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*To my wife Sheena and my daughter Charlotte*

**Part I**

**Genesis of Creation**

Chapter 1

***Extract from Progress Report 30.153 – Section 15 ‘Deity Creation’***

*As has been referenced in prior reports, the enthusiasm for belief in a divine power remains steadfast. This unique factor was the catalyst for the recommendation in Progress Report 23.134 that an experiment be instigated to create a single deity to replace the multiplicity of deities that were developing. The results from that attempt, despite the investment of significant resources, have been far from impressive, notwithstanding initial encouraging results.*

*The single deity has only been accepted by a small percentage of the population with the majority unwilling to change their beliefs. Most extraordinary is the fact that those who have accepted the single deity, are the subject of widespread religious intolerance. The experiment is at a point where it requires further resources to allow it the chance of achieving its objective, otherwise the experiment will stagnate and ultimately fail.*

*On balance, the objective of creating a single deity on Earth remains a worthwhile pursuit in the context of the wider plan, so it is recommended that a team be set up to re-energise the project. The team will need members with a proven history of adaptability, a wide range of skills, and the attributes of creativity and ingenuity. The team will have to be led by an individual with actual experience in the area. Our suggestion for team leader is Professor Yiler, head of the theology department of the arts university in the central capital on Deusi Prime.*

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Yiler was not happy. He was commuting to work on a Monday morning, squashed into a crowded and stuffy Undertram, with a couple of hundred other glum looking middle-aged commuters. The windows were wet with condensation due to the air conditioning malfunctioning again. He placed his hand on the collar of his shirt and pulled it away from his neck to allow some air to circulate to his chest, which was damp with sweat. He was still suffering the after-effects from his going away party at the university, which didn’t help with his perspiration. He had at least had the sense to have it on a Saturday night, but his legendary inability to consume even a moderate quantity of alcohol had doomed him to a ferocious forty-eight-hour hangover that kicked in early on the Sunday morning and was only now beginning to dissipate. If asked how he was feeling by any of his fellow passengers, which would have been unprecedented, he would have replied ‘barely tolerable’. However, the main reason for his unhappiness was where the Undertram was taking him and why.

He sighed loudly, a common occurrence during the three days since he had received the ‘e-mail of doom’, as he referred to it. He had been comparing the religious belief on a recently discovered planet with those he had already researched, when his computer had alerted him to an incoming e-mail. He had opened it and was horrified when he saw its contents. It was a letter informing him that he had been reassigned. He was to be transferred to the Sub-department for Administrative Affairs within the Department of Labour, with only three days allowed for a handover. He had sat there rereading the letter, hoping that it was a mistake or a practical joke. When he realised that it wasn’t, he had tried and failed to think of any justification for him being transferred to a role not relevant to his skillset.

Yiler had never left a task uncompleted; the idea was alien to him, so he wasn’t going to depart from his theology department without a fight. He had immediately contacted the dean of the university and reminded the dean that, for ten years, he had devoted his life to the formation of the department of theology. Every obstacle he had encountered, and there were many, had been successfully overcome. It would be ludicrous to transfer him just as the department was beginning to gain acceptance within the academic community. He had argued that it was only he who would have the commitment to secure its long-term future. The dean had agreed and suggested that Yiler should put in a written request that the transfer be reviewed. His staff member and students sent supporting e-mails. There were only five. He only had one assistant and four students. As well as forwarding Yiler’s letter of protest, the dean had made representations on his behalf. She had assured Yiler that she would get it resolved, so he was devastated when the answer came back that there would be no change.

A despondent Yiler had spent his last three days in the theology department handing over his work in progress. He was bemused that his replacement was coming from the accounting and finance department. Perhaps the love of money and the love of a deity were one and the same. Neither he nor his replacement were sure about that.

He sighed again when the intercom blared. “Parkland Station, next stop.” Either the automatic announcements were not working that morning, or the driver was keeping himself amused by making personal announcements. He groaned and stood up along with about half of the commuters on the Undertram. The Undertram usually ran on time, so he left the station on schedule which pleased him because he hated being late for anything. He looked around when he walked off the escalator and saw a forest of homogenous grey office blocks. He thought that whoever named the Undertram station ‘Parkland’ had an ironic sense of humour. He started to compare what he saw now to the tree-lined thoroughfares and manicured lawns of the university but stopped himself. It was pointless. This grey mess of office blocks was his new home for the foreseeable future, and he just had to accept it. He headed over to the office block where the Subdepartment of Administrative Affairs was located and arrived on schedule at nine o’clock.

The building where the subdepartment was located had no signage on it. Yiler surmised that this was in keeping with its low profile. Yiler hadn’t known there was such a subdepartment within the Deusi Civil Administration until he received his letter. He entered the building and walked over to the security desk, where he spotted a very small sign indicating the tenant of the building. Even to his untrained eye, it was obvious that a substantial amount of money had been spent on the security system, as he observed top of the range equipment everywhere. The security guard looked up. She eyed him up and down suspiciously. “Can I help you?”

“I’m sure you can. My name is Professor Yiler. I am starting a new job with the subdepartment today. Here is my work assignment letter.”

The security guard took his letter and placed it over a scanner. A green light flashed on her computer. She sniffed audibly. “You are on the visitor list. Please place your hand on the scanner.” Yiler did as he was ordered. “Your supervisor will meet you shortly. Here is a temporary badge. Do not lose it. Your permanent one will be ready when you leave later. Don’t forget to pick it up. Take a seat over there.” She indicated where he should go with a nod of her head to the right.

Yiler had been in a bad mood when he came in, and the abrupt attitude of the security guard nearly pushed him over the edge. He was biting his lip as he sat down in the waiting area. It was a small space, bordered by a veritable jungle of plants with a couple of seats arranged around a small table. He took out his e-reader. He was about to turn it on when the intercom barked.

“No electronic devices are permitted in reception.”

Yiler looked up to see the security guard glaring at him from her security station. “Did you not see the sign?” She helpfully pointed toward a sign on the wall.

“Sorry, I didn’t see it because of the hedge.” Yiler put away his e-reader, but he couldn’t contain himself any longer. “You could have just told me without the dramatics of the intercom. I’m only a few metres away.” Yiler grinned as the security guard gave him a withering look before turning back to the flickering security monitors.

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General Lateel was reading the latest meeting minutes of the board of Special Operations Executive, or SOE for short, when she received an e-mail from security that Yiler was waiting for her downstairs. She was delighted with the interruption, as the minutes were unbelievably dull. She decided to leave him there for a short while to increase his anxiety in the hope that it might make him more amenable to what she planned to propose to him.

While she sat there, she ran through the approach she would use to persuade Yiler to lead an experiment on Earth. She was looking forward to his reaction when she revealed the fact that it was fifteen hundred years since the initiation of the experiments. It had all started with the discovery of Earth by an SOE ship and the imagination of the infamous Commander Gerton. While the news of finding a planet with a sentient species should have been immediately passed to the civilian administration, Commander Gerton perceived a unique opportunity for the SOE and decided not to do so. Since Earth was a planet that only the SOE knew about and its remote location made its discovery by anyone else unlikely, the SOE could do whatever it wanted with Earth. Commander Gerton had proposed targeted societal and behavioural engineering on Earth’s sentient species. The SOE board had initially been less than impressed and concerned about the legal ramifications, but Commander Gerton carried on pursuing his idea regardless. He had argued that since the species on Earth was physically like the Deusi, it made successful societal and behavioural engineering a real possibility. Commander Gerton eventually presented his idea to the full SOE board and it was approved by a small majority. Commander Gerton had been proven right, as all the experiments had been successful, apart from one which had stagnated, with a considerable amount of useful knowledge gained.

Lateel stood up and stretched her head to the side with an audible click. She took a deep breath as she entered the lift and focused herself on the task of convincing Yiler to become a key part of reenergising that stalled experiment.

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Yiler was starting to become annoyed at having been left waiting and had just begun to inspect one of the plants encroaching on the tiny seating area, when he heard a lift opening in the lobby. A female leaned part way out of the lift. “Professor Yiler?” she called, as if she was trying to find one person in a large crowd.

Yiler stood up and made a point of looking around to make sure that other people had not entered reception without him noticing. “I am Professor Yiler.”

“Excellent. If you’d please join me.” Yiler walked over and stepped into the lift. “I am Lateel,” said the female. She took her hand away from the lift door and offered it to Yiler who shook it briefly as the door closed. “I will be your supervisor.”

“Best wishes to you,” said Yiler politely.

“And best wishes to you also.”

Lateel looked at Yiler closely. “Are you alright? You look pale.”

Yiler groaned. “Leaving party at the university.”

“Why on Deusi did you have it last night?”

Yiler looked offended. “I didn’t, it was Saturday.”

“That must have been some party.”

Yiler considered telling Lateel about his chequered history with alcohol but instead decided to change the subject. “Can you tell me what my new job actually entails? The letter was less than illuminating. I take it that you are in some way responsible for my being here.”

“If you don’t mind, I will explain when we get to my office.” Lateel stood ramrod straight with her hands clasped behind her back, staring at the lift doors to avoid eye contact. Yiler took the hint, and they lapsed into silence. He glanced over at Lateel for a second. His first impression was that she was unlike any civil servant he had ever met. He would guess military if he didn’t know any better. She was about ten centimetres taller than he was and much broader. Her tight fitted uniform emphasised her toned and well-muscled body. His ‘I should really work out more’ flabbiness did not compare well. His eyes were fixed on the lift door when he decided to break the silence with some small talk.

“Is Lateel a created or inherited name?”

“Inherited. I got it from my great grandmother on my father’s side. You?”

“Inherited as well. I got it from my grandfather on my mother’s side.”

“He must have died young.”

“He did. It was a gravflyer accident.”

“They were unpredictable when they were first introduced. Much more reliable now.”

The conversation ceased when the lift pinged, and the doors opened. A second security station awaited them. After placing their hands on the scanner, they were cleared to pass by the security guard. Yiler couldn’t fathom why such tight security was required in a civil administrative department. They entered a long, well-lit corridor that contained a lot of doors with names on them. Lateel’s office was the second on the right, so they reached it after a few seconds and went in. Yiler had always prided himself on keeping a tidy office, but Lateel’s office was a class above his. There was no paper or clutter anywhere.

“Please sit down.” Lateel offered him one of the two seats in front of her desk while she sat behind it. Yiler sat and watched Lateel as she looked in one of the desk drawers and fished out a couple of documents. “Before I explain your new role, you need to sign these.” Lateel pushed the papers over to Yiler who picked them up and read them.

“Why do I have to sign two non-disclosure agreements. What could I possibly be doing that requires me to sign these?”

“You need to sign first, and then I can tell you. If I tell you and then you refuse to sign, I will have to kill you.” Lateel did not laugh when she said that. Yiler picked up a pen and passed the signed pages over to Lateel.

“I have signed them on the basis that I am still not legally bound to take this job assignment.”

Lateel ignored him. “Welcome to the Special Operations Executive. I am General Lateel. Your rank is colonel, so you can address me as general or sir. I don’t mind which. I hate madam though.”

Yiler sat there with his mouth open. It was thirty seconds before he spoke. “This is crazy. There must be some mistake. What use would I be to the military? You do know that I am a professor of theology, don’t you?”

“Yes, I am aware of that. The SOE is not a branch of the military. We are independent of them. Membership of the SOE board is hereditary, and everyone on the board is a lineal descendant of a founder. No one applies to join us. If we have a project that requires exceptional people, we have them reassigned to us. You should congratulate yourself that you are one of those people.”

It suddenly occurred to Yiler that his right of privacy might have been infringed. “Did you have me under observation? You must have, to make a statement like that.”

“Of course, we did. You had the required expertise to work on a key project, so we assigned an operative to you. We have been observing you for three months and have been very impressed. I note that you never spotted our operative. We have superb people.”

“Self-praise is no praise. Are you newly formed? I don’t have any recollection of hearing the SOE name previously.”

“Don’t let the fact that you haven’t heard of us fool you. The SOE has been in existence for a long time. Our current location is just part of our strategy to keep the SOE under the radar.”

“What exactly does the SOE do?”

“Our role is to guide and shape current events to fit the long-term policies of the Deusi government.”

“What is the long-term strategy of the government? Like many others, I’ve always wanted to know.” Yiler’s tone was dripping with cynicism, which Lateel chose to ignore.

“Let me answer a question with a question, which I know is rude. What is the thing that irritates you most at present?”

Yiler thought for a moment. “Apart from being here in this office with you?”

General Lateel frowned. “You are aware of the concept of insubordination, aren’t you?”

“Please accept my apology. Apart from being here in this office with you, sir?”

“Adding sir at the end doesn’t change anything. In answer to your question, yes apart from that, what irritates you most?”

“Then, with that exclusion, the answer is the Santu.”

Lateel was not surprised by his answer because the Santu were extremely unpopular with the Deusi. Shortly after the Santu had successfully tested and produced the first Faster Than Light, or FTL drive, 1,750 years ago, they had commenced the exploration of surrounding star systems. It didn’t take them long to encounter another race, the Flambi, who were also experimenting with FTL technology. The Santu and Flambi founded the Federation and started a joint exploration programme seeking more first contacts. The Federation was now comprised of twenty-eight races, twenty-five of which were full members, with another three on the pending list.

The Deusi has developed FTL technology and formed a loose alliance with five other star systems sixty years before first contact with the Federation took place. The Deusi had not reacted positively to the Federation and disagreements with the Santu surfaced immediately, and those arguments had worsened in recent years. The Federation portrayed itself as a benign entity that promoted mutually beneficial contact with any race that it encountered. However, the Deusi and their allies were not convinced about joining. They perceived it as a significant threat to their way of life, because only races that adopted Federation economic principles were admitted.

