer interfere with the human as well as they had been able to as a threesome. Increasingly often, Ardas could elevate and hang there for longer stretches. Once, the four-armed being had to absorb eight kicks from various positions as Ardas hung in the air. The human could now form an energy ball and send it at his foe before punching him. Once, he even used an acoustic blast, temporarily

leaving the creature dazed. Ensuing punches and kicks connected, and the four-armed opponent managed to recover only by means of his unexpectedly strong concentration.

But the course of the fight had already shifted. The Atlantans could see that the Earthling would finish off his opponent within ten minutes. Thus, they decided to directly enter the fray themselves. After forming their energy weapons, they charged after the human. Not only did he avoid them, in the process the Atlantans stopped interfering with his ability to control energy, as well. Although he still could not access the planet's energy reservoirs, he had at least regained all control. The fate of the four-armed creature was clear. As his foe staggered after letting a routine punch slip through his defenses, Ardas stepped back, formed a huge energy disc, and let it fly. The disc struck the creature directly in the head and exploded, releasing massive amounts of energy. As a result, only the being's headless body remained standing. Had the creature not been dazed at the time, he would have easily avoided or resisted such an attack. Instead, Ardas had only the pair of Atlantans left to fight. These were experienced warriors, and the battle continued.

After a half hour, neither party had sustained any major damage. Only Tugor had lost vision in one eye after a direct hit, but he never even thought about retreating. The other Atlantan, having successfully avoided both the human's blows and his tricks, still had his health. Ardas began to weaken. He had expended a large amount of energy and could not replenish it. Tugor's sword debilitated one of Ardas' arms. The arm's scorched nerves would need at least ten minutes to repair themselves. Ardas could only defend himself, with the odd offensive move achieving little. The course of the battle had again turned against the human. Suddenly, the streets leading to the square filled with shouts, and moments later a mob of Isans and Sidargans appeared. Ardas doubted whether he had ever seen such a beautiful sight. He knew he had survived. Both Atlantans realized the futility of continuing the fight. They grabbed their injured comrades and disappeared into the dark, leaving the corpse of the four-armed creature. Tired and weakened, Ardas did not chase after them. The last thing he wanted was another battle.

•••••

### *The Central Planet. One hour earlier.*

THE female Sidargan gazed upon the modified Aloran standing before her, and could not believe her eyes. For one thing, she had been surprised to hear that a modified Aloran wanted an audience with her. But on top of that, the guest amazed her by revealing his true identity—not a modified Aloran, but a Dvarvan scout, working among the Demurgs for some time. The queen of the Ant Planet had never seen a Dvarvan admit his true identity. After some deliberation as to

whether to order the Dvarvan executed, the Sidargan's curiosity won over and she agreed to hear the visitor out.

"Let me get this straight," the queen stated in disbelief. "You're saying that the Demurgs have decided to attack the Human? When are they going to do this?"

Superficially polite, the queen hoped to pump out the information she needed from her race's enemy and then kill him. However, the Dvarvan's message soon changed all of her plans.

"Yes, you heard me correctly. The Demurgs decided to take advantage of the public opinion in their favor by kidnapping and destroying the Human. I only now managed to escape from their view. They have set up an ambush in the central square. Two warriors specially created for this purpose will participate, as well as their three top Atlantans and two masters from the While Circle. The attack should begin shortly, or maybe it already has, depending on when the Human gets there."

"What makes you think he'll show up?" the queen, still skeptical, inquired.

"He's there every night. The Demurgs know this; that's why they specifically chose that spot for the trap," the scout patiently explained.

He had been imitating an Aloran long enough to learn patience with the universe's obtuse creatures. No Dvarvan would ever, upon hearing such news, mess around with further questions and would rush to action. But this dark, shiny, toothed being was wasting time with the details.

"And just what gives you the idea they'll defeat the Human?"

"Their experts calculated an almost one hundred percent chance of winning. The team of Atlantans and super-warriors is basically unbeatable."

"You think he needs help?" asked the Sidargan, finally comprehending the full gravity of the news.

"Yes, but that won't prove easy to do. The Demurgs foresaw such a scenario, so they prepared teams to keep you out. In order for you to break through to the Human, you'll have to defeat all of the Atlantans and modified Alorans who have arrived with the Demurgs. I won't be participating in the battle, and then later I'll hide among the corpses and feign a concussion. Nobody will notice. Are you ready to take a big risk to help the Human?" the Dvarvan scout asked, still patiently but now with more urgency.

The Sidargan queen did not deliberate long. She had seen Ardas and knew what he was really like. The Demurgs' rhetoric had no effect on her. On the Planet of the Ants, she had witnessed Ardas agree to sacrifice himself for the Sidargans and meet with the planet's brain, knowing that the latter could easily

destroy him at will. This brave act had heavily impacted the Ant Planet hive's queen. The Human had no obligation to help the Sidargans. He had not incurred any debt or made any pledge, so he could have refused, but he didn't. Instead, he went to face certain death. Such a creature couldn't be evil or deceitful. Maybe smart, maybe cold-blooded, but he'd proven himself responsible and faithful to friends in time of need. The Sidargan felt indebted to him and had, while still on the Ant Planet, decided to return the favor at any cost. Without further ado, she ordered every last warrior to prepare for battle and alert the Isans of the current situation. The warriors did not doubt their leader's decision. They felt the same way as their queen.

"One more question, Scout: why are you helping the Human?" the queen asked, finally dismissing all of her doubts.

"Everything's very simple. We made a pact with the Human. He told us about your aim to take back your native planets and his promise to help you. We agreed to hand the planets over to you, if he and his people help us reach our goal—to ensure this galaxy's security from foreigners who might encroach upon it. The Creators ratified our pact, so now we all have to help the Human."

"You said the Creators? The same ones? They're really alive? This isn't just speculation?" the Sidargan exclaimed.

"Yes. To our knowledge, five survive, although there could be more. We stay in contact with four of them and get instructions from them. The fifth is the creature you call the Ant Planet's brain."

The Sidargan felt shocked. She was fighting against one of the Sidargans' Creators. Why was it attacking its children? But she quickly got hold of herself. The time for explanation would come later. Now, they had to act.

"Can we talk about this more later?" requested the queen, now so worried that she completely disregarded her hostility toward the scout's race.

"Maybe, if we meet again, I'll tell you more about their enemies and creations living in your native galaxy, as well as our war against them. Now, Your Majesty, I have to hurry. I'll be waiting on the battlefield."

Once ready, the Sidargans all stepped through close-range teleportation gates that their ruler had opened. Having arrived at the Isan consulate, they met this other race's warriors and rushed toward the central square.

That somebody had opened teleportation gates did not escape the notice of the planet's security detail. After taking a few minutes to fix the entry and exit coordinates, they sent several dozen security cyborgs to both the Sidargan ship and the Isan delegation's compound. But by the time the cyborgs got there, they found nobody to question. Meanwhile, two hundred Isan and Sidargan warriors hurried down the city's quiet streets toward the central square.



Credit for sensing the first ambush went to the Ant Planet hive's queen. She stopped the sprinting warriors. Iskik and Iskin knew of their ally's uncanny ability to anticipate a trap, so they transferred all control of the procession to her. While the Sidargans, thanks to their common consciousness, operated as one organism, the Isans used a technical network to maintain contact, a process that interfered somewhat with their ability to work together. The allies moved forward gradually and cautiously. Each warrior activated a personal energy shield via a module affixed on the body. This shield provided perfect protection from energy blasts, blocked or neutralized the close-range effects of energy weapons, and partly safeguarded the user from direct physical attack. Unlike the protection offered by the internal energy of a Human or Atlantan, however, this shield constricted movement, particularly quick motions. Moreover, it afforded little defense in personal combat with cold steel.

But on this occasion, the shields proved more useful than ever. As soon as they rounded a corner, they encountered a squad of Atlantans and modified Alorans ready for battle. The enemies were ready for the team rushing to help the Human and fired rounds of energy charges that should have caused major casualties among both the Isans and Sidargans. But the plan failed, as the shields did their job perfectly. The time for personal combat had come. Falling into three lines, the Atlantans completely blockaded the entire street. Unlike the allies, they could use their energy defenses without restriction, and thus they formed a wall that would prove hard to breach. The modified Alorans, assembled behind the Atlantans with no discernable organization, would serve as reserves in case anybody broke through. For their part, the allies also stuck to their accustomed tactics. Seeking honorable one-on-one battle, the Isans charged ahead in disorderly fashion, according to their oldest traditions. The Sidargans, meanwhile, used the strategy customary of warriors on the Ant Planet by assembling in a wedge formation behind the Isans.



The queen of the Ant Planet's hive always sought to be first. On this occasion, she ran ahead of the allies, passing the Isan warriors by a large margin. Upon entering the square, the view there somewhat eased her apprehensions. Still alive, the Human was fighting a pair of Atlantans. The Demurgs' two super-warriors no longer participated. One may have managed to stay alive, but the other had definitely perished, because he had literally lost his head. The Atlantans appeared to evaluate the situation realistically. Rather than waiting for the Sidargans to cross the square, they terminated the fight, collected their injured, and hurriedly retreated. In fact, the retreat resembled more of a full sprint. The Sidargans had no chance of catching the Atlantan warriors, who had not expended any of their own energy, and so they did not even try. Nor did the Isan leaders show any initiative to chase them upon seeing Ardas alive and

almost healthy. And the Human himself, drained after the fight, wanted only to rest and recover.

“Thank you, queen of the Ant Planet hive. You showed up just in time. They almost had me,” Ardas declared.

The Human, exhausted, felt stunned. His belief in his abilities had taken a major blow. He had not, to this point, thought that anybody among the Rationals could step forward and demonstrate the power to defeat a Human. Now, he changed his mind and vowed to carry himself more cautiously and less arrogantly.

“I’m not so sure. I don’t think those two fleeing Atlantans had any chance of capturing you, even in your completely worn-out state. Your excellent survival instincts made the difference. No need to thank us—you made a sacrifice for us; now we’ll help you. Don’t think that we’ve now repaid our debt. This trite assistance doesn’t mean the end of my hive’s aid to you. We also ran into a little scuffle on our way to you. The Atlantans and Alorans laid a trap for us, but everything ended well. Our wedge formation broke through their blockade and, as I see, we made it in time. Oh, look, here come your friends, the Isans.”

“Greetings! Thanks for the help,” Ardas addressed Iskin and Iskik.

“No need to thank us, Human. You’re our friend and our guest. This represents a matter of honor. We should probably hurry back to our delegation’s compound now. Ardas, can you open some teleportation gates for us?”

“Yes, I still can. What about the Sidargans?” he asked the queen. “Are you coming with us?”

“No, I’ll open gates directly to our ship. Good luck. We’ll meet again in court tomorrow.”

Ardas and the Sidargan hive’s queen opened their respective gates, one to the Isan delegation’s territory, the other to the Sidargan ship. All of the allies rushed through the gates, because by the time they had finished speaking and opening the gates, a second team of Atlantans and Alorans managed to reach the square. Five minutes later, the planet’s security forces also appeared at the square, but for a third time in a row, they found nobody upon arrival. Although the security team managed to determine the coordinates of the teleportation gates fairly easily, their investigation ground to a halt because both the Isans and the Sidargans kept quiet, and they had no basis for bringing charges. The Atlantans, likewise, had no reason to advertise their nocturnal escapades, so silence and a veil of mystery satisfied both parties.

•••••

***The Central Planet. One hour after Ardas' fight.***

"HOW could this happen? We had calculated everything. White Lord, why did this happen? Tell me one more time," the Red Circle Lord requested.

"The Atlantans haven't told you anything yet?"

"Only the basics. I hurried to see you about the rest. Why did it fail?"

"Everything started well. We barricaded the surrounding streets in time. The Human showed up and we attacked just as we had planned. But once again, we underestimated the Human and overestimated our fighters. He defeated both of our four-armed creations and one of the Atlantans. One of the four-armed beings died, while an Atlantan sustained serious injuries," the White Lord explained.

"The Atlantans were bragging that they had almost defeated the Human when the Sidargans got in their way. Is that true?"

"They can brag all they want. My masters say that the Human still had his strength and the battle would have lasted a long time. They couldn't break through the Human's mental block, which proves that he still had plenty of vigor. The Earthling fights intelligently, as if he has vast experience as a warrior on Earth. While the four-armed warriors had pressed him early, ultimately their lack of training and practice fighting became apparent. It looked as if they were gaining experience quickly during the course of the clash, so they have the potential to become superior to the Human as warriors, but only with time. The Atlantans, on the other hand, let me down," the White Lord vented.

"Why? They didn't lose a single warrior," the Red Lord replied.

"But they lost to a foe not really any bigger, and significantly weaker energetically. Their total inability to improvise upon seeing an unknown strategy by the Sidargans and Isans led to this result. The modified Alorans, it turns out, can't do anything more than catch flies. We have twenty dead and twelve more injured despite each individual being stronger than the opponent. They showed a total failure to fight in formation against the enemy's disciplined ranks. In fairness, I should add that the Sidargans surprised me. I didn't think that they had such warriors there."

"We had never encountered Sidargans from the Planet of the Ants. Apparently, the rumors about them as their race's best warriors aren't just empty tales. Relax, Brother. Life goes on. We need to think about further action. Any news from the Yellow Lord? He didn't come to the trial because he got caught up with the Harat project."

"You're right, Brother. We need to move on. I think we should continue the four-armed warrior project. They form a pretty good team with the Atlantans. I

think they'll come in handy in the future. The Yellow Lord sent word that he's encountered a few setbacks on the Harat planet. Nothing he can't handle, but he needs to stay there personally to make sure they finish the project on time. Did you ask the Atlantans if they left any clues?"

"I asked. Everything's clean. The planet's security forces won't have any proof, while I believe the Isans and Sidargans will stay quiet. At least now we've confirmed our suspicions that these two races are working together and have allied themselves with the Human. So the mission did accomplish that much. I'll inform my analysts. What do you think about the next part of the trial?"

"Only the Creator knows, Red Brother. We've revealed our strongest arguments. The Human hasn't. We'll see. I think we need one more backup plan. We should meet with the other brothers and discuss how the situation has played out. Let's call a meeting after the trial."

"I totally agree with you, White Lord. You go participate in the trial while I inform our brothers. We'll have to decide on our next steps. The Human appeared terribly virile and dangerous. There's no guarantee that the Harat project will succeed. Now I have to go pacify the Atlantans and inform the Yellow Circle to increase the number of modified Alorans. In my opinion, later we're going to need every fighter we can possibly create. Maybe we should think about revealing the Sidargan-Isan alliance to the court?"

"No, Brother. We'd make fools of ourselves without any proof. Okay, I say we finish this talk about business and go eat and rest."

As after every serious conversation, the Demurgs quickly forgot all their problems and retired to the adjoining recreation facility.

•••••

### ***The Central Planet. 21 May 2016.***

"MAY it please the court," Ardas began his speech after the judges granted him his opportunity. "During this session I've already heard various opinions about myself. I thank my friends for their kind words and the opponents for sincerely expressing their doubts. It's fairly strange that a trial about the attack on the planet Eduron, which the White Demurg Circle Lord and his helpers carried out, has suddenly become the human race's and an individual human being's trial. But so be it. I believe I need to retort and reveal some facts about humans that not even they, our creators, know. Before starting, I'd like to express my respect to the Demurg race and officially declare that humans will forever be grateful for their existence and will never forget the Demurg's contributions to our race's current prosperity."

“So, as I understand it, you will begin your statement with a retort to the Demurgs’ declarations,” the tribunal’s Chief Justice clarified.

“Yes, Your Honor. I’d like to begin with data about the first humans. I can honestly say that I was not yet alive then, and definitely cannot say what the original humans were like. Perhaps—and I emphasize, perhaps—the Demurgs’ description of my people represents the truth. But then the question arises: can we make the same conclusions about modern humans? Don’t tell me such unrivalled experts as the White Circle Demurgs think genetics alone determine behavior. If so, I have news for you: that proposition’s false. Throughout the history of mankind, the question often arose as to what affects an individual’s behavior more, nature or nurture. Two hundred years ago, people still believed that surroundings had a much smaller influence than genetics, and people from that age would probably have agreed with the Demurgs’ assertions and conclusions. Yet after that, many years of research proved something else entirely. A person’s environment is no less important than inherited genes. More than one hundred and fifty years ago, someone discovered some people raised from birth by wild animals, mostly wolves. Though normally developed humans with typical gene structures, they did not consider themselves human. Rather, they continued to believe that were wolves. Thus, they acted just like these creatures, walking on all fours, unable to speak, reluctant to wear clothes, and so forth. No treatment or prolonged period among people made any difference. As a result, an opposite theory flourished, offering the environment as the strongest factor shaping behavior. After observing the planet Earth, you should all totally agree with this proposition. The Earth’s effects only allow subjects who adapt quickly to their environment to survive. Sometimes, this process of adapting essentially changes an animal’s genetic code. Humans, I think, are no exception. You probably don’t often encounter humans with the original genetic code. This means that other representatives of my race, in order to adapt, have changed genetically. You may ask, what about me? After all, the Demurgs said that I have an exact copy of an original human’s genetic code. In response, I say there are two alternatives. Either I have not fully adapted to Earth’s hostile environment, or I live on a part of the planet where drastic alterations aren’t currently necessary. But I’ve digressed. Let me continue what I was saying about factors influencing human behavior. With time, scientists noted that people who grew up in the same conditions and who found themselves in analogous situations rarely acted the same. They then questioned why, if the newer theory held true, their behavior differed. The only explanation, one later confirmed by scientific experiments, holds that neither of these factors—genetics nor environment—alone determines human behavior. Both of these factors govern a person’s actions together and in equal measure. Two conclusions, then, follow. First, modern humans do not mirror their ancestors, and even genetically identical humans will not necessarily act like their progenitors. More importantly, doesn’t the possibility exist that the original humans’ behavior, as the Demurgs described it, resulted not only from their inborn nature, but also from the settings they found themselves in? In support

of my arguments, I'll tell all the Rationals about another characteristic humans have, one our creators either didn't notice or didn't appreciate."

After a slight pause, Ardas continued, "I speak of the yearning for freedom. Humans consider freedom life's most treasured value. They will never—I emphasize, never—become slaves. For this principle, humans will fight, sacrifice, and die. Even if they can't achieve it themselves, they will gladly offer their own heads to ensure their children live freely. Someone could probably defeat and enslave the humans, especially since they live on the Inhibiting Planet. But only this generation will remain slaves. In each successive generation, new leaders will arise and guide their people to battle for liberty. If anyone manages to occupy Earth, he'll have to prepare to fight every single resident of the planet and to never feel safe so long as a single human remains alive. Even a crushed and subdued human can rise like a phoenix from the ashes and again reach for a weapon. I think the original human beings had these characteristics as well, and they revolted only because their creators wanted to see them become obedient slaves. They had no desire to subjugate others; they merely sought freedom for themselves. This thirst alone caused them to rise up and fight. The Demurgs inaccurately evaluated their creations then, and continue to do so now. They would have achieved much more if they had addressed humans as their equals and had offered the role of partners instead of serfs. Humans always remain loyal to their allies and carry out their given assignments."

