

The background of the entire image is a deep blue space filled with numerous small white stars. In the lower half, a bright blue horizon line curves across the frame, with a glowing white light source, possibly the sun or moon, positioned just above it. The text is overlaid on this background.

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*Dedicated to my wife, Kay,
for her support over the years.*

PROLOGUE

The Internal Monitors of Peace and Citizen Tranquility, more commonly known as IMPACT, ruled the city-state of Sympia with an iron fist ever since the continental wars four decades earlier. Their authority now superseded that of the original police force, who were relegated to directing traffic and keeping streets tidy. Everything within the hundred-kilometer periphery wall was under their control. At first, they were welcomed to Sympia and the other five city-states within their jurisdiction. They provided the security that the weary locals needed. It was only after the military enforcement policy was given another five-year mandate that the all-powerful organization began to step over the thin line between protector and ruthless enforcer of IMPACT ideologies.

A year earlier, an unexpected pronouncement was made by the Grand Marshal of the United IMPACT Commonwealth. He stated that two hundred years before, the humanz—the z added to distinguish loyal citizens—of their land had been polluted by invaders. These invaders had contaminated the genes of loyal citizens by interbreeding. The only way to stop further pollution through future generations was to halt it now.

By default, all male citizens over a meter eighty-eight in height and females over a meter eighty were declared as possible

bearers of alien genes and were ordered to have DNA samplings.

During the following months, random arrests were extended to full-scaled roundups. Very few talls, as the unfortunate citizens became known, passed the test. Those who did were from prosperous families who were rumored to have bought their right to freedom. Talls declared as having defective genes were sent to internment camps that were set up on the coastal badlands. What happened there was unknown but those who entered a camp never came out. The official news stated that they were sterilized, while still being treated humanely, and deported to offshore islands to live out their lives in peace and tranquility. This news was not believed by even the most loyal citizens.

The other intelligent species that lived in and around Sympia was ignored in the midst of the xenophobia that reined over the land. There were few of them, and they were known for their neutrality in all the intercontinental wars. The so-called “silfs” that stood for Spherical Intelligent Life Forms were creatures the size of a large orange who had the power of flight without having wings. Four body openings expelled air under pressure to propel them along. They had small arms and legs, eyes and a mouth, but all other organs were hidden by a fuzzy fur that covered their bodies. They were highly intelligent and spoke in high pitched, almost squeaky, voices. Humanz had difficulty telling whether individual silfs were male or female for there were no external differences in their appearance.

But, the silfs were not as docile or harmless as the IMPACT leaders believed.

CHAPTER 1

A cold mist hung over the ancient city, so thick that the streetlights appeared as hazy circles along the narrow street. By three hundred hours, only the most foolish citizens would be out of their homes, even if they could bear the near zero temperature. This was the time the IMPACT forces were on patrol.

The wind blew through the silf Quig's fuzzy hair as he flew above the street, observing the IMPACT forces below. To him, it appeared that their movements were unusual in that everything was quiet and done in the shadows. The sirens, loudspeakers, floodlights, and hovering helicopters were absent. Instead, IMPACT military police sneaked from building to building until only one was surrounded. Usually a whole block was surrounded, and the citizens within were brought out. Residents were usually examined, and those within the gene criteria and with no criminal or political points against their names were allowed to return home. Everyone else would be forced into closed vans and taken away for more interrogating.

"It's going to be close," Quig muttered to himself.

The tall girl he was assigned to protect lived in the attic of this building, hiding. He knew that it was imperative that the humanz never interrogated Brittany Forbes. The silf gritted his

small, spiky teeth and dropped down on the dark roof of the building, trying to conceal himself from the surrounding IMPACT forces.

Brittany tossed in a fretful sleep. Since the new laws became official, she had to give up her college studies and felt almost like a prisoner in the attic apartment. Two men, who could be considered as talls, lived below her, but rather than providing a security shield, they scared her. Innuendoes and comments had been superseded by frank demands from the younger man for inappropriate favors, otherwise he'd notify the authorities that she lived in the building. She had double locks, a security camera, and other precautions but knew this would not stop the men if they wanted to enter. In fact, it was the Gridmyres, a humanz family on the first floor, who really protected her. Old Neechon watched the two guys like a hawk, and Brittany had heard him once telling them that if she was designated a tall, their own heights would also become suspect.

