



## CHAPTER I THE FIRST SARNIFIKANS

EARTH—1871

**A** bright, flying object suddenly streaked across the sky, moving faster than anything Josiah had ever seen. Flying? That wasn't possible. *I must have seen a meteor*, Josiah said to himself. Startled by the bright flash, Josiah half stood in his boat, rocking it severely. It wasn't until now that he noticed the water rolling over his hull. He willed himself to sit and think rationally. *A meteor. Yes, that's what it was.* But with his heart still pounding and his mind still reeling from what he had seen, Josiah Wilson quieted his boat and realized the object was still in front of him. The bright flash was now a glowing orb, hovering over the Cedar Key shallows on the west coast of Florida. Mesmerized, Josiah watched the orb as it hung motionless in the sky above him. His quiet night of fishing ended without warning. In stunned silence he watched—a minute, then five, then ten minutes. It seemed an eternity. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, Josiah saw another flash. The orb flew straight up, as if shot from a gun, and disappeared. Josiah calmed himself and stared in disbelief at his familiar sky. His quiet night was no longer quiet. But boy, did he have a fishing story to tell.

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Fifteen hundred miles north in Chicago, that same night, Lee Henry was half-passed out in someone's backyard. He guessed he'd been kicked out of a bar. Whether it was because the bar closed or he was too drunk, he couldn't remember. Waking up groggy, he looked around. As best he could tell he had made it somewhere near home. He thought he recognized some cottages and was sure that was the O'Leary's barn up ahead. He could even hear the cows lowing. He laid back and fixed to pass out again. When someone found him in the morning, they'd roll him over and tell him to get on home.

Oh Lord! He couldn't stand the thought of that. When Mrs. Henry got a hold of him for drinking up a week's wages, there'd be hell to pay. *Might as well stay put*, he thought. The way he felt, his legs probably couldn't hold him anyway.

Lying back on the dry, brittle grass, Lee stared at the sky. There hadn't been any rain for weeks, and once again the sky was clear. He figured he could see every star up in the heavens.

One of those stars moved. *A falling star*, Lee thought to himself. Well, maybe. The way his eyes were swimming he couldn't be sure what was moving. He closed his eyes anyway to make a wish. *I wish I wasn't so drunk.* He opened his eyes again. That star was still falling. He didn't know what it was now, but he knew it was coming right at him. And he knew he'd better sober up quick.

Lee forced his wobbly legs to get up underneath him. He managed to stumble past a few more cottages before looking back. The star, or whatever it was, wasn't coming at him, but it was about to crash into the O'Leary's barn. A few seconds later that fiery object did hit the barn, which erupted in flames.

When Lee Henry faced his wife the next day, she said nothing about his wages. She didn't say anything at all for a very long time. There was nothing to say. The fire had destroyed their home. Worse yet, it had destroyed most of the city. The papers were already blaming the O'Leary's cow for knocking over a lantern and starting the blaze.

Lee just kept his mouth shut about what he saw. He'd already been hired on a construction crew rebuilding the city, making enough to drink and keep his missus happy. Plus, the shock of surviving the fire had silenced his wife for the first time in their marriage. The way he figured it, that falling ball of flame had done him a favor. Besides, who'd believe an old drunk like him anyway? But that's not to say he wouldn't think of telling that story for the rest of his life from a barstool or two after he'd had a few.

## MIAMI—PRESENT DAY

Deke knew he needed a break. He breathed in deeply and slowly exhaled the tension he held within his body, trying to enjoy the warm Miami evening. He tried to refresh his mind and body by looking at the pleasant sights around him, and enjoying the calm of the night. He was never completely successful. Today at least there was activity in the bay, a welcome distraction.

It was Saturday, turnaround day for most of the week-long cruises. Sitting on the patio of his penthouse apartment atop Miami's old CenTrust Building, Deke could see the luxury cruise ships already in port. From his perch, the ships looked like horizontal hotels resting on top of the water. If he had wanted, he could have pulled out his automatic focus binoculars, equipped with LIDAR, and watched the passengers, one by one, as they walked down the gangplanks. But he didn't bother. The view was a familiar one for Deke and he had seen this play out many times before. As these vacationers disembarked, more were readying to take their place, making their way through the three-story glass processing centers where their passports and boarding passes would be verified. Porters took their baggage and deposited it outside each passenger's cabin. At other openings in the side of the ship, tons of food and other supplies were being loaded quickly so the ship might leave on schedule. When the cruise got underway later that day, all the passengers would be on deck, waving at friends and family ashore, listening to music broadcast throughout the ship, and toasting their farewells as the ship eased its way out Government Cut for the Atlantic Ocean. Each week was the same. Ships in, ships out; people on, people off. It was a merry business. Every detail planned out; everyone's happiness ensured.

