



The Zondon

by Robby Charters

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"This story is refreshing and completely new in concept and legend. The details of the worlds created in this story are unique and beautiful, with a great plot ... this is a masterpiece of history mixed with Sci-Fi."

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Ernie Magawan has been bothered by bazaar recurring dreams of outer space and a green crystal. He's tempted to agree with his twin that he might be off in the head - until, during an archaeology dig, he finds the very crystal and realises he's on an mission that started before he was born. The stability of the universe depends on their success. He has to find and wake up six others like himself. On the way, he and his growing team rub shoulders with international terrorists, Neo Nazis, migrant farm workers, and a mystic rabbi; in a rollercoaster ride that takes them from the streets of Bangkok to the mountains of Afghanistan, to Jerusalem, to a nuclear silo in North Korea.

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Excerpt (part 1):

Prologue - The Zondon

The seven Zondon lounged about their craft, visible to one another by the light of the fast approaching stars that glistened in their compound eyes, barely outlining their robed exoskeletons. No matter which direction they faced, the clear walls gave them an unobstructed view of the galaxy.

Phondesh, sat more or less in the middle, facing forward, minding an array of crystals that floated in front of him. One of these, he moved this way or that every so often, or else turned it on its axis ever so slightly to change the course of the ship, to counteract the tidal pull of dark matter, or divert the course around dense areas, especially around the galaxy's centre.

The seven watched as more stars came within viewing range; some apparently jumping out from behind patches of dark matter (the illusion caused by dense gravity bending the light towards itself); then over there, a

nebula appearing to change shape like an amoeba, as their angle of view changed; closer by, the dance of a binary star with its black-hole-twin, producing a magnificent spiral of light; then more stars, more stellar clusters, and in the distance, a quasar blinking its ultraviolet rays at them.

Each star expressed its own uniqueness. Some shone a love for truth, others of knowledge, beauty, liberty and other virtues in varying measures. All shared an intense love of life in whatever form it exists. Thus knowing each star, no Zondon ever got lost in their part of the galaxy.

But this was not familiar space. All they could do here was gaze, while the stars appeared to look back at them with equal curiosity. There was a sense that they had paused in their conversations to take a look at the strange vessels that had intruded into their sector of the galaxy -- this one and the one in pursuit.

Even as they gazed, the seven were well aware of their situation. This was anything but an exploration party. It was a mission, the success of which would affect the well being of each star, indeed, of every planet and comet, and each moon and asteroid. Already the mission was in jeopardy.

Not being distracted by what was behind, Phondesh maintained his focus straight ahead. He noted a stellar cluster appearing and tilted the control crystal so that the ship changed direction and sped towards it.

The others followed his gaze.

Drovshi spoke up: 'I recognise none of those stars, not even from the knowledge caches.'

'I know of them only as markers,' responded Phondesh, again adjusting the course. 'My instructions indicate it is here we must pull into a wide orbit. If you note the arc of our present course, you should see it at the centre.'

'Ahh,' said both Drovshi and Draz at once.

'That star I know,' said Draz, 'from my training.'

'The knowledge caches contain extensive information about it,' said Zikh.

Indeed, it was the only star in the galaxy that didn't radiate a joy of life. By that alone, it was easy to pick out.

'But isn't that the forbidden star?' inquired Zhondri.

'Yes, Phondesh, are you sure we're doing the right thing?' said Drovshi. 'You know this solar system is supposed to be the exclusive domain of the infant species.'

'I don't understand it either,' said Phondesh. 'I was given these co-ordinates, and I know that this endeavour is the only hope we have to contain the evil. The crystal will tell us more.'

Tsav spoke up. 'We don't have much time. The Glaat vessel is gaining on us!'

Their attention was immediately riveted to the point of light some distance behind but steadily growing in size. It had now entered the same circular path as the Zondon vessel.

Just as each star revealed its nature in the light it shone, so did the Glaat ship. Those who had once been mesmerised by their spell but had broken free, were the quickest to recognise it.

Its aura flooded the compartment. The ratio between the ship's distance and its brilliance was an indicator that the pilot was a high ranking Glaat with powerful weapons at his disposal.

'I hope you know a way out of this,' said Zikh. 'It doesn't look good.'

'Yes,' said Phondesh calmly. 'It has come close - perhaps too close for us to carry out our original plan for the time being. But I was told this could happen. Our hope isn't in our strength, but Wisdom in its purest form.'

From a fold in his robe Phondesh produced a multifaceted gem and placed it in their midst. There it remained suspended, turning this way and that as though it had a mind of its own. It radiated a green, sometimes blue glint, depending on the angle, or which facet was giving off the glow.

'A knowledge cache,' said Tsav.

'Yes,' replied Phondesh, 'but much more.'

Indeed, it was. A typical knowledge cache is usually a simple cube, a cone or pyramid shaped crystal. This one was the shape of a Zondon compound eye on one side, and mostly flat on the other. It looked almost like a visual corrective device for ageing Zondon.

'This one carries not just knowledge, but also the Wisdom.'

Phondesh signalled for all to move closer.

'As you know,' he began, 'each of us was specifically chosen for this mission, and but for all of us working together and doing our part, it will fail. Now, the crystal, in its capacity as a knowledge cache, will instruct each of you what you must do, and how to do it. First, we must join our minds and look.'

The crystal began to emit a low hum and the green and blue light increased in intensity.

They joined their minds and looked. Their doubts were answered.

* * *

The brilliance was visible from the Glaat vessel. Dosh knew something was up. He took two pyramid shaped crystals and placed one on the scaly surface of his forehead. Then he pressed the other into the soft crystal wall of his craft where it submerged and worked its way to the outer surface. From there it went speeding towards the Zondon vessel.

Crystals of this sort, be they 'knowledge caches' or probes, Zondon or Glaat, are capable of conversion into other forms of existence, enabling speeds many times faster than a space ship.

Just as it approached the Zondon vessel, there was a green flash of light, and a small object left the ship streaking across the black expanse towards a star not a great distance away.

Why this particular star? wondered the Glaat.

Scanning the interior of the vessel, the probe spotted the Zondon, but now they were seven still bodies. No life could be found. No green brilliance.

What's the meaning of this?

After further scanning, he detected something - a powerful explosive device had been set to go off that would easily engulf both the Zondon ship along with his own. It couldn't be undone.

The probe sped back to its sender, and Dosh turned his ship around and began speeding in the opposite direction.

Another problem surfaced: The Zondon had programmed their ship to automatically follow the Glaat should he change direction. There was no way Dosh could get clear in time.

