

It had felt the changes above, the planet was vastly different than it had been when It was imprisoned.

It had felt the changes start in the shapeless entities, as they moved from water to land.

It had felt the changes as these new creatures moved across the landmass, gathering into groups, fighting other groups.

It liked the fighting.

It felt the various evolutions, the discoveries, the building, the destroying, the rebuilding.

It felt the numbers as they grew and grew and grew and grew. It even felt how the bloated numbers were irreparably harming the planet, taxing the resources, creating their own demise.

It longed to be a part of this...

Chapter Six

Jacob Neuman opened another compartment in the back of the ambulance and began counting the contents. “So, how much will she be making? Twelve 4x4’s.”

“Twelve 4x4’s,” Bryan repeated, marking it down on the inventory sheet. “Check. The money’s not important. It’s more about ideals for her. From what she’s told me, this guy’s got some pretty progressive ideas for the city.”

“Nine 2x2’s. Yeah, but he’s a big-time lawyer, right? That must translate to big-time bucks. I’m just saying...”

“Nine 2x2’s. Check.” A sly smile crept across his face as he replied, with a chuckle, “Well, the pay bump is pretty nice.”

“Knew it! Four adaptics. What’s he like...personally?”

“Four adaptics. Check. Haven’t met him, yet. We’re supposed to go to dinner Thursday.”

“Hey! You finally have a reason to wear your tie! Zero ABD’s.”

“None?”

“That turf beef last night tapped us. I think all three of us ran out. I know Simpson was having a bitch of a time with that one gut shot.”

“Jesus. And I have *two* ties, thank you very much.”

“Yeah, but the Rudolph one with the blinking red light for a nose probably won’t fly at whatever fancy restaurant he takes you to.”

“It might...with the right jacket.”

Daniel had been trying to wrap up his discussion with Rabbi Halberstam for nearly thirty minutes. The man could talk until *you* were blue in the face, extending a five-minute chat into an hour or more. Being the family counselor for the temple you’d think the man got enough conversation in a single day of work, but the world wasn’t that lucky.

As they neared the bottom of the temple’s steps, the former priest tried a subtle psychological trick he used to use on his father, who also had been a big talker: Taking out his car keys and fiddling with them until the jingling triggered the gabbing party’s brain to let the captured listener go their way. Daniel didn’t have a car—no need in the city—but he did have an

apartment. He began spinning the keys around his index finger like a six shooter, making sure to occasionally catch them with a loud clatter.

Without conscious knowledge of being manipulated, Rabbi Halberstam wrapped up his story about his Protestant daughter-in-law's attempt at a brisket. They said their goodbyes and Daniel had to almost clutch his arms around him to keep from skipping down the street with glee that he was finally free from the boredom bubble that was the millionth telling of the Brisket Story. He couldn't wait to get home and tell...

His mood darkened and his pace slowed.

He hated when that happened. Especially now. One would hope, this far out, that moments like that wouldn't happen anymore, yet he knew exactly why. How close was it getting? He glanced at the date indicator on his watch. That close?! Time had flown.

He remembered when he ran into her at the Barnes & Noble that fateful day. He was perusing the biographies when he heard a lilting voice.

"Daniel?"

He turned around and saw Betty. She looked as if she hadn't aged a day in the sixteen years since he last saw her. His ordination. She was just as beautiful now, maybe even more so, especially with the sunlight coming from the store's windows behind her, bathing her, making her glow like, if it wasn't too cliché a thought, an angel.

"I thought that was you," she continued. "How have you been?"

That was the beginning of the end...and a new beginning. They sat in the store's coffee shop and caught up for the next four hours, though, at the time, it felt like merely a blink to

Daniel. Now, with distance affecting memory, he remembered it lasting half a blink. Time played those kinds of tricks when he was around Betty.

He learned she had been briefly married in her late twenties. It lasted one and a half glorious years, followed by another two loveless ones and produced no children. She was a graphic designer, working mainly for book publishers, and had taken a position here in the city at one specializing in children's and young adult books about a year earlier. She also admitted to keeping an eye on the crowds whenever she went out with the hope of running into him. She had kept tabs on him through the years but felt simply surprising him at the church would have been weird, not to mention feel kind of stalker-y.

That coffee led to others, which led to lunch dates. Lunch dates led to long walks, at first apart, then gradually advancing to hands being held. Long walks led to intimate dinners, which led to vows being bent...until they finally broke.

Daniel had been afraid that would happen, while simultaneously wanting it. At their first coffee, he had admitted to losing touch with her whereabouts, feeding her a line about his parish duties keeping him very busy. It was partially true, but the real reason was he knew every time he saw something about her he would feel the same pangs he felt the instant he turned around at the sound of his name in the bookstore.

This was something that started the day he was ordained. Betty had always been so understanding and supportive of his chosen path, and he had loved her for that. All through his schooling, he had thought it was simply a kind of brotherly/deep friendship love. Yet, when he saw her at the ceremony, saw her beaming smile, felt how proud she was of him, he knew he had never stopped truly loving her. He was relieved when he was assigned a church so far away, and

he threw himself into his work to try forgetting her. Of course, nothing helped, and not a day went by that she didn't pop into his head at least once.