*Clueless*, thought Deke. They are happy because they don't know. But he knew. He knew what was being plotted half a world away as these people embarked on their vacations and drank their toasts. Ten years ago, Deke intercepted a recording emanating from somewhere in the Middle East. The voice was unmistakable. Not knowing what the man looked like now, he still knew it was Ali Khan. His old nemesis. Ali Khan tried to kill him once, and now he had traveled half way around the universe through six galaxies for a second chance.

*This time, Deke thought, I will be prepared.*

Deke had spent the past forty-eight hours in communication with his contacts around the world, gathering data on the rising threat of the nefarious Ali Khan. Changing out of his host's clothing he found so binding, Deke opted instead for his Sarnifikan jumpsuit. Made of Sarafeen, a thin and yet extremely strong material, consisting of twenty-five layers of Teflon, glass fiber, and Kapton, the clothing allowed for comfort and protection. It was bacteria resistant, odor eating, moisture absorbing, and capable of withstanding temperatures of -400 degrees to +500 degrees Fahrenheit. His chukka boots were of similar design. In a matter of minutes one could be readied for space travel with the additions of Sarafeen gloves and a helmet. Deke doubted he'd be going anywhere tonight, but then he'd been wrong before.

Deke was of medium build and average height for a Sarnifikan male, at five foot eight inches. What set him apart from his host, other than the vertical crease in each ear lobe, was that he was over 400 years old, with an olive complexion and nondescript facial features resultant of a mixing of races on Sarnificus for over five thousand years.

Sarnifikan male jumpsuits came in several metallic colors, such as light grey, blue, and green, but could quickly be converted to formal dress by adding a French-cuffed white shirt with a mandarin collar, bowtie, or jewel affixed at the collar, and a black cummerbund. For a moment he visualized Sarnifikan women. Their jumpsuits were identical with the males for everyday wear, but became formal by adding a sheer top, white and black pearl choker and bracelet, matching black-and-white checkered belt, and high heels to replace their slim chukka boots. Jema looked so gorgeous when they attended formal government affairs, concerts, and other social events.

Deke's emotions still reeled at the thought of what really happened on Sarnificus. *Sarnificus*. Just saying it made him homesick. Sarnificus was the planet of his birth. The planet of his ancestors. The planet of his family. But no more. The planet, its history, even his family were all gone. Ali Khan made sure of that.

Returning his thoughts to Earth, Deke took another look at the bay. A huge orange August moon was beginning its ascent over the Atlantic Ocean and Biscayne Bay. The ships had sailed out of sight, and Deke gazed beyond where they had been.

From here he could see everything. Shaq's mansion on Star Island and Oprah's condo on Fisher Island, and even Al Capone's former winter home on Palm Island, where Deke knew of a well-concealed dock under the pool where people, bodies, and illegal booze were brought in and out by boat without being seen. Beyond lay South Beach on Miami Beach, where the wannabes rubbed shoulders with the rich and famous at night in the clubs and restaurants. Deke was momentarily

mesmerized by the myriad of iridescent neon lights that graced the buildings of Miami and Miami Beach. So many people. So much activity. All going on without him.

Deke was alone. He wandered back into his penthouse to make himself a Stoli vodka tonic. His fridge held fruit and juices, but also Diet Cokes and eighty-five percent cocoa dark chocolate bars—habits he had acquired as an Earthling. Two frozen glass tankards from a past Marine Corps Birthday Ball also resided in the freezer for whenever he wanted an ice cold Pilsner Urquell. But the Stoli was his bad habit of choice tonight. Deke needed the friendship of a stiff drink.

Returning to his view on the deck, Deke sipped his vodka tonic and waited for the numbness. The numbness would come. The view in front of him would blur. He would think about his aloneness. Closing his eyes he would confront the murkiness of his feelings and he would understand the human word for this: *lonely*.

Deke was lonely here. But it was self-imposed loneliness. He had no choice. His work necessitated secrecy and security. There were few he trusted completely. And being a leader meant making hard decisions, a role that didn't lend itself to good friendships. He was a man without a family and few friends, so instead he focused on his singular mission of stopping Ali Khan from doing on Earth what he had done on Sarnificus. On nights like this, lonely and with a goal of getting half-drunk, watching a world revolve without him, Deke closed his eyes and waited. He waited for what he knew would come: *memories*.

Deke judged himself by his memories—the good and bad, the triumphs and failures. In between those white and black events, there were far more grey life experiences worth remembering. Sometimes he would smile at himself, and other times he would cry. C.S. Lewis once said, *We read to know we are not alone*. Deke liked a different version of that saying. *We pray to know we are not alone*. And so Deke prayed. Now and always. He prayed, he drank, and he cried. And in his memories, at least, he was never alone.

### SARNIFICUS—1930

"I'll see you tonight," she said as she kissed Deke goodbye that morning. "I'll pick up Deke from school, but don't forget Saja's music concert is tonight."

Jema always gave him instructions like that. He managed Sarnificus. She managed him.

"I'll see you tonight."

Those words would haunt him. He did not see her that night. He would never see her again.