There was only one recourse. The probe...

Again, it sped off as fast as is possible for crystal to travel, following a course that would cross paths with the green one at its apparent destination, the forbidden solar system.

Straight ahead, was a blue and white planet, third from the central star.

There was no time to be lost -- not even to check on the green crystal. The clear crystal sped into the atmosphere, and began a quick search for a suitable host, zipping back and forth from continent to continent.

Here, he found a witch with a crystal ball. The use of a crystal was intriguing, but it wasn't good enough (it was no more than common crystal, entirely composed of the same primitive molecular structure throughout). There, he found a star gazer looking into the heavens. No. Then, a doctor with three comatose patients -- a good possibility here. Was there something better? Out of time -- the doctor would have to do.

The doctor was a good prospect; he wished for more power and wealth, and would do anything to get it. All Dosh had to do was make the probe appear to him and promise him all that and more. The doctor accepted, and

obediently placed the small crystal pyramid on his forehead. It was still hot from moving so fast within Earth's atmosphere so it burned his forehead. Though it smoked and sizzled he couldn't remove it. Then it began to melt through the surgical gloves.

The part of the deal the doctor wasn't told about was that once having gained entry, the Glaat was in control. The doctor was reduced to no more than a passenger inside his own body -- hardly better off than the comatose patients (though it would take a while for the doctor to fully realise this as Dosh would give him some leeway -- a honeymoon period -- and then the doctor's lusts would incline him to do anything the Glaat wanted anyway). Now, Dosh of Asvork had a human body. With it, came the doctor's memory (so he could carry on as though nothing strange had happened), a limited knowledge of the human body and fluency in about five Earth languages.

However, there was still more to be done.

A Glaat brain (and a Zondon one too, for that matter) has far more capacity than a human's. That's where the comatose patients came in. Immediately on gaining control of the doctor's body, he went first to one and then another of the patients, placing the crystal on their foreheads until all the knowledge known by Dosh of Asvork was downloaded into the brains of the doctor and his three patients.

Finally, the other crystal pyramid departed from the now lifeless body of the Glaat, taking with it two or three other crystal objects from the ship, and sped off, clearing the area just in the nick of time. All this had happened in the space of about ten minutes.

* * *

The explosion was visible to the naked human eye, if one happened to be looking in the right direction at that precise moment in time. A point of light appeared in a part of the sky where no stars are generally seen, stayed a few seconds and then went away.

The astrologer who had been bypassed by the Glaat probe saw it. The next day, his newspaper column said those born under Sagittarius would be in for a brilliant but short-lived flash of opportunity.

* * *

After the third orbit, scanning every inch of earth's surface, the crystal probe returned to Dosh without a single trace of the green crystal nor the seven lives that it contained.

Dosh had expected as much. It left only one possibility. This meant biding his time.

He'd make use of that time. He'd worm his way to the highest circles of power. He'd amass riches.

His human vessel was game -- for now, anyway.

Part I - The Crystal

Chapter 1

The ringing phone woke him. Daylight invaded his eyes, telling Ernie he should have been up long ago. He sighed as he stretched his arm towards the receiver. It had to be Eddie, his twin.

'Ernie! Look at the time!' It was him all right. 'The aliens abduct you again or what?'

Ernie mumbled an apology, slammed the receiver and began to pull on his clothes. Five minutes later, minus shave, he was outside his flat trying to wind up the old Toyota. Just as the starter began to die, the engine pattered to life and backfired. A timely tap on the accelerator kept it alive.

This was becoming a regular occurrence. He knew exactly what Eddie would say when he walked in:

The dreams again?

Yeah, the same dream again. The space ship, the stars, a green crystal, all that stuff.

This is ruining your life, Eddie would say. When are you going to get professional help?

Eddie was probably right. What brought on this plague of vivid dreams anyway? Why couldn't he just be normal like everyone else?

On the other hand, did he really want them to go away? They were almost a second reality. There were concepts that could keep him pondering for hours. Then, there were others that seemed to make more sense while dreaming than in real life.

Sitting in a cloud of exhaust fumes, his toe pumping to keep the old heap alive, while still twenty cars from the traffic signal, is an unmistakable feature of real life. What should have been a twenty-minute drive down Gardener Street, around the old customs house and over the River Liffey, was taking an hour in Dublin rush-hour traffic -- another reason to have started early.

At long last, he glided into one of the parking spaces allotted to his brother's flat cum office and removed the ignition key. The engine, just as reluctant to stop now as it had been to start, pattered a few more times and backfired before it died.

'I should'a walked,' sighed Ernie as he glanced at his watch. Not bothering to lock the car, he trudged to the front door.

The tiny plastic strip on the door read, 'Dr. Edward Magawan, Professor of Archaeology'.

Everything happened on cue: Eddie's usual tirade about getting his life together, his declaration that he was doing all in his power to help Ernie find a life, and why wouldn't Ernie at least co-operate, pull himself together and do something to help himself for a change.

Finally, he shoved Ernie a list of people to call, appointments to make and letters to write. Ernie took it to his side of the room while Eddie rushed off to do his second lecture of the morning.

What used to be a lounge had been partitioned, using bookshelves and file cabinets, into two workspaces. Ernie's side was away from the window that overlooked Trinity College -- all the better for concentration.

The first task was to do the email. He checked his brother's first, printed them out for him to read later, answered the previous day's as he'd been instructed, and then the ones from this morning that he already knew the answers to. Then he went on to his own.

He spent the mid-morning break answering his personal email, accompanied by a mug of the strong black stuff from his brother's espresso steamer. A couple were from old school chums he'd known in Bangkok. While their father's archaeology career had taken them all over the world, it

was this one particular group of former classmates that most interested him. Being the children of ex-pats, they were now mostly scattered all over America. Now, thanks to Internet and email they were back in touch.

Finally, it was on to the snail-mail and the phoning. There was enough today to keep his mind on earthly things -- or rather, under the earth.

A lot of his energy, of late, was spent both in negotiating with the Egyptian Department of Antiquities for permission, and in seeking a grant, for a proposed dig at the tomb of Thakanamen. It was a project that their father, Alec Magawan had started years ago, before the twins were born. It had to be called off just when they were beginning to make a breakthrough, because funding was suddenly cut. Later, when the timing would have otherwise been right, the war with Israel prevented them from going back. Though Alec had never been able to pick it up again, the project had lived in his heart ever since.