The Deusi alliance had a monetary economic model. The Santu had developed the same model but subsequently abandoned it for a civic model after they concluded that a monetary economy had several structural and unsolvable problems. The Santu’s primary argument was that the prosperity of any society and the well-being of its citizens should not and could not be determined by a monetary economy. Monetary based economies have peaks and troughs, impossible to forecast or determine in advance. In addition, the triggers for economic downturns could not be discerned in time to stop them happening. It was illogical to have the quality of people’s lives, both on an individual and planetary level, determined by an uncontrollable monetary economy.

The Santu also concluded that, in a monetary economy, consumerism takes over, and the gathering of material possessions becomes the prime objective. The Santu determined that the gap between those who succeed in a monetary economy and those who don’t becomes wider and ultimately unsustainable. The inevitable creation of a class of permanently unemployed, underutilised young adults and their alienation from society could be avoided in a civic model.

When first contact took place with the Deusi, the Santu, in order to encourage the adoption of their civic model, issued documents demonstrating that there were no economic troughs or peaks or excessive consumption within the Federation. They promoted the fact that Federation citizens contribute freely to bettering society and are not concerned with gaining material wealth. Every Federation member had accepted those arguments and adopted the civic economic model. The Deusi and their allies had not agreed. They decided to retain their monetary based economy, a decision that barred them from joining. As the Federation expanded and colonised more planets, tensions with the Deusi alliance increased as it also expanded and colonised but without any prior agreement or discussion with the Federation.

“What specifically about the Santu?” asked Lateel.

“The fact that they frustrate every attempt by us to involve ourselves into the Federation without us agreeing in advance to their impossible list of conditions, which is clearly never going to happen. Not being a member makes it impossible for us to colonise planets and expand.”

Lateel nodded in assent. “I agree wholeheartedly. Every time we discover a habitable planet, the Federation arrives with excuses as to why we cannot colonise it, and we don’t have the military muscle to start a fight with them. We can’t carry on like this much longer. Our home worlds and existing colonies are close to their population limits. Having our excess population as workers on Federation space facilities is not sustainable or desirable.”

“The tension between us and the Federation is getting worse day by day, and it has the potential to spill over into armed conflict,” said Yiler. “I don’t believe what the media tell us.”

Lateel was very pleased with how the conversation was progressing. “Nor should you. I knew that I was right about your potential. I fully concur with your analysis. The long-term policy that you enquired about, is to reduce the influence of the Santu over the Federation. We can only do that by joining the Federation and eventually usurping them as the leading member.”

Yiler leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. “That’s an ambitious long-term goal. Before we go any further, I must emphasise again that I haven’t said that I would join yet. I just signed the non-disclosure agreements. You still haven’t told me exactly what I would be doing?”

“Have you ever heard of a planet called Earth?”

“No, I have not.”

“Well, that’s good. It shows our security protocols are solid. Earth was discovered by us about fifteen hundred years ago. The planet is populated by a sentient race which we called the humans. We have been carrying out some societal and behavioural engineering experiments on Earth since then.”

“I’m far from an expert in the area, but isn’t that illegal?”

“It’s a grey area. Anyway, we have become fascinated by the fact that the humans have an unprecedented level of belief in divine powers. They have a multiplicity of gods. The human ethnic groups, of which there are many, believe in different gods. We want to attempt to create a single deity that all humans will believe in.”

Yiler was stunned. “Why would you want to attempt to do something like that? What could you possibly gain scientifically?”

“We want to see if we can create a single deity religion and then control the civilian population through the hierarchy and structure of that religion. There is no permanent central government on Earth and no prospect of one in the medium to long term. We think that a religious administration can operate as effectively as a civilian administration. With your background in theology, we think that you are the right person to lead this project.”

“This is completely crazy. The concept is ludicrous. Most importantly, I have absolutely no idea how to do this. How can I go to an alien planet and create a deity for them to believe in?”

“We are not expecting you to do this on your own. We will provide the resources you need.”

“I don’t know what resources I will need to achieve the impossible.”

“Maybe a computer, a pen and some paper.” Lateel laughed at her own joke. “Don’t worry. I have assembled a very strong team for you. You will have a sufficient budget, and your own ship for the duration.”

“How long is the duration likely to be?”

“Barring unforeseen circumstances, you will have an unfettered run on Earth for fifty years. No other experiments will commence in that period. Any ongoing experiments are in their second stage and will just run their course while you are there.”

Not for the first time, Yiler was rendered speechless, and there was a long uncomfortable silence as Lateel’s comment sunk in. “Fifty years is a lifetime.”

“Yes, I’m aware this is a major commitment on your behalf.”

“I guess the facts that I live alone, my parents have deceased, and I have no procreations had a bearing on me being nominated for this. No one will miss me.”

“Yes, plus the fact that you had no pets.” Lateel laughed again, but Yiler didn’t.

He took a deep breath. “Hold on a second. I just want to go back to what you said about the SOE and government policy. Are you telling me that creating a divine power on this planet is part of the long-term strategy?”

“The short answer is no. The elongated answer is that it couldn’t be government policy because the civil administration does not know about the existence of the planet. Earth was discovered by an SOE scout ship, and it was decided to keep the discovery within the confines of the SOE. That is about to change though, as the president will be informed shortly about Earth.”

“This gets worse and worse. It’s an SOE solo run.” Yiler sat there with his hands on either side of his face, moving them slowly up and down. “Let me think about this.” Lateel sat waiting silently for his response. After three minutes, Yiler turned to her and said, “Okay, I can hardly believe that I am saying this, but I’m interested. I still don’t see how this can be achieved, no matter what you give me.”

“Let’s head down to a conference room to meet your medical advisor and assistant programme chief, Dr Nowlett. When you have seen and heard her presentation, you might feel more optimistic.” General Lateel left her office with Professor Yiler following.

“Dr Nowlett?” said Yiler as he hastened to keep up with her long stride.

“Affirmative. It seems that you have heard of her.”

Yiler looked surprised. “Of course, she is the leading medical device innovator of our generation. I am a great admirer of hers.”

“Really, an admirer. Have you met her in person?”

“I wish. I just follow her on some of the professional social media platforms.”

“That explains it then.”

“That explains what?”

Lateel said nothing and just smiled. Since no response was forthcoming, Yiler carried on talking. “I have tracked her career through the many research papers that she has published on the data place. I am surprised that you managed to persuade a female of the quality of Dr Nowlett to join this madcap venture.”

“I’m not really comfortable with the use of “madcap” as an adjective for this project. Once Dr Nowlett understood the extent of the challenge, she was hooked. You’ll see why.”

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Dr Nowlett sat in the conference room waiting for Lateel and Yiler. She was working on her computer, updating the graphic capability to keep herself amused. General Lateel had asked Dr Nowlett to prepare a presentation on the biology of the humans to help convince Yiler that creating a deity could be done. She was one hundred percent confident that she could convince Yiler but was not looking forward to having to do it.

Dr Nowlett was not generally comfortable with social interaction, especially with males. She knew from prior experience that she could create a bad first impression, General Lateel being the latest unfortunate example. She tended to say the first thing that came into her head. In the “General Lateel incident”, she had just advised that, in her opinion, a career in the military was a life with long periods of boredom, punctuated by brief moments of sheer terror with nothing to show for it at the end. Unsurprisingly, Lateel wasn’t fully in agreement and a lengthy, and somewhat heated, debate ensued.

Her comments were frequently perceived as being sharp or blunt. People formed the impression that she either lacked empathy for the person she was addressing or was simply rude. She felt that impatient was a fairer description. All she wanted to do was to get to the conclusion of a discussion as quickly as possible and move onto other matters, and the best way to do this was to get straight to the truth.

The HR director in Biotech Inc, where Dr Nowlett worked previously, had tried to help. She had advised Nowlett to pause before she spoke to assess what the other person might be feeling, use humour, and not to take everything literally. On her problems with males, the HR director assured her that they were nothing to do with her and were probably due to most males having incurable genetic idiocy. Dr Nowlett had immediately explained to the HR director why idiocy could not be a genetic trait, at which point the HR counsellor had given up.

Surprisingly, Dr Nowlett was not fazed by large group presentations. She had given hundreds of them in her time in Biotech Inc, the larger the group the better, as far as she was concerned. She felt as if the end of the stage was an invisible barrier between her and her audience, and that she could set the terms of any interaction with the audience, which relaxed her. Her favourite ones were where she presented to a group of her peers. The question and answer sessions were invigorating, requiring her to fend off the barbs and bat back the curve balls, some subtle some not, contained within her colleague’s questions. She heard the conference room door open and stood up as Lateel and Yiler walked in.

“Professor Yiler, may I introduce you to Dr Nowlett and vice versa,” said Lateel.

“Best wishes to you.” Nowlett put out her hand and Yiler shook it.

“And to you.”

In his excitement of meeting Nowlett, Yiler forgot to let go of her hand. “Dr Nowlett, I am thrilled to meet you. I am an avid reader of every research paper you publish.”

Nowlett was not accustomed to protracted male handshakes, so she removed her hand politely from Yiler’s grasp. She remained motionless apart from gently rubbing her hands together. Yiler just stood there with his hands by his sides. Lateel was confused. Yiler had barely glanced at her, but his reaction to Dr Nowlett was the response that Lateel generally received from males. Somewhat arrogantly, she had assumed that Yiler was not interested in females, but it seemed that she was wrong. Lateel was primarily attracted by physical beauty, so she couldn’t understand what Yiler saw in Dr Nowlett, who in her view was a diminutive, plain looking female.

Yiler had developed a bad case of dry mouth and swallowed to clear it. “I have tracked your career from your earliest research papers. Everything you write is both innovative and thought provoking. I also enjoy your posts on professional social media.”

“Thank you very much. I wish I could reciprocate your kind comments, but I hadn’t heard of you until a few days ago when General Lateel announced that you were to lead the Deity Creation Group. Your department of theology doesn’t have a high profile because it is so new, which is probably why your name is unfamiliar.” Lateel put her elbows on the table, rested her chin on the tips of her fingers and shook her head slowly from side to side.

Yiler ploughed on bravely. “I suppose that I could take offence at that but, to be fair, you are not the first to say that, and what you say is after all true.”

Nowlett smiled grimly. “If everyone had such a reasonable attitude to hearing the truth, my life would be far less complicated. I’m sure I would have heard of you in time.”

“You probably would have. I had great plans for the department. Remember that big trees can grow from small seeds.”

“Growing it would have been challenging. You were studying something that doesn’t exist. What is the point of that?”

“You really do get to the point, don’t you? I was studying why some races are predisposed to believe in something that doesn’t exist. That is the purpose of the department. I am not trying to prove that a deity exists. That would be pointless.”

Dr Nowlett scratched her chin. “An interesting view, Yiler.”

Both Yiler and Nowlett lapsed into silence. Lateel was surprised by the exchange and congratulated herself on finding two people who already looked like they had the makings of a solid leadership team. Lateel decided that she better end the awkwardness. “Dr Nowlett, I am sure that you want to get down to business, so without further ado, let’s start your presentation.” Dr Nowlett did as requested, and her first graphic was a picture of a ship. “This the *Nubla*.”

She was surprised by the blank look from Yiler who decided he better say something. “It looks old.”

Lateel laughed. “Yiler, you need to get out more. Seriously, you must have heard of the *Nubla*. The big marble monument in City Park is dedicated to it.”

“To be fair, it was lost circa forty thousand years ago,” said Dr Nowlett. “And he works in the arts university, which is a long way from the city centre, so I am sure that he doesn’t get to the central park much.”

“Oh, that ship,” said Yiler. “As I recollect, it had dozens of scientists on board at the time, hence the erection of the memorial.”

Dr Nowlett smiled. “Correct. An SOE scout ship found a probe that came from the *Nubla*. Isn’t that amazing? The chances of that happening were astronomical. I have done some calculations on it and…”

General Lateel shifted in her chair. She was already aware of Dr Nowlett’s tendency to go off track. “Dr Nowlett, time is short. Could you keep to the point?”

“Did the probe shed any light on what happened to the *Nubla*?” said Yiler.

“It did. The *Nubla* was lost because its FTL drive had a malfunction that sent it off course. The probe gave us the location where the crew regained control of the FTL drive. Do you want to see a star chart that shows how far the ship went off course?” Yiler nodded, and Dr Nowlett’s hands flew over her keyboard until a hologram hovered over the table.

Lateel looked surprised. “I didn’t know we had holographic technology in this room.”

“You didn’t. I upgraded it while I was waiting for you.” Lateel looked even more surprised.

“That was a major malfunction,” said Yiler when he saw the distance between the flashing blue light that was Deusi Prime, and the flashing red light that marked the *Nubla*. “Not surprising that the ship wasn’t found. Did we have to do a lot of searching to locate the wreckage?”

“No, the probe gave us the location of a planet that the *Nubla* was attempting to reach after the accident. They placed all their hopes on it being life bearing. The odds were in their favour because the planet was in the middle of the temperate zone. When the scout ship got there, the crew discovered sentient life on the planet. Here is what the planet looks like.”

Yiler saw a blue planet shrouded in places with white cloud. “I presume that this is Earth?”

“Correct again,” said Nowlett.

“Well, that is really interesting. You and General Lateel both mentioned sentient life. Doesn’t that mean that we were, and are, prohibited from landing on the planet. Maybe the strict rules in force now didn’t apply back then.”

Nowlett glanced at Yiler. “That’s a very interesting question. My interpretation of the legal situation is that…”

Lateel decided to interrupt swiftly. “Dr Nowlett, could you move on please?”

“Maybe we could discuss that later,” said Yiler.

“Apologies and yes, Yiler, that would work for me,” said Nowlett first with a grimace and then a smile. “General Lateel had a concern that you might not sign up because you thought that creating a deity was not feasible. She wanted me to allay those concerns. This should do it.”

A picture of an alien standing upright popped on the screen, and Yiler leaned forward. “Amazing. I take it that this is a human.”

“Right again. As you can see, Professor Yiler, the humans are very similar to us physically. You will observe two arms, two legs, one head. However, there is much more to the similarity than that. The humans are a carbon-based life form with varying proportions of oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen and phosphorous within their cell structure. They breath oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide. The amount of oxygen required is very similar to the mix on Deusi Prime. They have a skeletal system, a muscular system and an integumentary system.”