He sat in his SAR 1 migrating with the rest of the shocked survivors traumatized by what had happened to them. As if in a bad dream, they followed through with the emergency escape plan no one ever thought they would have to use.

It was over almost as soon as it started. *How little time it takes to destroy a planet*, thought Deke. *Even less to destroy a man's world*. In all his work as planet administrator on Sarnificus, he had never given it much thought. Why would he? Who would have calculated the end of time? Ali Khan did. Ali Khan had planned the end of Sarnificus. And without notice or warning, unleashed his deadly blow on an unsuspecting planet. The Sarnifikans were unprepared. They long believed no one would ever seek to harm them or destroy their perfect society.

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Forty-foot-high stone doors opened on the mountainside facing the plains, allowing 205 mm howitzers to roll out on railroad tracks to the edge of the openings like *The Guns of Navarone*. The barrels of the howitzers were pointed almost straight up so the shells they fired would land on the very edge of the plains at the foothills of the mountains where the nearest Sarnifikans lived. As each shell landed, the explosion of fire and smoke reached thousands of feet into the sky. The cacophonous sound was that of a natural gas tank blowing up, so loud it foiled Sarnifikans' ability to speak to each other, even telepathically. Soil, trees, bushes, and buildings flew through the air leaving forty-foot-wide craters in the ground. As the shells and explosions continued, at times the Sarnifikans were engulfed in a giant fire with no place to run. In this manner the rounds fell at 250-yard intervals as the shelling advanced toward the coast. Buildings and homes were blown apart, and bridges destroyed. Bodies flew everywhere as ammunitions and fuel storage sites exploded.

Immediately following the artillery barrage, a squadron of SAR 2s and 3s emerged from the mountains, strafing and killing any Sarnifikan in sight. Some were shot as they were driving down the roads in their sarwegs toward the airport on the coast. Following the air strikes came boots on the ground. Ten heavily-armored mobile divisions of Sarnifikites mopped up as they crossed the plains. As the troops exited their Mulabars—heavily armored track troop transporters—they formed lines spreading out in intervals of five yards between each other. Each transporter carried fifty troops. The troops looked menacing as they could not be seen inside their massive body armor. Their Kevlar helmets were rigged with night-vision

goggles directly above their faces, which were completely hidden by a dark hardened plastic mask. There was no need for individual radios as they could communicate via thought processing.

They were armed with large multi-purpose assault rifles equipped with vertical handgrips, a ten-power combat optic system which allowed them to see into darkened windows and spaces, even through walls, infrared target pointer/illuminators, cartridge-like carriers that held ten magazines of thirty rounds each, and a water camel on their back that was sipped through a tube which ran over their shoulders. The total devastation equaled a scorched Earth disaster.

Though thousands of Sarnifikans were killed during this initial attack, those living or working on the coast still had time to escape. Watching from his eighty-story office window on the coast, Deke saw the slaughter on the Sarnificus plains as it approached the coastal cities.

Grabbing the family photo that sat on his desk, he looked at Jema's image and began his telepathic connection to her. Jema was home with their two children, waiting for him to join them for tonight's concert at the school. He was desperate to connect, to have them join him at the airport directly below his office building. They needed to leave now. He could see his home with the naked eye. They could still get there. They could all still escape. But Ali Khan's bombs were coming closer and closer. *Hello*, he heard her voice say in his head. In near panic he began his explanation. If she heard him at all it was a final scream...

*Jema!*

Before he could save his family, Deke watched a nuclear missile hit his home and turn it to ashes. Jema was gone, as was his son Deka and daughter Saja. All obliterated before his eyes. In that one fraction of a second, his family ceased to be. They and everything around them were incinerated by the heat from the explosion.

With these scenes flashing before him, his instincts took hold and he focused on what action he needed to take. He must evacuate immediately, along with the remaining Sarnifikans who had survived the initial onslaught. By the time the seventeen nuclear missiles were dropped on the coast by SAR 2s, many Sarnifikans had already fled the planet. As Deke and others left Sarnificus in their SARs, they looked back to see gigantic primary and secondary explosions engulf the entire planet. There was nothing left for Ali Khan to rule over.

*My God, they're all gone*, thought Deke. *I have failed my people. I have failed my family. How could I not know the enemy within us? How could I not have seen what Ali Khan and the Sarnifikites were up to? Surely there were signs, but I only saw what I wanted to see. Their dark side escaped me.*

He was enraged at this violent upheaval of his society and his people, perpetrated by one of their own. Instantly hardened by the catastrophic event, he resolved to never make the same mistake again.

Deke sat in the captain's chair of his SAR 1. The machine responded to Deke's telepathic commands as he set course for Earth. The other surviving Sarnifikans did the same. This was always their plan in the event of some unforeseen global disaster. Deke started sending exploratory ships to Earth in 1850. He found it to be one of only two planets capable of supporting humanoid life. Sarnifikites chose to migrate to Titan (Saturn's frozen moon) the second such planet, for the same reason.