It had also been a life long dream of Ernie's. It was his desire to go there that finally inspired Ernie to complete his bachelors in Archaeology after changing his major four times times. Something about the place always caught his imagination. As a boy, his father's stories about that dig captivated him, even when they bored his brother.

In fact, it was Ernie who practically picked the project from a list of other candidates and talked Eddie into it. Eddie was reticent, but only because it wasn't his idea. As far as he was concerned, Ernie wasn't even supposed to see the list. But he did see its merits and decided to go for it.

Funny -- it was immediately after that, that the dreams started.

Today, it looked as though they were beginning to make headway. The more answers that came from the various powers-that-be, the faster things moved, and the less Ernie's thoughts lingered on his dreams. By late morning, after six cups of strong coffee and a shot of brandy, Ernie was as steady as any workhorse.

Now it was time to knock off for lunch. Eddie, just back from his lecture, was in a better frame of mind, other issues and achievements having clamoured for his attention so that any doubts about Ernie's sanity had gone the way of the morning mist.

If only night-time didn't come once a day.

'So it looks like the Egypt thing is going through,' said Ernie, as they sat in a nearby pub.

Eddie grunted something to the effect that it was a good thing.

'What does Pop have to say about all this?' asked Ernie, after a pause.

'Don't know. Haven't asked.'

'I should think he'd have something useful to say.'

'I have his notes, and all the photos,' grunted Eddie. 'That should give us a start.'

'But what about any personal observations that he didn't write down -- or maybe thought about later, or wasn't concrete -- you know -- feelings...'

'Oh Ernie, give it a rest! Look, if you really think it will make a smidgen of difference, pop up to Belfast yourself and ask him. Then you be the right brain of the expedition.'

'But he's longing to see you, Eddie. When's the last time you went? I don't think he even knows this is on!'

'C'mon, you know I have important things to do.'

'I don't think the old heap can make such a long trip.'

'Take mine then.' Eddie threw him the keys. 'Go on. It'll get your mind off flying saucers.'

So it was that Ernie took it on himself to visit Pop over the weekend, while Eddie did his 'more important things'.

Chapter 2

The drive from Dublin to Belfast is a pleasant one if one doesn't stick to the motorways. Being in no hurry, Ernie not only diverted to the small roads, but even took a few 'long-cuts' where the countryside looked especially serene.

This was good therapy. It gave the prospect of the upcoming digs and the dreams of space a chance to fight for dominance over his thoughts.

Other things were swirling around in between, such as, why Eddie had to make such a big deal of it all. What's wrong with a few daydreams? Why couldn't Ernie just be himself? Was he *that* self-destructive?

Twin brother indeed! How could two look so much alike and yet be so different, Ernie wondered, not for the first time, nor the last. Nor was he the only one who asked.

Despite the one only shaving every other day, wearing just what he felt comfortable in and letting his hair grow into a pony tail, while the other dressed immaculately in a business suit and went regularly to the hair stylist; nothing could hide the fact that they were twins. So identical they were, even their parents often had problems telling them apart. There was even doubt who was born Ernie and who, Eddie.

But looks were one thing; personality and the path one took were another matter entirely.

Both had followed -- or tried to follow -- in the footsteps of their father. The one who followed was Edward. The one who tried, of course, was Ernie. Had Ernie not managed to finish his Bachelor's degree when he did, he would have had to sit through lectures by his own brother, by now, a Ph.D.!

After a series of county roads through Pointspass, Scarva and Lurgan, he got on to the motorway near Lough Neagh. That took him to the turn-off that led to the outer ring road, and followed the familiar route that led to the Braniel housing estates.

His parent's house was on a little lane facing the golf course. Behind it, beyond a few more lanes were rolling hills and farms, and some of Ernie's favourite walks.

He'd make his return trip early Monday morning, just so he'd have time for at least one long walk.

Mum and Pop were, of course, overjoyed to see him. Mum lost no time in arranging the teapot on the coffee table, surrounded by biscuits, cakes, tarts, scones, butter, jam, leftover apple pie and a few Kitkat bars.

'I don't know if Eddie told you or not, Pop,' began Ernie, as he poured his second cup, 'but we're almost set to start the digging at Thakanamen's Tomb.'

'Well! You don't say!' said Pop. 'Marie, did you hear that?'

'Yes, Alec love, that's where we made twins, so it is.' She said it with a tone of voice no different than had she said she baked a cake.

'Pardon me?' said Ernie.

Alec came to the rescue: 'Your mum and I were there exactly nine months before you and Eddie were born, so we were.'

'Oh, it was a romantic evening,' interjected Marie.

'Indeed it was.'

Ernie wasn't used to hearing his mother talk like this. Was old age finally creeping up on her?

'The stars were all out, and we were sitting on the edge of the mound looking over the desert, and I was just thinking, wouldn't it be nice if we could have twins.'

'A crazy idea, I thought,' said Alec. 'No one on either side of our family has ever had twins, so you know what chances there was of that.'

'... And then there was a vivid green shooting star...'

'I thought it was more a blue colour...'

'No, it was green love, and it left a tail clear across the sky, so it did, and I thought I saw it turn and come towards us before it disappeared ...'

'... which is ridiculous of course,' said Alec. 'Shooting stars don't turn. But anyway, I said, "Make a wish".'

'... and I said, "Twins".'

'... and I said, "My dear! No one on either side of our family has ever had twins".'

'... and I said, "But you said make a wish, Love, and I did!"'

'I, knowing you can't change a woman's mind, said, "We can always try, though, can't we!"'

'So we went into the caravan and we made twins, so we did!' finished Marie, speaking as though that were the standard procedure.

'So we did, indeed. The next day, word came that the funding had been cut off, so it did, so we had to pack up and come back to Ireland. Then, of course, there was the war with Israel, and all sorts of other things, so we never did go back.'

'Yes, and it's such a pity. You were so interested in that part of the world.'

'Was I?' said Ernie.

'Indeed you were,' answered Mum. 'Why, once, when you were five, we found you in Pop's study, so we did, standing on a chair looking at the globe. Your finger was on South-west Egypt, exactly where the excavation was. You had one eye open, close to the globe as you turned it slowly, as though you were an aeroplane coming in towards it.'

Pop added, 'You did indeed, but the uncanny thing was, you'd never been shown how to read a map.'

'After that, you seemed to have an interest in ancient Egypt.'

This wasn't exactly the sort of information Ernie had in mind when he proposed talking to Pop about the digs. In fact it didn't help him concentrate on the digs at all.