“What is the last item?” asked Yiler.

“The integumentary system is the largest organ,” answered Nowlett. “It consists of their outer skin, plus their hair and nails. Their skin regulates temperature, keeps water and salts in balance, protects from the environment and contains the receptors for pain, heat and cold. They are covered in hair which traps warm air close to the body, assisting in regulating temperature. We have much less hair, but what we have performs almost as efficiently.

They have a circulatory system consisting of a centrally located heart and a blood system that transports respiratory gases, waste products, digested products, hormones and immune cells. The blood system also regulates heat. Their lungs are located close to the heart and intersect with the blood system to supply oxygen and remove carbon dioxide. Their cerebral organ is contained in their skulls.”

“Okay, Dr Nowlett, I get it,” said Yiler. “They are very similar which will pique the interest of the anthropologists, but you haven’t dealt with my point that we can’t interfere with the humans. Surely, even the SOE has to adhere to the Sentient Species Directive.”

“The directive does not apply if the humans are a Deusi hybrid,” said Lateel.

Yiler gasped and put his hand over his mouth. He rubbed his upper lip before taking his hand away. When he spoke, his voice had dropped an octave. “Are you telling me we created the humans?”

“That’s what we believe,” said Lateel. “The crew of the *Nubla* did it.”

“And I have been considering how they did it,” said Dr Nowlett. “Now, let me open up my research. It all comes back to Dr Teclo, who was on the *Nubla*. She was a genetics expert. Now, I think that…”

Lateel tapped the table sharply. “Dr Nowlett, please stop. You can discuss this theory along with your other one with Professor Yiler later. Can you give us your conclusion?”

Dr Nowlett paused for dramatic effect. “Professor Yiler, I am confident that, with only a few minor tweaks, Deusi can look like humans. The ability to have our team members interacting with humans will be a key factor in our ability to carry out our mission.”

Lateel frowned. “I wouldn’t necessarily agree with Dr Nowlett’s definition of minor.”

“If what Dr Nowlett has postulated is possible, then that would remove some of my doubt,” said Yiler. “But with all due respect, Dr Nowlett, you have never tried something like this before.”

“I have a prior precedent to rely upon.”

“What precedent?”

“Professor Yiler, we have tried to create a single deity before, during which experiment, we successfully placed Deusi on Earth.”

Lateel decided that it was time to dismiss Dr Nowlett to keep the rest of the meeting tightly focused. “Now might be the time for me to tell Professor Yiler about the enigma that is Moses. Thanks for the presentation, Dr Nowlett. You can go now.”

“I’d rather stay. I enjoy talking to Professor Yiler.”

Yiler and Lateel both looked dubious. “You do?” they said in unison.

“Of course. It is my first experience of intellectual equality since being harangued into the SOE.”

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When Lateel had finished running through the ‘Moses Experiment’, it was nearly lunchtime. Lateel declined Yiler’s offer to go to lunch, having considered it for a microsecond, so Yiler and Nowlett headed off to the staff canteen on their own. When they arrived there, Yiler spotted the security guard he had met earlier on that morning. Nowlett looked surprised when he went over to her.

“How is your lunch?”

The security guard looked up in surprise. “What?”

“How is your lunch? Any recommendations for us newbies?”

“It’s all okay, I guess.”

“Good to know. Will I be seeing you every morning?”

“Probably. My shift is 7 am to 4 pm.”

“Fantastic, I shall have a spring in my step every morning with the mere prospect of seeing your smiling happy face.”

The security guard looked uneasy. “Umm… okay.”

“Anyway, you enjoy your lunch. See you tomorrow.”

Yiler walked back to a puzzled Nowlett. “What was that all about?”

Yiler started laughing. “She annoyed me this morning, so I thought that I would interrupt her lunch and wind her up a bit.”

Nowlett nodded. “Perhaps a little petty, but understandable given her brusque personality. I’ve already had a run in with her. She is very insistent on ID being shown to her every morning. I made the mistake of forgetting mine once, and she gave me a hard time about issuing a temporary one for one day. Every morning she acts as if she has never met me before. It’s very annoying, and I told her so when she was issuing my temporary ID. Anyway, enough about her, let’s get our food and then onto the *Nubla* theories that Lateel would not let me talk about.”

Yiler grinned broadly. “I can’t think of a better way to spend my lunchtime. I have one major question for you. I don’t believe Lateel’s explanation as to why we are being asked to do this. If the creation of a single deity was that important, why wait until now to reenergise the experiment. It should have been done immediately after the Moses experiment stalled.

“I agree completely. There is more to this than Lateel is letting on, and I intend to find out what is really going on here. Yiler, I have a question for you. Are you fully committed to this?”

“I am sufficiently intrigued to invest some time into this. I will make my final decision just before our ship has to leave for Earth. Is that fair enough?”

“Yes, that is entirely reasonable. I hope you decide to go to Earth. I believe that the two of us could lead the team to successfully complete the experiment.”

Chapter 2

Yiler and Nowlett had spent the four weeks since they had been introduced reviewing the profiles of team members, splitting them into two-person teams, preparing a briefing document and outlining a plan for the course of the experiment. The selection of team members had been easy thanks to Lateel. The general had given them a list of eight SOE operatives that recently had been initiated into the organisation, like Yiler and Nowlett. Yiler had pointed out that it was unlikely that he would need less than eight, so this didn’t allow them any input in the team selection. He asked for more names. Lateel countered that she did not have an unlimited supply of SOE personnel available, so their choice of taking all eight was technically still a choice. Yiler and Nowlett had protested, but Lateel refused to budge.

During those four weeks, Yiler and Nowlett had spent every minute they were awake, apart from when they parted at the Central Undertram station to go to their separate homes, in each other’s company. Yiler had fallen completely and utterly for Nowlett. His feelings for Dr Nowlett had come as a shock to him. He had never felt this way before about a female. He had been blown away by her intellect. He had yearned for lunchtimes and their journeys on the Undertram, where they had time to discuss diverse topics not connected with the Deity Creation experiment.

Despite all this time together, he still had no idea how Nowlett felt about him. She was very hard to read. Although he wouldn’t admit it to anyone, his growing infatuation with Dr Nowlett was the reason why he had pushed aside his nagging concerns about the purpose, result and probability of success of the Deity Creation experiment. He had decided to board the ship to Earth, commit fifty years of his life to the experiment and hope that Dr Nowlett would eventually reciprocate his feelings. He was optimistic that he hadn’t made the wrong decision on all counts.

Despite the prospect of losing his exclusive access rights to Nowlett, both he and Nowlett were delighted when their team was assembled for the first time on the Deusi ship *Tesfa* for their forty-day journey to Earth. The ship had just left the civilian space station at Deusi Prime. They were on the observation deck, which was located on top of the bridge, which in turn was situated above the living quarters and cargo hold. This segment was oval shaped with a short thin tube connecting it with the box shaped section containing the shuttle bay and FTL engine room.

The team was watching the ship moving to the Faster Than Light jump point. As the ship jumped to FTL, the view screen became a kaleidoscope of colour as they moved into FTL space. When the spectacle was over, they made their way back to the office accommodation which had been built in the cargo hold. Five cubicles, with two workstations per cubicle, had been constructed evenly around the exterior of the room. The workstations were small, equipped with a desk, computer, chair and either one or two pot plants beside the desks. The centre of the hold contained a large table surrounded by a low wall around which the eight other new SOE operatives were seated along with Yiler and Nowlett.

Yiler got to his feet. “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the first meeting of the Deity Creation Group. I am Professor Yiler, the programme chief, formerly head of the theology department in the arts university. Beside me is Dr Nowlett, head of medical affairs and assistant programme chief, formerly head of research at Biotech Inc. Both of us are looking forward to working with you. I hope this accommodation, which will be our base throughout the experiment, is to your liking.” Yiler took a sip of water. “Maybe you could also introduce yourselves, starting to my right.”

“I’m Captain Denned, Deusi Marine Corps, mechanical engineering specialist.”

“My name is Hyet. I used to work as the IT director for an advertising company.”

“My name is Sidion. I am a behavioural analyst, and I used to work in the Department of Business Enterprise. Hopefully, you will remember my name since I am the only female apart from Nowlett.” There was an uncomfortable silence after that.

“I am Uhet. Prior to joining, I was a nutritionist, so I guess my job is to find food sources on Earth.”

“My name is Fawter, and I used to be a private security consultant before being recruited into the SOE.”

“I am Konacht, and I was Fawter’s partner, in business just to be clear.”

“You two are the biggest males I have ever met,” said Hyet.

Fawter laughed loudly. “The benefits of personal training in the gym, Hyet. There is one on the ship so maybe you could have a go.”

“If we could move on please,” said Yiler who pointed at the next person.

“I’m called Cannet. I used to be a fitness trainer, so you might be seeing a lot of me in the gym as well over the next few weeks.”

“I’m Commander Hennegy, Deusi Navy, last posting as executive officer of the Battlecruiser *Raker*. I’m not a fan of the gym.”

“Thank you for sharing, especially your views on exercise regimes,” said Yiler. “Now the team allocations. Team 1 will be Hyet and Sidion who will look after our technology needs. Team 2 will be Denned and Hennegy. You will oversee all operations on Earth. Team 3 will be Uhet and Cannet, who, as well as advising on diet and nutrition, will provide personal security. Team 4 will be Fawter and Konacht, who will also provide personal security and will be Dr Nowlett’s medical assistants on Earth. Fawter and Konacht will be scheduling close combat instruction in the evenings for all team members, especially Hyet. Denned will give us the benefit of his marine training in small arms in later sessions.”

“Now, with the introductions out of the way, let’s discuss why we are here. The first deity creation experiment has stagnated. We have been given fifty years to re-energise and complete the project. I see that you all have a copy of the briefing document prepared by Dr Nowlett and me. I think that the document is all encompassing; it should be, given its length. If any of you have queries, feel free to come and talk to either myself or Dr Nowlett. Open door policy for both of us. Dr Nowlett will now brief you on your first assignment. Dr Nowlett, if you’d please...”

Nowlett looked surprised. “Thank you, Professor Yiler, even though I thought that we had agreed that you would do the briefing.”

“Did we? I don’t recollect.”

“I assure you we did.” Nowlett took out some written notes. “You have been organised into two-person teams, each with carefully selected complementary skill sets. The first task for each team is to document what you think we should do when we get to Earth. We want those suggestions within two weeks. Yiler and I have already done the same. We will draw from all these papers to create a final blueprint. You can now go to your workstations and start work. I hope that you get on well with your partner. No reallocations are permitted… well, at least for the first week, I suppose.” Hyet laughed at her joke. Nowlett was pleasantly surprised at the response, notwithstanding that the humour wasn’t intentional. “Oh sorry, one final thing to mention. Don’t be constrained by what you think can and can’t be done. If you have a good idea, include it, and then it will be our job to find a way to implement it. All we want from you is creativity.”

Yiler stood up and started speaking again. “I want to talk about the gender imbalance since there are only two females. This is deliberate. Earth is a male dominated society, by far the most imbalanced that we have come across. In human society, females have no leadership role and are not involved in making important decisions. They are second class citizens. Because each two-person team may be on Earth for long periods, we needed to have a disproportionate number of males on the team.”

“Why is their society so male dominated?” said Sidion. “No other race is like that. Not even the Santu.”

Dr Nowlett took a deep breath. “I have some thoughts on that…”

“In order not to lose half a day, I’m going to interject here.” Yiler smiled at Dr Nowlett, who rolled her eyes and waved her hand in acknowledgement. “Dr Nowlett surmised that the creation of a male dominated society was another SOE experiment. She pressured General Lateel on the topic and the general eventually confirmed that she was right.”

“Why would we do that?” The question came from Hyet.

Dr Nowlett leant forward and placed her elbows on the table. “The SOE are implementing a series of micro experiments that have the macro objective of creating a human society that differs from normal standards.”

“Again, why would we do that?” asked Sidion.

Dr Nowlett shrugged her shoulders. “I hate to disappoint, but in this case, I have no idea. I do think that General Lateel knows more than she is letting on. She won’t budge though. No matter what I tried, she wouldn’t give me any information. I might have annoyed her with all the questions.”

Yiler nudged her arm. “We know that you have a theory, so you might as well enlighten us.”

Dr Nowlett grinned. “This is pure speculation, but I think that Earth is not the only planet that we have colonised without Federation permission. I am convinced that the SOE have other secret Deusi colonies. At some point in the future, the existence of one or more of them will be discovered by the Federation. It is impossible to predict how the Federation will react. I believe that Earth is being prepared as a test case, and it will be disclosed to the Federation at a time of our choosing.”

Yiler looked surprised. “Why would we ever deliberately disclose a colony to the Federation? They could resort to extreme measures when they find out.”

“The SOE will be testing the reaction of the Federation to a planet that we can legitimately argue evolved naturally and is not a Deusi colony. The further human society can be removed from Federation and Deusi societal norms, the more likely the Federation will accept Earth as a natural phenomenon. We do not believe in a higher divinity, therefore, the entire human species believing in the one god with this belief as the foundation of their society, is one way of demonstrating that. If the Federation’s reaction to Earth is positive, it might act as the catalyst for the disclosure of other Deusi colonies to the Federation. If the Federation resorts to the extreme measures referred to by Yiler to deal with Earth, then we will know that we have to keep the others a secret.”

“So, you think we are just one small part of a large scheme to create the most abnormal society ever discovered by the Federation,” said Yiler.

Dr Nowlett perceived a general feeling of incredulity as she gathered up her notes from the table. “It’s logical when you consider the unique features of Earth. There are the multiplicity of languages, hereditary dictatorships, slavery, human sacrifice, xenophobia, widespread acceptance of currency and casual brutality to other species to which features will now be added a single deity. I also think that the DNA evidence might be of help in us arguing the natural evolution point, but that requires more research before I postulate a theory. Now, before Professor Yiler complains about me wasting any more of your time, let’s create a deity.”