"I see," the Demurgs judge interrupted. "Now we would like to know more about you personally. Tell us about your abilities and the guile you displayed while fighting on Eduron."

"What can I say? My abilities probably resemble the ones the White Circle Lord reported to you. Although, in light of the circumstances, I'd like to emphasize one nuance. Humans do not have automatic, inborn powers. They must always cultivate their abilities. A person must learn everything, but I had not had a chance to study much. Despite this fact, I'll try to answer your question in detail. At the moment, I control my internal energy masterfully and have learned the principles of telekinesis fairly well. For brief periods of time, I can break away and glide above a planet's surface, while in terms of mental abilities I can protect myself from outside influence. But I surely cannot pressure or subdue someone else, nor can I fight or travel on my own in the metaphysical state. Sometimes I succeed in blocking opponents' nerve cells, but only if I'm familiar with their structure. In general, I can unhesitatingly claim to control energy as well as the top Atlantans and match any circle's Demurg lord in terms mental defense, but in the field of mental influence I am useless. I wouldn't even know where to start. While I'm a good warrior, that's as far as it goes. I'm not nearly as dangerous or deceitful as the honorable Demurg representative described me."

Ardas waited somewhat and observed the spectators. He could see that his words had calmed his audience. "So my chosen strategy is working," he thought. "Let's keep going."

"Now I'd like to talk a bit about the battle on Eduron. Allow me to present an analogy—the Rationals' battle with the Sidargans and the ambush at the center of the galaxy. If I'm not mistaken, the entire ambush plan came about thanks to the Vabarians, of which race this tribunal's Chief Justice is a member. Yet nobody among the Rationals ever thought to accuse this race of treachery or dishonor. This is totally understandable and natural, for the plan represented a fantastic military stratagem, one to take pride in, not feel shame over. Likewise, my behavior represented nothing more than a simple battle strategy. Let us note that they invited me to the Second Isan Clan Leader's chambers and I came, without resisting or attacking the Atlantans sent for me. But I must say I found their behavior quite insulting, and thus I had to use all the patience I could muster. Upon entering the chambers, I saw the Demurgs' aggression toward my friends and simply had to take action to try to free the Clan Leader and his subjects. My honor and my respect towards the Isans required me to fight, despite the fact that I faced ten Demurg masters, the White Circle Lord, and dozens of Atlantans. My only chance of victory lay not in guile, as some have tried to represent, but in a military strategy based on distraction. In this case, if you accuse me of deceit, then you have to accuse the Vabarians, as well. I managed to liberate my friends and I'm glad I did, because otherwise I doubt we'd be scrutinizing this event. To be honest, I don't think the Rationals would have ever found out about it. You can choose to believe the Demurgs, but the facts speak for themselves. They have already made a blatant mockery of all the Rationals' rules and insultingly tricked everyone once. Of course, they try to rationalize these lies with noble goals, but a lie—even in support of a noble goal—nevertheless remains a lie. After lying once for an admirable aim, next time they can lie after inventing their own goals, goals that they alone may see as noble, and then deception becomes the norm. Isn't that what the Demurgs are now doing? Hasn't the goal of destroying or, in greater likelihood, researching me and conquering the humans become an all-encompassing obsession for which they would not only lie, but also use mental force against others and break all rules held dear by the Rationals? This leads me to another question. Do the Demurgs really need me in order to defend against the humans? Or, instead, couldn't they have decided to use the features of my genetic code to learn why humans did not become their slaves and then create a truly universal warrior-human, one completely dependent on the Demurgs' will? Perhaps the Rationals should consider whether handing me over to the pale ones wouldn't mean granting them a weapon they could later direct against you. Keeping in mind the Demurgs' war, one doesn't need a vivid imagination to picture the nightmare described by the White Circle Lord, only with the Demurgs ruling the galaxy instead of the humans. Furthermore, I'd like to offer some additional food for thought. Can anybody sitting in this courtroom imagine that, in the same situation, the Isans could act the same way? I think not, because

that would be absolutely impossible. The Isans would always act openly, which marks the very difference between them and the Demurgs. This distinction is exactly the same as that between honor and guile, truth and lies.”

“I’d like to interrupt the Human,” the Demurg judge interjected. “His speech has nothing to do with the essence of the case, and he has already answered the question. I have a few more questions, but first I’d like consent from the Human and my fellow judges to activate a lie detector.”

“Agreed. I have nothing to hide,” Ardas replied.

“The court has no objections,” the Chief Justice, upon glancing at his colleagues, answered.

“Well then, Human,” the Demurg judge began after turning on the machine. “Have you made some kind of agreement with the Sidargan mercenaries, and why did the Sidargans help you on Eduron?”

“I did not make any agreement with them,” Ardas responded. “They probably helped me because their hive’s queen ordered them to. I don’t know the queen’s exact orders and I’m not interested in them. You can ask the Sidargans personally why members of their race decided to help me on Eduron.”

As he spoke these words, Ardas’ thoughts differed ever so slightly: “You silly thing. Agreements can only be with female Sidargans. The male mercenaries don’t decide anything. And I’m only interested in the orders of the queens’ council, not the ideas of this insignificant young Sidargan.”

“Does this answer,” asked the Chief Justice, “satisfy the Demurg judge?”

“Yes. I want to ask one more question. Have you, Human, mentally subdued any Isan Clan Leader?”

“I can wholeheartedly answer that I have not subdued a single Isan Clan Leader and have not even tried to do so.”

“And a final question,” the Demurg judge continued. “Are you able to trick this lie detector?”

“No, because I only answer the truth. I think your machine would immediately identify any lies. I’d like to also take this opportunity, as long as we’re using the lie detector, to express that the Demurgs have no reason to fear me, and I swear, according to the custom on my planet, that I will not lay one finger on any member of the Demurg race. Furthermore, to placate all the Rationals, I declare that I will not avoid returning to my home planet in any way.”

Again, the human’s thoughts differed slightly from his words: “You can’t say I’m lying. I’m even telling the truth now. Not once did I lie. I simply responded with that which is the truth to me. It’s your fault you asked ambiguous questions.

And I may not use a finger, but we'll see about other methods. But let them get tangled in the meanings, especially with this decree so resonant and public."

The machine never even hinted at a lie. Although the Demurgs appeared somewhat disappointed, they as a race knew how to accept any setback without lamenting much. Thus, this minor obstacle did not unsettle them too much. The observers, for their part, forgot the negative thoughts that had arisen after the Demurgs' speech. The Human seemed open and just. He neither avoided questions nor lied. His speech and explanations sounded logical, and the suspicions he raised about the Demurgs had no less of an effect than those raised against him earlier. The observers' opinion shifted again and became even more favorable toward Ardas.

As everyone departed the courtroom, the White Circle Lord gazed spitefully at the Human. "A smart creature," he thought. "He whipped up a nice little oration. Who is he trying to fool with his reverence? Clearly, he contrived some way to fool the lie detector. I'll ask the Green Circle Lord to research the Human's address. They're our leading experts on diplomacy and oration. I have to admit, this Human scares me. My specialists have reported the Earthling's threat to throw one system's sun into another system as credible and, with a few million Humans working together, possible. I wonder if he was speaking seriously or just tossing about another routine sham. How can anyone understand such a subject, one who lies so easily and convincingly? Only the Creators know when he's speaking the truth. Maybe one of the brothers will think of something? I see that we really need a new action plan. If they return him to the same time, the Harats' attack could fail as well."

••••

### ***The Central Planet. 22 May 2016.***

"THIS court is now in session," the Chief Justice began. "We recognize the Sidargan race's representative, and we grant her the opportunity to speak."

"Honorable judges," the queen of the Ant Planet began her remarks. "I see today as a historical day for our races. Despite old wounds and wars, for the first time, we are all peacefully working together toward solving a problem. Using this opportunity, I have the authority to declare that, in light of current circumstances, the Sidargan queens' council, representing all the hives, is hereby offering the Rational Union both peace and economic, technical, and military cooperation."

The queen had dropped a bomb. Nobody among the Rationals had expected that their powerful enemies, whom everybody feared, would suddenly offer to become friends. The observers stirred again, feeling both amazed and overjoyed. They would no longer need to worry about a repeat of the previous

war's horrors, especially considering that the Sidargans rivaled the Rational Union both in terms of technology and number of warriors.

"We are prepared to trade technologies, sign commercial treaties with both the entire Union and its separate members, and help the Union or its constituent parts fight any enemies," the Sidargan continued. "Of course, you'll naturally ask why we are acting this way. I'll explain the answer while telling you a bit of our history. We came from a neighboring galaxy. A race more dangerous than almost any found here drove us out of our home planets. They are called Dvarvans. What makes Dvarvans so dangerous? Dvarvans are shapeless pieces of protoplasm that can assume any form. They can become trees, animals, Sidargans, or any of the Rationals. We thought we had suppressed the Dvarvans' penetration at a few systems still under our control, but recent events have showed that they have changed directions and are pushing toward us. You have all probably heard about the strange event on Eduron when a creature resembling an Isan was accidentally revealed to be an imposter. That was a Dvarvan. They are already hiding among the Rationals, and when they attack openly, it will seem that Dvarvans have occupied all of your most important posts. By then, your abilities to resist will prove limited. We do not wish to find ourselves surrounded on all sides by Dvarvans, thus we are offering you an alliance."

The entire courtroom was buzzing after yet another shocking announcement. Suddenly, the Rationals had lost one enemy and gained another, more dangerous than the first. The tribunal's observers began to panic. But the judges, true masters of their trade, remained inscrutable. Little could unsettle them. The Chief Justice thanked the Sidargan queen and asked her to turn her attention to the relevant facts of the trial.

"All right, honorable judges, I'll speak of the facts pertaining to this case. Most of you, if you have any interest in Sidargans, know that both resistance to external mental influence and a strong common consciousness characterize our race. But besides that, Sidargans have another useful trait, the capacity to travel in the metaphysical state. Our females rival Demurg masters in this field. Of course, this ability allows for extensive espionage opportunities, of which Sidargans have successfully taken advantage. When the Human arrived on Eduron, we found out about it the same day. We also learned fairly quickly about the Demurgs' plans regarding the Human. Because the Demurgs did not know that we could travel in the metaphysical state, they did not hide anything at the time and we had access to all of their plans."

"We object!" exclaimed the Demurg representative. "We can't trust longtime enemies who have not proven their noble intentions. They may just be talking in order to divide the Rationals. Let such proposals remain secret and leave them to the Rationals' ruling council."

“Objection overruled,” the Chief Justice fired back. “The Sidargans’ testimony could have an important bearing on the outcome of this case.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” the Sidargan resumed her address. “The Demurgs rejoiced at finding a Human genetically identical to the original specimens, and decided to first research him in order to find the faults that led to disobedience, then create an army of submissive warrior-killers. Using this army, they planned to resume the pursuit of their race’s most important goal. Of course, our claims may make you skeptical, so we’re offering you the opportunity to verify them. Our race has created technology that can detect lies not in words, but in thoughts. This technology can read a speaker’s thoughts and ascertain the truth. We suggest that the Demurgs’ White Lord agree to a test with this absolute lie detector in order to determine their true ambitions with regards to the Human.”

Dead silence came over the observers. With her suggestion, the Sidargan essentially turned the Demurgs’ weapon against them and also produced a major psychological effect. The Demurgs could not agree to the proposal for fear of the truth emerging, and, besides, the technology could end up having even more dangerous consequences than the queen had suggested. But refusal would mean confessing to lying, thus devaluing all of the Demurgs’ earlier words.

“I’ll keep going, because as I see, I won’t be getting an answer to my offer anytime soon,” the Sidargan continued. “After learning of the Demurgs’ plans, the queens’ council decided to interfere and rescue the Human. Of course, a number of selfish motives drove our decision. We certainly did not want to encounter the Demurgs’ killer creations in the future, even after their finishing off the remaining Rationals. A contingent of warriors traveled to Eduron and hindered the Atlantans’ efforts to attack the Human outside and then, later, mentally kept the White Circle Lord from focusing all of his attention on the Earthling. But I have to add that our expedition’s leader warned the Human of what awaited him and suggested he run, but he refused and hurried to help his hosts, the Isans.”

Ardas smiled when he saw how the Isans reacted. They absolutely shined. Ardas had never told them of his conversations with the Sidargans, and they had had no idea that the human had already known of the impending threat before even entering the palace. In their opinion, rushing to their aid with full knowledge of the danger and without any obligation to do so deserved the highest respect. Nobody had even considered that Ardas could have chosen an alternative to fighting. The Isans figured that if he could have escaped to safety, as the Sidargans now suggested, he surely would have done so. Even the Isan judge became visibly moved as a result.

“So then, the Demurgs attacked the Isans not to defend against the threat of the Human, but to create an obedient race of Humans and use it against the

other inhabitants of this galaxy. We ask the court to consider our message and grant the Isans' request to hand over the White Lord to them for punishment. Also, we'd like to emphasize that the Human has impressed us as an honorable and self-sacrificing individual, and therefore we sympathize with him and the Isans. In light of the Demurgs' true scheme, we will not allow them to take the Human and will support the Isans in any conflict between the two races."

Nobody had any further questions. Since the Demurgs had not anticipated such a turn of events, especially the suggestion they undergo a lie detector test, they decided not to exacerbate the situation. The court granted each party the opportunity to make closing arguments, during which both the Isans and Demurgs summarized their key arguments and repeated their earlier requests. Neither side presented any new evidence or arguments. At the conclusion of the session, the Chief Justice announced that the court would declare a verdict the next day. Ardas listened sporadically, with his attention often drifting elsewhere. He knew that the Demurgs' arguments would not end up deciding this case. And he also knew that the court would probably not grant the Isans' request. In a worst-case scenario, even if they court did not hand him over to the Demurgs, it could require him to immediately return to Earth. Ardas needed at least a few more months to finish preparing his base on Eduron. He began to evaluate all the possible outcomes of the case until he got tired of thinking about it any more. Finally, he decided to stop agonizing, and just wait for the tribunal's verdict.

•••••

### *The Central Planet. Evening on the same day.*

"GREETINGS, Human. I have news for you," said the modified Aloran standing before Ardas. But Ardas' senses had no trouble identifying the visitor's true identity.

"How nice to see a Dvarvan representative again. What's happened?"

"Nothing special. I have orders to inform you that the Dvarvan you know, Chrz, has successfully settled on the planet Harat and is carrying out his mission."

"That's good to hear. I have not forgotten our agreement and will implement it as soon as the opportunity arises. Has he learned anything about the Harats?"

"Yes. Chrz sent us all the data he has about the Harats' internal structure and their civilization," the Dvarvan explained, handing over a file compatible with the Isans' information system. "Also, Chrz sends his concerns over preparations for war taking place on the planet."

"Whom are they preparing to fight?"

“We don’t know yet, but plans call for the expeditionary corps to depart next month. They’ll be fighting the inhabitants of some planet not belonging to the Rational Union. All we know so far is that the planet is far from Harat, and its population seems dangerous to these invaders. We have no information about the coordinates of the target planet or the appearance of its inhabitants. Or at least, Chrz has not gathered that information yet. But the young scout will participate in the expeditionary corps’ mission and learn everything.”

“How is Chrz doing in general?”

“Thank you for your concern, Human. He’s fine. Farewell. My assignment called for me to give you a message, and I have done so.”

“Good luck, Dvarvan,” Ardas replied, watching the scout walk away. “A useful race,” he thought. “I have a feeling they’ll prove useful in the future.”

•••

### *The Central Planet. 23 May 2016.*

THE final day of the trial differed from the others. Tension reigned over both observers and participants. Even the Demurgs—fatalists as hardened as anybody—worried, unable to predict the tribunal’s decision in advance.

“The court will now announce its verdict,” the Chief Justice told the hushed courtroom. “First, having considered the Isans’ request, the court agrees with their accusations toward the Demurg White Circle Lord, deeming them well founded and sufficiently proven. Because he violated all of the Rationals’ established norms of interaction, the White Circle Lord deserves punishment. The motives behind the Demurgs’ use of coercion on Eduron, in the court’s opinion, have no relevance in this matter and cannot justify the White Circle Lord’s behavior. Deciding the White Circle Lord’s punishment must fall to the aggrieved party, in this case the Isan Clan Leaders’ Council. However, in making this decision, the court adds one stipulation. The Clan Leaders’ Council gains the right to decide the punishment only if an examination confirms the absence of mental dependence on the Human, known as Ardas, and any influence by him. This condition reflects the reasoning and evidence presented at trial regarding Humans’ mental abilities and their stated goals. Given even the slightest possibility that the presented reasoning could conform to reality, we must investigate. Although the court cannot force the Isan Clan Leaders to undergo these exams, principles of justice warrant ensuring that any punishment assessed to the White Circle Lord be fair and impartial, which only Isan Clan Leaders free from external influence can do.”

Ardas noticed relief or even joy on the face of the White Lord. During the reading of the verdict, his face had turned slightly grayish, but it returned to its usual white after the final sentences.

“Second, having deliberated the Demurgs’ request to research the Human, the court has decided to reject it in part. The outcome depends on one condition: whether the White Circle agrees to undergo the lie detector test that the Sidargans suggest during the next two weeks. If the test’s outcome demonstrates the veracity of the intentions expressed by the White Lord toward the Human, the court will recommend that the Council of Rational Beings decide the matter and suggest that they hand the Human over to the Demurgs.”

“The Demurgs will never agree to the lie detector test,” the Isan representative whispered to Iskik.

“Third, based on the evidence the Demurgs presented and the arguments regarding possible Human schemes, but also taking into account the Isans’ and Sidargans’ responses about this specific Earthling, the court has decided to fulfill the Human’s wish in part and allow him to remain on Eduron for another two months, starting today. Furthermore, the court does not preclude the Isans from returning this individual to the same time and space from which they seized him.”

Now came Ardas’ turn to exhale. He had cared most about staying for another few months and then returning to the past. Secretly, Ardas had expected a similar outcome to the case. Earlier, he had already noticed long-range teleportation gates open at his secret building on Eduron and humans visiting there, meaning that his plan had at least partially succeeded and was continuing to materialize. However, in light of the unpredictable subtleties of time, Ardas still worried. Anything could happen. He could have been handed over to the Demurgs, and then a war would have begun. Or, the court could have exiled him to Ligia. In either event, his plan would have become difficult to effect. Finally, he could have erred in drawing conclusions from the fact that people were visiting the secret house.