Apart from that there were no striking observations, save that Alec thought that had they been given one more week, they would have found a door or a passage into the underground chambers. Abdul Kalif, he said, could help them with that. He had spotted something about the site that could have been of utmost value had they been allowed to continue.

'Uncle Abdul?'

'Yes. You'd remember Uncle Abdul. He visited us several times when we lived in Bangkok, so he did.'

'Is he still about?'

'He is indeed, and he's still in the business, so he is. If you can obtain his services, he'd be a great asset.'

The walk the next day was pleasant. This time, he wandered down country roads turning here and there until he came to a hotel. He had a pint in the hotel pub, and then walked back. All the way, he tried to focus on the trip to Egypt, but his mind kept returning to the green shooting star. There was a slight tinge of familiarity about it that made him uncomfortable.

Why did mum have to bring it up, anyway?

Was it just a shooting star, or did it really turn and come towards them? Of course it didn't! It was an illusion, probably caused by a layer of hot air over the desert sand.

Then why did it bother him?

He didn't know. It just did.

When he got back to the house, he buried his doubts in such a plate of sausage, bacon, egg and potato furls as only his mother could fry.

Early Monday morning he started back for Dublin.

Chapter 3

To: Beta@xx.com
From: Ernie <ErnieMag@xx.com>
Subject: Re: long time no see

Hello Beta,

Beta wrote:

- > It's really great being back in
- > touch like this. You say you're
- > working with your brother? What
- > are you doing? I heard you were
- > archaeologists like your dad.

Ernie answered:

- > That's right. We're currently
- > trying to get things together to
- > go to Egypt. There's a tomb of a
- > high priest that my dad began
- > digging at but had to discontinue.
- > That was just before we were born.
- >
- > Have you heard much from any other
- > 'Salemities' - like Sam or Boz?
- >

Beta answered:

- > Sam is working for the city transit
- > service in Seattle. He started there
- > driving a bus, and now has an office
- > job, married his boss ...
- > Boz o'Brian is still in Thailand and
- > has a Thai wife ... My sister got her
- > degree in sociology ...

Ernie answered:

- > Things are coming together for the
- > dig so we should be going to Egypt in a
- > couple of weeks.
- >

Beta answered:

- > That sounds exciting. Egypt is one of
- > the places I haven't been to yet.
- > You'll have to give a full story
- >

Ernie's reply:

Do you remember Uncle Abdul, whom my dad brought to the school at Salem House? He's the one who gave us the lecture on Egypt on our special Saturday class. Anyway, he's been back in Egypt for quite some time, still working along with different archaeological projects. I've contacted him and it looks like he'll be with us on this dig. Now all we need is a rich old bloke who has pots and pots of

money and doesn't know what to do with
it all, to fund the digs. I really hope
it works out.

cheers
ernie

End email

Two weeks before kick-off a rich bloke was found, permissions were granted, and volunteers began coming out of the woodwork. During the final week, Ernie managed to obtain visas for all of them through the Egyptian consulate, make hotel reservations, and arrange for pick-ups.

Two a.m., the morning they were to depart, Ernie heaved a sigh of relief, picked up everything they'd need, placed it in his folder, put that into his shoulder bag along with his notebook computer, and went home to wash up before leaving for the airport for their six o'clock flight.

He went out quietly so as not to awaken Eddie. He'd give him a wake-up call later.

At home, he took a shower, threw a few belongings into his big backpack along with his sleeping bag and called the taxi company.

The taxi on its way, Ernie took his backpack and shoulder bag, locked the flat and went to the bottom of the stairs to wait. He made sure his passport was in the pouch about his neck under his clothing, and his palm-top was in his inside coat pocket.

He was early, but thought it better to get to the airport first, and then maybe catch a few winks.

The taxi arrived. On the way, he gave Eddie a wake-up call.

The airline flight counter opened a few minutes after Ernie arrived, so he went to get his boarding pass. He sent his backpack through with the checked in luggage. The gate hadn't been assigned yet, so he found a seat near the centre of the departure area.

He couldn't sleep, so he got up and walked about the shops, looking at all the duty free goods for sale. It was nice to look even if he never had enough money for things like that (the notebook computer was originally his brother's, who had bought a nicer one, and the Palm Pilot was a birthday present from Pop).

He soon got tired of looking and found a seat. He went through his bag to double check that he had everything -- as though knowing something was missing would be of any use now that it was too late to go back for it.

Everything was there.

After some more walking about, the gate assignment flashed on the monitor, so he went to the appropriate waiting area and sat down.

He still couldn't sleep, so his mind went from this to that -- to the digs in Egypt -- to his dad's opinion that in a week they would have found the underground chamber -- to the green (or was it blue) shooting star.

Close to boarding time, he gave Eddie another call. He was checking in.

He appeared just as it was time to board.

They recognised a few of the other workers for the digs. Having all checked in separately, they sat in different parts of the plane.

They took off. Breakfast was served.

As the hostesses collected the empty breakfast trays, the fatigue of the past day or two and the sleepless night caught up, and Ernie dozed off.

Maybe it was because he was so tired, or that he was flying, and the last thought in his mind was the green shooting star. He dreamed he was a shooting star, flying over desert, looking for a place to rest.

Though the dream lasted only a few seconds, he was acutely aware of

every passing millisecond, and took in every detail of the landscape below. He wasn't alone. There were six others with him. They came to a mound with a shallow pit dug into the top exposing a stone marker. He recognised it immediately as middle Groount architecture. On the far edge of the mound, two living beings were seated, facing away from them. He took note that they were humans, natives to this planet. Around about was an encampment of some sort. Though he saw it in vivid detail, he could just barely discern the function of each item. It struck him as being horribly quaint, but that was to be expected, as the residents of this planet were known to be a primitive race.

It only took him a split second to make all these observations. Now they were coming down towards one side of the marker, into the dug out area around it. As they descended, the dust and small rocks were blown out from beneath them until a bare rock floor was exposed. There, a square panel opened for them, and they went down in.

They were now inside a long passage. They proceeded in the direction away from the stone marker, sloping downward along a path with several angles to the left and to the right, until they entered a chamber. Inside were sculpted images and other items, some made from a yellowish metallic substance. Though the passage and chamber reflected middle Groount craftsmanship, the sculpted objects did not. He could tell by the way the yellow metal was used that it was considered a commodity of utmost value -- probably rare on this planet.

In the middle of the chamber was a pedestal on which stood a sculpture of something that looked part human, but had a different sort of head. As they approached, it slid backwards out of the way until it fell off. They came to rest in its place.