The team members, apart from Yiler and Nowlett, left their seats and walked over to their workstations. “Good speech,” said Yiler.

“Thanks, but you know damn well that we agreed that you would do it.”

“Yes, but it was a perfect opportunity for you to break the ice with the rest of the team, and I couldn’t let you miss the opportunity. Please don’t thank me, I’ll only get embarrassed.” Yiler turned with a broad smile and walked out before Nowlett had a chance to reply.

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Hyet smiled at Sidion as she sat down beside him. “Welcome to Team 1.”

“Thank you, Hyet.” She shook his hand. “Should we start by exchanging some personal details?”

“Good idea. I am thirty-five, no procreations, that I know of anyway.”

“I am thirty-two, also with no procreations. I am sure about the procreation bit.”

Hyet grinned. “I imagine you would have noticed having a procreation. I see that you have adopted the current trend for shaved heads. I have adopted the same style, but mine wasn’t a choice.”

Sidion smiled broadly. “Premature baldness, I presume. Well, at least you don’t have to shave your head every couple of days to keep the look.”

“There is always a bright side, I suppose. Pity that everyone else has a full head of hair. I fear our team will soon be named ‘Team Eggheads’.”

Sidion sighed. “I wouldn’t be happy with that.”

“Me neither. What do you think of Nowlett and Yiler?”

Sidion scratched her gleaming head. “I haven’t decided yet. I’m leaning towards weird.”

Hyet grinned. “They have an odd chemistry. I am sure that you spotted that little bit of sniping and griping during the introduction. I don’t have a view yet as to how effectively they will lead the group.”

“They did a good job on our team. Our professional skills certainly suit each other.”

“Indeed, but that means we have no excuse for not coming up with some brilliant ideas,” said Sidion. “Did you see that we are being asked to act as the group’s communications and technology experts.”

“I did,” said Hyet. “I would not consider myself an expert in the area. You?”

“Not really. When we finished our work on the blueprint, we won’t be bored anyway. A lot of manuals to be read and digested.”

“I perceive one positive in our assigned specialism.”

“What is that?” said Sidion.

“Very few trips to Earth, if any. We won’t be able to bring a lot of technology down to avoid raising suspicion among the natives, so we will spend most of our time on the ship. Have you ever travelled in a drop pod?”

Sidion grimaced. “Once, it was horrendous.”

“Same here. I hated it.”

Sidion laughed. “Well, in order to make sure that we don’t get transferred from our technology role, we better get started on the blueprint and leave enough time for the manuals.”

Hyet suspected that Sidion might have been more diligent than he on reading the material provided by Yiler and Nowlett, so he decided to start posing questions to disguise the fact. “Having read the briefing document, what is your assessment of religious belief on Earth?”

“Well, let’s start with the Roman Empire, which is the largest and most civilised political area on Earth.”

Hyet laughed. “The competition isn’t very high for that title.”

“True. Can you remember how many gods they have? It was in the document.”

Hyet looked blank. “Not exactly sure. Ten... twelve?”

“A lot more than that. There are Jupiter the King of Gods, Juno the Goddess of Marriage, Neptune the God of the Sea, Saturn the youngest son of Uranus, father of Zeus, Venus the Goddess of Love, Pluto the God of the Underworld, Vulcan the God of the Forge, Ceres the Goddess of the Harvest, Apollo the God of Music and Medicine, Minerva the Goddess of Wisdom, Diana the Goddess of the Hunt, Mars the God of War, Mercury the Messenger of the Gods, Bacchus the God of Wine, Proserpine the Goddess of the Underworld, Cupid the God of Love and Gaea the Goddess of Earth.”

“That is a lot of gods.”

“And that excludes minor gods and house spirits.”

“And the fact is that many other human groups and associations also have their own gods,” said Hyet. “It is incredible. What is it about the humans?”

Sidion shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. Honestly, the humans would worship anything. Some human cultures believe that there are spirits in the air, water and trees. This intense belief is why we instigated the Moses experiment. Dr Nowlett explained our objective of trying to prove that if you create one religion, then you will be able to exert control over the planet. Based on an analysis of the few races with religious belief, we concluded that religion is often the mechanism that is used to introduce civil law into societies, where civil authorities do not exist.”

“Can religion really regulate a society?” said Hyet.

“It should be possible. Fear of incurring the wrath of your ancestors or a powerful deity encourages compliance with the rules of that religion. If the rules of the religion are accepted widely and mirror the rules of a civic society then you will have a stable society. Religion can give meaning to the lives of those who are at the bottom of a monetary based society like ours, something the Santu don’t have to worry about with their civic based economic model. If you believe that this life is just a path to a greater afterlife, then you will be prepared to accept what you believe is only a temporary low quality of life. If you are a slave, as many humans are, with no quality of life and no hope of it getting better, then your religion and the hope of an afterlife are the only positives.”

Hyet decided to change the topic. “So, what do you think of Moses?”

Sidion smiled. “I think that Moses was an amazing leader of the original experiment. He suggested the Hebrews, who were slaves of the Egyptians, as the group to experiment on. He devised a plan whereby, through divine influence, he would lead the Hebrews out of slavery into a promised land. There they would be free to worship Moses’ god. He planned the ten plagues that afflicted the Egyptians but did not affect the Hebrews. The first nine plagues were water turned into blood, frogs, gnats, flies, disease to their cattle, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness. Each of them had a major impact on the Egyptians, but the tenth plague of killing the firstborn sons of the Egyptians was the one that broke them. That was a work of genius.”

“I think that the tenth one was over the top,” said Hyet. “Didn’t Moses have to face an internal inquiry into that one?”

“Well, the Egyptians were killing off all newborn Hebrew males, so you could argue that they deserved it. The enquiry concluded that since Moses had been given no restrictions by the SOE as to what he could or couldn’t do, he didn’t have any case to answer.”

“I think that the most impressive manoeuvre was the escape of the Hebrews from the Egyptian army. Using the thrusters of three military grade shuttles to part the Red Sea to let the Hebrews escape and then crashing it down on the Egyptian pursuers was incredible. I’ve seen the recording of that a few times.”

“You can just about make out the shuttles if you enlarge the picture and look carefully,” said Sidion. “The chameleon camouflage was amazing, even back then.”

“So why didn’t the plan work? Moses had demonstrated the power of his god convincingly to the Egyptians and Hebrews. Why didn’t other humans convert to this god? Their gods had never done anything to prove their existence, so belief was just based on obscure legends with no physical proof.”

“Hard to say,” said Sidion. “The Hebrews were convinced that they were God’s chosen people. They were given the Ten Commandments on which their lives were to be based. It was a simple and uncomplicated message that they had to spread. They should have been evangelist missionaries spreading the word of their god. It just didn’t happen. They didn’t spread the message vociferously, so their religion got lost in the multitude of religious beliefs. That’s why we need to come up with something revolutionary.”

“It will be difficult to come up with something bigger than what Moses tried,” said Hyet. “Even if we do, what is different now compared to then? Let’s say we fake a meteor crashing onto Earth and then have the son of God step out of it. Only a few people will witness the event unless we crash it into the middle of a city – just to be clear, I am not suggesting that as an option. Even then you might have only a few thousand who witness it. So, what is the crucial difference that will enable the Hebrews to better spread the message of God this time?”

Sidion paused. “Rome. The crucial difference is Rome. In Moses’ time, there was no large, stable and functioning political entity. There were just competing tribes, city states and smaller geographical areas. None were large enough to allow extensive safe travel. However, now the Roman Empire ticks all the required boxes. It is large and stable with strong civic principles, relatively speaking. This time the Hebrews can safely move through the Roman Empire and spread the word of God.”

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Hennegy sat on his seat with his legs stretched out in front of him and his hands behind his head. He watched as Denned walked over and saluted. Hennegy stood and saluted back. They shook hands and sat down.

“Have you seen any action?” said Hennegy.

Captain Denned leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. “Unfortunately, sir, the answer is yes. I was based on three different planets where colonisation disputes with the Santu arose. What about you, sir?”

“Please drop the ‘sir’. I was on convoy duty protecting ships probably on route to some of the places where you were stationed.”

“Have you procreations at home?”

“No, have you?”

“No.” Denned rubbed his head. “I don’t think that a fifty-year posting like this and procreations would be a good mix.”

“True. I doubt that anyone on this ship has procreated, probably a prerequisite to being selected. I’m thirty. How many years have you?”

“Thirty-one. Does it reflect badly on the imagination of the programme chief that two military personnel are put on the same team?”

“Maybe, but it is a logical choice. Our team is no doubt destined to do the grunt work on Earth, keeping the rest of the team safe. Plenty of drop pod trips.”

Denned scratched his nose. “Fawter and Konacht would have been perfect for the marines. I haven’t seen physiques like that since the end of basic training.”

Hennegy leaned back and rubbed his stomach. “You have kept yourself in shape. It is a while since my midriff has experienced planks or sit-ups. I hope those two go easy on us in the close combat sessions.”

“You haven’t piled on the weight. A couple of weeks of workouts and you will be back at your peak. Have you family, Hennegy?”

“Just one sister but we are not close. You?”

Denned looked sad for a moment. “Two sisters whom I am very fond of, even if we don’t get to see each other that much. I’ll get to see them even less now.”

“More than you expect, hopefully. Right, we better start coming up with some ideas.”

“You will be delighted to know that I already have an idea.” Hennegy said this with a serious face and Denned couldn’t tell if he was joking or not.

“That quickly? Go on then, enlighten me,” said Denned in the tone of voice that implied he anticipated a fairly poor suggestion.

“When you read your briefing, you will have seen references to a series of writings by the humans called the Old Testament. The Old Testament, which includes a lot of the details of the first experiment, was attached as an appendix to the briefing document. Did you read it?”

Denned picked up the briefing document and flicked to the appendix containing the Old Testament. “I remember that bit now. I sort of skimmed it. It is turgid stuff.”

“I agree, but I still read it fully to see if I could glean anything useful from it. The hands of the legendary Moses are all over it. What I learned was that Moses had already laid the groundwork for the introduction of a messiah, the son of his God. This was his backup plan in case his attempt failed. Look at these extracts from the Old Testament, which outline what he wanted to happen in the next attempt. ‘[Isaiah 7:14](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Isa%207.14): ‘Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.’ ‘[Isaiah 9:6](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Isa%209.6): For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.’ ‘[Micah 5:2](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Micah%205.2): But you, Bethlehem Ephrata, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.’ There are loads more.”

“That’s amazing,” said Denned. “It sets out exactly what Moses wanted done.”

“True, and the Old Testament tracks out the plan for the whole life of this son of God, not just the birth. It also deals with his life and death. Moses was so keen on detail that he gave a name for the new religion. Christ is the son of God, so the new religion should be called Christianity. The whole plan is there in the Old Testament.”

“So, the starting point is engineering the birth of the Messiah in accordance with the Old Testament?” said Denned.

“Exactly. By adhering to the Old Testament, it will prove that what we are doing now is part of God’s plan.”

Denned was impressed by Hennegy’s unexpected scholarly genius. “So, how should we progress this?”

“We have to read through the Old Testament again and pick out every reference to the Messiah. I haven’t found them all. Then we sketch out a life plan starting with the virgin birth all the way to his death, highlighting the key waypoints. The intellectuals can work out how to do it.”

“Honestly, I am not being condescending when I say this, but that is a really good idea, just one slight problem. How could we possibly engineer a virgin birth?”

Hennegy started to laugh. “That, as I said before, is where the intellectuals come in, especially Dr Nowlett.”

“From what Dr Nowlett said, this is exactly the sort of challenge that she is expecting from us.”

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Yiler stretched his hands above his head and groaned loudly. “I need to take a break.”

Nowlett closed her laptop. “Good idea. My eyes are getting tired. As a distraction, can I ask you a few theology questions?”

“Of course. It’s my favourite subject.”

“Great, but before I do, I want to make something clear to you. I am asking you because I am interested. I’m not trying to massage your ego or ingratiate myself with you. I say what I mean as succinctly as possible. There is never any double meaning or hidden agenda with me.”

“I appreciate your candour, but after five weeks of working with you, I had already come to that conclusion myself. What do you want to know?”

“You were studying why deity belief exists on some planets yet is non-existent on other planets. What did you conclude?”

“My work was incomplete, but I believe that the strength of belief in a species is linked to evolution. Species disposed to religious belief generally congregated into groups of likeminded individuals. These groups were better able to withstand environmental variations and so, flourished. Those who weren’t as disposed did not readily form such groups. Atheism, the lack of a belief in a divine power, was not enough to bind them together. These individuals or smaller groups were not able to withstand the environmental challenges and either died off or joined the larger groups.”

“They pretended to believe in order to survive.”

“Exactly. The capacity or willingness to believe became a trait that was passed on and strengthened from generation to generation. The groups got bigger and bigger.”

“So why don’t we have religion?”

“I don’t know. It could be that the need or desire to believe or belong in such a community never existed within the Deusi. Alternatively, it is possible that it existed, but the groups that formed were weaker than the groups that had no belief. Maybe atheism became the inherited trait for the Deusi.”

“That’s a fascinating theory. It’s a shame that you didn’t get to finish your work.”

“When I get back home, I hope that it will be written up and published by the theology department.”

Nowlett patted him on the shoulder. “I am sure that it will be.”

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Yiler and Dr Nowlett were delighted by the quality of the proposals they received and the fact that they had all been received within the requested fourteen-day period. The four teams had produced a broad range of ideas. Some ideas were brilliant, some were strange, some were both.