She woke from a deep sleep when something shook her toe. Immediate thoughts were that of panic. Why hadn't the alarm rung? She forced her eyes open, but in the dull, reflected light from outside, she could see nobody.

A cough made her heart leap. "You must get dressed, Brittany," a high-pitched voice whispered. "IMPACT has this building surrounded. Hurry! There's not much time."

The girl turned and saw a silf standing on the end of the bed. His dark fur was almost a perfect camouflage,

"You're Quig from that group that patrols the city, aren't you?"

It was the silf's turn to look surprised. "You know?" he said. Brittany managed a smile.

"You are one of our few allies in the city. Whenever I see

you or one of your friends flying above me, it gives me the strength I need.”

Quig nodded, well really his whole body vibrated above his tiny legs, but Brittany understood the movement.

“You must get dressed and come now!”

She followed a well-rehearsed plan. Within seconds, she was in her street clothes and stared at a small wall monitor. It was linked to infrared cameras that switched on when there was any movement in the hallway or foyer. It now pulsed green to indicate that the area was empty.

“Nobody’s downstairs yet,” she whispered. “What way? Down the back steps to the alley?”

“No. Every entrance is covered. We have to go out the way I came in.” Quig glanced around. “Bring a blanket.”

Brittany frowned. “But how?”

“I came down the chimney. There are iron rungs that go up the inside.”

A buzzer sounded, and the monitor light changed to a pulsing yellow. Someone was out there!

Brittany nodded and grabbed a small backpack from under her bed, strapped a blanket on the top, and slid it onto her back.

She moved across to the monitor and pressed in a code. The words *Armed* flashed on the screen.

“A couple of hundred volts are going through the door handle,” she explained. “It’ll take them a while to get around it.”

“Good for you,” Quig whispered, “but we must go.”

Brittany knew the chimney towered above a steep tile roof but had no idea what would happen when she reached the top. The iron rungs were freezing to touch, and every movement she made brought a cloud of soot down on her.

But she kept going.

A small rectangle of light gray appeared above her; she was almost at the top. In the center, she saw a circle of black with two shining eyes as Quig looked down at her.

“Almost there,” he whispered.

Below, the alarm beeped; there was a shout and the hiss of a laser pistol.

Brittany shivered and increased her speed. Soot stung her eyes. She sneezed. Surely someone must have heard the sound! A light flashed below, and she heard more thumps and crashes. Voices echoed up the chimney.

“She’s gone, Commander.”

“Look at the bed. It’s still warm. She’s here somewhere . . .”

The voice became indecipherable when Brittany turned her head up and reached for the next rung. Soot tickling her throat threatened to create another sneeze. She swallowed and willed herself to keep quiet. Fresh air replaced the soot when she reached the top. Now her fear returned. What would happen next?

She slung one leg over the top ledge and pulled her slim body up so she straddled the chimney top. Freezing air engulfed her, and the lights in the fog below appeared close, too close. A patrol wagon at the front door had its lights flashing. Four IMPACT guards stood on the sidewalk; their black oval helmets and dark glasses recognizable even in the gloom.

Without warning, a beam of light shone up the chimney, and someone shouted. A pistol fired, and the bricks across from her cracked open. Pain, like a white-hot needle, shot through her leg. Brittany stifled a scream and slung her inside leg over the ledge. Oddly enough, the pain from the laser beam that hit her disappeared as quickly as it came. Now, she was outside the chimney but not out of danger.

“Your blanket!” Quig whispered in an urgent tone. “We need it, Brittany. I called for help and my friends are here.”

“It’s tied to the top of my backpack, but I can’t reach it.”

Her position was precarious, and she was too afraid to let go. Another laser beam hit the bricks where her leg had been seconds before.

"You are surrounded, Miss Forbes," a voice called up from inside. "If you surrender peacefully you shall be treated with respect. We know you are there."

"Bastards." Her voice shook. She clung to the bricks while tiny hands undid her backpack straps and lifted the blanket off.