Suddenly, he felt a release of his innermost being from whatever it was he was in. It was a sensation of being reduced, or stripped down, as though suddenly finding himself naked, not only of clothing, but of everything else that had ever been a part of his being. He was now no more than a particle of dust.

He and the six others flew upward and outward, and looked back at the pedestal.

There they saw a multifaceted crystal, now glowing green, now blue as the source of light moved about inside among the various facets.

An air pocket woke him up.

'Oh God!' he thought. 'Not the dreams!'

He went over the details of this one -- first the primitive looking encampment.

A primitive encampment?! Those were caravans and tents, three Land-rovers and a lorry! How could they have looked so primitive?

Then he remembered the two humans.

They looked like none other than...

'*Oh God!*' he said, slapping his own face with both hands.

'You -- er -- forgot something?' enquired the passenger next to him.

'Oh, no -- er -- sorry,' he said. Then he got up, and walked, shaking, to the toilets. He didn't really need to 'go'. He just wanted to get completely by himself.

One of them was vacant. He went in and sat down with his head in his hands.

Why hadn't he recognised them? Then it dawned on him. If the dream were indeed that of the green shooting star, he would never have met them yet.

Of course, that would make sense in real life, but for goodness sakes, this was a dream! How could he dream about seeing his own parents in such vivid detail, and yet not know them, as though they had never met? And

since when does one make the observation, 'These are humans, they are native to this planet'? In a science fiction film, maybe, but *be real!*

As vivid and recurring as they were before, at least the dreams had never intruded into the real world in the way this one did.

He finally gained his composure and walked back to his seat. The passenger next to him only gave him a funny look as he sat down, but said nothing.

Try as he might, he couldn't sleep any more for the rest of the trip.

Chapter 4

The plane landed, and taxied to the terminal where all the passengers got off.

All the usual things happened that do when one arrives at a foreign destination. They presented their passports, they collected their bags, they checked through customs. Ernie's presence was needed, along with the letters of permission and other paperwork for the equipment being checked through, so his mind was back to the business at hand, and off crystals, space ships and shooting stars.

This time, he wanted to forget.

The first few days were spent in Cairo, going here and there, and finishing off pieces of business that they couldn't do from Dublin.

Abdul met them in the lobby of Hotel Beirut the day after their arrival. They had lunch, during which Abdul recounted his fond memories of their father. Since Ernie's role on the team was to see to the logistics, he had a good reason to linger and chat, as Abdul was to be the resource man. But his private reason was the fondness he still maintained for him since boyhood.

He found himself still addressing him as 'Uncle Abdul'.

Eddie had also been fond of him as a child, but now he was an adult, and saw everything through thoroughly grown-up eyes. In his humble opinion, old Abdul was really no fonder of their dad than every other archaeologist he had worked with, but wanted the brownie points.

On the afternoon of the third day, the fleet of double cab four-wheel-drive pick-up trucks set off for the farther hinterlands of Egypt. Abdul drove the lead car and Ernie sat with him in the front seat.

By driving all night, stopping only for a three-hour rest, they shortened the two-day trip to a day and a half. Ernie slept most of the night while Abdul drove.

When Ernie was awake, Abdul managed to keep him occupied in conversation. He asked more about Alec and told Ernie a few stories he remembered about him. Things went just fine until late the second day. The closer they came to their destination, the more familiar the landscape began to look.

Ernie had never been here in his life, yet, it looked familiar.

'Have any movies ever been filmed out here?' he asked Abdul.

'None, as far as I know. This is too far away from Cairo for most production companies. They prefer the pyramids. Why do you ask?'

'I don't know -- it just seems like a good spot to shoot a film, I guess.'

'Maybe you uncover the tomb of Thakanamen, and that will be a good background to shoot. I can then recommend it to the next film crew that comes,' said Abdul.

'I'm sure they'd want to build a nicer road out to it though,' said Ernie.

'That, they would indeed.'

Even the road was familiar.

Now, he remembered the dream he had on the flight. The details of it were vivid, down to the most minute feature. Was this the road that crossed the path of the shooting star on a diagonal course?

He looked in the direction he calculated the shooting star would have gone. There, sure enough, was a large mound.

'Er -- is that it?' he asked Abdul.

'Yes indeed. But we must go around it first. There is an old trail that we turn on. You must have seen it from a photograph?'

'No,' said Ernie, almost under his breath. 'Eddie never showed me any of the photographs.'

'Hmmm!' grunted Abdul with interest.

Ernie was now wishing he had. He had meant to ask for them, but had

been too busy with the other details. Had he looked, that would have at least provided an escape hatch to reality, which he needed right now. The only other explanation altered his perception of things too much.

They came to the turn off. Abdul manoeuvred the vehicle carefully onto it and put it into four-wheel drive. Then they slowly and painfully made their way.

Sections of the trail had been covered during various sand storms. The parts that were visible were almost no trail at all.

When they were sufficiently close to the mound, Abdul stopped.

'This is a good place to set up,' he said.

'Why don't we set up on that side, like Pop did?' Ernie asked before he realised what he was saying.

'You must have studied the photos down to the smallest detail!' said Abdul.

He started the car again, and they drove over to the side Ernie suggested. All the others followed.

Ernie managed to keep himself busy enough with the setting up of camp not to think too much about the familiarity of the situation. However, he found himself directing vehicles and caravans into the same arrangement the earlier ones had occupied 30 years before.

Abdul continued to be amazed.

All the while, Eddie and some of the others were inspecting the mound.

Ernie put off his first visit as long as he could. Finally, after a meal under the big canopy, Eddie invited him up to look, and Ernie had no recourse.

While they walked up to the mound, Ernie tried to brace himself for what he was about to see by convincing his own psyche that perhaps he had, after all looked at some of the photos. Maybe Pop had shown them to him. He couldn't remember.

Most of the pit, except for a bit of the taller monument, had been buried during various sand storms. What was left did look uncomfortably familiar. At least Ernie was relieved that it did look different, not that this was a logical thing to be glad about.

That evening the whole team gathered around a fire while Eddie gave a few words about the history of the dig, and what they were to expect. Abdul was also asked to add his perspective on the excavation in the days of Alec Magawan. Most of what he shared was straightforward technical talk.

But hadn't Pop said Abdul spotted a clue where the door was?

Finally, it was Ernie's turn to give guidelines as to the living arrangements, and where to find what, and who to ask for whatever.