“Fourth,” continued the judge, “having considered the Sidargans’ request, the court has decided not to express its opinion on the issue separately, given the request’s direct association with that of the Isans. Likewise, the court recommends the Rationals’ ruling council debate all the remaining suggestions the Sidargan put forth, for these matters have particular importance for the Rationals’ future way of life. This decision is not subject to appeal, and must be voluntarily carried out without delay.”

“What wise judges, trying to cater to all sides,” the Isan representative told Iskik, who listened intently. “Who could argue with the outcome? We have to accept the verdict, because they found the Demurgs guilty. The pale ones can’t object, because they essentially avoided any punishment. And the decision

won't distress the Human, either, because it almost conforms to his earlier plans. Finally, the court showed proper respect to the Sidargans, so they have no reason to complain."

"When we return, I'll have to speak to the Human," Iskik replied. "I'm curious what he'll do next and why those long-range teleportation gates have been open so long on our planet. Do you think he'll reveal all his plans to us?"

"I think so. Ardas sees that we are his allies and that he can trust us. Besides, the Clan Leaders believe his warnings about the Demurgs and will help him avert such a grim future. For my part, I'll speak to the Isan judge. Maybe he'll tell me how the Demurg judge behaved and what he demanded. I'll let you know. When do you leave?"

"Immediately, I think. Come to Eduron some time. It'd be nice to talk to you some more." Iskik bade farewell as the Isan representative headed to find the judge.

...•••

### ***The planet Eduron. 30 May 2016.***

"I wonder what the Clan Leader wants to talk to me about. Nothing's happened, unless they heard about something new," Ardas thought. An hour earlier, a messenger from the palace had come to announce that the Clan Leader urgently wanted to speak to him. The messenger didn't say more, although perhaps he didn't know anything more. Ardas worried a little, for the Clan Leader had not sent him such a pressing and formal summons in a long time. The entire way to the palace, Ardas pondered what issues the conversation would cover and why he sensed such a change in the Isans' mood. Most likely, the Isans had discovered the long-range teleportation gates and would ask him why they were operating in his yard. How to answer them, Ardas could not decide even as his meeting began.

"Greetings, Ardas. Thank you for coming," the Clan Leader began.

"Greetings, Clan Leader. How could I not come when the Clan Leader beckons? I always enjoy seeing my friends and spending time with them."

"I'm glad you still feel that way. I want to seriously discuss a few matters, and if you don't mind, I've invited my son, Iskik; my brother, the leader of the Fourth Isan Clan; and Iskin to participate."

"Of course I don't mind," Ardas replied.

This opening sequence unnerved the Human even more. The discussion's agenda seemed serious and not very pleasant. Judging by the body language of

Iskin, who appeared the most agreeable of the group, the Isans had decided to require an explanation of him. "I wonder what I'll have to do in such a case, tell them the truth or simply use mental force," Ardas thought.

"I'll tell you frankly, Ardas. We feel somewhat uneasy. Your actions, your talk, and especially the very important fact we learned at trial, that despite your knowing of the Demurg foray and having the option of fleeing, you still decided to help us, all that allows us to consider you a comrade of our race. The Second Clan and I personally would never doubt that, but some data received a while ago and recently verified by Isans from other clans has raised some serious uncertainty. Now a question has arisen, and we'd like an answer from you. Of course, you could opt not to answer and we'd honor your decision, but personally, I would really like to hear an explanation. Ardas, why are there long-range teleportation gates, linking your yard with the planet Earth, open on our planet? Who opened them? What are you plotting, and why haven't you told us about it?"

"Honorable Clan Leader, I will answer your question," Ardas began, so far having decided not to use mental force. "First of all, I'd like to reveal to you one of my abilities, the power to open short- and long-range teleportation gates. I have mastered this skill for several months now and can open the gates without any supplemental equipment. You are correct; long-range teleportation gates in my yard do indeed link Eduron with Earth. I opened these gates, but at the same time, it wasn't me. You see, I—the current I—simply prepared the facilities for these gates, while another I—the one who will return to the past on Earth—has opened these gates and occasionally returns to Eduron for short spells in order to shed Earth's inhibiting effects. I don't want to lose what I have gained. In order to help my people live on a planet as hostile to life as Earth, as I've decided to do, I will need to periodically shake off the effects that my native planet places on its children. That's why I prepared a facility in which I could open teleportation gates and decided that before leaving, I would ask your permission to occasionally return to Eduron in secret and briefly stay in the house that belongs to me. That way, I could recover and maintain my new abilities, as well as help my people. I know that isn't quite right, which explains why I didn't approach you with this request. However, now, I'd like to take this opportunity to ask you, the Leader of the Second Clan, to allow me to infrequently return to Eduron in secret. In addition, I ask the others taking part in this meeting to do me a priceless favor and keep all this a secret."

"Won't the Demurgs find out?" asked the Fourth Clan Leader.

"They won't," Ardas answered. "I've agreed with the Sidargans, and they will mentally hide the entire planet Eduron from the Demurgs' view. The pale ones won't see anything at all on your planet."

“Why should the Sidargans help you?” continued the Fourth Clan Leader. “What pacts have you spun behind our backs with the Sidargans, Earthling?”

“The Sidargans don’t like the Demurgs. They prefer the Isans. Besides, my fight against the Demurgs made an impression on them. That’s why they help me. We haven’t made any other agreements with them. I’ve told you everything,” replied Ardas.

Meanwhile, he looked at the Fourth Clan Leader and thought, “As for you, I see we’ll need to have a separate talk. We won’t manage without mental force in your case.”

“Forgive us, Ardas,” the Second Clan Leader apologized, “my brother has a bit of a temper. Is it very important for you to get our permission to visit Eduron periodically?”

“Yes, very important. I won’t do anything without your agreement. Then I’ll try to ask the Sidargans for help. But these creatures have not befriended me as you have, so they could begin to use me. Because I’ve always regarded you my best friends, I know that I can trust you and that you won’t ever force any conditions on me. Besides, I would enjoy visiting my friends on Eduron every once in a while. Everything depends on your decision. If you won’t allow it, it won’t happen.”

“What do you mean it won’t happen, if it’s already happening,” the Leader of the Fourth Clan grumbled.

“It’s happening,” Ardas explained, “because I’m doing it. If you forbid it, then I, when I return to the past, won’t do it. I won’t open the teleportation gates and won’t visit here.”

“That beaver is starting to annoy me,” Ardas thought. “I hope he stays another week, so I can seriously process him and keep him from causing problems later.”

“All right, Human. I owe you more than my life. Let this represent repayment of part of that debt,” the Second Clan Leader explained. “I allow you to secretly visit Eduron and will keep this fact in confidence. Does everyone else agree? Iskik?”

“Yes, Father. I would love to keep in touch with the Human. Our friendship should benefit us both, I think.”

“Iskin?”

“I wholeheartedly agree, Clan Leader, and I will keep the agreement secret.”

“Brother?”

"I wouldn't do it, Brother. His type seems suspicious to me, but maybe I just haven't had a chance to get to know him."

"You're right about that," Ardas thought, "but don't worry. You'll get your chance."

"However," the Leader of the Fourth Clan continued, "in light of your disposition and as a display of solidarity, I promise to keep this arrangement a secret."

"Then it's decided," the Second Clan Leader declared. "You have our permission and our guarantee of confidentiality. Thank you, Ardas, for your honesty and openness."

After that, the conversation continued more pleasantly and casually. While the Isans discussed the latest battles, Ardas reported how training some of the members of the elite forces was going. An hour later, as he walked home, Ardas smiled and mused about those combative, honorable, and naïve Isans. He liked them more and more. The human decided to never use mental force against the Leader of the Second Clan or his son, and to refrain from more serious mental adjustments with Iskin. But his anger toward the Fourth Clan Leader had not subsided, and he had no plans to alter his earlier intentions.

•••••

### ***Demurg-controlled space. 30 June 2016.***

FOR the second time, all of the Demurg Circle Lords had congregated. This time, the White Lord no longer had to persuade his colleagues of the danger posed by the Human. The lost battle on the Central Planet and the partly unfavorable ruling by the tribunal had forced even the greatest skeptics to reconsider the true capabilities of this specific Human and of his race in general. Yet not all the Lords believed the Human to have antagonistic plans.

"Brothers," the Black Circle Lord began, "perhaps we should stop acting paranoid towards the Humans. Consider what the Human has said. Not once has he emphasized a negative disposition toward us. On the contrary, he expressed respect to the Demurgs as creators. Maybe we should try to come to terms with him?"

"How can we agree anything with them?" the White Lord retorted. "You don't know what the Human said to me privately during the trial. He ironically inquired whether I happened to know how many Humans it would take to throw the sun from the White Demurg system to the Yellow Demurg system. There's your threat, and it's very real. If all of the Humans on Earth were to awaken, they could easily throw entire solar systems from one galaxy to another!"

“But maybe he just wanted to scare you, while his true ideas came out in his remarks to the court?” The Black Lord held his ground.

“I expected you to ask that,” the White Lord replied. “That’s why I asked the Green Circle Lord to analyze the Human’s speech. His conclusions support my contentions.”

“Brothers,” the Green Lord intervened, “I usually side with the Black Circle Demurgs, but in this case I must remain objective. In truth, the Earthling’s words do not directly confirm friendliness toward us. Multiple meanings lie hidden in each of his sentences and in his entire speech generally. For example, the sentence ‘Humans will forever be grateful for their existence and will never forget the Demurgs’ contributions to our race’s current prosperity’ truly has two meanings. We can only comprehend both of them after considering mankind’s current existence. On several occasions, the Human himself mentioned that they practically live in hell, and we all know the nature of Earth—dangerous and unsuitable for life. This situation arose because of the Demurgs’ actions. Humans were running from none other than us when they ended up on the Inhibiting Planet. Therefore, he couldn’t have been talking about true prosperity, so this word must have some other meaning. In speaking this way, the Earthling did not express gratitude, but rather threatened the entire Demurg race. The Human’s promise not to lay a finger on any Demurg has an even simpler explanation. He may not lay a finger on us, but, for example, he could kill with a spear and still keep his word. Of course, despite its ambiguity, such a promise has a decent psychological effect. But we feel most disappointed about his statements concerning the Sidargans after we started using the lie detector. After much contemplation, one of my masters realized that male Sidargans don’t actually decide anything or make treaties; the females do everything. The Earthling meant that he had made no agreements with male Sidargans, but omitted the fact that he had made an alliance with the females, thus tricking the lie detector.”

“Ingenious!” the Blue Circle Lord expressed. The others agreed.

“So then, we believe that basically the Human was both threatening us and offering to make an agreement,” the Green Lord summarized. “I personally believe that we could come to terms with him. Granted, I understand that his one absolute condition—recognizing the Humans as our equals—would probably not sound acceptable to you, Brothers. But still, I, concurring with the Demurgs of the Black Circle, suggest you think again. It’s not too late; we can still cancel the invasion.”

“I respect my brother from the Green Circle tremendously,” the White Lord answered, “but does he himself agree with his own words? Are the Green Circle Demurgs really prepared to recognize the Humans, their own creations, as equals? Has the Green Circle forgotten what goal these creatures were made for? If we can’t achieve our goal using them, then why do we even need them?”

I will agree with the Green Lord's suggestions if he can confirm to us all that, in dealing with Humans as our equals, we will still have the opportunity to achieve our Great Goal."

"Unfortunately, brothers, I must speak frankly. We have no guarantees that we will achieve more through accord with the Humans than via conflict," replied the Green Lord. "Agreement may provide greater safety. But I must say, according to my specialists' calculations, the odds of suffering major losses after negotiating with the Humans equal the odds of enduring similar casualties in war. You know me; I oppose force if it does not guarantee victory. Thus I now suggest a peaceful solution."

"As far as I can understand, Brothers, we gain nothing by offering the Humans negotiation, and we can lose in either situation. So then let's not beat around the bush. The Humans pose a threat to us, so we need to destroy them. Only then can we ensure a calm future for later Demurg generations. By negotiating, we only delay the inevitable. We're better off destroying the Humans now, before they awaken and while we're completely prepared," the Yellow Circle Lord fumed.

"I concur with the Yellow Lord," the ruler of the Red Circle agreed. "Let's not forget our primary aim. First of all, we must try to research those Humans identical to the first batch and create a Human race obedient to us. Only then can we crush the ones remaining on Earth like some annoying bugs."

"I agree," the White Lord stated. "Let's vote on the matter. Who supports the prepared plan, based on conflict with the Humans?"

Even the Black Circle Lord, convinced by the Green Lord's conclusions, voted in favor. Only the Green Lord himself abstained. But he reiterated that, his personal opinion notwithstanding, he would support any decision of the majority.

"Excellent," the White Lord rejoiced. "Let's talk about specific issues. Yellow Lord, update us on the preparations for the Harat expansion."

"Everything's going according to plan. In two weeks, the fleet and an expeditionary corps will depart on their crusade. We'll give them the coordinates, but not a single Demurg will be able to participate in the campaign."

"Why?" somebody asked.

"The Rational Union will be checking all ships arriving near Earth. If the fleet includes any Demurgs, they'll have the basis to ban us from access to the Humans and charge us with a premeditated act of aggression. But if the fleet includes only Harats, the Rationals won't be able to stop them. Because the horned creatures do not belong to the Rational Union, the quarantine does not apply to them, and they can attack any other non-members, such as the Humans. The

Isans won't have the grounds to cause us trouble. They'll only be able to demand the evacuation of that specific Human, I mean Ardas, because he holds the status of an Isan guest. But that decision will lie with the Rational Council or even a separate tribunal. Meanwhile, the Harats will suppress the resistance, occupy Earth, capture Ardas, and begin searching for other individuals genetically identical to the originals. We can't fail."

"Let's hope everything goes smoothly," the Red Circle Lord replied. "What's this Sidargan story about mysterious aliens from another galaxy? Are they really that dangerous?"

After considering the question momentarily, the White Lord responded, "I doubt it. In any event, they're far away right now, so let them squabble with the Sidargans. When the time comes, we'll inquire more. Just for the hell of it, I appointed my circle's group of masters to find out who they are. The Sidargans and Ligians are still interfering with our efforts, but my guys will break into the neighboring galaxy by taking a roundabout route. When I learn more, I'll definitely let you know. But, Brothers, on several occasions we've said that we could not fail, and we still failed. In my opinion, we need another plan. I heard the Brown Circle prepared a backup option."

"Not so much a backup plan as a complementary one," clarified the Brown Lord. "We suggest destroying the Isan ship with the Human the moment they return to the past to return him home. You may ask how to do this without giving ourselves away. Very easily, I say. Perhaps you know that we have cyborg-ships left over from the Goal Wars that we don't use and the Rationals know nothing about. A few cosmetic repairs and the ships won't appear to have anything to do with our race. We can even use the Sidargans' story and blame those mysterious aliens from another galaxy.

"Which circle has such ships? We don't," the White Lord wondered aloud.

"We have two. That should suffice fully," the Brown Lord answered. "The plan is simple. Using the Isan information system, we find out the precise time and location they kidnapped the Human. In order to avoid encountering themselves, the Isans will present him to the same location at almost the same time, with a two or three second margin of error. Knowing the time and place, we can go there earlier and wait for them. As soon as the ship appears, we'll destroy it along with the Isans and Human aboard."

"What about our plan to capture this Human?" the Yellow Lord inquired.

"Brothers, from what I can tell, this specific Human represents the only threat to the Harat forces on Earth," reasoned the Brown Demurg Lord. "He could still have his powers and mobilize or warn the other Earthlings. Various probabilities of success are possible, but I think we'd better not risk it. In my opinion, we have

to destroy this Human, and we'll find another specimen genetically identical to the originals on Earth, also known as the Inhibiting Planet. Don't you think?"

"I concur," the Blue Circle Lord replied.

One by one, some reluctantly, others enthusiastically, the Demurg Lords agreed with the Brown Lord's plan. The White Lord resisted the most. He wanted to snatch Ardas and personally retaliate against him by torturing him, genetically modifying him, taking away his powers, and enslaving him. The White Lord hoped to settle his score this way after his loss on Eduron, but the new plan eliminated that possibility. In the end, he backed down and the proposal passed. After a few trivial questions, the Demurg Lords finished their serious discussion and turned their attention to the topic of amusement. This race knew how to celebrate and never avoided an opportunity to do so. As usual, everyone jovially headed toward the recreation facility, where the Black Circle Lord had prepared a feast this time.

•••••

### *Meanwhile, in Sidargan-controlled space.*

"SISTERS, I have news for you," the eldest member of the Sidargan Council addressed her colleagues. "The Dvarvans have contacted us on the Planet of the Ants and confirmed the existence of an agreement between them and the Human. We guessed correctly—the Human struck a bargain with the Dvarvans."

"So the Human betrayed us?" asked one of the most experienced Sidargans, voicing the majority's thoughts.

"At first I thought so too, but the ruler of the Ant Planet's hive, who views the Human very favorably, convinced me to try sorting everything out. We arranged another meeting with the Dvarvans. They agreed to reveal the details of the pact. As it turns out, the Human's agreement does not neglect our concerns. He agreed to help the Dvarvans achieve their mission, but, in exchange, he required they return our occupied native galaxy to us and help him collect certain information. The Dvarvans agreed and during our second meeting, as a sign of peace, offered to return both of the forts their captured last year to the ruler of the native galaxy's hive."

"What do you mean? They're returning the forts with all equipment without a fight?" asked a few Sidargans, dubious of their enemy's generosity.

"Yes, and they're not demanding anything in return. During our conversation, they led me to understand that our future relations depend on the Human's actions and whether he upholds his end of the bargain. If everything goes as agreed, we'll get our entire domain with all our fortifications, occupied

ships, and everything. The pact's lone restrictive provision forbids us from traveling to our native galaxy's center."

"Why?" the Sidargan queens clamored.

"It has to do with the Dvarvan's mission. From what I understand, these creatures still keep in touch with the Creators and get direct orders from them. Their assignment entails serving as a wall to keep the native galaxy's races from a crusade against us. According to the Dvarvans, our expansion would provoke a retaliatory blow from powerful races living in the galaxy, one that neither the Dvarvans, nor we, nor even the entire Rational Union would withstand for long," the council's eldest Sidargan explained.

"And what exactly have the Creators created, anyway?" somebody asked.

"Apparently, it wasn't the Creators creating there, but a race known as the Creators' Great Enemies. Their creations could prove more powerful than those of the Creators, and the Dvarvans claim they're having trouble maintaining the status quo. That's precisely why the formless ones have an interest in the Humans' awakening and want their help ensuring peace and protecting the Creators' produced races from decimation."

"Does that mean the Dvarvans—our enemies—have become our defenders?"

"Yes. Even in the event that the Human does not fulfill his part, the Dvarvans will refrain from further hostile acts against us as long as we don't act recklessly and create a threat of invasion by the races constructed by the Creators' Great Enemies."