He reached the subway entrance and got swept into the humanity wave that flowed into the underground, and his trance was broken by the need to concentrate on his surroundings. After much jockeying and jostling, Daniel and his fellow commuters were on their way. The sardine standing next to him was a middle-aged Hispanic woman who looked to be between seven and eight months pregnant. He glanced around them and saw a teenager engrossed in his phone, sitting on the long bench. As kindly as he could, Daniel cleared his throat to get the kid's attention.

Then repeated the action.

And again. Louder.

The phone fanatic looked up but didn't seem to focus on anything before returning to his texting.

With another loud cough, combined with a light kick to the teen's shin, Daniel finally got the attention he sought. The kid gave him a pissed look. Daniel gave an even meaner one back as he jerked his head in the direction of the pregnant woman. Reluctantly, the boy stood and offered his seat to the lady. She thanked the boy and sat down. The boy glared at Daniel, but quickly realized he'd ignored his poor phone for more than ten seconds and returned to feeding its need for affection. The woman smiled at Daniel and mouthed a thank you.

The former priest returned her smile, added a nod and rode the Good Deed Feeling all the way to his humble apartment.

It was another night of clear skies and bright moonlight as Michel made his way out onto the upper deck to send his nightly message. Just as he was about to pull out the satphone, he caught some movement around the shipping containers in his peripheral vision. He instinctively stepped back from the railing, quickly finding a shadow. He'd made it through last night's conversation with Sam, but he didn't want to chance raising the suspicions of one of the less dense other crewmen. Once he felt sure he wasn't spotted, he inched back toward the railing to get a better look.

One of the oilers, either Sergei or Pavel—it was tough telling them apart with all that grease, was creeping around between the containers. This wasn't unusual in itself, since many people liked to walk around to stretch their legs and not feel so confined, and it was especially true for those who worked below deck. However, Sergei/Pavel was wearing one of those hands-free headlamps, it's light very dim, almost imperceptible. He was also carrying a clipboard, some sort of tool and the moonlight occasionally caused some thin objects in his back pocket to glint.

Michel watched as the engineer disappeared into the stacks, then quietly made his way down to follow. Sergei/Pavel was obviously looking for specific containers, ones on the clipboard he kept glancing at. Michel had to keep farther back from the man than he really wanted due to the lack of adequate hiding spaces. Finally, the man stopped. He set the clipboard down and, using the tool, snipped through the metal customs seal. Instead of tossing it aside, he stuffed it in his shirt pocket.

Sergei/Pavel opened the door just wide enough for him to slide through, trying to limit the noises it made. From his position, Michel couldn't see anything. Not only did he have a bad angle on the opening, but what he could see of the inside was nearly pitch black, save for an occasional brief flash of dim light. The oiler wasn't inside very long and, when he shut the door, he took the wad of what Michel could now see were several customs seal strips out of his back pocket. He removed the snipped one from his shirt, compared it to the fresh ones then wrapped a new one around the container's latch. He stuffed the old one in his pants pocket and moved on.

Michel followed and witnessed a few more such instances, each identical to the first. At one container, Sergei/Pavel left the door open a little wider, and while Michel couldn't see much detail, he saw the oiler fiddle with some sort of device in the dim illumination and the glow of a tiny red light in the darkness when the man turned and exited.

A couple containers later, Michel figured he'd seen enough. Besides, he was close to being in danger of missing his message window. He turned around and misjudged the amount of space he had. His steel toed boot smashed into a container with a dull, hollow clang

The oiler's head spun around but couldn't see anything. The dim headlamp, while perfect for the detailed work he was doing, was actually a hindrance when trying to see farther than arm's length. He switched the light off and gave his eyes a moment to adjust before slowly approaching the sound.

He crept up to the first path junction, held for a second right at the edge then leaped around the corner, the snipping tool held before him weapon-like. No one was there, yet he continued onward. It always could have been something shifting in a container, but he knew better to be cautious.

His nerves electrified and his senses heightened, the oiler slowly made his way through the stacks of containers. Every corner was a chance at confrontation, never realized. He could've sworn he heard footsteps occasionally, but their owner remained elusive. Eventually, he decided to give up the fruitless chase before he got too far away from the progress he had already made. He still had a number of containers to check.

When he got back to the container he'd just been in, he saw the door was open. He stopped short and tried to remember if he had closed it or forgotten to in his haste. The old customs strip was still in his shirt, so he hadn't locked it, that much he knew. He turned his headlamp back on and carefully, quietly approached the door. He took a breath then whipped only his head around the edge, to limit the size of target for any potential attacker, especially if they had a gun. He could see nothing in the small radius of light, so he quickly shut the door and latched it. If anyone had been hiding, they weren't going to see daylight for a while.

In fact, Michel *had* doubled back and found the door still hanging open. He got all the way to almost being able to see inside when he heard Sergei/Pavel returning. He barely got out of the open and around the other side of another container when the oiler arrived. He tried to hold his breath, a difficult task with so much surging adrenalin. When it was safe to move, he made his way, *quietly*, back to the upper deck.

He couldn't be sure what the tiny red lights belonged to, but he had his suspicions. None of them were good. There was no way to get a warning out, either, since he couldn't risk a signal longer than the one it took to send what he normally did, for fear it could be detected. He simply sent his message and hoped he'd have a chance to communicate to someone in port,,before it was too late.