With his ship away from the planet and on course to Earth, Deke let his body slump in his chair. His head rolled back and his eyes cast about for meaning in the stars around him. In his hand, he still clutched the photo of his family and made his first log entry.

## **FIRST LOG ENTRY**

### **"0800 FEBRUARY 20, 1930—ABOARD SAR 1**

As the Director of Administration of the planet Sarnificus, I feel compelled to commit to history the events which have reshaped our planet, and, indeed, the universe. Ours was the first nuclear war to destroy an entire planet. May those who follow realize nuclear energy should not be reconstructed into war heads or bombs, which have the sole purpose of destroying life. I will continue to make periodic entries in this logbook so long as I am able. Possibly future generations may benefit from learning of the demise of our civilization or our story of survival. We do not know what our future will be on Earth and Titan, but we are of the planet Sarnificus, God willing, we will find a way."

## ALI KHAN

*I am Ali Khan, the great leader of the Sarnifikites. When I was young, my parents brought me and my seven siblings to Sarnificus. We emigrated from our own planet of Mulaka. We were no longer Mulakans, but we refused to abandon our religion or our way of life. We were different—and better—than the Sarnifikans, so we called ourselves Sarnifikites, and went to live in the mountains. Our people were separated and I grew to be their leader. But why should I not lead all who lived on Sarnificus?*

*Deke! Deke is why I was not the ultimate ruler. He was the son of a son of an administrator. That is why the people support him. It is merely habit. But I am superior. He is weak. A ruler but not a warrior. I am a warrior and I will rule!*

*Deke and I are similar in age. Physically I am a giant. I stand 6 feet 8 inches tall and weigh 295 pounds. I dwarf normal humans! My complexion is swarthy and olive in color, and my ebony straight hair is shoulder length, now pocked with the salt and pepper of age. My beard is also long and with salt and pepper streaks. My very countenance demands respect. My size and my arrogance intimidate others. Yet Deke is recognized by the people and I am not!*

*People call me an angry man. They say I am fanatical in my disdain for my rival—Deke. I erupt in outrage at his name, smashing furniture, throwing any object in reach against a wall or through a window, even hitting others near me as if they were Deke. They think I am maniacal, mad, yet they do my bidding for fear of retribution.*

*I failed in my first attempt to assassinate Deke and take over Sarnificus through a nuclear revolution. Deke escaped to Earth—he and his followers. And as for we Sarnifikites? We were sent to Titan! A frozen planet where we were expected to live among the ice and the frigidness... no warmth from the sun. No flowing rivers. No soft grass to lie on. Only cold.*

*This is what the Sarnifikans think of us. That we are worthy of no more than a frozen rock. I have failed once but I will not fail again. I have come to Earth. I will locate Deke the Sarnifikan. And this time I will kill him. I will rule the human race. I will be commander of the universe. I am Ali Khan!*

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## ENROUTE TO EARTH

Flying at up to 50,000 miles per hour, the flights to Titan and Earth took approximately 304 days. There was no time yet to communicate with each other to determine who had survived and who had not. They were all fleeing for their lives. The SARs were set on autopilot and there was little else to do. Fuel was not a problem. Giant panels were deployed to capture moisture from the atmosphere. Being water, they would either drink it or extract the highly volatile hydrogen from it, turning it into fuel to power their spacecrafts. Settling down in individual recliners, they had the ability to lower their heart rates to twenty beats per minute, causing them to slip into hibernation. Little food was consumed, and little energy was expended.

About one hundred days into the flight, Deke started to try to communicate with others. Thought patterns were interrupted by white noise, radio waves, and particles floating in space. He realized a different means of communication might be required once they reached their destinations.

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Deke poured himself another Stoli. As he sipped the vodka, he reveled once again in the fact that he could see so much from his penthouse vantage point, yet not be seen by those around and below him. Over his left shoulder he could see the magnificent Robert Wyland mural of whales and other marine life on the back wall of Macy's Department Store. Gazing beyond the mural through two Florida Black Olive trees that bordered Lummus Park, he could see the long one-story building known as the William English Slave House, dating from the 1830s.

Though his office headquarters might be considered hidden from the outside world, it was located in the center of downtown Miami. A new Bank of America logo beneath him acknowledged the current major tenant of the building. The façade was an eye-catching visual of evenly-sized horizontal lines of windows and white walls. On special occasions, various colored spotlights shine on the building from rooftops across the street, bathing different floors in different colors, making it the most attractive building in the city at night. The lights also cast Deke's penthouse into darkness, making it easier for Deke to access his helipad unnoticed.

Taller than all the buildings around it, Deke's rooftop quarters were only visible to those planes flying in and out of Miami International Airport because their flight pattern took them over the heart of the city. But even they couldn't see all the building's secrets.