"And how would they view our conflicts with the Rationals?" asked one of the Sidargans.

"It seems that neither they nor the surviving Creators care at all about that. This part of the universe remains totally open to us, and the Dvarvans won't get involved in any conflicts in this galaxy except those directly related to their agreement with the Human."

"So we'll continue to support the Humans?" somebody asked.

"What do you think, sisters?"

"Yes, of course!" answered the participants, one after another.

"Then it's decided. We remain on the Human's side and carry out his wishes. He recently requested that we concentrate on metaphysical defense around three planets: Eduron, Ligia, and Earth," the eldest Sidargan declared.

"Why Ligia? They're doing fine on their own," her neighbor inquired.

“The Human wants to take a few Ligians to Earth and then to Eduron. That requires tricking all the Rationals’ forces near Ligia and ensuring a sufficient energy canal to open teleportation gates to Earth. Then the Ligians will take care of everything themselves, while we cover Eduron and Earth from the Demurgs’ eyes and, obviously, continue to observe the pale ones elsewhere in the galaxy. We just won’t enter any more battles with them.”

“That we’ll definitely do. It shouldn’t take much effort. What will the Human do next?” asked another one of the Sidargan queens.

“I don’t know. The Human didn’t specify. He doesn’t plan to remain on Earth and has set up a base on Eduron where he’ll gradually bring other Humans and awaken them. What happens after that, I don’t know. I think he’ll contact us and explain everything as soon as he thinks that’s necessary. Now that we’re convinced that the Human is fulfilling our agreement to help return our native planets, I think we should trust him and simply carry out his requests and wait. So far, everything is going in our race’s favor. The queen of the Ant Planet’s hive has requested permission to serve as liaison with the Human and, if the need arises and the Human asks, to use her forces for military action to help him without the Council’s explicit consent. Do we grant it?”

This issue encountered no dissenters, either. The most experienced Sidargans unanimously agreed to all of the Human’s requests without asking too many questions at that point. Both the possibility of an end to their fight against the Dvarvans and the idea of throwing all of their efforts behind expansion into the Milky Way galaxy impressed them. The Rational Union included only a small number of races; they were nowhere near the entire galaxy nor even most of it. As the Sidargans saw matters, so far they had no reason to war with the Rationals. They could, instead, search out and colonize planets not belonging to the Union. With time, they reasoned, the Sidargan population would grow so large and cover such a great area that neither some union nor the Humans themselves could challenge their expansion.

•••••

### *Meanwhile, on Eduron.*

THE Human was studying again. He devoted every free minute to training and tasks necessary for his plan. If he did take a break, his yearning for home became too great to bear. Only constant activity and a steadfast belief in the justness of his cause helped him overcome. Spending time with the Ligian provided much-needed relief. Only with him could Ardas talk about Earth. He alone understood Ardas and his moods. While the Isans treated him hospitably and Iskik or Iskin made for intelligent and interesting conversation, they were still foreign. Ardas needed people. He missed his home city, the affection of loved ones, and even

pick-up basketball games with his friends. Ardas thought of himself as one of the few people who loved their state and their nation with all their hearts, someone who appreciated his country's beauty and his city's growth. Now, without everything that granted his soul vitality, Ardas suffered from recurring attacks of depression. As a remedy, he could only study, train, prepare, and dream about the day when he could return home. And that's exactly what he did. On this occasion, Ardas again trained with the Ligian.

"No, Ardas, not like that. You're letting the stored energy release. Try it a different way. Form an energy ball and give it life. In your mind, grant it structure, as with an intelligent being or a programmed machine. Then, when you see a clear image, give it the same structure in the physical state. It'd be a lot easier if I could only show you, but you'll have to try it by yourself," the Ligian explained.

"Well, okay, I'll grant it structure, but how can I force it to maintain its form and act according to my wishes? That won't make it an intelligent being or a programmed machine."

"Yes, it will. I have no idea why, but that's the truth. If you grant it the requisite structure and convince yourself that you can program the actions of the energy creature you've created, then that's exactly what you'll have done. You'll have programmed it according to your wishes."

"But that's ridiculous. By your reasoning, all I need is desire and belief, and then I can work miracles!"

"That's right, just not all the time. It's only true if you're working with energy creatures. They say it has nothing to do with miracles and that everything has an explanation—we just haven't discovered it yet. We only understand the principles of utility. It's just like with a gadget of some kind. Just because you have the instructions and you use the thing doesn't mean you know how it works. If we devoted more attention to studying how it works, we'd quickly find the answer. There's no time for that now, so let's just settle for learning how to use what we have. Try it again by yourself. You'll see—it'll work," the Ligian said before changing the subject. "What did the Sidargans say?"

"They agree. They'll ensure safe teleportation for you and a few of your colleagues to Earth and, later, metaphysical defense for Eduron and Earth from the Demurgs. As a contact, they chose the Ant Planet hive's queen, who, at my request, also has permission to use her forces. So now we command an army of one hundred thousand Sidargans. We just have to decide where to use it."

"What's happened, Ardas? I sense edginess and irritability in your voice. What's the matter?"

“Forgive me. Maybe I am a bit testy. I want to go home. The surroundings here look beautiful, but they’re still foreign. Sometimes I speak of Earth as if it were paradise. I miss everything, and my plan is starting to frighten me.”

“Why, Ardas? You’re doing the right thing; you’re freeing your people.”

“But do they need that freedom? If I succeed, life on Earth will change forever. People will change, too. Of course, war will cease, and we’ll gain a common consciousness and common goals. But love will disappear, too. People will stop enjoying every moment of their short lives. Everything will change, like art and culture. So much could simply disappear. People won’t love other individuals; they’ll love all mankind. That contradicts the very nature of love. Think about what we won’t have anymore: first date anxiety, the secret of an initial sexual experience, one’s dearest loved one. Why would we want that? It could all lead to boredom descending over mankind, then the very race’s extinction. The Creators represent a perfect example.”

“Maybe you’re right, Ardas. But you’re idealizing life on Earth and underestimating people. You say that everything will change. So it will. Let’s not just talk about disease, war, and famine—mankind’s constant companions, bringing so much suffering—and how they’ll end. Let’s discuss other things. You say to enjoy each moment of such a short life? You’re exactly right. What kind of lives do people have on Earth? It’s hell, but not everyone can admit that. All people, no matter who, are just running in place, like hamsters spinning wheels. Everybody has to deal with the monotony of everyday life, and, on top of that, they have to realize that regardless of what they do, everything ends badly. The same fates await everyone: the deaths of loved ones, the loss of abilities, the dimming of one’s mind, and ultimate powerlessness. Old age means the worst possible fate. What could feel worse than the sensation of weakening and withering away? All of your work represents nothing more than a trifle by which others may possibly remember you. They don’t mean anything to you, because you’ll never be able to do or make anything new again. You’re still young and full of hope, but just wait until surviving one more day, seeing one more sunrise, and prolonging your life somewhat represent your greatest hopes. Every old person would give up everything he owns—all his achievements and all his treasures—for the opportunity to regain his youth. There’s nothing worse than comprehending the circle of life and its inevitably bad ending. You can change that by returning hope and the possibility to work not for fifty, but for five thousand years—or however long they want to—to people. At the moment, one can live on Earth only by not dwelling on the future or by forming some sort of philosophy. Why do you think religions flourish there? Basically, they provide some kind of hope, albeit paltry, and help avoid going crazy or committing suicide. As soon as you start dwelling on everything, without a proper philosophy, you’re left with two roads: one leads to the nuthouse, the other to the cemetery. In no other galaxy could anyone imagine a reasoning, intelligent being consciously taking its own life. On Earth, and especially in your country, Ardas, that’s common.

Don't tell me you really enjoy seeing your parents grow old and weak. You can't really live peacefully knowing that a person you love, a person who loves you, could one day die, can you?"

"But somebody loves me right now. Will that remain the case after everything changes? By granting people life, won't I take away the possibility of enjoying it?"

"No, you won't. I'll give you the planet Ligia as an example. As you know, humans also live there, the ones who managed not to end up on the Inhibiting Planet. Ligians also form couples, start families, and love one another. Of course, the process runs much more simply there. You immediately sense whether a potential partner loves you or not. Because of the common consciousness, our couples know each other fully and feel each other's thoughts. For this reason, people only form relationships if they know they're right for each other. Our couples almost never break up, while many couples live together for hundreds or even thousands of years. Such couples make me believe in eternal love and friendship, but you'd rather have the short-term relations you have on Earth. How many divorces, or worse yet, domestic murders, happen on Earth? All of that would end. As for what might happen in millions of years, I don't think it's worth dwelling on. Let's wait and see."

"Okay, okay," Ardas answered with a smile, "you've convinced me. I give up. Let's change the subject. Have you chosen the Ligians who will travel with you to Earth and then Eduron?"

"Yes, Ardas, I've chosen and instructed them. They're all trustworthy and experienced. They'll be useful both in battle and when instructing other people. How about you? Do you know whom you're going to take when you get back to Earth?"

"Yes, precisely to the day. I've planned everything: when and whom I'll awaken first, when the awakened people will take over my country's government, and when we'll begin forming awakened armed forces. In fact, I've even planned when we'll introduce the technology I got from the Isans and where we'll get the necessary funds for that. With all the time I had, I think I considered everything."

The friends continued their conversation in the metaphysical state. Ardas easily crossed into the metaphysical realm and felt comfortable in it. The Ligian taught his friend how to travel, fight, and hide there. By then, Ardas had mastered the intricacies of the metaphysical world as ably as the Demurg Circle Lords or the most experienced Sidargan females. Both friends tried to prepare in every possible way for Ardas' future plans on Earth and Eduron.

•••

***Demurg-controlled space. 23 July 2016.***

DEEP down, the Demurg White Circle Lord had expected this news. It wasn't the first time that Demurg plans related to the Humans had strangely and inexplicably fallen apart. As with those other times, nobody could explain why. A few hours ago, the White Lord had heard from a representative of the Brown Circle that their attempt to go back in time had failed. The ships simply did not transfer to the point they were supposed to. Everything was working normally and the Brown Circle specialists checked everything several times, but the trip through time did not happen. Nobody knew why. If the Demurg culture had included religious beliefs, the White Lord surely would have suspected that some higher power was protecting the Humans. Instead, the White Lord was busy trying to understand why they were unsuccessful.

Then a second message arrived, heightening the White Circle Lord's melancholy. The Harat squadron had gotten lost and ended up in the wrong solar system. Only the Creators knew why. Clearly, the Harats would have to return and begin preparing for their mission all over again. Preparations for a new expedition would only take a few months, but they no longer had enough time to arrive on Earth before the Isans and stop Ardas' return.

But minor failures did not faze the stubborn Demurgs. Although the White Circle Lord believed in fatalism as much as any Demurg, this ongoing slump had even rattled his convictions. Only through great effort could he keep his temper in check. The White Circle Lord had ages of life experience. He had already lived almost two thousand years and, barring any unforeseen circumstances, would live several thousand more before his body physically failed him. But never had he experienced such a run of bad luck. The lord could only hope that his future plans would not stall and that ultimately everything would turn out well.

Thus, after considering that all experiences have beneficial reasons, he finally calmed down and began forming new plans for paying back the Human and all of mankind. In addition, the White Lord decided to seek advice from his race's veterans, some of whom had lived twice as long as he had. These individuals possessed vast experience and had once enjoyed tremendous power. Unfortunately, with time, the majority of older Demurgs became bored with the physical world and its problems. They preferred to travel and experiment in the metaphysical realm without intruding into the lives of other races. These oldest Demurgs made sure their bodies, their only connection with the physical world, stayed alive, but this existence amounted to lying in a permanent comatose state. While powerful enough to contact the elders, the White Lord doubted they would take any interest in his problems. Nonetheless, he decided that doing so represented a chance he had to take.



**Part VII**

*The Dvarvan's  
Mission*



*Meanwhile, aboard the Harat fleet's flagship.*

It appeared Chrz's luck had finally run out. The injured scout took the form of a chair and, waiting for his inevitable end, cowered in the darkest corner of the Harat squadron's flagship. With his deep wound, he would surely have died if he had maintained the form of a Harat. Since the chair had no internal parts and his internal Dvarvan organs had not suffered, he had a chance to live by assuming this form. If he would only get a chance to regenerate, everything could still turn out well. But he didn't have time. The steps of his persecutors sounded louder and louder, and sooner or later somebody would discover the scout. Doing so would not prove difficult—the Dvarvan continued to bleed, and even with his camouflage, he could not hide this inconvenient signal. And everything had started so smoothly. While waiting for his persecutors to arrive, Chrz reflected on his mission and his accomplishments.

The inexperienced scout viewed his mission to the planet Harat as neither dangerous nor difficult. He believed in his abilities and in the luck that had accompanied him from his earliest years. Chrz successfully made it to Harat and, after collecting much necessary data during the journey, fully believed both that he had made the correct choice in helping the Human and that this path would lead to success for the greater Dvarvan operation. Besides, although not greedy, the young scout still hoped for the same honors and recognition that awaited the most decorated Dvarvan scouts. A more experienced scout would not have acted as recklessly. Only a rookie like Chrz would charge ahead without preparing for the mission first. On the other hand, sometimes such hurried but determined behavior achieved results. After all, a cautious scout would not have found the Human so quickly and would definitely not have agreed to talk openly with him.

The Dvarvan remembered the start of his mission, how he had assumed the appearance of one of the ship's passengers, left the Harat spaceport, found a hiding place, and considered his next steps. At that point, the young Dvarvan was not content simply hiding from possible persecution. He had to familiarize himself with Harat society, their social structure, and the plans of the planet's

rulers. Chrz saw two alternatives. The cruder option involved trying to attack a Harat and interrogate him. Or, he could find a busy area and imitate a rock in order to subtly eavesdrop on the conversations of passersby. Never a fan of physical force, the scout also knew that the first option featured a greater likelihood of getting caught. Chrz decided to wait for an appropriate moment and become part of the floor or a wall in some busy area. But deciding proved easier than doing. The Dvarvan saw the passenger terminal of the spaceport as the most appropriate place for his plan, because large numbers of Harats were always milling around inside. But that constant traffic also posed the greatest barrier to implementing his plan. With the spaceport full of Harats at all hours of the day, entering or even approaching the building posed a significant danger.

After a seventy-two-hour wait, an opportunity finally presented itself. Not far from Chrz's hiding place on the edge of the spaceport, a small ship landed with a group of Harat passengers. After they disembarked, spaceport personnel removed their baggage and set it on the runway. But because their shift had ended, the personnel opted not to take the baggage to the terminal, instead leaving the task for the next shift. Chrz saw his chance. He melted into shapelessness and flowed toward the payload of four large boxes. A half hour later, when the next shift came to pick up the baggage, they found five boxes, one slightly heavier than the others. Neither the number of boxes nor their weight raised any suspicion for the baggage personnel. Merrily chatting and cursing their colleagues, they loaded all the boxes onto a six-wheeled vehicle and drove them toward the main terminal, precisely where Chrz needed to go. Apparently, the Harats' traits did not include attention to detail. When they arrived at the terminal, the baggage handlers simply dumped the cargo in a convenient corner and left them there. They did not care whether anyone would guard the boxes or present them to their owners. The personnel simply followed orders; beyond that, they cared about nothing. Isans would never act that way. They would have carefully arranged all the boxes, registered them, and locked them safely away if they could not present them to their owners. Chrz would not have been able to imitate baggage as easily on Eduron. Instead, he assumed his usual shapeless form and slithered through a crack under the door in search of a place to hide and collect information. A brief survey of the premises persuaded Chrz to choose the wall. Bumpy and uneven, the walls allowed him to spread out over a wide area and become totally indiscernible. The scout again got lucky, for he found the usually busy terminal completely empty, meaning he had enough time to familiarize himself with the wall's surface and become a part of it. This moment, he thought, marked the true beginning of the process of collecting information about the planet Harat.

Soon, however, this conviction evaporated. As on Eduron earlier, the Harats walking by discussed everything except what Chrz wanted to hear: some kind of strength contest, gambling, love affairs, or their despised bosses. But nobody said a word about the purpose or destination of the ships undergoing

preparations. The Dvarvan did not sense that Harats took particular caution; they simply didn't know anything and had no interest in the subject. They received orders and followed them, but they would never think to question the necessity of those orders. Chrz managed to learn only that Harats enjoyed all forms of violent and combative sports and entertainment. These often aired on some kind of a device, referred to by Harats as spectrovision. For seven days, Chrz listened to such useless conversations before finally realizing that he could gain more information via this spectrovision, which sounded like something similar to television on Earth or the Isan information system.

The next time he found the facility empty, the Dvarvan again surrendered his shape and trickled off to find a spectrovision device. His journey included some dangerous moments. On two occasions, Harats walking past noticed him but, strangely, paid absolutely no attention. The Dvarvan had resigned to face his death when one Harat looked directly at him, but when the horned creature jumped over him like a dirty puddle and marched on, he left the scout in complete shock. Carelessness and laziness defined this race. Those who did notice the dirty patch on the floor never considered cleaning it up or at least informing others of it. They left such tasks to the personnel responsible for cleaning the spaceport facilities. After a second Harat acted the same way, the Dvarvan gradually calmed down. The search for the elusive spectrovision set lasted over three hours. Finally, Chrz saw it, a huge screen about ten feet wide showing a constant stream of various images. A half hour later, Chrz had become part of a wall near the screen and could collect information both from the device and from the Harats gathered around it. To this point, the Dvarvan had not seen a single member of any other race and, more surprisingly, had not heard the Harats even mention another intelligent race. If he didn't know any better, he would have thought that the Harats had never met any other races. The scout would have to seriously ponder this question. Fortunately, he had plenty of time to do so.

Within a month, Chrz began doubting his chosen strategy and his chances of success. An assortment of pugilism, combat, and duels aired on the spectrovision nonstop. The Harats seemed very inclined to fight. Strangely, however, they did not wage war amongst themselves. The scout's observation led him to theorize that they, by dueling and following such events often, let off steam and satisfied their inborn taste for violence, thus preserving the race as a whole. Some of their duels appeared quite impressive. Chrz had to admit that the Harats had reached lofty heights in the sphere of martial arts, and a regular baggage handler could easily challenge the finest Isan warriors. Duels between Harats even arose in the spaceport. Once, two spaceport employees got into an argument about the conclusion of a fight that was airing. They both seemed like fairly experienced fighters and did not hesitate to literally lock horns. These two Harats fought with all their body parts. They butted horns, broke opponents' arms, tripped and kicked with their legs, and even used their hips for leverage in flipping foes

over. Evenly matched, the opponents fought for over a half hour, and the match ended in a draw. The biggest advantage either of them could manage happened when one rammed his horns into the other's stomach, but the latter responded by bending his opponent's arm behind him just as successfully. In the end, neither could turn the course of the fight, and it ended when their supervisor came and broke them up.