After that, people sat and talked into the evening, one by one going off to bed, until Ernie was left alone, nursing a cup of hot chocolate. After another refill he gazed at the stars for a while. Then he looked over towards the mound.

Was there a slight greenish halo over the mound, or was it the lights playing tricks with his fatigued eyes?

What was that low hum?

Probably the voltage regulator for the camp electrical supply.

After a while, he went into the caravan, which he shared with his brother, and went to bed.

He managed to go right to sleep.

Around two a.m. he woke up on dreaming that he heard someone say something he understood as, 'Everything depends on the success of this mission.'

The -- what? Who said that? What did it mean?

The more he pondered it, the more confusing it seemed, because it was said in a language he didn't even know.

Then how did he understand it?

While trying to remember the sound of the words, he fell asleep. Soon he was dreaming again.

He was with a group of others like him. He said, 'I know that this endeavour is the only hope of containing the evil.'

He had an impression of intense evil stretching its claws over the entire universe. He was sitting where he had that evening, looking at the stars. One by one they were disappearing, as though a dark clawed hand were stretching over the sky.

He was sitting near the fire with his cup of hot chocolate, but at the same time he was among the group of whatever they were -- both places at the same time.

Someone was asking him, 'What's the plan?'

'The crystal will tell us more. We're out of time. We must consult the crystal,' he was answering. Then he produced a green glowing crystal.

From where he was sitting with his cup, he looked at the mound. There, he saw a distinct greenish halo, and heard a loud hum. It wasn't the voltage regulator.

Now, he was awake, sitting bolt upright in bed in a cold sweat.

There was no hum -- only an impression of having just heard it.

He looked out the window, from which he could see the mound. All he saw was the light of the full moon shining on the sand. All the stars could still be seen.

Finally he fell into a more peaceful sleep.

Chapter 5

The next day, work began on the mound. Those who were already experienced started digging carefully in their assigned spots while Eddie trained the newer ones.

Most of the work for the first day or so involved removing the sand that had accumulated in the last 30 years. Then, they could proceed with that from the previous three millennia.

Not that this was any of Ernie's concern. His role involved the day to day needs of the very much alive people on this side of the ground, not the dead priests and their attendants, and whatever else lay immediately below -- emphasis on 'whatever else'. He intended to keep it that way.

By the third day, a routine had been established. They were all up at first light so they could get as much done as possible while it was still cool. Breakfast was after sun-up, and that was a simple affair of biscuits or Danish pastries, or bread and jam, downed with tea and coffee. There was also a mid morning tea break, and then lunch at noon. That was followed by a long siesta. Not a lot was expected during the hot afternoon. The early evening was when work picked up again in earnest, and that went on till sunset.

Though Eddie coaxed, Ernie remained unmoved at his post in the common area under the canopy.

'What's with you?' Eddie asked, as they were finishing their tea following the afternoon siesta, about the third day. 'You act like you're afraid of the mound! Don't have a fear of mummies do you?'

'I don't know. I guess it just isn't my thing,' Ernie said.

'What is your thing then? When are you going to sort yourself out? You've got to settle down to something, don't you! And we could use your help up there.'

With that, he got up and walked towards the mound.

'All right, back to work you lot!'

Ernie poured himself some more tea, and took another biscuit. He certainly wasn't about to tell Eddie about the latest twist in his dreams -- not after he had run roughshod over all earlier attempts at opening up.

He wasn't even sure that he understood his own feelings.

On one hand, there was the prospect of finding something bigger than he felt he could cope with -- if his dreams were to be believed, that is.

On the other, if his dreams were indeed to be believed, the equilibrium of the entire universe was at stake pending the completion of some mission or other. That rather put the pressure on.

But what if his dreams weren't to be believed? Then there would be nothing under the ground but a mummy and a few artefacts. That consideration put weight on the side of taking a look to find out.

He knew he would have to have a look sooner or later. He just wasn't prepared to do it right now.

Abdul came and sat down across from him, and poured himself a cup.

So far, he had said nothing about the clue Pop had mentioned. Ernie took the initiative.

'Uncle Abdul, when I talked to Pop about coming here, he said that on the last day of the digging, you spotted something that could be a clue to where the entrance is.'

'Ahh, yes.' He sat in silence for a moment.

Ernie wasn't inclined to rush him.

'Ahh, yes,' he said again. 'But really, it was the night before that I saw it.'

'The night before?'

'Yes indeed. The night before. I've told this to no one but your father. He was a very understanding man, your father. He understood deep spiritual things. When I told him, he just nodded his head and didn't say anything. I

didn't know what he thought of it until just now. The fact that he told you indicates that he took me seriously.'

'What was it you saw?' Ernie asked.

'You seem more like your father than Edward. Perhaps you might understand it -- or, if not, at least you'll not think me a raving loony. On the night before we were told to cease digging, I saw the whole mound radiating a blue light. I went up to look. What I saw was that in front of the central monument, just about two meters, sand and dirt had been blown away as though a powerful wind had blown downward. I could see the stone floor, and there, I saw a square of light, as though something were inside the tomb shining through the cracks of a square slab. I knew immediately it was a sign from Allah. But it wasn't Allah's will that we should open it. The next day, we were told we had no more funding for the digs, but I knew that one day, I would have the chance to come back. I had thought of telling this to your brother, but he isn't like your father. He's not inclined to believe things like that.'

Ernie just sat there with his forehead in his hands.

'Are you alright, Ernie? You look pale!'

'I - I think there's something I must tell you, Uncle Abdul.'

'Yes?'

'This might take a while.'

Abdul refilled both teacups.

'You know, the day we came,' began Ernie, 'when it seemed like I knew where everything ought to be?'

'Go on.'

'I really hadn't ever looked at any of the photographs of the previous digs.'

Then, Ernie went on to tell about some of his earlier dreams, and then of his father's and mother's account of the green shooting star, and then of his dream while on the aeroplane.

Abdul's rapt attention had the effect of making Ernie's words flow that much more freely. Finally, he told of the dreams of the last few nights. When he was finished, Abdul was ecstatic.

'You are on a mission from Allah!' he said. 'I think they have dug almost down to the stone floor. When they do, I think you must go to see if the door will open. I will go with you if you wish.'

'Yes, I would definitely want you to go too.'

Abdul put his hand out and grabbed Ernie's. 'Don't be afraid, Ernie. Allah will be with you. I will go with you too. I have waited all my life for this. I knew this day must come.'

Having got it off his chest made Ernie feel a lot better. Also Abdul's enthusiasm about the whole thing gave him courage.