Yiler’s favourite of the bizarre ideas came from Team 3, Fawter and Konacht, who had displayed far more imagination than what he had expected from private security consultants. Their plan was to hover the *Tesfa* over Rome at night and illuminate the city. A cable would be used to slowly lower Yiler until he hovered two hundred meters above the city; they speculated that this distance would be out of the range of primitive human missile fire, probably. He would then announce the arrival of the one true god on Earth. The ship would then destroy the ten largest temples in Rome to demonstrate God’s displeasure with the worshipping of false gods. The ship would repeat the process in the next three largest cities on Earth, Alexandria, Antioch and Ephseus. The idea lacked subtlety, but Dr Nowlett thought that it was technically possible. Although Yiler found the idea amusing, he wasn’t convinced. He felt that Moses had made a mistake by opting for a god of punishment and that Team 3’s idea was replicating it.

Team 4, with Uhet and Cannet, had suggested replacing the Roman Emperor with one of the team. Coincidentally, they also felt that Yiler was best qualified for the job but would have to be surgically altered. The new emperor would announce that he was the son of God and insist that all Romans convert to the new religion. The first to refuse to convert would have to be sacrificed. Thereafter, the incentive of staying alive would give the necessary encouragement. Dr Nowlett advised that the surgical element was no more than a minor tweak and could easily be done. Yiler felt that this was also creating a god of punishment and this was not what he wanted to do.

Team 2, Denned and Hennegy, had searched through the Old Testament to look for a plan left by Moses. Yiler was amazed when the team extracted a roadmap from birth to death. Team 2 suggested that, by following this roadmap exactly, they would show that the Old Testament had predicted the coming of the Messiah. They believed that following this preordained plan should convince the Hebrews that the son of God had come to Earth. This in turn would be the catalyst for the Hebrews to enthusiastically commence missionary work. Team 2 neglected to include any practical suggestions as to how to implement any of the steps.

Team 1, Sidion and Hyett, had also plumped for the idea of the son of God with a link to the God created by Moses. Otherwise, there was a risk that the new religion could grow in tandem with the Hebrew religion. Neither religion would reach the critical mass required to supplant the multitude of gods of the Roman Empire. Even if the Roman gods could be supplanted, they speculated that there was a risk that the two competing religions would eventually lead to conflict. There was no evidence to support this theory because no race with religious belief had been observed with two competing deities. However, Yiler agreed that conflict was a very real possibility if two opposing religions emerged from the experiment, so it was best avoided.

He groaned and stretched his hands above his head and brought them down onto his computer keyboard. “Okay, Dr Nowlett, let’s start writing this up.”

“That habit of groaning while stretching is intensely irritating. I thought that you needed to know.”

“Thanks. I’ll bear that in mind.”

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Fawter clapped his hands gleefully. “With the academic work out of the way, it’s time for personal combat followed by weapons training.” There were a few audible groans from group members, who were all well-padded. “It’s great to feel energy and enthusiasm in a room. We are going to split up into groups. I will take the eggheads and Yiler.” Hyet’s fears had been well founded.

“Konacht will take Uhet, Cannet and Dr Nowlett. Denned will initially work with Hennegy one to one, and when Hennegy is ready, Denned will help train my group and Hennegy will work with Konacht. We will do an hour each of personal and weapons practice. Today’s lesson is basic personal protection. While we will have side arms and other weaponry on Earth, we will not be carrying them regularly. Therefore, you must be able to defend yourself if you are accosted. Now to start, I need to pick a victim. Sidion, you’re up.”

Sidion stood in the middle of the gym on a soft matt a couple of metres away from Fawter. “Ok, I am going to approach you from behind and attempt to pin you to the ground.” Sidion turned around as he moved towards her, bending down from the waist to shift her weight forward. She twisted into Fawter and pushed her elbow into his neck. This gave her the room to turn fully and drive her knee into his groin. Despite the padding, Fawter still crumpled to the floor.

Konacht nearly collapsed laughing. “Not a complete novice then, Sidion.”

“Should have asked me before you started,” said Sidion as she helped Fawter up.

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Nowlett was reading over the final draft of the plan which had taken herself and Yiler a further ten days to complete after the teams had delivered their papers. With fourteen days left on the *Tesfa* until reaching Earth, they still had adequate time to complete their work. Across the office, Yiler slumped on a reclining chair with his eyes closed. Every now and again, Nowlett would sigh and change a word or two.

Yiler opened one eye. “You must be finished by now.”

“If I am still editing, how can I be finished? Also, I will never be finished if you keep asking me if I am finished.”

“Sorry.”

“Your interruption is well timed though. Unfortunately, there is a major flaw in the document.”

Yiler opened both eyes and spoke slowly. “What do you mean there is a flaw?”

“No need to raise your voice. My hearing works fine. There is no insurance, no plan B.”

“Again, what do you mean?”

“What happens if the child Messiah dies before we are ready to move on to the final phase?”

“The experiment ends.”

“Your ability to point out the stunningly obvious is extraordinary.”

“As is your ability to ask obvious questions.”

“It was a rhetorical question actually. Anyway, that is the risk that we must protect against. I can’t envisage proceeding with that risk hanging over us. We must have another option.”

“You seem to have something in mind, so can you just tell me?”

“We need someone to shadow the child and replace him if required.”

Yiler looked at her incredulously. “Do you mean like an insurance baby? That only works if the second baby is born at the same time as the first one, but that’s impossible. The chosen mother cannot have twins. It’s not in the Old Testament.”

“Yiler, that is, once again, stunningly obvious. There is another way though. I can easily fertilise a second egg at the time of the child’s conception and bring it back to the ship. The children will be fraternal twins and not identical twins.”

“But for what purpose? What are you going to do with it then?” Yiler’s eyes widened. “Are you going to be a surrogate mother? Have you asked Sidion to do it?”

“Both are options but somewhat of an imposition on our personal lives. I have another alternative in mind. During my last few months in Biotech Inc, I designed a prototype artificial womb. I called it a uterine replicator. From the array of equipment and parts that I have brought on board, financed by General Lateel’s generosity, I can build one.”

“A *uterine replicator!* If that is a proven concept, surely Biotech Inc would have commercialised it? Does it really work?”

Nowlett glared at Yiler. “Of course, it does. I wouldn’t release anything unless it was proven.”

“Do Biotech Inc think that it won’t attract customers?”

“Let me think about that one. The agony of expanding a gap, normally two centimetres in diameter, to squeeze out a three to four kilogramme baby, versus a machine doing all the painful work for you. That’s a hard one. Of course, it will be a sought-after service. The issue is cost. It will be very expensive to set up and run a uterine replicator clinic, so only the rich would be able to afford it. Biotech Inc are already being accused of making products only accessible to those with premium level healthcare plans. That is why they are unsure of what to do with it.”

“So, we have the technology to do it, but have you thought about the practicalities of raising a child? Presumably, the child will be held in a nursery on the ship after being born.”

Nowlett rolled her eyes. “Let’s consider chapter three of the parenting skills book “How Not to Raise a Disturbed Child”. This states that raising a child in an environment with no family structure and no contact with children of its own age is a sure-fire way of ending up with a catastrophically neurotic child. Yiler, come on. Think!”

“You want us two to raise the child? As if it were our own?”

“So close.”

“You want *us* to adopt the child.”

“Exactly. I knew that you would get there in the end.”

“Why do you keep springing things like this on me? It would have been much better to gradually introduce the idea to me.”

“Well, you can hardly talk. You didn’t give me any warning when you made me do that introductory speech.”

“I don’t think making you do an introductory speech is comparable to me being asked to adopt the twin brother of the infant son of a god!” Yiler exhaled slowly. “What else is there to consider?”

“We will have to bring the child home with us to Deusi Prime to allow him to go to school there. This will be facilitated by the hiatus in the plan from when the child is born until he reaches twelve or thirteen, and we insert his implant. There will be a further hiatus until we decide the time is right to go to the final phase. One or both of us will be back on Deusi Prime for long periods, and when we aren’t, he can spend time with us on the ship. He will have to spend time on the ship anyway to shadow what his brother is doing on Earth.”

“It won’t be easy for him to blend in on Deusi Prime.”

“We can just say that he has a mild genetic disorder. That will adequately explain the physical differences.”

“To the adults yes, but to his classmates no. He will have a difficult time in school. Adopting a child is a big step, but we will be adopting a child with a predetermined destiny. What happens when he finds out that he is part of an experiment? He is unlikely to be happy about it. What about our emotional attachment to the child? I need to think about this.”

“That’s reasonable. However, I think if you are as fully committed to the task as I am, you know it is the right thing to do.”

Yiler resigned himself to succumbing to the will of Nowlett. “Okay, you win. Anything else?”

“Oh yes, one thing. We will need to cohabit to raise the child properly.”

Yiler sat up. “Cohabiting?”

“Of course, unless you don’t want to.”

“Oh, I want to. I really want to.”

“Excellent, that’s all settled then.”

“Should we start when the child is born?”

Nowlett looked quizzically at Yiler. “Well, we could, but I was getting the clear impression from you that you wanted to move our relationship on. Did I pick you up wrong?”

“No, it’s just that I never knew that you were thinking this way. I didn’t want to appear pushy.”

“I have decided that we should cohabit now, so no further discussion required. Will you help me move some of my things from my cabin? I will keep my cabin for when I need peace and quiet for research projects.”

Yiler stood up. “It would be my pleasure. Shall we go now?”

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The team members were seated around the table in the conference room, all expectantly waiting for the results of their work. Nowlett handed a pile of manuscripts to Hyet, who was the closet person to her, and asked him to pass them around. The title on the first page was “Deity Creation – Blueprint.” Yiler waited until everyone had a manuscript and started talking.

“Thank you for the papers you submitted. These were exactly what we wanted. The difficult part was selecting the best suggestions from all the proposals, but we have now done that. The teams that contributed most to the plan were Team 1, Sidion and Hyet, and Team 2, Hennegy and Denned, but all of you had great ideas. You deserve a lot of credit.”

“Unfortunately, there are no prizes,” said Dr Nowlett, which incited a laugh from the table.

Hyet leaned towards Nowlett. “Very funny,” he said in a low voice.

Nowlett looked bemused. “Oh, thank you Hyet. I appreciate that, but I was only stating a fact. We don’t have prizes.”

Yiler tapped the table loudly. “The key to the plan is adhering to the steps set out by Moses in the Old Testament. By doing this, we will prove that God has had his son, the Messiah, born on Earth exactly as he had planned. The challenge now is deciding how to implement each of those steps.

“Putting meat on the bones, so to speak,” said Nowlett. “Speaking of bones, the fact that you all are stronger, taller and larger than the humans with much less body hair will make it difficult to blend in when you go down to Earth in stage one of the plan. You will all need plastic surgery to make your facial features more human. I can assure you that it is reversible. There is also the possibility of leg shortening surgery. An extracted bone can be frozen and stored safely for years before being reinserted. There are two solutions to the lack of body hair. You can apply a follicle stimulating cream, but it must be applied daily. The other possibility is semi-permanent implants. You need to schedule appointments with me so we can agree specific treatments.”

Yiler saw some horrified looks. “Hyet and Sidion, as our technology and communications team, along with me, will primarily be based on the ship, so we are exempt from these procedures unless and until we have to spend an extended period on Earth.” Hyet and Sidion exhaled in relief.

“So, no drop pods?” said Hyet clenching his fists.

“Correct, unless and until you have to go to Earth.”

“I must work on the drop pod issue,” said Nowlett.

Yiler tapped the table gently. “The rest of you will be based on Earth, so the alterations must be done before you go down, apart from the leg surgery which is optional.” The rest of the team looked slightly less uncomfortable after the threat of major surgery had been removed. “Now, can you all please turn to paragraph one on page four, headed ‘Stage 1 – The Virgin Birth’.”

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The president’s aide heard the raised voices as he walked down the main corridor of the private area of the residence of the Deusi President, pushing the refreshment trolley. He didn’t remember President Flanstid ever sounding as angry as this. She never lost her temper, well, hardly ever. Normally, he would enter the president’s office without seeking permission, but this time he knocked loudly at the door. The room went silent, and President Flanstid told him that he could enter. He pushed the trolley into the room and closed the door behind him. He didn’t say anything as he served, carefully avoiding eye contact. He did notice that the president was seated at her work desk, leaving General Lateel in an uncomfortable position facing her. The back of the desk was solid wood and immovable, so General Lateel was leaning forward awkwardly. The president could have chosen to use the large meeting table with six chairs near the window. Neither President Flanstid nor General Lateel said a single word while he was there.

President Flanstid started speaking as soon as the aide had left. “Well, give me your opinion of what happened yesterday, since I am clearly wrong.” She almost snarled the words.

“The advisory council voted to select one option from the alternatives presented,” said General Lateel calmly. “Our objective is to achieve a military stalemate with the Santu and agree an accommodation with the Federation that doesn’t require us ripping our society apart and adopting their civic economic model. The alternative is acceding to the economic preconditions. That would be unacceptable. Selecting the option of a strategic withdrawal back to Deusi Prime was the correct decision. I don’t know why you left the advisory council meeting with the impression that success was guaranteed. The general rule is that no plan ever survives contact with the enemy. In this case, even small deviations could cause the strategic withdrawal to fail. Everything, and I mean everything, must fall in our favour. That could happen, but there is a high probability that it won’t.”

“You didn’t make that clear when you spoke during the meeting,” said the president who was calming down a little.

“With all due respect, I did. You and the advisory council heard what you wanted to hear.”

“You and the military representatives were hiding the possible failure of the armed forces to secure a definitive victory over the Santu despite all the resources that will be given to them.”

“Again, with all due respect, the failure, if it happens, cannot be attributed solely to the military,” said General Lateel. “It was the failure of diplomatic efforts that caused most of our allies to move from being positive, to being neutral about us joining the Federation. Worse still, most of those who held a neutral position moved to the side of the Santu, allowing them to impose strict conditions. Our negotiating position is weak. Madam President, it is pointless discussing this further. The decision has been made, correctly in my view, and you can’t go back and change that. In the meantime, we should plan for the worst-case scenario, instead of just waiting for it to happen. Let me ask you a question. If our strategy fails, and we enter surrender discussions, what do you think the worst-case scenario will be?”