Throughout that first month, neither the spectrovision nor the conversations he overheard gave Chrz even a hint as to the purpose of the ships' preparations or the Harats' relationship to the rest of the galaxy's races. The scout's hopes revived, however, when military regiments began to appear at the spaceport. These impressive specimens seemed taller and heavier than the other Harats Chrz had seen, but he noticed a more significant difference as well. Among Harat males, height and weight varied little, by no more than a foot and 200 pounds, respectively. Compared to a Harat's overall measurements, these differences did not mean much. More significantly, in Chrz's view, the soldiers' poise and self-confidence set them apart. Brimming with might, their power visibly radiated in all directions. One could almost physically feel it. Spaceport personnel tried to stay out of the warriors' way, and not even the bravest of them dared to challenge one. The military's arrival signified that events were nearing a climax.

Another week later, the Dvarvan confirmed his suspicions. That day, the spectrovision's program finally changed. Rather than hostile contests, the screen showed announcements that the Harats, in developing their space colonization program, had encountered a hostile and intelligent life form on another planet. This newly discovered race displayed antagonistic and savage tendencies and had no intention of recognizing Harat superiority. They had refused to cooperate despite an offer of favorable conditions and had declared war on the Harats. From then on, everybody had to rally behind the war effort in hopes of either destroying or enslaving this common enemy. The announcements did not specify the location of the hostile race or its physical characteristics. But further information came later, as a third of each day's program consisted of demonstrations of the military's might, coupled with discussions and movies about the Harats' superiority to all the races found throughout space. Chrz expected a diverse and many-sided discourse from the community in reaction to the news. After all, they were preparing for war against an unknown race, and nobody knew what to expect. At least some of the planet's inhabitants ought to want to discuss the issue. If such Harats existed, the Dvarvan did not see them, because euphoria and celebration over the impending war pervaded.

It left the scout amazed. He had never encountered a race so unanimously set on war. The Harats began to gravely concern him. Every one of them had absolutely lost their minds, in the Dvarvan's opinion, and somebody had to prevent them from leaving the planet at all costs. The scout wondered which unlucky race would soon have to deal with these psychopaths. When he found an opportune moment, Chrz sent all the information he had acquired to his

superiors, but this time without any recommendations. He had begun to judge his abilities more realistically and no longer felt comfortable advising the more experienced members of his race.

For a while, Chrz could not believe that any intelligent life form could act that way, and Chrz speculated that some cruel symbiotic beings or a treacherous race from another planet controlled all the Harats. But ultimately, the scout dismissed such ideas. Day after day, the spectrovision showed the same war-glorifying shows. Propaganda and elation for the war's impending start exuded from everyone, including political leaders, who numbered in fairly sizable quantities, and martial arts stars, who enjoyed particular respect from the public. In a number of days, the word "alien" in the Harat language became a synonym for a wimp or a pansy—the greatest insult imaginable. Several times, the scout observed Harat women and children in the spaceport, but even they gleefully discussed how many aliens various army units would kill. The possibility of defeat never even occurred to anyone. Chrz once saw a group of cargo handlers mocking their co-worker for guessing that a Harat warrior would kill no more than two hundred aliens. In comparison to this skeptic, the others believed that each Harat would finish off a minimum of three thousand aliens each. As for the enemy presenting some degree of resistance, nobody mentioned this possibility, and they probably didn't even consider it, either. After four days of listening to such rhetoric incessantly and reviewing all of his collected data, Chrz came to dismiss the idea of symbiotic beings or evil aliens controlling the planet. All of the Harats, from the Dvarvan's perspective, suffered serious mental issues. As time went on, the scout's concern increased, especially because he saw how well the Harats fought, and had no way of ascertaining their target.

After a period of abundant information, things started calming down again. Chrz couldn't complain that he was not getting any information; the problem was that the same information was repeating. The spectrovision did not report anything new, and the Harats hurrying past repeated the same conversations. Chrz spent another month in this anxious state. He felt powerless. None of his plans had come to fruition, and he had trouble thinking of new solutions to his predicament. At one point, the scout had considered taking on the appearance of a warrior asking others for information, but he soon dismissed this idea as an unjustified risk.

Another plan involved breaking into one of the ships, preferably the flagship, and try to learn everything once aboard. By observing spaceport staff and comparing that information with a nearby map of the facility, the Dvarvan quickly learned of the command ship's location and the route to get there. The map of the spaceport had pleasantly surprised Chrz. He had only noticed it hanging on an adjacent wall during his second week by the spectrovision set. And even then, he initially paid no attention to the graffiti-covered poster. But one night, with some free time on his hands, the Dvarvan decided to study his surroundings in more detail and read all of the advertisements posted in the

vicinity. Surprisingly, he found that one of the muddled flyers actually depicted a detailed layout of the spaceport and its evacuation routes. That day, the scout regained hope and belief in himself, if only temporarily.

Once he discovered the command ship's location, Chrz decided to wait another week and then, if he did not learn anything new, try sneaking onboard. As it turned out, he needed less than a week. On the sixth day, the spectrovision changed its program again and presented a detailed description of the hostile aliens. Chrz could not believe what he saw. The Harats were preparing to attack the Humans, and, furthermore, they had gathered a staggering wealth of varied information about Earth's inhabitants. Not even the Isans had this much detail. The news baffled the Dvarvan, who could not understand where the horned ones had gained so much data and how they planned to defeat the Humans. Granted, the Harats fought well, perhaps even better than any known race except the Ant Planet's Sidargans and the Atlantans, but they couldn't even come close to the Humans. The scout clearly remembered the conclusion of the duel between the brash Harat pilot and Ardas, who did not even use his energy-based talents.

It did not take long for the spectrovision to answer the scout's questions. The Harats apparently knew that on Earth, Humans controlled no more than ten percent of their abilities and could not easily defend themselves. Even more shockingly, one evening Chrz saw a pilot speaking, the same one who had lost to the Human on Eduron and ended up in the hands of the Demurgs. The pilot calmly related the Human race's unspeakable treachery, their avoidance of open combat and attempts to attack from behind, and how they captured him after he barely survived a failed teleportation attempt. Prior to his capture, he had managed to kill seven fully armed Humans with his bare hands and horns, and it took one hundred Humans to tie him down. But when he recovered, he broke free of his shackles, swept aside the Humans in his path, took control of a ship, and managed to return home. This ship had contained all of the data about the Human race. In this way, the pilot became an overnight national hero, an even bigger celebrity than the martial arts stars.

The pilot lied shamelessly, and Chrz knew it. However, to the Dvarvan's bewilderment, it did not appear that the Harat spoke untruths. He recounted the events as if he had really experienced all of them. Chrz could think of only two possible explanations. Either Harats had a shockingly devious ability to lie and relate contrived stories realistically, or somebody had impressed upon the poor pilot that his story represented the truth. Throughout his observations of the Harats, the scout had never noticed an ability to fabricate anything convincingly. Some attempts to trick others arose, but these efforts failed horribly. This meant that the pilot was preaching a history that someone had mentally implanted in his head. Such an explanation immediately led to a series of other questions, including an essential one: who could do that?

Analyzing the mystery logically, the Dvarvan formulated two equally plausible hypotheses. On the one hand, a race could be living in parallel with the Harats on the same planet, ruling them mentally and successfully maintaining a full conspiracy. On the other, a mentally strong alien race could have decided to use the Harats for their own aims. Chrz saw the Demurgs as the main suspect fitting such a description. This speculation, although supported by certain facts—for example, a brief visit by the Alorans to Harat and the pilot's release in spite of the Rationals' contravening decision—would prove difficult to verify. Of course, Chrz could assert that Alorans never did anything without their hosts knowing, which implied that the Demurgs knew about the Harats and were working with them. However, he could not prove this proposition, and the pale ones could always claim that the Alorans were acting on their own initiative. Alternatively, the Alorans had never displayed impressive cerebral abilities, and if some other mentally strong race was hiding on Harat, they could just as easily have taken control of those few Alorans. After much contemplation, the scout decided that he had not come any closer to an answer, and decided to concentrate instead on collecting more data from his environment.

The next week, the Dvarvan received new information. A story on the spectrovision recreated the pilot's account and attempted to portray the Humans' fighting tactics as deplorable. All the Humans took to attacking the hero pilot by approaching him from behind and striking him across the legs with some sort of farm tools. Those in front of the Harat either turned and fled or fell to the ground and whimpered loudly. The Harat propaganda emphasized more than just the Humans' lower status (which went without saying, for all Harats had received constant reminders of their race's superiority and singularity); it portrayed Humans as completely inadequate. These scenes depicted Earthlings as retarded mentally and barely more advanced than beasts. Killing such a creature differed little from stomping on a bug, and every member of the Harat race, regardless of gender or age, firmly believed as much.

But despite the expanded stream of information, Chrz still could not find out when the invasion would take place. Nor did he know who was mentally influencing the Harats. A few weeks later, having tired of the dearth of new information, Chrz decided to give up his observation post and move to the fleet's flagship, which stood almost directly in the center of the spaceport. But planning this move proved easier than executing it. The flagship stood in a brightly illuminated area with plenty of guards. Besides, a few team members were already living onboard, while workers bustled about by day preparing the ship for the journey and for battle. The Dvarvan already knew the easiest way out of the building, for the spaceport map showed not only the exits, but also the ventilation shafts, some of which led to the facility's exterior. He could easily turn shapeless, flow to the nearest ventilation duct, and use it to exit the building. The hard part would come when he tried to make his way from the building over an almost completely uncovered area that spaceport personnel frequently

passed through. Chrz decided not to place unnecessary restrictions on himself by planning too much and, as soon as he found an opportune moment, entered the nearest shaft and headed toward the building's exterior. The Dvarvan decided to address potential challenges if and when they arose.

Having arrived outside, the scout stopped to look around. In order avoid unwanted attention, he blended in with the building's outer surface and again became invisible. From here, he could watch his surroundings and await his chance to move to the ship. But doing so seemed more difficult than had entering the spaceport terminal. The ship's guards meticulously checked everyone headed toward the ship. Even service personnel completing their routine tasks faced strict scrutiny. Chrz immediately dismissed his initial plan to imitate one of the Harats and simply walk to the ship. The scout neither had the documents necessary to clear security nor the skills characteristic of such service personnel. Thus, he would have to keep waiting.

The wait continued for several days. From the beginning, the scout paid particular attention to the equipment headed for the flagship. Packed in boxes of various dimensions, this equipment would have provided an easy subject to imitate and thus a convenient means of boarding. However, before he could replicate the boxes, he would have to get near them and fully research them. In other words, he needed time and proximity to the boxes—and Chrz could only dream of such luxuries. On any Rational Union planet, where at least a semblance of order existed, the Dvarvan could not have boarded the ship. But here, on Harat, where mayhem and an inborn lack of discipline reigned, he had a chance. Of course, the odds of some staff member heading to the flagship with equipment in hand, then hearing the signal for the end of his shift and dropping everything to return to the building, seemed slim. And for such a series of events to happen near Chrz appeared impossible.

Yet everything transpired precisely in this manner. Though the Dvarvan could not believe his good fortune, he did not waste time. In the blink of an eye, he moved beside the pile of boxes and, as the next shift approached, copied the surface of one of the crates and covered its exterior. When a worker came to load the cargo, he did not notice anything unusual. After all, that particular container had grown by only half an inch and 1300 pounds—far too minor a change for an inattentive Harat to perceive. Likewise, the security guards and the other staff members loading the ship did not observe anything out of the ordinary. Chrz identified only one cause for concern: the emptied boxes he saw the staff loading off the ship. This meant the Harats were using the boxes to transport their equipment and then, having emptied their contents, returning them. He knew he would have to abandon his camouflage immediately once aboard the ship and search for a new hiding place.

Within the hour, Chrz found himself aboard the ship. The staff would have fourteen boxes to unload ahead of his. During that time, while these other

packages kept the workers busy, the scout melted into shapelessness and exited the cargo bay as quickly as possible. The next stage of the Dvarvan's plan had begun. He hurried off to find a suitable hiding place.

Slithering along the edge of a corridor, Chrz searched for the ship's bridge and command center. Fortunately, despite the Harats' ongoing preparations, not a soul stirred in the entire ship apart from the cargo handlers. All of the crew had left somewhere, while the handlers stayed in the hold. Besides, only the exterior guards protected the ship, and they did not even consider the possibility that somebody may have boarded illegally, so nobody thought to activate the ship's internal security system. Only the Dvarvan's formless structure hindered his progress, because it kept him from moving quickly and exploring the ship fully. Chrz therefore decided to alter his image. He figured sacrificing fifteen minutes for the transformation would pay off once he could start moving at a more suitable pace. After considering his options for a moment, the scout opted to become a predator from his native planet, one known for its fleet feet and impressive leaping ability. Within several minutes, in place of a formless mass stood a thick creature with long legs and rippling muscles.

The ship seemed colossal. It contained twenty-four decks joined by an intricate system of stairs and elevators. Each deck had its own biomaintenance system and could automatically maintain pressurization independently of the others. The scout had too little time to examine the ship's weaponry and other equipment, and at that point he cared most about finding the command post and hiding there. After more than an hour, Chrz found the bridge on the eleventh deck, one particularly well fortified. In addition to a separate biomaintenance system, it featured its own engines, energy supply, and teleportation equipment, allowing it to function as a separate ship if necessary. If a disaster struck the flagship, its officers could escape by turning the entire eleventh deck into its own ship. Chrz found the arrangement ingenious.

Once inside the vast command center, Chrz searched for a place to hide among the scores of workstations, computers, and equipment. At first, the Dvarvan considered blending in with the wall again, but it contained hundreds of wires, gauges, and sensors. Chrz could imitate their exterior without any problems, but he could not replicate their functions—a sure way to attract unwanted attention. The ceiling presented the same problem. A quick glance at the furniture, and he knew that they would not suit his needs either. The Harats would notice if an extra table or chair suddenly appeared, and he didn't have the ability to vaporize a piece of furniture as the Human had on Eduron. Only the floor remained as an option. Chrz hated imitating the floor. Even though he could disguise himself perfectly and did not feel anything when others walked on him, he still felt uncomfortable with the idea that some crazy Harat could jump all over him at will. But Chrz had no alternative, so he prepared for his transformation. Half an hour later, the wild creature standing in the middle of the room vanished without a trace. Only an astute observer could notice that

part of the floor rose by a fraction of an inch, especially because the Dvarvan had made sure the edges sloped gradually and blended with the real floor almost imperceptibly. The young scout prepared for the officers' arrival, knowing that only they could provide him with the information he needed about the imminent expedition.

A week elapsed before the first members of the command team appeared, but even then they would stay just long enough to drop off or pick up something. Their infrequent conversations did not provide Chrz with any useful news. The scout continued to wait patiently. He rehashed his options thousands of times and resolved that his chosen path would still yield the optimal results.

This patience paid off when, a few weeks later, the Harats began testing the ship's systems. Approximately one third of the ship's crew and a few officers were living onboard already. Once the systems activated and the various sensor lights and monitors began glowing, Chrz thought to try browsing the ship's information system. The bridge usually remained empty, because neither the captain nor the other senior officers who had access to the facility had arrived yet. Chrz simply had to become the Harat pilot he had observed during the journey from Eduron and go to the main information system terminal. Learning to use the program took less than an hour. To his amazement, the Harats did not use any kind of security codes. All of the information lay before him, as if on a platter, and Chrz could not complain about any shortage of it. He learned everything about the Harat fleet, the planet they were preparing to attack, and even the coordinates of the teleportation they planned. But he found nothing about the date. Based on the rate of preparations, the Dvarvan could speculate that the mission would start within a month, but he could not confirm this. Having spent a few hours in front of the information system, Chrz prepared to return to his hiding place when a new idea came to him. Before leaving the terminal, he spent a few more minutes reprogramming the navigation system with new teleportation coordinates. Then, after eliminating all signs of his presence in the system, he calmly returned to his hiding place.

A few days later, the scout began doubting whether hiding in the command center represented the best possible strategy, and these doubts grew with each passing day. Further reflection convinced him that staying on the ship would not lead to any new data and that he needed to move to wherever the planet's leaders were making decisions. But Chrz first needed to think of a way to leave the ship. As far as he knew, the Harats had finished loading the ship, eliminating his preferred technique of imitating cargo as an option. The Dvarvan considered assuming his shapeless form and flowing out of the ship, as he had when he left the spaceport. But he rejected this option when he realized that unlike the building, this ship had no ventilation ducts leading outside, while all waste and evacuation ducts were closed. Streaming out through the corridors posed a problem because more than half the crew already used the same routes, and somebody would surely have taken notice of a mysterious, formless mass trickling down the hall. Chrz

had no desire to simply sit and wait for an unexpected solution to present itself, as it had outside the spaceport. The only remaining alternative entailed turning into a Harat again, simply walking out of this ship, and hoping that none of the crewmembers would pay him any attention. Thus, not having enough data about any other Harat, he again assumed the same pilot's appearance and exited the bridge. Not having walked more than twenty steps, the Dvarvan encountered a younger warrior who stared at him in awe. Chrz tried to appear calm and confident. Without hurrying, he passed the warrior and turned toward the exit, hoping that his natural self-confidence would lead the Harat to assume that he had every right to stroll the ship's halls. These hopes faded not more than two steps later. The scout heard the sound of a drawn weapon, followed by a Harat's stern voice.

"Stop! Turn around. What are you doing here? Keep your hands where I can see them."

Chrz had two choices. He could try to convince this overeager cadet that everything was fine, or he could run. The Dvarvan knew that the former option would present difficulties, because not only did he know nothing about procedures on the ship, possible passwords, and so forth, he also had to deal with the pressure of a weapon pointed at him. Running seemed more reasonable. Chrz was standing near a corner and, despite his current form, could move much faster than the Harats, so he viewed his chances favorably. But as it turned out, he underestimated the crewmember's reaction speed and poise.

As soon as he had budged, he felt a blow to his neck. The shot would have instantly killed any Harat, but he was no Harat. Chrz survived the blast because none of his vital organs had suffered, but maintaining his current appearance would have weakened him to the point of making him easy prey for the crew. Using all the energy he had left, the Dvarvan took off, thinking of nothing but refuge. The Harat warrior, stunned by his fellow Harat's display of invincibility, sounded the alarm and took to organizing a search party. Limping away, the Dvarvan soon found a mechanic's cabin of modest dimensions, at least by Harat standards, at the farthest end of the ship and hid there. In truth, the scout could not have continued much further without giving up his form and trying to regenerate, so he would have chosen any berth he could find.