What was not immediately visible to anyone who might view the top of the building was that Deke's heliport not only served as a helicopter landing and takeoff site. It was also an elevator which lowered and raised his chopper, a Harrier (VTOL) jet fighter, and SAR 1—his space ship from Sarnificus—all from the hangar deck below. The hangar deck occupied the entire top floor of the building. Deke's SAR 1 was a one-of-a-kind flying saucer. It was made from a combination of titanium and carbon molecules called "buckypaper," estimated to be ten-times lighter than steel and 500-times stronger. While seated in his leather command chair, the exterior of the plane rotated around him at the speed of a high-performance propeller, with a row of 50-caliber machine guns positioned around the entire circumference of the ship. Directly under the machine guns was a similar row of alternating Sidewinder air-to-air heat seeking missiles and Phoenix long-range air-to-air guided missiles equipped and modified to be loaded with air-to-ground warheads in fifteen seconds. All these weapons were capable of being fired individually, sequentially, or simultaneously, ranging from pointing at forty-five degree angles above the ship down to forty-five degrees beneath the ship so their fields of fire crossed each other. Deke didn't need a computer aiming capability. He sighted his weapons using his mind, eyes, and hands. No rote training here. These were instinctive skills acquired at birth. "Thank you, Grandpa," he said to himself. He could even aim at a target beyond the horizon or over a mountain or other obstruction. The ship was also equipped with an electronic shield, which repelled or destroyed incoming projectiles, making the SAR 1 a virtually indestructible weapon capable of taking on dozens of enemies in a single dogfight. Though the SAR 1 was large enough to cover the top of the Bank of America building, its outer dimensions folded inward twice, allowing it to be reduced in size to fit on the helipad and be raised and lowered to the hangar deck. This was the only time the plane was vulnerable, as all its weapons were folded inside.

The general public believed the top floor was occupied by the CIA. This idea was mild compared to the many conspiracy theories that had taken root on Earth since the Sarnifikans first arrived. Usually Deke laughed at their flying saucer and crop circle stories. They devoted entire TV shows to such phenomenons and invented outlandish stories. But he tried to avoid causing these misconceptions as much as possible. Conspiracy theorists were an avid bunch and he didn't need anyone investigating his activities. At least if they thought the CIA was here, they weren't likely to come snooping around.

Not that they'd have much luck. Only one building elevator served the floor, and Deke controlled it. The camera had a 180 degree view of the lobby and hallway. On the rare occasion he wished for a face-to-face meeting, such as when he beckoned Macholy to come see him from Poland; an identity card was FedEx'd two days prior. Macholy built SARs and sarwegs on Sarnificus, and was now using his skills in the Gdansk steel plants. Arriving at the elevator, Macholy stood in front of the camera. Even though the Sarnifikan visitor had the tell-tale ear lobe creases, Deke would never again trust without verifying. Once Deke visually verified Macholy through the insertion of his identity card, and an eye and right hand scan, Deke activated the elevator and brought Macholy up. While in the elevator, Deke scanned Macholy and everything in the elevator cab. Should anything not look right to him, he would stop the elevator before it reached the top, and handle the matter accordingly.

His quarters were unremarkable except for his office. Hidden behind the wood paneled walls and ceiling was a thin layer of titanium mixed with a reflective material that shut out sound, radio waves, and any radioactive substance. He was safe and alone in his office. For security reasons, the office was void of any personal items such as photographs, awards, or gifts. There were, however, several wood pieces Deke crafted or restored himself: the magazine rack at one end of the sofa, a coffee table with lion claw feet, a renovated Duncan Fife drop-leaf game table, and a reproduction of a Nigerian birthing chair. He loved working with wood, with its varying hues and grains. A hobby he picked up here on Earth. His prize possession, an elephant ivory swagger stick, lay on his desk to remind him of his years in Africa. In one corner was a pachinko game from his travels in Japan. On one wall were thirty-five flat-screen TVs which allowed him to watch the news from every major network in Europe, Russia, Asia, the Middle East, South America, Africa, Oceania and, of course, North America. ABC's Christiane Amanpour caught his attention as she reported from the Middle East. Deke appreciated the fact that she just reported the news without her personal or network spin, as had Charlie Gibson for many years before her. Fluent in twenty-two languages, Deke didn't need the visible English subtitles. As a telepath, he actually preferred no language at all.

Deke used two computers to read the latest Earth news and technology reports. Neither computer used a mouse or keyboard. Instead, Deke communicated verbally with his computers. He did not use them to communicate with his followers

for fear of being hacked or having messages intercepted. His Sarnifikan telepathy was far superior. On the rare occasions he had to use snail mail to communicate with Earthlings, in order to protect his identity, he used secretly watermarked stationery and envelopes provided by the Walsh Envelope Company in Pennsylvania. Within one hour of the envelope being opened, it and its contents dissolved into thin air and the recipient was left to figure out where it disappeared.