“Losing our colonies and being left only with Deusi Prime and D2, maybe D3,” said the president. “What do you think might happen?”

“I agree with you,” said General Lateel. “The Santu will permit us to spread into the Federation as second-class citizens. Our future population expansion will be in off-planet facilities in Federation space. We will not get new colonies. By dispersing us throughout the Federation in small numbers, the Santu will feel that they can control us. Our position will only ever change if the Santu become less influential in the Federation. The Santu losing their dominant position in the Federation will be a long time coming though, if it ever happens. I know for certain that none of us will be alive to see it.”

“You said that you have a proposal for dealing with a Santu victory and the aftermath. Since this meeting is off the record, I fear that your proposal will have no legal basis.”

“You know me too well. My proposal is that we will work against the Santu through a covert organisation separate from the military and the legislature, answerable only to the office of the president and the board of the SOE. It could be vital if, as I suspect, Santu intelligence already knows about the SOE.”

The president shook her head. “As I suspected, illegal. You are proposing to set it up under the control of the SOE, whose own constitutionality is debateable.”

General Lateel handed over a file to the president. “Legal or not, I have a list of people who are currently working in the organisation.”

“Working in it?” said the president in surprise. “I thought that we were considering a proposal?”

“We may spend thirty to forty years building towards one final, hopefully successful, battle. If we lose, then our ability to create this organisation after signing the treaty disappears. Scrutiny by the Santu will ensure that. So, I created it six months ago. It will be well established and fully functional even if the Santu win.”

“You should become president since you are now making the key decisions.” The president started reading the list. “You do realise that what you have done has broken so many laws that you could spend the rest of your life in prison.” General Lateel just smiled and nodded. “These names are all unfamiliar.”

“I assure you that these people have exceptional skills. I spent a year identifying them with the help of a couple of trusted SOE operatives.”

“What are they doing?”

“I think it is better that you have no knowledge of what the organisation is doing. At least then you can plausibly deny all knowledge of it. I guarantee that they will not have the resources to undertake any form of military action against the Santu.”

“What have you called this organisation?”

“They are just a section within the Department of Labour called ‘The Subdepartment for Administrative Affairs’.

“With a name like that, no one will ever want to see what they are up to.” General Lateel was relieved that the president’s humour had improved.

“I sourced space in the Department of Labour on two unused underground floors. They moved there a month ago. Everyone will be recorded as being Department of Labour employees with no mention of the SOE of course.”

“An ever-expanding Department of Labour. A place for the mundane, the dull, and now the covert too.” The president let out a brief snort in amusement. Shaking her head, she asked, “Anything useful produced so far?”

“Yes, Madam President. We already have one very promising project that the team has taken over from the SOE.”

“What is it?”

“The SOE discovered a planet fifteen hundred years ago with sentient life. We have called it Earth.”

“Fifteen hundred years ago. Impossible. I’ve never heard of it.”

“You wouldn’t have. It is only known within the SOE.”

“Are you seriously telling me that the SOE kept this a secret for fifteen hundred years?”

“There are matters that are best kept within the SOE, as opposed to being disclosed to the civilian administration.”

“Since when does the SOE make decisions like that without the knowledge of the civilian administration?”

“We did what we felt was right.”

“This is unbelievable. The SOE usurped the government by taking control of a newly discovered planet.”

“I wouldn’t quite put it like that.”

“I would. This is something that we need to come back to later. I mean that. I can’t let this slide. For the moment, let’s go back to this planet, Earth. What have we been doing with it for the last fifteen hundred years? Why disclose it now? What are we going to use it for?”

Lateel sighed. “In order to answer all of your questions, you will have to cancel your meetings for the morning.”

“Fine.” President Flanstid pressed her intercom. “Itelle, please cancel all my morning meetings. Rearrange them for later this week. Right, General Lateel, start talking.”

Lateel shifted in her seat uncomfortably. “Can we move to the meeting table?”

The president stared at her and said, “No.”

“The SOE has colonised five planets of which Earth is one. The board had come to the conclusion that the Federation were never going to allot planets to us, so we took unilateral action. The Deusi planets are close to being overpopulated, so something had to be done.”

The president went white in the face. “What? How do you manage that without the Federation finding out and blocking you?”

“That would take a long time to explain, so I will skip that for the moment. Four of the planets are modelled on Deusi Prime. Earth, however, is a different story. We are making Earth as divergent from us as possible through a range of experiments, some of which are completed, others are ongoing.”

“Why would you do that?”

“In the future, it may suit us to allow the Federation to discover Earth. We hope that the Federation will accept that it has evolved naturally. If they don’t, then the secondary benefit is that we will be able to gauge their reaction to what they believe is a Deusi colony. A reasonably positive reaction would allow us to consider commencing a staggered revelation of the other four colonised planets. If the response is negative, which could even entail the eradication of Earth, then we will know for certain that the existence of the other four colonies must be kept a secret.”

“You might be prepared to sacrifice Earth?”

“If necessary, yes. Anyway, the humans are not pure Deusi. They are a hybrid between Deusi DNA and the race that was discovered when we first found Earth.”

The president sighed. “I see now why I had to cancel the morning for you. Go on, how did you create a hybrid species?”

Chapter 3

Hennegy was currently sitting in the middle of a copse of trees near Nazareth in Galilee, sweating profusely. For the umpteenth time, he mentally cursed Yiler for banning unnecessary technology, which in Yiler’s opinion included temperature-controlled skinsuits.

It had been four weeks since the *Tesfa* arrived at Earth. The first week was spent confirming the location of all the places that Moses had referred to in his plan in the Old Testament. When that had been done, the next step was to identify suitable targets for selection. Consequently, Hennegy was monitoring a female called Mary of approximately fourteen years of age to assess her suitability for the experiment.

He felt a slight vibration as his implant indicated that another team member was contacting him. He accessed the implant and discovered that it was Denned.

“*Are you awake?*”

All the members of the Deity Creation Group had received military standard upgrades to their civilian implants, which had been inserted in their early teens. The upgrade allowed for communication to be made by internal vocalisation which took some getting used to. You had to be very careful to make sure you designated who you wanted to contact. Commander Yiler was less than amused when he heard some of the references to him by the team members. Dr Nowlett on the other hand, was pleasantly surprised.

The implants were much safer than using earpieces and verbal communication. These ran the risk of the team being observed talking to themselves, which would arise suspicion among the humans.

*“It’s the middle of the day. What do you want?”*

*“No need to get angry. You do sleep a lot. Anyway, I have news from Fawter and Konacht on the number one prospect.”*

*“Which is?”*

*“She’s no longer our number one.”*

*“Are they sure she has copulated?”*

*“Oh yeah. Fawter was watching her and a man’s heat signatures, and it was clear what was going one. That’s one month of Team 3’s time wasted.”*

*“Well, that makes Mary number one then.”*

He linked Fawter, Konacht, Uhet and Cannet to the conversation. *“Well, what do the rest of you think?”*

*“Mary is the best prospect by far,”* said Uhet.

*“We agree,”* said Fawter.

*“I will send an update to the people on the ship and let them make the final call,”* said Hennegy.

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“We need to make a decision,” said Yiler to Nowlett, Sidion and Hyet as they had lunch in the ship’s observation deck, watching Earth pass by underneath them. “Target number one is now Mary, daughter of Eli. She is fourteen years old.”

“Before you say anything else, I have to say again that I am not comfortable with her age,” said Sidion. “I am struggling to reconcile with it.”

“I have the same problem,” said Nowlett. “However, you have to view this in the context that the human life expectancy is only thirty-five years, and because of that, the custom is that girls marry young to ensure that they can raise their own children to maturity before they die. You cannot consider it in Deusi terms. Our average life expectancy is one hundred and fifty years.”

Yiler smiled grimly. “Dr Nowlett is correct in her analysis. Mary has been under close observation by Hennegy’s team for two months. They have assessed Mary as being reasonably intelligent, healthy and fertile. They have observed regular ovulation. She is a virgin, as far as we can tell. Mary is betrothed to Joseph, son of Jacob. Joseph is also assessed as being reasonably intelligent, circa twenty-two years old. No reason to speculate on his fertility because that isn’t crucial. They are betrothed and soon to be married. We don’t know if it is an arranged marriage, but even if it is, they do seem to have formed a real bond. Both are deeply religious. Both seem quite pliable, but that is a difficult one to make a call on.”

Nowlett was tapping her fingers on the table. “Don’t ignore the fact that Joseph believes that he is related to the famous King David and, if so, that fulfils another of Moses prophecies.”

Hyet groaned audibly. “Remind me who he was?”

“David, one of our early projects, was the first king to be based in Jerusalem. His reign is looked back on with great fondness. His reputation as a great fighter who slayed the giant Goliath is legendary. David became king about one thousand years ago because the lawlessness of the period created a popular desire to have a king to exert control. The benefit of a king with strong leadership outweighed the risk of the king exploiting the people's wealth and resources to promote and expand his own power. There was a prior king called Saul, Israel's first king, but he had to be removed due to continual disobedience. We appointed David as his successor, maintaining that this was done at God's direction. David was hugely successful, and his reign was one of peace and prosperity.”

Yiler frowned as a point occurred to him. “That is an accurate summary of what we discussed at another meeting, but we didn’t attach much value to it. Joseph is related to David, and Joseph is not going to be the father of the child.”

“I think that we discounted this prematurely. That nuance might well be overlooked in the future, with Joseph being his father legally.”

“You two are going off point again,” said Sidion. “We can’t second guess the team on Earth from up here in orbit. We have to go with their recommendation.”

“I agree,” said Hyet. “When is Mary’s next ovulation?”

Nowlett looked down at her notes. “Three weeks’ time.”

“Three weeks to set up the virgin birth,” said Hyet. “I think I should work with Dr Nowlett to get everything ready. You two work with the Earth based teams.” Hyet had decided to make a play for Nowlett at the first meeting of the Deity Creation Group. He was not particularly attracted to Nowlett physically, but she was the only available female on the ship. There was no way he would get involved with Sidion because they worked so closely together. He had reckoned that he had the edge on Yiler, so it was worth a try. He wasn’t happy when his chance to do so disappeared when the final plan included Nowlett and Yiler adopting the second child. He decided to extract a little revenge by attempting to get Yiler convinced that he was still interested in Nowlett.

“I think that it would be better if I worked with Dr Nowlett on this,” said Yiler immediately.

Sidion sighed. Males, she thought to herself. “I will liaise with the Earth-based teams. I think that the two of you are required to help Dr Nowlett.”

Nowlett smiled happily. “It’s great to have you both. We will have a great time working together.”

Hyet grinned broadly.

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Yiler and Hyet sat across from Dr Nowlett in the medical room. Hyet knew that Dr Nowlett enjoyed theorising on everything, so he decided to throw a difficult question at her to encourage her to talk. “The briefing document gives no guidance as to what the crew of the *Nubla* did when they reached Earth. Have you an opinion?” Nowlett smiled at Hyet, and he settled back for a long answer.

“What do you know about natural history and genetics?”

“I never worked on anything related to either area, so my knowledge is limited,” answered Hyet.

“I will keep it simple then.” Yiler sniggered but stopped when Hyet scowled at him. “The humans are an experiment in genetic engineering, specifically gene therapy, which commenced when the *Nubla* discovered Earth. The experiment probably commenced by default rather than design.”

“Why do you say that?” said Hyet.

“Earth was populated by a first stage sentient race when we found it. Our regulations at the time, like the existing Federation ones, were not to colonise such planets. Nevertheless, the crew of the *Nubla* decided to commence the experiment. Why remains unclear. How, is something that I intend to investigate during visits to Earth when time permits, and when my excursions are authorised by someone.” She frowned at Yiler. Hyet smirked this time.

Yiler decided that a question was the best way to deflect Nowlett away from the ongoing row over his order, blocking her exploratory trips. “Dr Nowlett, I am aware of the term gene therapy, but I don’t really know what it means.”

“Not part of the theology syllabus then,” said Hyet.

Dr Nowlett carried on oblivious to the tension between Hyet and Yiler. “Gene therapy is where the DNA sequence of a gene is altered by an insertion that changes the number of DNA bases in a gene by adding a piece of DNA. It is normally used to treat or prevent disease by replacing a mutated gene that causes disease with a healthy copy of the gene. However, it can also introduce completely new genes.

A gene that is inserted directly into a cell usually does not function. Instead, a carrier called a vector is genetically engineered to deliver the gene. Certain viruses are often used as vectors because they can deliver the new gene by infecting the cell. The viruses are modified, so they can’t cause disease in the general population. Some types of virus, such as retroviruses, integrate their genetic material, including the new gene, into a chromosome of the target cell. Other viruses, such as adenoviruses, introduce their DNA into the nucleus of the cell, but the DNA is not integrated into a chromosome.

The vector can be injected or given intravenously directly into a specific tissue in the body, where it is taken up by individual cells. Alternately, a sample of the patient’s cells can be removed and exposed to the vector in a laboratory setting. The cells containing the vector are then returned to the patient. If the process is successful, the new gene delivered by the vector will make a functioning protein. We make extensive use of the second method.

The assimilation of viral sequences into the host genome is a process referred to as endogenization. This occurs when viral DNA integrates into a chromosome of reproductive cells and is subsequently passed from parent to offspring. Retroviruses can generate such endogenous copies in vertebrates.” Nowlett laughed. “You are probably sorry that you asked the question. Now that you understand gene therapy, you will be able to understand how it was used to create humans.”

“It is hard to believe that we actually created a new race,” observed Hyet.

“It’s not exactly a new race,” stated Dr Nowlett. “You see…”

Yiler was confident that Nowlett had forgotten about being annoyed with him, so he decided to interrupt. “Dr Nowlett, I would love to hear more, but we should focus on the matter of the impregnation of Mary. How are you going to do it?”

“All I have to do is jump from the ship in a drop pod, meet with Hennegy, Denned, Fawter and Konacht, get to Nazareth, insert some nanobots, impregnate a human with Deusi sperm, collect some viable eggs and get back into the drop pod for extraction. Should be easy enough.”