Crammed in the darkest corner of the room, Chrz imitated one of the chairs he found there and anxiously awaited his pursuers. It would take time for him to stop the bleeding. He needed at least a half hour before he could perfectly resemble the other chairs. To make matters worse, he naturally assumed that any Harat would notice that the room contained an extra chair, no less a chair stained with some unusual liquid. The young scout trembled as he heard the search party approaching and prepared for his inevitable death. Their steps sounded louder and louder until the door flew open with a thud, followed by three Harat warriors entering. The persecutors stopped in the center of the room and keenly

inspected their surroundings. Terrified, Chrz waited for the cry announcing that they had found him.

"Or maybe," the Dvarvan thought, "instead of saying anything, they'll simply shoot."

Hence, the scout felt understandably astonished and relieved when the Harats, not having noticed anything unusual, turned around to continue their hunt elsewhere. Only then did it occur to him that the locals knew nothing of his race or his abilities. The search party was looking for an injured, trespassing Harat, not a dirty chair or a foreign chameleon. After a deep sigh, Chrz regained his hopes for a successful conclusion to his mission. Once his wound healed, he took his time looking for a more suitable hiding place. The scout elected to stay in the small cabin and wait for a more convenient chance to leave the ship. In order to raise as few suspicions as possible, Chrz again turned into part of the wall, a move that was becoming easier with all his practice. When the room's resident mechanic returned hours later, he noticed nothing unusual.

Chrz never had a chance to leave the ship, however, because a few days later it took off along with the rest of the fleet. The scout accepted this fate and resolved to take full advantage of his time on the ship and gain as much information as possible. He felt so lucky to have survived his near-death experience that he did not dare complain about his prolonged stay aboard the flagship.

•••

### ***The Harat fleet's flagship, 22 July 2016.***

"I don't understand what's going on here," the Harat admiral said to his assistant. "The scouts returned from the planet's surface?"

"Yes, sir. They found an uninhabitable planet. Life cannot survive there, unless maybe some life form that doesn't breathe oxygen."

"Maybe they live under the surface of the planet," the admiral speculated. "Tell me again: how many planets does the system supposedly have?"

"Nine, sir."

"I only see four here. The Humans are supposed to live on the third. Maybe something happened here, rendering our intelligence obsolete."

"I doubt it, sir. Analysis of the surroundings does not show any cosmic catastrophe for the last billion years. Maybe we simply traveled to the wrong system."

“What do you mean the wrong system? Don’t be ridiculous. We checked the data several times. These are the coordinates that central command gave us.”

The admiral became absorbed in thought as he stared at the planet sprawled out before his fleet. This planet clearly did not match the description in the information system. It neither appeared blue nor full of life. Orange clouds composed of various gases dominated its atmosphere. They did not find a single drop of water or the natural satellite that their data indicated should be orbiting the planet.

“Maybe we really did make a wrong turn,” the admiral thought. “But these coordinates precisely match what central command gave us.”

The admiral faced a difficult decision. He could turn back, or he could continue researching the planet in hopes that they had the right one. His orders forbade him from contacting Harat until the fleet encountered a Rational Union defense ship and relayed their demands and arguments supporting the necessity of war with the Humans. Only after officially presenting everything to the Rationals could they stop concerning themselves with concealing the location of Harat, a secret which unnecessary contact would surely have revealed. The admiral failed to see the logic in this order, but as a model officer he carried out all of his superiors’ orders without questioning them. To return home meant refusing to lead this mission. He could only go back after discovering what went wrong and fully convincing himself that they had arrived at the wrong planet.

“Send another team down to the surface. This time, make sure they investigate the possibility of Humans living in its bowels. If necessary, make them check underground with their own eyes,” the admiral ordered.

“Yes sir, consider it done,” the assistant answered. “Also, one of the younger troops asked us to inform you of an incident on Harat a few days before we left. The security agency has his report, but I think you’d like to hear about this, as well.”

“What happened?”

“A few days before departure, he encountered an imposter onboard. The warrior followed protocol, and after the stranger did not obey, he shot him. Such a shot should have killed him, but that’s not what happened. Instead, he ran off surprisingly quickly and hid from our search party, and we still haven’t found him.”

“What makes you think,” the admiral posed, “he’s still aboard?”

“He didn’t leave the ship. At least, neither the security cameras nor the guards saw him. But we haven’t found him onboard, either. And that’s not even the most amazing part of this saga. The imposter looked like a dead ringer for our

hero pilot, the one who gallantly fought the Human. Our security cameras caught him earlier, too, sitting by the information system terminal on the bridge."

"And that means what, that he's a traitor? Did security find him and question him?"

"Yes, and everyone close to him. At that time he was filming a spectrovision show, and he categorically denies ever boarding the ship. Eyewitness accounts and the spectrovision show both back him up. It seems we had a phony onboard, but we have no idea where he came from."

"Did we inform central command?"

"Yes, but so far we haven't received a reply."

"Good. They'll decide what to do. It's not our concern. Don't worry about it. Thank you for the report, and go carry out my previous orders. We'll stay here until we find out whether this is the right planet."

With these words, the admiral excused his assistant and again turned to watch the planet before his ship. He was no longer thinking about the mysterious intruder. That was somebody else's problem, and as a true warrior, the admiral did not get involved in others' affairs. Central command would clarify everything and let him know. Things always worked out that way. Besides, the Harats did not encourage unnecessary initiative. Likewise, the assistant, hurrying to execute his orders, had forgotten about the impostor. As his duties entailed, he had informed everyone necessary. After that, the problem no longer concerned him. If the admiral thought that central command had to resolve the issue, then that's how it was. Ancillary questions did not occur to the assistant, just as they never arose in such situations.

## Part VIII

# *The Advice*



*A planet in the Demurg White Circle, two days before the Human's return to Earth.*

THE White Circle Lord walked slowly toward his father's mausoleum. Of course, this mausoleum differed from traditional ones, because the lord's father had not yet died. More precisely, this facility housed the former White Circle Lord's body, constantly fed by an energy source. It would continue to lie in a comatose state either until it could no longer function or until its master, who spent all of his days in the metaphysical state, decided to ascend to the symbiotic universe and sever the link with his physical body. A larger building of several hundred stories housed the mausoleum, one of thousands such mausoleums located there. Likewise, the larger building had hundreds of analogous counterparts spread throughout the planet.

Strolling through the seemingly endless corridor of mausoleums, the White Lord painfully recalled the reasons for the constant decline of his population. For the moment, the number of individuals in the physical state equaled those in the metaphysical one, but over the next century the former number would decrease dramatically. Still powerful, the White Circle currently commanded sufficient resources to ensure the departed Demurgs' existence and the feeding of their physical, comatose bodies. But according to experts, if the situation did not change, in a hundred thousand years the White Circle would weaken completely. Then, according to the experts' forecasts, White Demurgs lying in mausoleums would outnumber those in the physical state by five to one, and their energy needs would surpass the circle's capacity. The mausoleums would disappear, and the entire circle would quickly head off into the sunset.

But that was the distant future, and even the grimmest predictions foresaw a future of three hundred thousand years for the White Circle. By then, not a single currently living Demurg would remain, not even in the metaphysical state, so the White Circle Lord did not feel too distressed about such a distant future. He hoped that the circle—and with it the entire race—would undergo a revival, as had already happened several times. On these occasions, the Demurgs stood on the brink of extinction, but each time they miraculously rebounded and then

became more powerful than ever. As much a fatalist as any Demurg, the White Lord steadfastly believed that, with time, some event would shake up his race, sweep away the laziness that prevailed among them, and reinvigorate them with new energy. Then the White Circle and all the other Demurg circles would flourish again, and they could take over other planets suitable for life.

For now, the White Lord worried more about the Human problem—the very reason why he now came to confer with his father, long departed from the physical world, but once one of the most famous White Circle Lords of all time. The current lord could never succeed in reaching his father’s prominence, so he suffered from an inferiority complex, knowing that his childhood fantasy of becoming more powerful than his father would always remain a fantasy. Their impending conversation could exacerbate these apprehensions, but the lord felt he had no choice. The Human threat scared him enough to endure such unpleasantries. In fact, this Demurg would even have unhesitatingly offered his life to ensure the prosperity of his circle.

The White Lord reached his father’s mausoleum. His father looked the same as ever, with kingly facial features and a powerful physique. The White Lord recalled what vast strength of will and endless spiritual force his father had demonstrated while still in this world. No Human could have stood up to him. Even the boredom and emptiness that overcomes every Demurg at a certain age, the reason they move over to the metaphysical state, could not break this solid individual for many years. Only at the age of forty-five hundred did the former White Circle Lord finally decide to give up his physical life, move to the metaphysical world, and hand his title down to his only son, the current White Lord. Now his son stood before the mausoleum, looked at his father, and suddenly felt overcome with longing and the same affection he had felt for his father as a young child. He remembered feeling proud of his father when he saw how the other lords respected him. Now, more than ever, he needed his father’s advice, and maybe even consolation. Firmly believing that he had acted correctly in coming here, the White Lord prepared to resolutely dive into the metaphysical state to search for his father. The only questions left were whether he would find him and whether his father would still have any interest in the problems of the physical world.

He certainly did not expect to find his father immediately upon entering the metaphysical state. Yet his father was already waiting there, anticipating a conversation.

“Greetings, Son. I’ve been waiting for you for a while, expecting that you might want to see me and share some ideas.”

“Why did you think so? Do you have an idea of what I wanted to talk to you about?” the White Lord asked, slightly annoyed.

With such perceptiveness, his father had again demonstrated his supremacy, even while existing in the metaphysical realm.

“Obviously. You see, unlike the vast majority of Demurgs in the metaphysical state, I follow the developments of your world. I’ve been watching this crisis for a while and have tried analyzing its causes and potential consequences. I’d even say I’ve become interested. I think you’ve come to share your concerns about the Human and your series of unsuccessful plans related to him.”

“As always, you are correct, Father. You watch us and know about all the problems plaguing us. Maybe you can explain their causes and advise me on what to do next,” the White Lord, having relaxed, requested.

“That won’t be easy. First, it’s not that simple for me to give advice, and second, I doubt you’ll take it. In any event, you now lead the White Circle. Under no circumstances do I plan on returning to your world, so you have to make the decision. I can only provide counsel.”

“I value your opinion tremendously, Father, and I will definitely take it into account.”

“We’ll see. So then, you are correct if you think that something more than chance explains the constant failures associated with the Human. But in order for you to understand that, I’ll try to explain a little about life in the metaphysical state.”

“I already know all that. I’ve been in the metaphysical realm many times and feel comfortable there.”

“Don’t interrupt, Son. Listen closely. You don’t know the slightest thing about the metaphysical state, although neither does anyone else. After I left your world, I’ve spent all these years wandering through the metaphysical one, trying to research it. Here I saw an endless number of miracles. I even met one of the Creators, as a purely metaphysical existence has become popular among them, too. If almost ten Creators still lead physical lives, then nearly one hundred of them roam the metaphysical world. I befriended him, and for a long time we drifted throughout this galaxy and a neighboring one. He showed me their Great Enemies and their creations. You’d be amazed. In the next galaxy, there’s a creation analogous to the Humans, whom they successfully use as a defense mechanism against new, aggressive races. Some other race created the Creators and their Great Enemies, but I could not find out anything more about that. I only know that they were unspeakably powerful, and, I suspect, they managed to break through to the symbiotic universe and could exist in any universe they wanted. But that’s just a guess. My tour of the neighboring galaxy disappointed me, because the races there were created according to the same principles as the ones living in ours. With my friend, we jumped to the neighboring universe, one parallel to ours. Alone, I would not have been able to open gates between

universes, but the Creator could. It turned out that every universe parallel to ours also had a symbiotic universe, but we did not manage to find a way into those, just as we couldn't enter our universe's symbiotic pair. We found that parallel universes feature the same principles of life and death but with many common exceptions, just as in ours. Wandering through the parallel universe, we met a live planet. It drifted through space and fed off the energy of other celestial bodies. The living planet seemed so mentally strong and powerful that we felt like ants before the largest known animal. At that time, it felt satisfied and content with life, so it agreed to spend some time with us. We learned a lot from it, but one bit of news might have particular relevance for you. With its endless power, the planet could freely travel through all universes and their symbionts. As Humans would say, it felt equally comfortable among the living and the dead. But even it encountered beings superior to it, and once, according to its own account, it felt *something*. It felt something so unspeakably powerful and mysterious that even this mighty, living planet could only feel its existence on the very fringes of sensation. In its opinion, it, or they, or He—who knows—could rule time and space, their flow and their laws. It could interchange causes and effects and could form not just planets or solar systems, but entire universes on a whim. Maybe, and I emphasize, maybe, it or they drew up our universe's, and our galaxy's, and our own fates, and we cannot alter their designs. That could explain the failure of our experiment with the Humans, our travel back in time, and our best laid plans. Perhaps they have a role in mind for the Humans? We don't know if or how this role relates to our fate, but I think we'll find out some day."

"Father, are you talking about that, which the Humans call 'God'?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. See, if somebody or something can at least sense these unbelievably powerful beings, then they don't match the Humans' conception of God. In that case, they're simply incredibly powerful beings. If that were God, He would be beyond the limits of understanding and sensation. Naturally, He would not have any concrete plans. That would basically be an absolute secret."

"Wait. You just laid out our theory of absolute secrecy, but I'm talking about Humans' conception of God."

"Who cares about their conception? Our ideas and our understanding matter far more. Consider some wild tribe's conception of God. They'll have deified some predator simply because it once ate their most famous tribesman. If you recall, as White Circle Lord, I researched the Humans somewhat with the Yellow Circle. And I can tell you that most of their religions have close ties to politics and ways to take over authority. From what I remember, a Roman emperor ordered his subjects to rewrite the holy book of one of their main current religions, while another primary religion came about only to offset this first one during a battle for power. So let's not talk about Human conceptions of God. And

anyway, I've strayed off topic. I'd like to suggest a solution for you. You won't like it, I know, but as I said before, it's just a recommendation. The final decision belongs to you. Are you ready to hear it out?"

"Yes, father, I'm listening."

"I recommend letting the Humans out of the Inhibiting Planet and not doing anything hostile to them. The entire Rational Union, Demurgs included, should masquerade as the Humans' allies and try to use diplomatic methods to direct the Humans' energy to achieve other goals. For example, you could explore the neighboring galaxy. Wait, I know, you want to ask what to do, in that case, with the Human project and our hopes related to it. By no means am I suggesting giving up our Great Goal, but I recommend scrapping the Human project and creating something new."

"But why, Father? By learning the reasons for their disobedience, then destroying the Humans and creating new, submissive versions, we'd gain a great weapon. It could help us achieve our goal, at least in this galaxy."

"I'm pretty much convinced that that won't work, and the Humans have a different destiny than to serve as our tools. It doesn't matter who determined their fate. The fact remains that we cannot fight it. Besides, by freeing the Humans, we would reduce the threat they pose to our race."

"In what way? On the contrary, I think that they'll need an enemy, and we'll seem like the most fitting candidates," the White Circle Lord disagreed.

"Listen, my boy. Keep their nature in mind. Our genes dominate their makeup. The Humans won't attack the Rationals if they act friendly. After all, the Demurgs wouldn't do so, right?"

"No, but the Demurgs would wait for the appropriate time and achieve everything by slyness and craftiness. Why wouldn't the Humans do the same?"

"Because although they share our features, they are not Demurgs. Humans, born war machines, need activity. These troubling aims to work, fight, search and study motivates everything they do. Look how they live on their planet. Not a day goes by without a war, a crusade, or a quest. You think they'll change once they're free? They'll immediately need activity, or some goal to strive for, or an enemy to defeat. Since they won't be able to attack their friends in the Rational Union, Demurgs included, they'll eagerly seek somebody else to pursue. Then we'll be able to offer them whichever target helps our interests the most."

"Maybe so, but sooner or later they'll run out of steam and turn into a calm, sedentary race that will probably oppose the Demurgs."

"I don't think so, my son. If they run out of steam, they as a race will simply vanish. Hidden deep inside them, Humans also have the ability to live like us. You are ignoring their nature again. Their character makes them more active

than us, and when they tire of the physical world, they'll start choosing existence in this world and journeys through it in masses. Then their race will disappear, or at least decline to the extent that they will no longer pose any danger to us."

"Perhaps you're right. I don't know, Father. Your arguments seem persuasive, but they have no basis in fact. One could call them a collection of guesses. I'll think about it. Answer another question for me. What motivated you to move to the metaphysical realm? What sensation forces Demurgs to choose such an existence?"

"Boredom, my boy. That's it. Your world became too cramped for me, while the secrets of the metaphysical state kept luring me more strongly. It's like rising to a higher level. But even it becomes tiresome in the long run. Most Demurgs maintain their curiosity and need to experiment for no more than one thousand years. After that, they overindulge and choose to travel to the symbiotic universe, thereby extinguishing life in their comatose physical bodies. That has not happened to me, even though I've been wandering for two thousand years. Everything still interests me. I still want to take the longest journeys, and I still care about events back home and how you're doing. Hopefully, I'll keep wandering for another several thousand years. My body should survive that long in its comatose state, and I'll certainly not refuse all those miracles voluntarily. My friend, the Creator, and I have decided to travel to the center of the universe, where we should find the oldest galaxies and the most ancient races. But on the other hand, I have one unconventional idea that I won't share with you yet."

The White Lord listened to his father while pondering his advice. He did not yet feel bored and did not yearn to experience the miracles of the universe. Still fully absorbed in his current life, he listened to his father's accounts with mild interest but without any particular passion. Understandably, concerns over the Human problem stayed at the forefront of the White Circle Lord's mind.

After 24 hours of uninterrupted conversation, the White Lord headed home. Although still undecided about what to do, his previous opinion about the future of the Humans gradually overshadowed his father's arguments. Ultimately, the White Lord decided not to stop the Demurgs' current plan, and if those plans should fall short, he would reconsider his father's suggestion.

## Part IX

# *The Return*



### *Meanwhile, on Eduron*

ARDAS seemed noticeably worried over the upcoming journey through time. Information he had collected earlier gave him cause to doubt whether the trip would succeed. The process could lead to any number of problematic results. He could end up not going anywhere, traveling too far back in time, or warping to the future. Worst of all, the Rationals had no idea why perfectly planned trips through time could suddenly fail. He needed to calm down and talk to someone. Knowing that the Ligian was due to visit him in the metaphysical state, Ardas decided to go there and wait. He did not have to wait long. No sooner had he finished acclimating himself to his new surroundings than he saw his guest arriving.

“Greetings, Ardas. I see you’ve been waiting for me. Why are you so upset?”

“You can’t imagine how worried I am. I can’t stand still. Yesterday I read everything in the Isan information system about time travel. Only twenty percent of trips succeed, and nobody knows why the others don’t. Tomorrow, as you know, they have to return me to the same moment on Earth when they kidnapped me. I’m really concerned that something could go wrong.”

“Calm down, Ardas. Do you remember when I told you about what I think predetermines events in our universe? I think everything will turn out all right. Somebody has protected you until now. Why should anything suddenly change?”