Deke glanced again at the screens in his never-ending quest to learn as much about Earthlings as possible. They performed so differently from each other depending on the country in which they lived, and the culture they belonged to. On one camera an ABC news team was on the scene where a U.S. Coast Guard boat crew was trying to pluck illegal aliens out of the water before they touched U.S. soil. These foreign citizens came from the poorer island nations of the Caribbean or even from as far away as South America. Sometimes the local news crews didn't arrive on the scene until the illegals had waded ashore and could be seen running down the street in search of someone who would hide them. National news networks stopped covering these stories because it was almost a weekly occurrence for the Coast Guard to be called out to intercept a drug boat dropping "square groupers" in the water from Colombia, or to grab Cuban illegals before their feet touched shore and were allowed to stay. Illegal immigrants from any other nation had no such right, and were soon returned to the country from whence they came. Deke was irked by the obvious injustice of this policy, a product of a government system that didn't work. He wanted to tell the poor souls in the water to not bother. That this wasn't the country they thought it was, at least not anymore. But he could only shake his head. He wasn't here to rescue illegal immigrants bound for the United States. And it wasn't his job to fix the government.

CNN's camera showed burning vehicles and eighteen mangled dead bodies lying in the street in a Haifa Road market in Jerusalem, results of a Palestinian car bomber. This was yet another example of the terrorists Deke must seek out and annihilate.

On another screen, Fox News captured a story of pirates off the shores of Somalia which caught his attention. Now this was his business. In the past ten years, "Somali pirates" captured over 10,000 ships throughout the world. They attacked and boarded oil tankers and cargo container ships on the open seas mainly as the ships passed East Africa en route to Europe via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. Or they might be caught passing through the Mozambique Channel between Madagascar and Mozambique, heading around the Cape of Good Hope out into the Atlantic, destined for North and South America. In Asia, ships from Australia and Indonesia, bound for India and Dubai, often disappeared before or after they sailed through Singapore, the world's largest seaport. Even some mothballed military ships mysteriously disappeared from storage shipyards in Philadelphia, New Haven, Yokosuko, Bremerhaven, Kamchatka, Baku, Tianjin, and Liverpool. Fifty-ton fishing trawlers often went off the radar in the Bering Strait, never again to be seen or heard from. Cruise ships in the Caribbean and Mediterranean were captured and their passengers held for ransom. Though the passengers were released when ransom was paid, the ships and crews were never returned.

*Could Ali Khan be involved?* he thought. Earthlings had a long, notorious history of piracy, and Deke studied it with a military curiosity. The profession of pirating dated back to some of the earliest Earth civilizations. If there was a nation with power, there was another nation trying to take it away. England was a prime example. The Elizabethan wars with Spain in the late 16th century, in which England made great utilization of pirates, had made it a world superpower for the next four centuries.

But the title of most successful pirate belonged to a woman—Ching Shih, the wife of Cheng. She took over the Chinese Red Flag Fleet of pirates when her husband died in 1805. She then married one of her adopted sons, Cheung Po, and placed him in command of her fleet of 1,500 ships and thousands of pirates as they plundered the China coastal waters. In 1810, after five years of trying unsuccessfully to rid the seas of these pirates, and having lost sixty-three ships in battles with Ching Shih, the Chinese Government granted her amnesty. Cheung Po became a captain in the Chinese Navy, and Ching Shih ran a gambling house until she died in 1844 at the age of sixty-nine. Ching Shih intrigued Deke, and he tasked his followers on Earth to find out what happened to all those ships. There must be a tie-in between the ancient pirating and recent pirating along the east coast of Africa, and it might somehow have ties back to Cheung Po.

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Still, with hundreds of SAR 2s and 3s at his disposal, it was hard to imagine Ali Kahn wouldn't choose an air strike. SAR 3s were troop carriers, equipped with much of the same technology as the SAR 2s, but capable of transporting hundreds of troops. Much as Deke's followers built their first bunker under the remote deserts of New Mexico, Ali Kahn built his under the sands of Iran and Syria, according to reports from his Middle East followers.

Deke knew Ali Khan possessed the technology and the equipment. But he didn't know if Ali Khan had the army. And if he did, would he be able to lure the free world armies into the desert oil fields and mountains of the Middle East where he could destroy them?

During his time on Earth, Deke studied these people, their cultures, their literature, philosophers, and their religions. He reflected on an ancient Biblical text, Isaiah 13:4-5, which said: ***The noise of a multitude in the mountains... a tumultuous noise of the kingdoms of nations gathered together... They come from a far country, from the end of heaven, even the Lord, and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole land.***

Other ancient religious texts contained similar prophecies. Deke could only suspect that Ali Khan knew these prophecies as well, and would be all too willing to exploit them, especially living where he did—in what Earthlings called the Middle East—where the people seemed so willingly led by their radical voices. But Deke couldn't much defend the United States, his primary country of residence. The people had grown lazy and willfully ignorant. Their leadership became useless puppets of special-interest groups and corporations that didn't have the country's best interests at heart.