Later in the afternoon, Ernie found it in himself to walk up to the mound and observe the digging. More and more features had been uncovered, and now it looked unmistakably familiar.

Some of the foreboding came back again, but this time he met it head on.

He walked to the spot about two meters in front of the monument. There was as much sand covering it now as he remembered there being before the meteor landed in his dream. He stood there gazing at the spot for a moment, and then went to get a spade.

It took just a few minutes to get down to the stone floor. He cleared a spot a bit larger than what he remembered the opening to be. There were no cracks nor anything that suggested a door of any sort.

Strange.

He cleared away more of the area around about. Then, he got down on his hands and knees and tried to feel for any seams, blowing the dust away in spots.

Just smooth solid rock.

Finally, he went back to the mess tent.

Before turning in that night, he said to Abdul discreetly, 'I cleared off the spot in front of the monument, but I found no door.'

'Allah will show you the door,' said Abdul.

Chapter 6

Ernie was awakened by another dream.

He had seen himself standing in front of the monument, looking at the bare spot in the pavement he had cleared. It was night, and as he looked, the outline of a square appeared in the pavement in luminous green. And then, he opened his mouth and spoke:

'Vratzan Ghish Phondesh.'

As he said it, the stone panel outlined by the green light began to move so that it sloped downward, away from him. Then, all at once, the whole panel slid into a slot along the far side of the newly opened door. Underneath, was a passage dimly visible by a greenish bluish light.

That's when Ernie woke up.

He could clearly remember the words he had spoken. There was even a familiarity about them, especially the last word, 'Phondesh'.

After sitting up for a while, he decided to get up and walk to the mound. He put on a jacket and went quietly out.

Halfway there, he decided he should awaken Abdul first. He walked back to the encampment and up to one of the other caravans and tapped on the window next to where he knew Abdul slept.

The window opened a crack.

'I'm going up to the mound. Want to come?'

In a few seconds Abdul was out the door and they walked to the mound together.

Having Abdul along was good in a way Ernie hadn't realised. The security guard stationed in front of the mound would have inhibited anything happening out of the ordinary.

Abdul walked up to him and said something in his ear, and the guard walked good-naturedly to the canopy.

Together, they climbed to the top, and then down into the pit. There, they stood in silence, both gazing at the same spot on the stone surface.

It looked just as plain in the light of the moon as it had in the late afternoon.

'I saw the door here in my dream just now,' he whispered to Abdul.

'That's also where I saw it 30 years ago,' he answered.

Nothing happened. They just stood there.

It felt like any other night. No magic -- just the coldness of the desert.

Maybe, Ernie thought, he should give it up and go back to bed. But Abdul still stood next to him, unmoving.

Maybe he could just try the words he heard in his dream.

'Vratzz -- er...' there was a frog in his throat.

'Pardon?' responded Abdul.

Ernie cleared his throat and tried again.

'V-vratzan Ghish Phondesh.'

At first it appeared nothing happened.

They couldn't hear anything, but soon they both knew something was different. Then they were aware of a low hum that was becoming gradually more audible. It was the same sound he had heard before.

Then, the luminous outline of a square appeared in the pavement.

Now, the hum was plainly audible, sounding like a high voltage generator, but at a low tone.

As they watched, the stone panel sloped downward away from them until it slid into the slot, just like in the dream. Inside, there was the passage, dimly lit by the greenish bluish light.

The floor of the passage could be seen below.

Abdul said, 'You must go. I will wait for you here.'

Ernie grabbed two opposite sides of the hole, and dropped himself down.

It was a longer jump than he had expected. It would be a challenge to get out again -- another good reason for having brought Abdul.

He walked in the direction away from the monument, just as he had seen in his dream on the aeroplane. There were the same twists and turns.

He was just beginning to wonder how the light could shine around so many corners, when he found himself at the entrance of the chamber. The source of the light was ahead of him, on the pedestal in the middle of the room. It was a crystal as big as the palm of his hand, and it glowed just like in his dreams.

By the greenish bluish light Ernie could see the whole room clearly. It was an unusual arrangement for a burial chamber. Everything was centred about the pedestal in an unnatural order: a statue of Ra on the ground, as though it had fallen off; the gold objects set here and there; and the sarcophagus over against the wall, as though grudgingly ceding the position of honour to the pedestal.

But right now, that seemed like meaningless trivia. The only thing that mattered was the crystal. He reached out and took it.

As he retraced his steps to the door, the glowing of the crystal grew less and less. As it dimmed, so did the mystique of it. By the time he reached the moon lit area just below the door, his mind was more occupied with the chamber and its contents than the crystal.

In one blow, they had just about accomplished the purpose of the entire expedition.

Abdul gave him a hand up.

He showed him the crystal, which now shone only a faint greenish glint out of one of its facets, which could just as well have been a reflection of the moonlight.

'Allah will show you what you must do next,' said Abdul.

He put the crystal in his pocket.

So, this was the job of an archaeologist, was it? A treasure hunting adventure? Did 'X' mark the spot?

He could just picture Indiana Jones suddenly popping out of nowhere, saying, 'That belongs in a museum!'

But this was no museum piece. He tried to imagine it in a glass case, marked, 'Crystal from outer space that arrived in 1967, bearing archaeologists pre-existent soul, to save the galaxy.' No, the museum pieces were still in the burial chamber.

'Why don't we wake Eddie up,' suggested Ernie. 'He'll be happy about the passage anyway.'

So they did, explaining to him that Ernie hadn't been able to sleep, so he had strolled to the mound and, sort of by accident, opened the door.

'So, what was all the talk about, "...this isn't my thing..."'? said Eddie, as they peered down into the passage. 'And what about the mummies? You'll get bitten one of these days if you're not careful!'

Ernie felt as though he'd been bitten by something far worse than a mummy, but he kept that to himself.

Together, they explored the passage and the burial chamber. Eddie was pleased with the findings. For one thing, it was unlike any other burial chamber he'd ever seen. It would make a thoroughly intriguing study, maybe even an article in *National Geographic*.

For the next few days, they worked as two teams, one photographing and mapping the inside, and categorising the artefacts in the chamber, while the other continued uncovering the exterior.

As for Ernie, he had no more dreams the rest of that night, nor the next. In fact, he could have almost forgotten about the crystal altogether, except for what happened the following night.

Chapter 7

Ernie didn't know why he had such a hard time getting to sleep. There wasn't a lot on his mind, and he hadn't eaten anything unusual. He usually had no trouble sleeping at all. Even excessive coffee and tea didn't keep him awake, and he hadn't even had much of that.