“But according to your theory, I might have already carried out my mission and might no longer be necessary. Why protect me then? And who knows when that mission ends, or even if such a mission really exists?”

“Enough, my friend. Let’s not discuss philosophical questions anymore. Instead, let’s go over your plans one more time. When do you intend to open the gates to Ligia and Eduron?”

“Two days after I arrive. That’s July first, 2015, according to the current calendar. You and the Ligians you’ve chosen will come to Earth and then directly to Eduron. I’ll deliver the first people to Eduron for awakening three days later. Will you manage to calculate time accurately and jump back to the designated date?”

“I think so. Preparations for this event have dominated life on Ligia for some time now. We devoted a substantial part of the planet’s energy resources toward ensuring the accuracy of the trip through time. Of course, more than anything, we just need to think positively, and everything will turn out fine. Is anything happening in your building right now?”

“I looked yesterday. They’ve set up a huge underground facility. I think the number of people on Eduron exceeds one hundred. Good thing the Isans don’t know, because I don’t know how I’d explain it. I’d have to use mental influence, which I don’t like doing. The Isans are good guys. I’ve decided not to use mental force against the Clan Leader, his son Iskik, and his warrior Iskin under any circumstances, and I’d only influence the others in cases of utmost necessity. I’ll ask the other humans to do the same. What do you think? Am I correct in thinking that way? Maybe I should forget about friendship and just consider practicality?”

“Friends are friends, and you’re making the right choice. If this decision results in a threat to the existence of mankind, I’ll ask you to reconsider. But for now, I totally agree with you, and I think all of the awakened people will, too.”

The friends talked for a few more hours about Ardas’ trip back and his future plans. They discussed every detail and raised every contingency that could happen. Nonetheless, they both knew that much depended on luck and that this conversation could represent their last. The Ligian tried to console his friend however he could, but he himself felt far from confident. Once he left Ardas, he continued thinking about destiny, which could instantly ruin all of man’s efforts and all of his hopes.

Ardas felt calmer after the conversation and decided to act as he had on Earth when he feared something. He simply looked his fear directly in the eyes and said, “Let whatever comes come. I can’t change anything, anyway.” After that, Ardas stopped contemplating time travel and all the related misfortunes that could arise.

•••

## ***Aboard an Isan ship orbiting Earth, 29 June 2015.***

“IT worked, Ardas, it worked!”

Neither Iskin nor Iskik could contain their joy. Both warriors had decided to accompany their friend on the journey and share the risk of any misfortune that could happen along the way. Prior to the trip, the Isans had radiated confidence in themselves and their ship, and only now did the pressure they had felt become apparent. Ardas felt a huge weight come off his shoulders.

“I guess somebody’s still protecting me,” he thought and said aloud: “Now we just need to find the place you took me from and return to the surface of the planet. When can you do that?”

“In five minutes,” an Isan technician replied. “We arrived five minutes too early, so right now we haven’t kidnapped you yet.”

“Thank you, friends, for all your help,” Ardas said to Iskik and Iskin. “I don’t want to say goodbye, and I think we’ll see each other again soon.”

“It would not surprise me,” Iskik answered, displaying his sharp fangs—a display of joy among Isans. “Good luck on Earth, Human. We don’t want to know your true plans until you tell us yourself. Just remember, the Isans, at least the Second Clan, are your friends and will support you in any situation,” Iskik continued as Iskin nodded his head approvingly. “Don’t think that we have forgotten what you did for us and, most importantly, what you didn’t do to us. You could have turned us all into your slaves. We’re perfectly aware of your true abilities,” Iskik finished, giving Ardas a solid hug as he did so.

These words surprised Ardas, because he did not expect that the Isans would understand everything. Only now did he comprehend this race’s true values. The Isans respected his works and assistance toward them, but most of all they valued his self-restraint and the fact that he did not demonstrate his might unnecessarily. In observing their guest, the Isans understood that he had no desire to enslave others, even though he had the ability to do so. This proved the deciding factor in the Clan Leader’s decision, which his son Iskik was to relay to the Human before he left.

“Ardas, I would now like to officially pass on to you the Second Clan Leader’s decision,” Iskik began. “The Second Isan Clan will not object to your employing all the means you have kept secret and using the plot of land granted to you, which we will enlarge, as a base for awakened Humans.”

The declaration left Ardas speechless. They had hit the nail on the head, while also providing on a silver platter that which had required great effort until now. Without saying a word, Ardas hugged both Isans, thereby expressing his deepest appreciation for everything they had done for him and for all mankind.

•••

***Earth (the Inhibiting Planet). 29 June 2015.***

ON a warm, sunny day in late June, Ardas stood beside a stream and gazed upon the surrounding greenery and soothing flow of water. He remembered an old saying—a person could stare at three things for a long time without tiring of them: flowing water, a burning flame, and an unpleasant chore.

“Ideally,” he thought, “if I could watch firefighters putting out a fire, I’d see all three of those at once. For now I’ll just have to settle for the flowing water.”

But he did not stay standing beside the stream for long, because a moment later he literally disappeared. If someone had been watching him there, the observer would not have believed her eyes, because the incident happened that suddenly, without any accompanying sounds or clues. But staring at the same spot for a few more moments would have amazed the observer even more. The same person again stood at the same spot. And nobody could ever guess how much the person had changed in those few moments.

Ardas had returned to Earth precisely according to plan. Just as in kidnapping him, the Isans had used teleportation rays to return him. Although effective, the technology also posed control difficulties. Moving an object to or from a planet using teleportation rays required vast quantities of energy and pinpoint accuracy. Teleportation gates would have offered a much easier solution, but present circumstances would not have allowed for such a risk. The Isans had to both capture him and return him without detection, and teleportation gates would have inevitably attracted the attention of anybody nearby.

Ardas turned his attention first to the river, then to the green fields nearby. “Man, how I missed all this,” he thought. It seemed strange to see people in the distance and to hear the forgotten sounds of dogs barking, children crying, and the city bustling. After a few minutes, Ardas glanced up at the sky. He could not see the Isan ship, nor would he be able to even without the bright sun interfering. But he knew the Isans were orbiting up there, just as the Rational Union, the Sidargans, and unknown numbers of other intelligent races were.

“Just you wait. The humans are coming. Soon the real games will begin,” he said to himself as he stared at the endless blue sky.

•••

The woman stood again and stretched out her svelte arms.

“You know, secretary, I’m completely stiff. You’re not tired?”

“Should I say the truth?” he asked with a smile.

“You couldn’t lie to me if you wanted to,” she replied jokingly.

“Elena, I wanted to ask for a break three hours ago. That’s how long we’ve been working continuously. I’m really tired.”

“You should have asked. Why didn’t you say anything? I would have gladly finished earlier. Okay, let’s take a break. Once you’ve rested, we’ll write about the Harat invasion, which almost brought the history of mankind to an end.”



## Short Stories

# *Don't Chase God Up A Tree*



ART LIAPKOVSKI slept in unusually late that morning. Having stayed up late playing computer games the previous night, he finally pried open his eyes around noon to the sound of a loud knock on the door. "Go away," he thought, turning on his other side. "I'm not home and I'm not accepting any guests." The knocking continued loudly. It almost seemed as though the visitor knew that Art was home. "Man, it seems they're not going away. I guess I'll have to get up and see who's there. But it better not be that neighbor asking to loan him some money again. I'll kick his behind so hard he'll fly down the stairs," he thought as he grudgingly willed himself out of bed. With hair disheveled and eyes glued together, Art opened the door to find five uniformed, burly men in matching dark sunglasses standing there, each with a holster and large handgun hanging off his hip.

"Those are definitely not the neighbors," he whispered softly. "Hi, how can I help you?"

"Mr. Artemides Liapkovski?" the man standing in front inquired politely.

"The one and only."

"Do you work as a programmer at Apple Inc.?"

"Yes."

"Height: six feet, two inches? Weight: two hundred pounds?"

"So what? Who are you and what do you want from me?"

"We're from the FBI," the man explained, showing his identification. "We have orders to bring you in."

"Me? Why?"

"You can stop kidding around now," the FBI agent replied angrily. "Don't tell me you haven't looked out the window or turned on the news."

"No, I was sleeping," Art shrugged his shoulders. "Why, what happened?"

"Look!" the agent exclaimed, clearly irritated as he pushed Art toward the window and pulled back the blinds. Art began to protest, but his first glance outside shut him up and kept him staring in the distance in disbelief.

Half a mile above the city hovered an object in the shape of a disc, six miles in diameter.

"What is that?" Art gasped.

"See for yourself," the agent answered, turning on the TV.

CNN was repeating the same story without interruption, how a series of alien ships had descended upon the world's largest cities early this morning, giving an ultimatum in English, Spanish, Russian, German, French, Japanese, and Chinese. The visitors demanded that within ten hours, at a designated location near Washington, D.C., a human was to be presented by the name of Artemides Liapkovski, who was to stand six feet and two inches tall and weigh 200 pounds. If Earth's inhabitants did not carry out this order, the aliens would destroy one populous city after another.

"They're talking about me?" Art, still in shock, asked the nearest agent.

"Probably," the agent shrugged. "You match all of their criteria. Will you come voluntarily, or will we have to take you by force?"

"Where do you want to take me?"

"You heard it on the news—to the designated location near Washington. Nobody wants a war with the aliens. The President has decided to hand you over and we have authority to use all necessary force on you. So maybe you should go voluntarily; you'd be doing mankind a big favor."

"What do they want from me? Easy for you to say: 'Go, save mankind.' I'm the one who has to go, not you. Okay, I see I have no choice. We'll go, just give me twenty minutes to shower and get a bite to eat."

•••

The grassy field serving as the aliens' designated location looked like any other field. Green grass, a few trees, the odd squirrel—everything looked like it would any other day. "Where are those aliens?" Liapkovski thought, scanning his surroundings. The man stood there for a good five minutes before noticing any attention from the visitors. The spaceship that had come to take him looked like a large insect that had not spread its wings. Moving almost silently and making sudden turns, it demonstrated that neither gravity nor inertia posed any challenges to the aliens' technological achievements. "Damn," Art mumbled in awe at the impressive maneuvers. The alien vehicle finally made a gentle landing thirty feet from the human. Up close, the ship's similarity to a bug seemed even more marked. The shape of its fuselage and protective plates described the form of

an insect's folded wings, while the cockpit projected from the ship's main corpus like a bulky head. Even the colors were identical to one of Earth's insects, known to scientists as *geotrupes stercorosus* and to lay people as a dung beetle. "If their ships look like dung beetles, then their living environment probably resembles a pile of dung," Art imagined as he watched the ship's doors open. After fruitlessly waiting a few minutes for something to emerge, the human mulled boarding the ship on his own. "I see there won't be any welcoming committee or orchestra," he mused, continuing to view the circumstances good-naturedly. "I guess we can do without them. I'm not an arrogant person. I don't need a personal invitation. I can enter on my own." Upon entering, the human immediately found himself in an enclosed space with softly padded walls. "Reminds me of a nut house," he continued conversing with himself mentally. "Conclusion: the poor aliens live in feces, while they themselves are psychopaths. That makes sense. Who wouldn't go insane living in a pile of manure?" The visitors, apparently, expected the human to enter, because immediately the doors closed and the shuttle smoothly elevated off the planet's surface. Rather than heading towards one of the massive objects floating above one of the cities, it headed toward the moon, where a mother ship sixty miles in diameter was orbiting. The flying bug covered the distance in fewer than ten minutes, yet Art felt neither acceleration forces nor any intense effects. To his amazement, just a few minutes after he had boarded the vessel, the same hatch opened again and invited him to disembark.

Having emerged from his temporary mode of transportation, Art found himself in a large hall, where various mechanical gizmos were scurrying in every direction. Before the human, nine aliens stood in circular formations. Pale-skinned and twice as tall as the average human, the extraterrestrials had arms that reached the knee joints of their long, emaciated legs. Their body composition seemed fairly humanoid, with only the facial features offering major differences. Covering almost half the area of their faces, the aliens' eyes were all black with no visible pupils, while their mouths resembled those of humans. Two small nostrils served in place of a nose.

"Greetings, lunatics," Art broke the silence. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes," the response echoed through the hall. Art couldn't tell which of his hosts was speaking, as none of them moved their mouths. "We did, and yourself specifically."

"That's nice. Let's get acquainted. My name is Artemides Liapkovski, but you can call me Art. With whom do I have the honor of speaking?"

The human's self-confidence seemed to unsettle the group. For several moments they simply glanced at each other without a word. After more than half a minute, the mysterious voice sounded again.

"All right, Earthling. Pay attention and don't interrupt."

"Great, go ahead," urged the human, comfortably finding a seat on some kind of mechanical apparatus.

"Now then, Earthling, our race is called the Valorans. Our native planet is Vala."

"Okay. And I'm a human from the planet Earth."

"Don't interrupt, Earthling. Listen further," the voice commanded angrily. "Our race has an ancient history. For over a million years we've been living on our planet, and for more than half that time we've been traveling throughout the infinite reaches of the universe. Almost one hundred thousand years ago, Valoran scientists began studying the nature of the universe. Over the course of the studies, researchers proposed various theories on the origin of the universe. Initially, a "Big Bang Theory" gained significant popular support. According to it, the universe arose from a condensed, massive nucleus, which exploded and began to spread outward. Ultimately, we disproved this guess along with most similar ones. Ten thousand years ago, the most famous Valoran scientist, Il'zekh, proved that the universe appeared intact and at once. It didn't explode, expand, or evolve; it simply materialized. The universe's outward expansion resulted from the forces of entropy and had nothing to do with any explosion. Expanding on this theory, our brightest scientists realized that the space around us, the planets, the stars, and all the other heavenly bodies resulted from creative forces, not just sudden, random materialization. We arrived at this conclusion after encountering myriad similarities between various galaxies, their inhabitants, even their forces majeures. That shows that someone, in creating our surroundings, always relied on the same principles, or, in all likelihood, created the entire universe at once. These conclusions then begged the resulting questions: who undertook such a mammoth task, and why? For the whole duration of those ten thousand years, we've been searching for that catalyzing force, or, in other words, the individual who created this and every other universe."

"Basically, you're looking for God?" Art asked.

The aliens stopped, their oversized black eyes staring blankly at the human.

"Yes," the answer finally came. "We see how you understand the word, 'God.' That's exactly what we're looking for. But you should try to ask less and listen more."

"Okay, okay, I'm listening."

"Finally, we ascertained not only the point in space where we could find the catalyzing force, but also the individual who embodies, in your words, God. That individual, that's you."

"Ha ha ha," bellowed Art heartily. "Me? God? Oh yeah! You're obviously joking. Come to your senses."

"No, we're not joking. You are the individual who created this universe. We don't know how that happened. Maybe this universe is just your dream, just a part of your fantasy. We have not yet determined the boundary between reality and fantasy. All we know so far is this: whatever you perceive, that is reality. Only the brain makes the world real, so in truth the only things that exist are whatever an individual understands to exist. All that exists beyond the realm of comprehension is just apparent reality. Each individual has his own truth and his own reality. Understand?"

"So far, yes. Keep going."

"So this whole universe is just a single individual's reality. Everything came about and continues to happen only because of his desires, whether conscious or subconscious."

"And you think that that individual is me? I know who I am and know perfectly well that I am not God."

The aliens again glanced at each other and then, after a few seconds, continued staring at the human.

"Think back," sounded the voice. "Think back and remember everything."

And Art did remember. He recalled dinosaurs, Egyptian pharaohs, the Roman Empire, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and all the other countries he had lived in. Each time, he created a new identity and new surroundings for himself, became a member of some family, and started a new life. The same process occurred 34 years ago, when he became Artemides Liapkovski. He truly was immortal and eternally young. After further searching, he remembered other planets and their races, of which he had been a member before becoming human. He remembered the Valorans as well. Once, he had been fond of this race, but that was a long time ago. On this day, he enjoyed being a human.

"Fine, you win. I remember," announced the man now called Artemides Liapkovski in a muted voice. "You found me. I suspect you didn't make such an effort for nothing. For thousands of years you searched to the far edges of the galaxy before finally revealing my identity. You probably want something. Before you start listing your wishes, tell me how you recognized me."

"We conducted some experiments while you stood in the field and during your flight from Earth. The characteristics we used to establish the true identity of Artemides Liapkovski will remain our secret. You understood correctly that we have wishes that we will ask you to carry out. Now, again, be quiet and listen to the history of the Valorans. We have to go through this before we can express our wishes."

Art, somewhat surprised and annoyed by the aliens' audacity, raised his eyebrows. "Fine, let them talk," he thought. "Just stay calm and don't act impulsively. I'll treat them like disobedient kids."

"So then," continued the voice, even though, as before, none of the aliens opened its mouth. "As we've said, the Valorans are an ancient and intelligent race, and over the course of our existence we've experienced our share of setbacks. On two occasions, we created grand civilizations, and both times they died out. The first time, 800,000 years ago, an enormous heavenly body struck our native planet and sent us back to the Dark Ages. But we did not give up. Five hundred thousand years ago, the Valorans rose again from our native planet and took to exploring nearby cosmic space. At the time, it seemed we had overcome every obstacle and could finally survey and conquer the galaxy. However, again, fate would not be on our side. A treacherous and previously unknown virus wiped out nine-tenths of our race, and the entire Valoran civilization. But we persevered again, and for two hundred thousand years now we have traveled throughout space for the third time. This time, we Valorans are not inclined to take chances and wait for some unforeseen event to send our race back into darkness. We have decided to challenge fate. Currently, Valorans rule ten intelligent forms of life that we have encountered and overpowered during our expansion years. But that's not enough. Recently, we established that a race's proliferation throughout the Universe does not ensure security or guarantee survival absolutely. Besides, there are too few of us to inhabit even a tenth of the galaxy. We live for an extremely long time, thousands of years, but we are not immortal. Perhaps you've already guessed what we'll ask of you?"

"Not yet," replied Art, shrugging his shoulders. Feigning naiveté and ignorance, he thought to himself, "What could you want? The same as everybody: power, wealth, or immortality. I'm not going to hear anything new."

"Strange," the voice sounded. "All right, our first wish: change the past so that our civilization would never have died out."

"I will not. Playing with time is very dangerous. By altering your past, I could change the fate of other races as well. Besides, there's no guarantee that the newly modified past would please the Valorans more. Consider the first death of your civilization. If that asteroid had not struck the Valorans' world, you would have encountered an aggressive race called the Digrs, who lived in the same part of the galaxy. They would surely have tried to kill every last Valoran. You should consider yourselves lucky to have met that fateful asteroid."

"Understood. We did not really expect that you would be able to fulfill our first request, so now we'll require something else of you. Make the Valorans immortal and omnipotent. Let us, in the same form we take now, travel between planets without ships and match you in terms of power and abilities."