America had taken the wrong course in recent years, establishing policies that severed old friendships and instead created new enemies in the world with their arrogance and egocentric ideals. The country was ripe for a revolution. But could Deke make sure it was the right revolution? He was sure of only one thing. A people that did not work constantly to protect its freedoms would surely lose them. This country, the world, needed a leader with intelligence, vigilance, and courage. If America and the world wanted to remain free, they were going to have to fight for it. Deke was going to war. He would meet the Earthlings on the field of battle where they were so used to trying to settle disputes. This time he would take them all on, take the fight out of them, and then show them how to live in peace, or die trying. He would have to use all his leadership, management, and military tactical skills to the highest degree. He would leave nothing to chance, make no mistakes, and challenge all his warriors and his own heart and mind to perform at warp speed. He must not fail, and he must not die trying. *Grandfather, I will make you proud*, he thought to himself.

## SARNIFICUS, 1588

"Pangea," Deke answered.

"Correct. Now, what do they call the land masses that broke apart from Pangea?"

"North and South America. Africa, Europe, and Asia. Oh, and Australia... the island continent."

"There's one more. Think about it."

Deke thought. His grandfather often quizzed him like this. As administrator of Sarnificus, Grandfather's job was to study other worlds for potential allies, natural resources, and the unlikely need for an escape... if anything catastrophic should happen to Sarnificus.

"Antarctica," Deke answered with confidence.

"Very good." His grandfather smiled.

In years to come, Deke would realize the greatest gift his grandfather gave him during these study sessions was a "superior autobiographical memory" whereby he could remember everything he ever learned in school, everything his grandfather taught him, and everything that ever happened during his lifetime anywhere in the universe. In deep concentration he could recall the date, the day of the week, and the event. This ability proved invaluable in the years to come once he became the Director of Sarnificus.

Deke loved to please his grandfather. They were here enjoying a holiday on the mountainous side of Sarnificus. Sarnificus was located some forty light years beyond Pluto inside a massive black hole near Beta Raticuli, which measures sixteen times the size of the sun. The planet was developed in two halves. One half was inhabited by the original Sarnifikans and the latter-day immigrants, called Sarnifikites. The second half, here on the mountain ranges, was designed for vacations or seclusion away from the business of life. Life was so good, so simple, and so orderly. Sarnificus was a "green" planet. Electrical power was provided by the river water flowing down from the mountains, giant windmills strategically located on the plains, and solar panels which served as roofs for all buildings and houses. The river water also irrigated the farm fields on the plains, as it was guided down rock channels much as the Incas irrigated their terraced fields and provided water for their homes in Macchu Picchu and other villages of the surrounding region now known as Peru. Throughout Sarnificus, pure underground spring water was pumped into homes and businesses, and did not require any treatment or filtering.

Transportation was provided in the form of sarwegs, which looked like Earth Segways, except they came in one to four passenger models, with easily installed clear plastic panels to protect the passengers from inclement weather.

Everyone lived 500 years. Children went to school for 150 years, studying all sciences, plus cooking, sewing, astronomy, psychology, geography, engineering medicine, music, mathematics, galaxy and solar system history, and space exploration. Physical education classes consisted of mastering all individual sports such as wrestling, track and field, swimming, and marksmanship. Team sports included soccer, rugby, basketball, volleyball, and baseball.

Since the population was not large, and did not grow, people were known by one name. This system was used at the beginning of time on Earth, as well. Only when the population grew did Earthlings add a second (family) name. John the baker became known as John Baker, and Peter the fisherman became known as Peter Fisher or Peter Fishman. On Sarnificus, when a name was used a second time, they just added the numeral II or III and so on, as is done in royalty.

Once men and women completed their formal education, they would marry and parent two children—one boy and one girl. They recognized their planet could only sustain suitable quality of life for a finite population, so they adopted a birth control system precluding women from having more than two births. All babies were born through natural childbirth requiring no medical attention for either the mother or baby. After birth there were no contagious illnesses, because no other beings were ever allowed to migrate to Sarnificus after the Sarnifikites arrived. Leaders such as Deke and Ali Khan had the ability to heal wounds and grow replacement organs should one be damaged or inexplicably fail. All communication was verbal or through mental telepathy.

Business was conducted solely through bartering, negating the need for currency. Corruption and divisiveness were avoided because no one was allowed to acquire more of anything than needed.

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The mountain range rose sharply with peaks reaching 17,000 feet. Above the tree line, the mountain tops remained covered with snow year round. The ski lifts ran up to 15,000 feet where the ski runs began. The higher terrain was reserved for mountain climbing. Below was a vast forest of oak, maple, redwood, pine, cedar, birch, ash, baobab, and linden trees. The area was dotted with mountain cabins and lodges, generally located around lakes or alongside rushing mountain streams. These sites were located a minimum of one mile apart so one would not be bothered by others who were also seeking quiet privacy in nature. The coast on this side of Sarnificus consisted of rocky cliffs up to one hundred feet high, and beautiful soft white sand beaches. The breakers in the ocean often swelled to ten feet high, perfect for surfing. The ocean stretched around the planet to the inhabited side. Some people would sail their boats across the ocean to the vacation side. But most people enjoyed the drive over the mountains to reach geographic Nirvana. It was on these vacations that Grandfather could relax from his imposing duties and share his knowledge with Deke. He expounded on all manner of things, some of which young Deke could understand and some of which he could not. Grandfather shared stories of other worlds and cultures, and imparted the lessons he learned, on topics such as politics, religions, and societies at war.