“Easy?” said a surprised Hyet.

Dr Nowlett looked at him quizzically. “Of course. The risk created, due to me having no experience of any of this, can be eliminated through proper planning.”

“I can’t tell whether you are joking or not,” said Hyet.

Yiler laughed softly. “I can assure you that she isn’t. “Fail to plan, plan to fail” is one of her favourite mantras.”

Nowlett coughed and picked up a plastic cup and shook it in the air. The two males shifted uneasily in their chairs. “Which of you will provide the sperm? Now, before either of you say anything, I want to make two points. The first is that I am not going to have any hand… sorry, bad choice of words… any part in obtaining a sperm donation. The second is that it must be Deusi sperm. The second stage of the plan requires the insertion of an implant into the procreation. The chances of a successful implant are enhanced if the offspring has fifty percent Deusi DNA, so it cannot be a human sperm. So, who is it to be?” She sat back and folded her arms.

“As programme chief, I should do it,” said Yiler glumly.

“Good for you.” Dr Nowlett handed him a plastic cup. “Look at it this way. You are about to become the father of a God.”

“Marvellous,” responded Yiler. “Now?”

“Yes, but you can start after we leave. Hyet, don’t look so chuffed, you are not off the hook. I must test Yiler’s fertility. If it is not okay, then you will have to step in.”

“Does being out of shape affect fertility?” Hyet struggled to keep a straight face as Yiler’s face went red.

“Possibly, but he looks healthy enough. When I have a viable sample, I will isolate the Y chromosome sperms and freeze the sample. Then, I get to visit Earth.”

“You have no doubt that you will succeed,” said Hyet.

“None at all. My part is based on proven science. Denned and Hennegy must convince Mary that she has been impregnated by a God that never touched her. That is going to be far more challenging. One last question. I need constant data from Mary post impregnation, so will I have access to a permanent satellite link?”

“Yes,” said Yiler. “It’s a military grade satellite at low orbit. We can keep her under observation at all times.”

“Isn’t a low orbit satellite visible to the naked eye?”

“Not military grade,” said Yiler. “A civilian grade satellite would look like a bright star at that altitude, but the military grade has chameleon light deflecting plating.”

Sidion scratched her chin. “Dr Nowlett, how are you going to carry out the procedure on Mary?”

“Keyhole surgery, with an incision at her navel. The incision will allow me to insert a micro camera and light, nanobots and Yiler’s sperm. The nanobots will spread out into the fallopian tubes to search for the egg, and I will see a soft red light when they find it. I will check the viability of the egg and if everything is in order, I will order the nanobots to surround the egg, leaving just a small opening. I will then release Yiler’s sperm and it should all happen naturally from there. This isn’t the simplest way to do this, but it is the least invasive from Mary’s perspective. Mary will notice the scab from the incision, but she will assume that it was an insect bite during the night.”

“Have you spoken to Hennegy yet about stepping into the role of the angel to break the news to Mary?” said Hyet. “He doesn’t strike me as someone comfortable with subterfuge.”

Yiler nodded. “Nowlett and I did. He wasn’t very happy about it even after I told him that his military background made him perfect for the role. He exudes confidence and authority, so he is the natural choice. He argued that his acting as the angel would compromise his future interaction with the family. He was worried that they might recognise him.”

“I dissuaded him of that,” said Nowlett. “Firstly, Mary will barely be conscious, having just come out of sedation and secondly, the angel outfit that he will be wearing will disguise his features.”

“Does it do that?” asked Hyett.

“Not yet,” said Nowlett. “I will have that resolved before I bring it down with me in the drop pod.”

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Hennegy and Denned stood close together with their faces turned towards the sky. “There it is,” said Denned, pointing towards what looked like a shooting star. “I wonder how Dr Nowlett is feeling.”

Denned thought back to the first time he had used a drop pod. He had been deployed to D9 when the colonists had rebelled against a federal tax to cover central government costs on Deusi Prime. Neither the practice nor the simulations had come close to the real thing. He had vomited almost from start to finish despite the anti-nausea injection. He had thought that towards the end of the drop, he had nothing left in his stomach. He had been wrong. When the parachute had deployed at the minimum height of five hundred metres from the ground, he had felt his stomach heading towards his mouth, and he had managed to throw up again. When the thrusters had kicked in two hundred and fifty metres from ground, the same had occurred. He was never as glad again to breath in fresh air as when the door on the pod opened. Seasoned soldiers had jumped out from other pods and moved to cover. His squad, all novices, had crawled dejectedly out of theirs. Some had even forgotten their armaments and had to go back for them. It had taken thirty minutes for the squad to function as a collective again, at which point they had been informed by their sergeant that they would have all been dead if some of the angry colonists had turned up unexpectantly. He had done ten jumps since then and had thrown up every time but was now able to walk out of the pod in a functional state. “This is her first drop after minimum practice and simulation. I expect that we will be carrying her out.”

The drop pod parachute deployed, and the thrusters kicked in to slow the descent. Denned turned to Hennegy. “They could have set the parachute to deploy at a higher altitude. That was unnecessary. It’s not as if she is landing in a hot zone. If a few Roman soldiers turned up to investigate, I think that we could handle them.”

The drop pod landed gently, and the door opened. They walked over to extract the unfortunate Dr Nowlett. They were more than a little surprised when Dr Nowlett walked out without any help from either of them. She flicked the catch on her helmet, took it off and took a deep breath of air. She then roared, “I’m on Earth!” at the top of her voice. “Denned and Hennegy, it’s a pleasure to see your happy faces. This place smells very strange, but I suppose I will get used to it. I have two medicinal bags in the drop pod. Don’t damage them. Where’s the transport?”

Denned and Hennegy were speechless and stood motionless. “Don’t just stand there gaping. Go on and get them. Mary’s ovulating and her egg is not going to hang around forever in her fallopian tube, you know.”

“Yes, doctor,” was all Hennegy could manage. They retrieved a bag each from the drop pod. “How did you find the trip down?”

“Absolute blast.” Dr Nowlett remained eerily cheerful. “Better than the fastest entertainment park rides and beats a shuttle any day. I loved it. I better do this a lot more during this mission. What are those again?” she asked, pointing at the three animals tied to a tree. Her enthusiasm was beginning to unnerve Hennegy and Denned.

“The locals call them camels,” replied Denned. “They might account for the smell you mentioned. We will be using them to get into Nazareth. Not as fast as a gravcar but less likely to be spotted than a chunk of metal travelling at one hundred kilometres per hour.”

“Brilliant… absolutely brilliant… a ride on a native animal.”

  “The camels look slow, but we will make it in an hour or so. The egg will still be there, won’t it?”

“Oh, definitely. It doesn’t move that quickly,” Nowlett said while moving to inspect the animal.

Denned caught Hennegy’s eye who nodded before he spoke. “Excuse me, Dr Nowlett, but what did you take before you got into the drop pod?”

“I don’t suffer from travel sickness, but I took an anti-nausea concoction that I developed in the lab just in case. It did the trick, but a side effect seems to be a touch of over enthusiasm. Might have overdone the stimulants a little.”

“You should give General Lateel the formula of whatever you took,” said Hennegy. “She will be very interested.”

“Yes, I’ll tell her next time I see her, but I will reduce the number of amphetamines. Why are looking at me like that? Do these animals have any peculiar habits I should know about before I get on?” Dr Nowlett eyed Denned and Hennegy suspiciously.

“They do tend to spit at their riders… and make a lot of noise,” said Denned.

“I’ll take the last camel then; they probably can’t spit backwards. I don’t want camel saliva in my face. Come on, help me up.”

Denned and Hennegy handed Dr Nowlett some native clothes which she placed over her skin suit. Hennegy noted that Yiler had allowed Nowlett to wear a skinsuit unlike the rest of the Earth-based team. They hoisted Dr Nowlett onto her camel and mounted their own. Denned and Hennegy soon discovered that Dr Nowlett's enthusiasm was not dissipating. She asked a never-ending stream of questions about everything she saw and expected Denned and Hennegy to know the answers. By the time Nazareth came into view, the males were mentally exhausted.

“Nazareth, I presume,” said Nowlett. “Wow, I can smell it from here. How are we to get to Mary’s house without being discovered? Will we have night suits and goggles?”

“Not necessary,” said Denned. “We are only securing one house, so it’s not a combat zone. We have a tent at the edge of the village where we can get ready and move in on foot from there. It’s nearly midnight, so we are unlikely to meet anyone, but just in case, Fawter and Konacht are already in Nazareth and Uhet and Cannet will be coming with us. They have neural stunners to deal with anyone they might meet. Hopefully, there won’t be anyone waking up in the middle of the street tomorrow morning wondering what happened to them. You will be the only one wearing a skin suit under your clothes, but keep it powered down. You will create havoc if it senses a threat and takes off on its own.”

Nowlett opened one of the equipment bags and took out a package and handed it to Hennegy. “Here is your angel suit.” She could see by the expression on his face that he wasn’t happy. “I promise you that the lighting effect that I have installed will disguise your facial features adequately, so your future role in the experiment will not be compromised.”

Hennegy smiled weakly. “Great, thanks for that. I’ll check on the progress in Nazareth.”

*“Fawter and Konacht, is Mary’s house ready?”*

*“All the family are sedated,”* replied Fawter.

*“Okay, copy that. ETA ten minutes.”*

*“That quickly?”*

*“Dr Nowlett did not need to clean up first.”*

*“You can’t be serious.”*

*“Yes, I’m serious. See you in a few minutes.”*

Denned faced Dr Nowlett. “We have the house secured with Mary and her family sedated”.

They arrived at the tent on the outskirts of Nazareth and secured their animals to a nearby palm tree. Denned brought the camels food and water while Hennegy brought Dr Nowlett into the tent. The tent was a mess. Sleeping mats and blankets were strewn everywhere. Nowlett held her nose. “Do you people ever wash?”

Hennegy started laughing. “How can we when nobody else does? Us smelling well would be a giveaway. Do you need both of your bags for the operation?”

“Yes. I have doubles of everything. I know that it weighs a lot, but I couldn’t run the risk of a crucial instrument not functioning. I only want to have to do this once. I have Yiler and his arm to think of.”

With that unpleasant image in their minds, Denned and Hennegy each picked up a bag and headed out of the tent with Dr Nowlett.

“It is only a few minutes,” said Denned.

They walked slowly and silently to Mary’s house with any conversation taking place through their implants. Fawter and Konacht were standing beside the covering that acted as a door for the house. Dr Nowlett entered and moved through the kitchen with the other two following.

“Where are the parents?” asked Dr Nowlett. “I want to check on them.” Denned pointed towards an internal door with no covering. Dr Nowlett walked in and turned on her small headlamp. She scanned the two of them and then administered some more sedative. “That should keep them sedated for another two hours.” She pointed to another door. “I presume that Mary is in there.”

“Yes,” said Denned.

Dr Nowlett walked in and scanned Mary. “I am going to inject some more sedative. Slightly less for Mary because we will need to wake her up before the rest. Put the bags beside Mary, and I will set up.” Denned and Hennegy placed the bags carefully beside Mary’s bed and then moved to stand at the door.

“I would like to preserve Mary’s dignity as much as I can, so you two can go,” said Dr Nowlett. Denned and Hennegy shuffled through the door and stood outside with Fawter and Konacht patrolling the street. Dr Nowlett set up two portable lights over Mary’s bed, attached goggles to the camera and carried out the procedure exactly as explained to Sidion earlier. With the goggles pulled over her eyes, she watched as the released sperm swarmed around the egg. She thought that it looked like a pack of Deusi males fighting during one of the numerous ridiculous sports that they insisted on playing. After about thirty seconds, one sperm cell managed to adhere to and enter the thick protective shell-like layer surrounding the ovum. The sperm produced enzymes, which allowed it to burrow through the outer [jelly coat](https://mail.mazars.ie/owa/redir.aspx?C=w4dI-aUyUDusFxyGjmsxcxpHB5-1do5PWGr3V0SNIjZHf7GOKvjTCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fen.wikipedia.org%2fwiki%2fEgg_jelly) of the egg. The fertilization process continued as the sperm plasma fused with the egg's plasma membrane, and the sperm head disconnected from its body. The egg then polarized, repelling any additional sperm, which the nanobots helped to push away as well. She knew that the zygote was male because the egg had been fertilized by a sperm that carried a Y chromosome. She was tempted to use sperm with the X chromosome, why couldn’t God have a daughter after all? But she knew that they had to adhere exactly to Moses plan. She ordered the nanobots to form a protective screen as the zygote began its five-day journey down the fallopian tube.

With this stage complete, she moved on to the creation of the insurance baby. She had initially decided upon a clone, but because that technology was unproven, she eventually opted for a fraternal twin brother. Yiler had agreed with her despite the increased risk. A clone would be an exact copy, but a fraternal twin would create two brothers, with the possibility that their resemblance might not be sufficiently convincing to avoid suspicion if the second child had to be utilised.

She removed the plastic tubes with the empty vials. She took out a new tube and vial and navigated through the fallopian tube and arrived at the ovaries. She looked for a mature follicle about fifteen to twenty millimetres in diameter. When she found one, she carried out an egg aspiration procedure to retrieve some eggs. The fluid in the follicles was aspirated through the tube, and when the eggs detached from the follicle, they were sucked out of the ovary and into the vial. She sealed the vial and then placed it into a well-padded and insulated cold box to be brought back to the ship where she would fertilise the egg later.

She started withdrawing her equipment but stopped the camera when she reached the egg. It had only moved a small way down the fallopian tube which was normal. The ovum was no longer a single cell. It had divided several times to form a ball of cells; the cell division was proceeding within normal parameters. She ordered the nanobots to make sure that the ovum moved through the fallopian tube and safely embedded in the wall of the uterus. This wouldn’t happen for five or six days. The last thing she wanted to happen was an ectopic pregnancy. She extracted the camera, cleaned her equipment and carefully packed it away. She double-checked to make sure that every piece was accounted for. It would be a disaster if Mary found some Deusi technology in her bedroom.