"You are demanding this?" Art clarified.

"Yes. If you refuse, we will destroy your beloved planet Earth."

"Wait," Art tried to calm the aliens down. "There's no need to raise your voice. You could simply ask."

"Why ask, when we can demand? If you refuse or try to harm us in any way, we can and will destroy Earth using nothing more than a thought. Choose: either you do what we want, or mankind will be no more."

"No, let's discuss this. I cannot make you even with myself, because this is my universe and only I am its master. My laws rule this space. If I carry out your demand, everything around us will fall apart."

"You lie!"

"No. Don't tell me you've never heard the question, 'Could God create a rock so heavy not even He could move it?'"

"The question has no answer. What's your point?"

"The point is, no matter how you answer the question, the result is that God is not almighty. This is the same situation. I cannot grant you the powers you seek."

"You lie. Choose: either you do what we demand, or Humans die."

"There's no need. I'm telling you for the third time. One of the nations on Earth has a proverb: 'Don't chase God up a tree.' It means don't be greedy; don't ask for too much. I will grant Valorans eternal youth and immunity from all diseases. Do not demand any more."

"Stop whining. This is your final warning. You really have no choice."

"Forgive me, my creations," Art thought, bowing his head.

"You are wrong. I always have a choice," thundered the voice of the universe's Creator and Master. That which lay hidden within Art's skull slowly raised his head to reveal eyes burning with neon-green fire.

The Valorans panicked upon comprehending the situation. Some wanted to kneel and ask for forgiveness, while others tried to order their ships to attack Earth. Only now did they have some understanding of what really stood before them.

"Forgive us, Lord. We made a mistake. Forgi—" echoed the aliens' voice though the hall, but it would not get to finish the thought.

•••

Art Liapkovski returned to his bed. His neighbor eventually woke him and asked for a small loan, for which he was extremely grateful when Art agreed.

"Good, let him enjoy it," Art thought, pleased by the neighbor's heartfelt thanks. He decided to sleep a while longer, knowing that nobody would be bothering him further. There were no Valorans in the universe; they had never visited Earth. That race became extinct four hundred thousand years ago, killed off by a mysterious disease.

"I wonder why they thought that I couldn't effect their first request. I never said that. It's simply difficult to delve into the flow of time and alter the past, but that's hardly impossible. And another thing—I wonder when the next race will find me and rush to make similar demands. The Valorans were the fifth? Or maybe the sixth? I don't even remember. It doesn't matter. What happened is behind us, and we'll see what the future brings. Forget it; I'm going to sleep. I have to go to work in the morning. But it's strange that they asked me why I liked Earth and its inhabitants so much. It's very simple. Humans are the only race that knows not to chase God up a tree.

# *The Writer*



“LEONID STRETCHED out, turned his head a few times, and extended his arms and legs. He knew that the journey would stress his muscles, so he used special exercises to loosen them up as much as possible. Finally, Leonid was ready. Now he simply had to check all of his equipment, and then he could begin his routine mission. He felt totally calm. Leonid had built up a reputation as a time cop who had seen everything, and this next mission did not strike him as difficult.”

Having written these words, the man set his pen down and hurried to the kitchen to make some coffee. Short, frail, and not particularly attractive, the writer made up for these shortcomings with his intellect and creativity, for he had earned worldwide fame as the bestselling author of numerous science-fiction novels. Soon the man reappeared in the room carrying two small cups of coffee. He arranged himself comfortably on the sofa, directed his attention to the middle of the room, and began to wait.

Within a few minutes, the air in the room began to ripple, quickly morphing into a vertical, spinning vortex, black in the middle and white around the edges. From it stepped a tall individual clad in a tight, black uniform.

“My goodness,” the writer cried out, simulating fear as best he could. “Who are you and how did you get into my house?”

“Have no fear, Karl. No harm will come to you. I will tell you where I’m from, but you have to promise not to yell. Remember, I only want to talk.”

“Oh dear! I’m so scared,” blurted the host with a subtle smile. “But if you say that nothing bad is going to happen to me and you only want to talk, then I’ll agree. Have a seat. Would you like some coffee? It just so happens I made myself two cups.”

“Hmmm,” the guest hemmed, surprised by his host’s behavior. “All right, thank you. I didn’t expect to get such a warm welcome.”

For some time, the two men calmly sipped their drinks and just stared at each other. Finally, the visitor broke the silence.

“Perhaps,” he began, “we should get down to business?”

“Certainly. But before we begin, I have one request. You already know my name, but I don’t know yours. Perhaps you could introduce yourself? I’d like us to be equal participants in this conversation.”

Again, the guest appeared momentarily rattled.

“Fine, as you wish. Nobody prohibited me from revealing my name. Let’s get acquainted. My name is Leonid,” the traveler announced as he shook the writer’s hand.

“Splendid. Now that we have met each other, I think now you can tell me what winds blew you to my modest apartment.”

“Indeed I can,” Leonid agreed. “I have come from the future. I am a time cop.”

“Oooh,” the writer responded with a contemplative furl of his brow. “To tell you the truth, I suspected you might be a time traveler.”

“Why?” inquired the visitor, amazed once more.

“Honorable Leonid, bear in mind that I am a science-fiction writer. I am no stranger to logical explanations of events. Once I saw that strange occurrence in the middle of the room—” Karl paused in mid-sentence. “By the way, what do you call that again?”

“Temporal gates.”

“Right. When I saw the temporal gates, at first I thought they might be teleportation gates. If my suspicion had proved correct, an alien from another planet would have stepped through. You do not resemble an alien. What other alternatives are there? Only one—gates used for time travel. That’s how I arrived at the conclusion that you are a time traveler.”

“Ahhh, I see. That’s great that you understand everything so well. You see, I’ve had the opportunity to travel back in time more than once, and people like you, who react so calmly to the news, are the minority.”

“Thank you. It’s nice that you appreciate my analytical skills.”

“As I said before, I come from the future, six hundred years to be exact. As a time enforcement officer, I make sure there is no unsanctioned contact between residents of different time periods, unlawful time travel, or efforts to change human history. You, as a world-class science-fiction author, should understand that such situations could determine the death of millions of people, or even the entire planet.”

“In my opinion, you’re somewhat exaggerating the consequences of time travel, but I have to agree that the effects of meddling with time are unpredictable.

But what do I have to do with any of this? My humble self has never traveled through time, and you're the first person I've met from another epoch."

"Perhaps, but doubts about who you really are have arisen at the Time Enforcement Office. Our investigators have noticed that all of your novels are absolutely accurate predictions of the future. For example, in the short story 'Pirates,' you write about the criminals' ship the Storm Carrier, whose crew takes the entire leadership of the United Nations hostage and demands a gigantic ransom. In the same work, you give a detailed account of the UN Special Forces and their perfectly executed rescue operation. All of these events happened in the year 2323, that is, more than three hundred years after the story's publishing date. So a reasonable question arose among us: where could you have learned all of this, and so accurately that you could even describe the details of the soldiers' uniforms?"

"Coincidence," replied the writer, shrugging his shoulders.

"Perhaps, but that's not all. Let's analyze the well-known novel *The Princess of Silgar*. The planet Silgar was only discovered in 2398, and the princess featured in your book really did come to Earth in 2407 and really did try to hypnotize the leader of our Defense Forces. I have to say; one of my time police colleagues was a big fan of yours. He read this novel in time and took preventative measures during the princess' visit."

"So my work helped you?"

"Yes," Leonid admitted reluctantly. "But that's not what we're talking about. Every one of your works describes events that actually happen in the future. That's not natural. Take the book *Exile in the Parallel*. We did not discover the path to parallel worlds until 2517, yet you wrote everything about them in 2008. A person simply cannot have such uncanny foresight. The time police think that you are engaging in illegal contact with individuals from the future, or gathering information about other time periods in some other way."

"Now wait just a second. You're drawing unfounded conclusions again. Answer a simple question for me. Am I the only writer who foretells the future?"

"Hmmm," pondered Leonid. "I guess not, but such accuracy—"

"Of course not. Did you know that Jules Verne wrote about many of mankind's future inventions? Have you at least heard that science fiction writers created the word 'robot' well before the first robots came about? Who predicted the coming of computers? Who wrote about space travel before it became a reality? Science-fiction writers. Have you read Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*? The part of the original version that talks about a flying city? How could the author know about celestial bodies and the principles of moving cities, if Mars'

moons and anti-gravitational forces were discovered much later? Maybe he was a time traveler, too?"

"No," answered the policeman.

"Of course not," continued Karl, somewhat angrily. "Actually, I heard that Swift wrote another, more licentious, part of *Gulliver's Travels*, but that has nothing to do with our discussion. I'm neither the first author nor the last to foretell the future. Would you like me to tell you how we do it?"

Leonid nodded.

"The human psyche is to blame. If robots didn't show up in fiction, they would still get invented, but we would probably call them something else. Keep in mind, inventions come from the same people who read science fiction voraciously. The incident you mentioned with the princess from Silgar is a perfect example."

"So you mean to tell me that all of the events I was describing resulted from your novels? People read the works of Karl Miller and therefore subconsciously acted accordingly."

"Exactly! You phrased that perfectly. The pirates named their ship 'Storm Carrier' precisely because they had read my story. And what's more, the kidnapping itself was initiated by my creation."

"Maybe, but what about *Parallel*?"

"It's quite simple. Mountains of books talk about parallel universes. I borrowed the idea of parallel worlds from other authors. For the people who discovered the path to the neighboring world, it was natural to call it 'parallel,' because they had already read about it in science fiction. I see I still haven't convinced you."

"I don't know. Your explanations are convincing, but there are so many coincidences."

"Fine. Let's look at this problem in another way. Did you track somebody from the future visiting me?"

"No."

"Then the only alternative is that I would have traveled to the future, right?"

"It would seem so."

"Tell me, how does someone feel traveling through time?"

"Destroyed. All your muscles hurt. You have to be in excellent physical condition. The stress would tear a weaker person's arm and leg muscles. You'd suffer permanent injuries."

"Hence your impressive body," the writer complimented Leonid, truly awed by the time cop's physique. "Now look at me. Do I seem like a strong man?"

"No."

"And do you think my muscles could withstand that terrible stress?"

"Definitely not."

"Then what are we talking about?"

The men chatted for another hour. As they did, Leonid's conviction that the writer could have traveled through time continued to fade. Ultimately, he acknowledged the infallibility of Karl's argument, politely excused himself, and returned to his own time period. Although a suspicion that he had overlooked some detail had pestered him before his return, once at home this feeling gave way to thoughts about his brother's upcoming basketball game.

The writer smiled as he viewed the spot where the temporal gates had just vanished. "An inobservant official," he thought, "very inobservant. That's okay, he's still young. He'll learn."

Returning to his desk, Karl took his quill pen and wrote, "Waiting for his guest, the writer—." Without finishing the thought, he stopped, pondered a bit, and started a new musing at the bottom of the page:

"What would you do if you could see the future? Would you rather know lottery results or news about historical events that had not yet occurred in your lifetime?"

After a few more moments of reflection, the writer pulled out new bottle of ink, dipped his plume in it, and wrote in letters barely visible in the light:

"How would you act if six hundred years really did separate your era from that of a visiting time cop, just not in the same direction as my naïve official, Leonid, thought? What if you worked for the secret Office of Historical Supervision, sent to point mankind's history in the right direction with your novels. What would you say to your guest, then?"

Karl stared at the ink drying on the page, then sighed heavily and tore up the page before throwing it into the smoldering fireplace. For a few moments he reclined in his chair with his arms linked behind his head. Then he sighed again and continued his suspended sentence: "Waiting for his guest, the writer prepared an extra cup of coffee."



# *Almost The Same*



THE OLD man sat by a smoldering campfire and stared sadly toward the East. Once, he had been young and fast, a leader of the inhabitants of the endless night. But now his strength had waned, and his hearing had become less acute. The old man had understood for several years now that his clan no longer had any use for him. That's when he had decided. Now, sitting by the fire, he gazed East and awaited daylight and, with it, death. Light and death were inseparable in this world, always coming from the East. Straining his shortsighted eyes, the old man noticed the glow of the rising sun skimming the ridges of the nearby mountains. "It's coming," the man thought. "How much longer do I have before the light reaches me—twenty, maybe twenty-four hours? I wonder why we still measure time the old-fashioned way. For a long time now, an Earth day has taken hundreds of times longer than it used to."

In his youth, the man had heard from his great-great-grandfather how, during the elder man's childhood, this planet had been completely different. Humans at that time, rather than fearing the light and the sun, had enjoyed them. Light had brought hope and life, not death. Then something happened. The man had been too young to fully understand his great-great-grandfather. He only remembered something about a large celestial body, a catastrophe that took two thirds of the population to their graves, and the destruction of some kind of layer of gas that had once sheltered the planet from the sun's harmful rays. The man had never been able to imagine how gas could provide protection from the sun. "He had probably started going senile and confused. Maybe people then had covered the entire planet in a shield made of stone or metal or well-crafted wood, which protected them from the sun," pondered the old man. "Then, the catastrophe destroyed the shield and started man's endless escape from the light."

At first, the survivors did not consider that the sun was gradually, but surely, killing them. Only after the rate of skin cancer rose cataclysmically did people start worrying. The shattered civilization could no longer offer any effective defense from the malignant rays attacking it from space. This point marked the beginning of the survivors' flight from the sun. Thankfully, the planet helped them. Year after year, its axial revolution slowed, extending the length of each

precious night. And humans were gradually evolving, as well. Each successive generation adapted better to the bleak darkness and the accompanying cold, and each one seemed increasingly afraid of the light. Outlined against the fire's glow, the man's figure suggested a height of ten feet and a weight of eleven hundred pounds. A dense layer of fur protected him from temperatures often reaching fifty degrees Celsius below zero. These features had become the norm among humans. They were fully capable of seeing in the dark, and their giant feet allowed them to wade through deep snow banks. Over time, they had adapted fully to their environment. And yet, the sun's rays could strike down these nocturnal beings in the blink of an eye.

For over a hundred years, the old man led his clan along the infinite night's winding path, yet he never stopped wondering about what was out there, in the light. Often, the Night Travelers, as his clansmen called themselves, found strange footprints that could only have belonged to creatures living in sunlight. People never encountered these beings, so they figured that the unseen animals fled from the night in the same way as his clan ran from the day. Now, too weak to travel with his people, the old man decided to satisfy his curiosity and see what would come with the light.

"It's getting warm," he thought, "probably no less than minus twenty. I wonder what the temperature is like after dawn. There's still time to get away. I still have enough strength to flee from the light; I could still travel through the night. Though I wouldn't be a leader, I'd live another decade or so. Why am I sitting here? I need to run, and quickly." Afraid, the old man knew that when light came, he would not survive. Yet, despite everything, he stayed put. He had long since decided to die meaningfully, not like an ill, useless patient living off the mercy of his family. "I have to do this," he contemplated. "If not now, when? If I give up now, I'll never again muster up the resolve. All my life, I've been a fighter. Once, after overcoming my fear, I fought a polar bear with my bare hands and choked it to death. I'll defeat fear this time as well. Even though I'll never have a chance to tell anyone what I see, at least I'll die knowing what lives in the light." With these thoughts, the old man turned back toward the mountain ridges glimmering in the dawn. He looked East, for only from the East came light and death.



Shadow felt overcome with deathly cold. He had drifted too far from the saving light and the nourishing sun's rays. Shadow's body had lost its lucidity and began to harden. "I'm dying. What a fool, running into the deathly dark," the man thought. "I don't want to die; I'm too young. What was I thinking trying to learn what lived in the dark?"

Shadow's tribesmen lived only in the light, capturing the warm and life-sustaining rays of the sun with their transparent bodies. Just recently, the

youngster had heard about an ancient catastrophe that exterminated most of the population. The survivors managed to adapt to their new conditions and the significantly more intense sun. Over a long period, they evolved so much that they could no longer live without the light, so they started constantly running from the persecuting night and its arresting cold. Often, Shadow's tribesmen encountered the footprints of nocturnal creatures. "Who could live there? Nighttime temperatures fall below zero degrees. No human could live in that temperature." Shadow, like his tribesmen, felt ideal in an ambient temperature of fifty degrees, so he could not even fathom a creature suffering in such unimaginable cold. As the years passed, Shadow's curiosity kept growing. "What's the use in my continuing to live in this monotony without unlocking the greatest secrets of nocturnal beings? I have to go and try to discover everything. I simply must." Shadow's tribe could not comprehend his goals and used every possible means to dissuade him from such insane behavior. But the youth did not give up and thus now traveled through the dusk, staying a few hours ahead of the sun.

"It's so cold. Probably close to zero degrees. It's so dark and empty." Crestfallen, Shadow slowly trudged forward. "The sun won't be warming me up anymore. I've been in the cold for too long. How much longer can I survive—five, maybe six hours?" Suddenly, in the distance, the youngster spotted a nearly extinguished fire and a stirring mass lying beside it. Perking up somewhat, Shadow hurried in the direction of what he could only imagine to be a night dweller.

"Hello, can you understand me?" Shadow shouted to the distant stranger.

Upon hearing the voice, the old man flinched as if struck by a whip. He felt weak, tormented by the heat, unprecedented in his vast experience. His eyes, feverish, could not adjust to the light. Lifting his heavy head, the man spotted a small, almost transparent figure somewhat similar to himself.

"Yes, I understand," the elder responded in a hoarse voice. "Who are you?"

"I am a human," announced Shadow proudly. "And you, I presume, are a creature of the night?"

"Yes, I live in the night, but I am no creature. I am the human, while you are an alien from the world of light and death," stated the elder, no less sure of himself.

"Wait, don't be in such a hurry. We'll sort this out. I'm the human, having come from the land of light and life. You are a being from the nocturnal world of death."

Thus began a conversation between these two people, strangers until now. Ultimately they discovered that their common ancestors, the catastrophe's survivors, had chosen two divergent paths to survival. The old man had an

endless barrage of questions, as did the youth. They both asked questions, explained what they could, marveled, laughed, and wished that they could have met earlier. Those few hours separating them from the sun passed almost without them noticing. Finally, the sun's rays broke free from behind the mountains containing them, and dawn had fully arrived.

•••

Watching the old man's body and feeling the oncoming effects of death, Shadow regretted only that he had not earlier been able to meet this amiable, hirsute person, one so inquisitive and yet informative at the same time. In his remaining half hour, in the throws of death, the youngster wondered about the fabulous, fairy-tale, nocturnal world he had learned about from the old man.

•••

A pair of bodies lied in the brightly illuminated valley. These humans had appeared and lived differently. One, huge and hairy, traveled through the endless night. The other, small and translucent, lived only in the everlasting daytime. Though vastly different, they nevertheless seemed almost the same. Both were curious and intelligent, brave and strong-willed. Both of them were human.