War was unknown on Sarnificus. Differences and inequalities among its people were eradicated long ago, at least among the Sarnifikans. When the Sarnifikites came to the planet, they experienced difficulties assimilating with the Sarnifikans, as they led a different lifestyle. Metaphorically speaking, they lived the life of Peruvian shepherds, constantly grazing their sheep and goats across the mountain ranges in search of grass. They ate meat, for example, where as the Sarnifikans were vegetarians. Sarnifikites preferred living in the mountains, while Sarnifikans lived along the ocean coasts. Their religious differences were accepted. At least, the Sarnifikans believed that to be the case.

In their studies of other worlds, Sarnifikans observed that people throughout the universe worshipped gods of all kinds. But on Sarnificus it was believed there was no reason to recognize different gods. To avoid discrimination and ill feelings toward each other, the Sarnifikans recognized one God, one Creator as being representative of all the gods. From that point on the Sarnifikans worshipped one God on an individual or group basis of their own choosing. Some folded their hands, closed their eyes, looked to the sky, knelt, bowed their heads, raised their hands, faced the east, worshipped at different times of the day, or on different days, it didn't matter. What their worshipping amounted to was praying, each in his own words and each in his own way.

His grandfather shared that on Earth great wars were fought over religious differences. One culture worshiped its God one way; another culture worshiped a different way. People allowed themselves to be ruled over by kings and queens, and these monarchs told them which way to worship their God. Those who refused were persecuted and often killed.

After studying other planetary governments, Deke's grandfather observed that multi-party systems were not without

weaknesses, not the least of which was the unproductive practice of party politics. For this reason he put forth the idea there should be no government, per se. Instead, Sarnificus enjoyed what was thought to be the perfect democracy, one which embraced some elements of socialism. All decisions were made by the people based on a simple majority rule. On such occasions, a body of clerks, supervised by the Director of Administration, conducted a voting system. Every citizen over the age of one hundred voted. In every respect, all were considered equal. Once a decision was made, all supported its application because it was "their" cumulative decision. To rail against a decision would be ignorant and selfish to think everyone else should agree with you. Sarnifikans knew better.

As for religion, long ago Sarnifikans realized people throughout the universe worshipped Gods of all kinds. But in actuality, they all observed one being, one Creator. The only difference was the manner in which they worshiped God, aptly explained in the Torah, the Bible, and the Koran. On Sarnificus they all recognize only one God.

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Earth sounded awful to Deke, even though he knew it was the intended destination in the event of something tragic happening on Sarnificus. Many times his grandfather explained how similar the planetary conditions were, how Earth also displayed great mountain ranges and beautiful oceans and magnificent forests. The atmosphere, his grandfather assured him, supported abundant life forms, and was perfect for humanoid races. But it was hard for young Deke to think of the Earthlings as humanoids. The wars and plagues and crusades and atrocities against one another made them sound like monsters. He hoped he would never go there. And why would he? The plan was only in case of a tragic occurrence here on Sarnificus. And that was highly unlikely. Especially here in the serene surroundings of the Sarnifikan mountains, tragedy seemed far, far away.

As his grandfather shared stories of yet another war on Earth, Deke's mind wandered and he noticed another boy playing ball over by a clearing in the forest. The boy was alone and so he threw the ball up into the air and caught it, over and over.

"Grandfather?"

Deke interrupted his elder's story with caution. "May I go play catch?"

Caught off guard, and unused to being interrupted, Grandfather paused briefly. A smile spread across his face as he noticed the other boy and then nodded to Deke. "Of course," he replied.

Deke had just passed the one hundred year mark. He was full grown, and his youthful bulb-shaped white head had molded into its final, rounded, proportional shape and olive coloring. Such physical changes marked the end of his youth, and he would expand his formal studies as a future Sarnifikan leader when the two returned to the other side of the planet. His life would be full of studies, and his grandfather's questions would become more pertinent and necessary. Still, he relished the chance to just be a kid.

Deke walked over to the boy. "Here," said Deke, motioning for the boy to throw him the ball. The boy hesitated. As Deke got closer he saw why. The boy was a Sarnifikite. And while the two races coexisted on Sarnificus, they didn't usually interact. This Sarnifikite was young, and had not yet reached the physical benchmarks of adulthood.

"Wanna play catch?" With a slow spreading smile, the boy tossed the ball in Deke's direction. The throw was shy and fell short of reaching Deke. Deke picked it up and tossed the ball back to the boy.

"Like this," he instructed, showing the boy a firmer grip that helped him put more force behind his throw. The game continued, the young Sarnifikite's throw getting stronger and stronger. The boy's smile grew wider and wider.

Deke smiled, too.