“Denned and Hennegy, you can come in now.”

Denned was first in. “All went to plan?”

“Mary is pregnant. No doubt about it. The egg is viable and cell division is normal. The nanobots will help to get it embedded in a few days. All indications are that we should have a normal pregnancy.”

Hennegy had followed Denned. “So, I can go ahead with the big announcement then,” he said unenthusiastically.

“Absolutely. Let’s get the bags out, and then it’s over to you.” Dr Nowlett and Denned carried out the bags while the somewhat reluctant Hennegy prepared himself. He was not happy, but orders were orders. He put on the white luminous clothing and turned on the lighting effects, so that Mary would be able to see the outline of his face but not discern any features. Dr Nowlett walked back in and administered an injection to counter the sedative. She gave Hennegy a small square piece of material. “When you finish, make sure that you place your hands close to her face and squeeze this. It will provide enough sedative to knock her out again while we make our exit.” Mary began to stir, and Dr Nowlett left the room.

Mary moaned softly. “Ohh…”

“Mary do not be afraid. I am an angel of the lord bringing you happy tidings and wondrous news.”

Mary’s eyes opened wide and she sat up slowly. As her eyes accustomed to the light, she saw a tall figure in front of her surrounded by shimmering white light. “Is that you, Joseph? Are you crazy? My parents will kill you for being in my room.” She evidently hadn’t comprehended what Hennegy had said, so he tried again.

“I am an angel, Mary. The lord has chosen you for a wondrous task. He has decided to give his only son to you to nurture and raise until he reaches adulthood.”

“Where is this child?” Mary looked around the room. “Is he outside?”

“I am not making myself clear. You are to be the mother of this child.” Mary looked puzzled. “Tonight, the Lord has given you his child to carry.” Mary still looked puzzled. “You are with child.” Mary still wasn’t getting it. “You are pregnant.”

Mary put both hands to her cheeks and gasped. “How can that be? I am a virgin.”

“The Lord works in mysterious ways. I can assure you that you are with child as we speak. In nine months, you will be the mother of the son of God.”

“Why me? What have I done to deserve this?”

Hennegy was beginning to think that Mary was never going to be able to grasp what he was saying. “You were chosen to be the blessed one many years ago. Your kindness and devotion are like a shining light among all humans.”

“I meant, why am I being punished in this way? I was due to marry Joseph in a few months. How am I going to tell him that I was made with child by the hand of God? He won’t believe me. He might think that I am covering up that I have lain with another man and am having his baby. My life is ruined. What have you done to me?” Mary started to sob.

Hennegy was starting to sweat. “Mary do not be afraid. The Lord will help you with Joseph if required.” Mary cried for a few more minutes and then stopped and wiped her eyes.

“When can I tell Joseph about this?”

“You can tell him after five weeks have passed. You cannot tell anyone else that the child is not Joseph’s. You and Joseph must get married immediately. You must raise the child as your own and love and nurture him. In the future, when the time is right, the Lord will reveal the truth to his son and set him on his path to greatness.”

“What should we call the child?”

“Jesus is the name that you should give him.”

“We will do that then. Are you going to appear regularly?”

“I don’t think that you will see me again until the child is born, unless you really need me. Until then you must just trust in God. He will be watching over you constantly.”

Mary looked down at her stomach sadly. “I will do what God wants,” she said after a few moments. “What choice do I have?”

Hennegy moved towards Mary. He placed his hands on either side of Mary’s face. “Mary, you are very brave and courageous. Place your trust in God and remember, he is watching over you always.”

“I suppose I have no other option other than to trust you.” Mary closed her eyes and Hennegy laid her down carefully onto her bed. Hennegy covered her up and placed his hand on her forehead. Mary reached up and placed her hand gently over his. In a few moments she was asleep again, and Hennegy moved her hand to her stomach.

Hennegy walked out of the house and picked up one of the bags that had been left outside. He walked back to their tent without saying a word to Dr Nowlett or Denned. He didn’t speak on the way back to the drop pod either. Even Dr Nowlett gave up on trying to get him to speak and concentrated on Denned, who did his best to keep Dr Nowlett entertained. When they reached the landing site, they carefully loaded Dr Nowlett and her gear into the drop pod and shut the door. Even when they exchanged goodbyes, Hennegy didn’t say a lot. He barely thanked Dr Nowlett when, after she had dosed herself, she gave him her extra anti-nausea supply just in case.

“What’s up with you?” asked Denned as they watched the drop pod shoot into the sky.

“Mary, that’s what. It’s easy to plan to do this on paper, but when faced with another sentient being, who you are cajoling to your will for the purpose of a societal engineering experiment, it isn’t so easy. Especially when Mary is just a kid. A nice one at that. We have just impregnated her against her will. Yiler and Nowlett are blinded by achieving what they were tasked to do. They are not thinking about the ethical and moral issues of what we have done. I am though.”

Denned didn’t know how to respond. “I hadn’t thought about it until now, but you have a valid point.”

“Perhaps I don’t care as much as they do about creating a deity. If the experiment fails, we will go home and both of us would be assigned a new task without any further comment. Yiler and Nowlett have their professional pride to think about if they went back. Maybe that is the difference between them and us.”

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Yiler was waiting expectantly beside the docking bay for the drop pod to finish the post landing check. He watched as the light of Dr Nowlett’s pod moved from red to green. The door opened with a swish, and Dr Nowlett walked out clutching her two medical bags. Yiler took one from her.

“Congratulations,” said Yiler. “An outstanding job.”

“Thank you, but it's only half done.” They walked the short distance to Nowlett’s lab in silence. Yiler could tell that Dr Nowlett was deep in thought, so he left her alone. When they arrived at the lab, Dr Nowlett opened one of the medical bags and took out the metal case containing the harvested eggs.

Yiler placed his hand on Nowlett’s to prevent her opening the case. “Are you absolutely certain that you want to do this?”

“Yes. We have discussed this at length. It is necessary to have a backup plan if anything happens to Jesus.”

“I didn’t mean that. As far as anyone is concerned, we will be the parents, so it will be our job to look after him. I am the biological father, so I have a moral obligation to do that. You don’t.”

“I know what I am getting into. It will be difficult, but I haven’t yet shirked a challenge, and I am not going to start now. We will be fine.”

Yiler took his hand away. “Then please proceed.”

Dr Nowlett opened the metal case, extracted an egg and placed it under a microscope. When she was happy that the egg was perfect, she took another vial of Yiler’s sperm from the fridge and commenced to fertilize the egg.

After a few minutes, she looked up at Yiler. “Your sperms are very active. Happy to tell you that we have another successful fertilization.”

Yiler grinned broadly. “So, Hyet’s input won’t be needed then. I will make sure to tell him personally.”

Nowlett looked at him quizzically. “I was going to do that myself, but you go ahead.” Yiler bounded out of the room to find Hyet.

Nowlett picked up the dish with the fertilized egg and went over to the door to a small room adjoining the lab. The uterine replicator was humming quietly, and the artificial amniotic fluid bubbled gently. She opened the seal on the side and implanted the egg into the wall of the replicator. “No going back now. The day Jesus is born, we will become parents too.”

Hyet feigned excitement when Yiler gleefully informed him of his proven fertility. After that, Hyet decided that he had better desist his attempts to wind up Yiler because he never wanted a conversation like that ever again.

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Mary was sitting beside the River Arnon with Joseph. They had walked to their favourite spot, as they did most evenings, to sit and talk. It was under a large tree, about five meters from the riverbank. The tree was very old with a wide canopy, giving shade during most of the day, hence its popularity. Denned and Hennegy were observing from a camouflaged hide that had been set up previously.

“Is it really necessary to have a plasma rifle aimed at Joseph’s head?” said Denned.

“Considering five weeks have passed since the night of the impregnation, I think Mary is about to break the news, and I am concerned about how Joseph might react. We have both witnessed males assaulting females for perceived slights to their male pride. I hope that we do not have to intervene, but there is no way that I am going to permit Joseph to rough Mary up. Before you ask, the rifle is set at stun, so he should live.”

“Joseph would be the first human to be hit with a plasma rifle, so let’s hope you are right. Yiler would be furious if he knew you had the plasma rifle with you.”

“I couldn’t care less.”

They lapsed into silence as Mary and Joseph sat down. As soon as they did, Joseph asked her what was wrong. Joseph had noticed that Mary had not been her usual happy and carefree self for the last few weeks.

“Everything is wrong,” said Mary. She started crying.

Joseph took her hands into his. “Mary, please tell me, so I can help.”

“Joseph, I am with child.”

Joseph dropped Mary’s hands. “*What!* Mary, how could you have lain with another man. We are betrothed. Who was it? I have seen the way the son of the wine merchant looks at you. Was it him? I will bloody kill him.”

“Joseph, please calm down and listen. What I am about to tell is going to be difficult for you to believe. Firstly, I am still a virgin. You must believe me.”

“Mary, how can you possibly be with child and still be a virgin? Talk sense. Have you been drinking wine or something? That might explain the nonsense coming out of you.”

“It is not nonsense. A few weeks ago, I was visited by an angel of the Lord. He told me that I was with child, and the child was the only son of the Lord. He told me we must raise the child as our own. You must come with me and tell my parents that the child is yours and we are to be married immediately.”

“Mary, I don’t know which is worse, being with child or covering it up by using our Lord’s name in vain with this ridiculous story?”

“It is not a ridiculous story. It happened. The angel was standing at the end of my bed in shimmering white clothes. He told me that God sent him.”

“Mary, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Please, say no more. I cannot meet with your parents today because I am too angry. I will come to your house in the morning at first light to break the news to them. Your poor parents. The shame you will bring onto their house.” Joseph stood up. “I will walk you back to your parents’ house, so they do not get suspicious. Speak nothing to them of this son of God foolishness until tomorrow morning. It is madness. Hopefully in the morning, you will be willing to tell them the truth of how you have become pregnant.”

Hennegy looked at Denned and shook his head. “Joseph is clearly not as pliable as we hoped. Damn it, another night for me as an angel. I had hoped that my first time would be my last.”

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Joseph woke up with a start. He tried to get out of bed but couldn’t get his limbs to work, so he lay there looking at the tall white figure at the end of his bed.

“Joseph be not afraid. I am an angel of the Lord.”

“I had a suspicion that you were going to say that. What do you want?”

“The Lord has asked me to assure you that what Mary said to you today is true.”

“How do you know what passed between us?”

“God is close to her at all times. She is, after all, carrying the son of God. Please do not be angry with her or cast her out. The Lord wants you to marry her and raise his son as if he were your own. Only you and Mary can know the truth. Your reward will be that your name will be revered by all men in the future, and your place in heaven is assured. Will you do this for the Lord?”

“I don’t care about any of that. My only concern is Mary. What choice do I have if I want to stay with her?”

“You can do as you want. This is your decision. However, whatever path you choose, you must remain fully committed to it.”

Joseph didn’t say anything for a few minutes. “I will do it. However, the only reason I am doing this, is because I love Mary and want to be with her. She is innocent in all of this, and I am not going to cause her any more suffering. You have inflicted enough of that already.”

“Thank you, Joseph.” Hennegy placed his hands on Joseph’s head. “Now, go back to sleep, and when you wake up, go to Mary straight away. She is in great pain after your conversation earlier.”

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Mary was lying in her bed. She had slept very little and her eyes were red from crying. She was dreading telling her parents that she was with child and no longer betrothed to Joseph. She could not tell them that God was the father of her child. She had promised not to. Her father might even throw her out of the house. When the first light of dawn crept slowly into her room, she resigned herself to her fate. She dressed quietly and sat at the end of her bed. When she heard voices from the kitchen, she realized that it was Ruth and Eli welcoming Joseph, so she got up, sighed deeply and left her room. As soon as she entered the kitchen, Joseph walked over and placed his arm around Mary. He edged her over to the bench in the kitchen and they sat down together.

“Joseph, please don’t,” she whispered in his ear. He squeezed her shoulder.

“Eli and Ruth, please sit down. We have something to tell you.” He waited until they sat down before continuing. Both looked at him, Eli suspiciously and Ruth anxiously. “Mary is with child. We are to be married immediately.” Everyone gasped with surprise at Josephs’ news. Eli looked furious. Ruth started to sob. Mary however looked relieved and started to cry in unison with her mother.

“Mary, I am very disappointed in you,” said Eli. He then pointed at Joseph. “You on the other hand, I want to kill. How could you take advantage of our daughter before you are married? You are a mature man who should have known better. Mary is not much more than a child.”

“Eli, I am sorry. We were sitting by the river in our usual spot and we lost control. Well, I lost control. I couldn’t stop. It is shameful, I know. Mary is blameless. I instigated it. It is entirely my fault.”

“Eli, at least they were betrothed, and they are getting married,” said Ruth.

“Damn right, they are,” said Eli fiercely. “The whole of Nazareth will know why they are getting married though because of the rush.”

“So what?” said Ruth. “It will be news for a day or two, and then the villagers will move onto gossip about something else.” Ruth ushered the young couple out of the kitchen. “You two go out for a walk now. I need to talk to Eli about the arrangements which should calm him down. You know how he is about money.” Joseph took Mary by the hand as they left the house. They walked down the street and exchanged good mornings with the early risers. When they reached the outskirts of the village, they stopped.

“I love you, Joseph.”

“I love you too.”

“Why did you change your mind?”

“Very hard to resist when an angel is standing at the end of your bed.”

“You got a visit too.”

“Oh, I did.” Joseph put his arms around Mary and kissed her.

Hennegy put down his binoculars and looked at Denned. “All back on track, it seems. That’s another human being that I have duped.”

“Hennegy, I think you just have to accept this as part of the job. I understand your qualms, but you have to move on.”

Hennegy started disassembling the plasma rifle. “I’ll try.”