She glanced down. A search light on the patrol wagon's roof cut through the white fog only a few meters away. In seconds, it would find her.

"Roll forward, Brittany," Quig directed. "Do it now!"

The girl turned and saw eight silfs hovering below her. They held her blanket out like a stretcher.

"But!" Brittany was terrified. How could these tiny creatures hold her weight?

"Go!" Quig shouted. "You have no choice."

Brittany shut her eyes and let go of the chimney just as it was illuminated by the searchlight.

She stifled a scream as her body descended three stories, expecting to crash onto the cobblestones below.

But it didn't!

She landed on the blanket unharmed, apart from her racing heart.

The eight silfs held the edges with tiny hands. Quig gave an order, and the tiny creatures propelled themselves up into the night sky. Brittany could feel a freezing breeze buffeting her. She saw the swirling fog and the shimmering searchlight off to her right.

"Thank you," she whispered when they slowed and moved across the city. "If it wasn't for you . . ." Her voice cracked. "May the power of a galactic cruiser help you all."

"Why do you say that?" Quig asked.

Brittany swallowed. What had she said? Of course . . . "It's just an old saying we have. It's a charm of good luck, I guess."

“And it has helped us, Brittany,” another squeaky voice said from near her left ear. “That and your courage.”

The girl moved her eyes and saw a speckled black and white silf studying her.

“Meet Pepper,” Quig said. “I guess you’d call her my partner in human society.”

Brittany noted the absence of the zee sound at the end of the word “human” and allowed her tense body to relax a little.

“Hi Pepper,” she said. “You don’t know how pleased I am to meet you.”

“I do,” Pepper replied, her manner serious and focused. “We couldn’t allow another human girl to be taken. Our reports . . .” She left the sentence unfinished, and her tiny lips turned up in a smile. “It’s the least we can do.”

As they were flying across the city, the silfs showed no signs of weariness or distress. Aside from a few curt commands from Quig, they remained quiet during the journey. Brittany could see a patchwork of streetlights like pinholes in the fog. Ahead, darkness showed that they were almost above the security wall. She had long ago realized that the wall, and the more recent the security fence surrounding the newer suburbs, was to keep citizens in, not undesirables out. She swallowed and took a cautious glance over the side of her blanket.

Yes, they were over it. A long strip of floodlit soil appeared in front of the high stone wall. This was the neutral zone that citizens were not allowed to cross. Armed IMPACT patrols shot first and asked questions later if anybody or anything ventured in the area. This security was the one thing that had stopped her from leaving the city months before. Some of her friends had tried to escape but were never heard from again. The rumor of internment camps and a fate worse than death didn’t help when one had to decide whether to stay and hide or try to leave.

“We’re safe, Brittany,” Quig said. “Oh, they know we’re here, but they will not risk trying to shoot us down.”

“Why?” Brittany asked.

“A balance of power,” Pepper said. “We have the power to wipe half this city off the face of this world, and they know it. That’s why they tolerate us. It’s not by any act of kindness, I assure you.”

Brittany lay back, deep in thought. So, there was truth in the old stories? But what about the story that silfs never interfered in the affairs of other species? She had known silfs all her life but really knew so little about them. In some ways, they were like moths fluttering around a light at night. You knew they were there, but they never harmed you, so you ignored them.

But now it seemed that the moths had grown teeth.

“We’ll reach our destination in twenty minutes,” Quig said. “There will be food and a bed you can rest upon, so relax Brittany. You need never return to the tyranny of the city again.”

Brittany looked back and saw the city as a square of light in the distant fog. Something deep inside told her she was in safe hands, even if those hands were hardly more than two centimeters wide and connected to little balls of fur.

The man who sat behind the oaken desk was a typical officer of the IMPACT military arm. If the word wasn’t banned in the city, Colonel Slovinof, like the rest of the humanz, would have been called a zaric. He stood a meter seventy tall, had wide shoulders, and a full white beard that jutted out like an inverted broom.

His dark green uniform carried a row of colorful, triangular awards that signified his bravery and ruthlessness. At the moment, his eyelashes were creased in a frown cemented across his leathery face.

“Your troopers allowed her to escape?” His volume was a mere whisper, but the tone was like poison.

The major who sat opposite still managed to appear to be at rigid attention.

"Your orders could not overrule the directive to avoid hostilities with any silfs, Colonel Slovinof," he explained. "We tried to get clearance to shoot them and the girl down, but all communication was blocked."

Slovinof leaned back in his chair and nodded. "I believe you, Major Kross. You are ordered to tell nobody, but we know the silfs have the ability to block out radio and video transmissions over all frequencies for up to ten minutes. No doubt that is what they did tonight."

"And the border guards at the main gate?"

"By the time orders could be transmitted to them, the girl was beyond the city." Slovinof clenched his fists in suppressed anger. "We are about to reestablish landlines to use, not that it will help us now."

"So, what are my orders, Colonel?" Kross asked.

"Search and apprehend, Major. All clearances are through. You are to find that woman and bring her back here. She is of no value to us dead. The electronic chip she carries is programmed to delete itself if her heart stops beating."

"That makes it difficult, Colonel."

Slovinof's expression turned into a determined grin. "The kid gloves are off, Vlademyre. If any silfs get in your way, they are expendable."

The major's eyebrows rose slightly. "And risk breaching the treaty? Is the girl that important, Colonel?"

"Not her," Colonel Slovinof nodded at the monitor on his desk. "It's what she carries. I doubt if she even knows she has the microchip embedded in her body."

"But why has it taken us so long to find her, Sir?"

Slovinof reached down and placed an electronic book on his desk, used his forefinger to flick through a few pages, and turned it around for Kross to see. The words "*Top Secret. For Officers' Eyes Only*" were written in red across the top.

“Read this.”

Kross read the contents and grimaced. He had heard vague gossip about the contents but didn’t realize that there was any truth in it.

“Oh, it’s true, Vlademyre. Her ancestors were clever. If a carrier is killed before the microchip self-erases, it sends all the information to a dormant receiver and is then activated. To find anyone with a dormant microchip is as valueless as it is to kill the carrier of the active one. We think there is only one microchip active at any given time. We have found other dormant chips on talls. The last active carrier died under interrogation before we could download information from the chip. Forbes became the active carrier at that time. It took us two months to trace her.”

Vlademyre ran a hand over his chin and stared at the colonel. “Can I ask how, Colonel?”

“No, it’s classified, Vlademyre.”

“So, the silfs will use the microchip information and all will be lost, Sir?”

The colonel shook his head.

“We believe they have no knowledge of the actual microchip. Their new policy seems to be that of helping any talls. This is a disturbing change from their former neutrality in our affairs.”

“So, where will they take her, Sir?”

“As you know, the silfs have no mechanical airplanes or helicopters at their disposal. Nor do they use animals, such as horses. They can only carry the girl a short distance. They will need to land and accompany her as she walks.”

“So, an interception should be easy.”

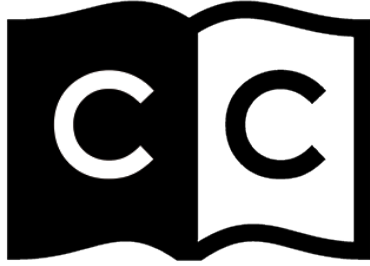
The colonel looked annoyed. “Through the eastern forests and mountains, Major Kross? They won’t be foolish enough to keep to roads or open land.” He stared at his monitor again for a moment before looking up. “Oh yes, there’s another point;

most of your electronic tracking equipment will be useless within a fifty-kilometer radius of the girl."

"I shall pick my men and be ready to move at dawn, Sir." Kross took out his electronic phone but hesitated when he saw the colonel frown.

"And by then, you'll be six hours too late, Major. I want yourself and your three best operatives ready by midnight," Colonel Slovinof spat. "That's a direct order from the Grand Marshal."

Kross paled. "It shall be done, Sir." He saluted again, stepped back the mandatory six steps, turned, and marched out of the room.



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“Oh galactic stars,”
Brittany gasped as the
screen spun and jumped
in a blur of motion.
She persevered, though,
and managed to make the
monitor appear as if she was
flying over the forest.



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