Maybe that was it. He needed a cup of tea to get him to sleep.

He decided to get out and sit under the stars.

While looking for a pair of warm socks, his hand fell on the crystal. Maybe he'd take it along and get a good look at it. He hadn't really paid attention to it at all since finding it.

That fact alone puzzled him. One would think that after so many remarkable dreams about the same thing, confirmed by actually finding it, one would be obsessed. But this was like something he had known all along, but had forgotten.

Dressed in a warm coat, carrying a high power torch, the crystal in the pocket, Ernie walked out into the moonlight. He gave a friendly wave to the security guard, who waved back. Then he went to sit in the common area under the canopy out of sight of the guard.

He set the torch on the table, and lit the candle in the candlestick with the matches sitting nearby. The torch was better for examining the crystal.

It was not cut like a gem one finds in a jewellery shop. It was an odd shape; not symmetrical, rather flat, no two facets alike, and a large completely flat area on one side of it. If anything, it resembled a giant tear-drop. A few of the facets were triangular, some rectangular and diamond shaped, and there were polygons of any number of sides. Not all the surfaces were flat either. Two or three were round, and stuck out like a smooth gem set into the larger crystal. Some of the facets reflected green light from the torch, others blue, and one or two, red and amber. Now and then, he thought he saw another colour or two he couldn't place.

Ernie held it up and looked through the flat side towards the light.

Now, it was even stranger. There were colours and shapes one wouldn't expect to find. Some were changing as he watched.

There was at least one colour that couldn't be placed on the spectrum. As much as he tried, he couldn't remember anything he had ever seen of that colour.

He couldn't make any sense of it. What did this have to do with the equilibrium of the universe? What about the mission? .

What was that phrase he had said the other night? He could still remember words clearly.

'Vratzan Ghish Phondesh,' he muttered to himself. What did that word mean anyway -- especially that last bit, 'Phondesh'? There was something strangely familiar about it.

Suddenly he was aware of a low hum, the same as the other night when the door opened. It was coming from the crystal. It had started the instant he muttered the words.

The crystal was beginning to glow, now a brilliant green, or an aquamarine, now a shade of blue, and a few other colours as the light inside seemed to alternate between facets.

Ernie looked into the flat surface. Now, he saw colours and shapes changing as though they were saying something.

Suddenly, they weren't just colours and shapes. Something in a forgotten portion of his brain was translating it into knowledge.

This was a knowledge cache, he suddenly knew, designed for human use. It was especially made to facilitate the mission. The centrepiece of the strategy required that the participants put on humanity to take advantage of the unique strengths inherent in that species.

He also knew that to make full use of it, he had to place the flat surface of the crystal on his forehead. By doing so, he would begin to know as much of the mission as he did before he first arrived.

Ernie did do, and the transmission of knowledge suddenly increased a hundredfold. With it, came a consciousness he never had as a human.

He suddenly knew from looking at the table he was leaning on, all the different elements that composed it, even the atoms, and the sub-atomic particles that were in it. He saw each one individually, and yet he saw the table as a whole. Somehow, his brain was big enough to take it all in.

He looked at the wooden candle stand, and he could see the dead DNA, the atoms, and the sub-atomic particles. He knew how they composed themselves when the same piece of wood was still alive, and how they were when it was a sapling. It looked like something that remembered having once been alive, and understood how to hold life.

He knew this, he realised, because even though the crystal was on his forehead, he was really looking at these things through the different facets of the crystal, making up a compound eye. Each receptor of a Zondon eye is capable of picking out a different property of matter, whether it be the colour, the shape, the activity of the protons, the electrons, the neutrons, the zoetrons, the spondrectons, any atomic particle for that matter, as well as various energy forces.

He also knew a whole world of wisdom, and even some memory of what went on before. He also understood a language. He hadn't just learned it, it had been with him all along. He knew that the words he had spoken, *Vratzan Ghish Phondesh*, were not magic words, but were from a language he knew. It meant, *Phondesh reporting for the mission to contain the evil*. He also knew his own name was Phondesh.

The stone itself, he knew, was not a simple crystal composed of molecules of the same compound, as crystals known on earth. Rather, it could be better described as one giant molecule. Each atom, indeed, each subatomic particle that composed it played its own role, while joining with others in close proximity to perform group functions, as switches, processors, storage capacitors, and receptors and senders of various energy fields. Some of these were capable of interaction with the human brain. They both received and sent signals to various parts of the brain, including the portions not normally used in human thought, and linked those parts with the conscious thought processes. Thus, in effect, the crystal was equal to a million supercomputers. Being crystal, the processing medium was light rather than electronic impulses.

He took the crystal away from his forehead, and suddenly, he was no more than Ernie, holding a large gem. He looked at the table and could see nothing but metal and plastic.

It was as though he had only dreamed he was Phondesh, and that he could understand sub-atomic structure. Try as he might, it was like trying to remember a fading dream.

He put the crystal back on his forehead, and immediately it all returned. Now, it was almost like his human existence was only a dream and he had awakened to everyday Zondon reality, only he remembered his humanness too vividly to dismiss it as a dream.

He looked at the stars, and he could see the happy light they radiated. One star gave off a passion for freedom. There was also a love of truth and an appreciation of the individual uniqueness of the others, but freedom was the quality that shone the most brightly.

He focused on another star. While looking at that Ernie felt hope and encouragement welling up inside. Another one shone an intense desire for justice. The affect was contagious. Ernie could almost feel anger begin to rise up. Something inside him said this was good, but that he must keep it in

balance with what the other stars radiated.

The fourth star he looked at quickly became his favourite. It flooded his soul with a similar feeling to that of a child sitting in his mother's arms, or holding his father's hand. Even though this was a thoroughly human sensation, he had forgotten it in the rush and strain of acting like a grown-up. He sat for a while gazing, as the feelings filtered through the crystal into his human emotions. His eyes began to go damp, so he thought it better to look at something else.

He looked at the moon.

In stark contrast to all the stars, it was sad. Again, Ernie wanted to weep, but in a sad way.

Why was the moon sad?

There was a longing for something to be set right, which long ago, had gone terribly wrong. So intense was the longing it made Ernie want to double over and groan.

He looked quickly back at the star that had shone hope. Now, it was speaking in a language near to that of the colours and shapes Ernie had seen inside the crystal, but not as distinct.

Help will come...all things will be restored, it was saying.

He looked at the star that radiated a passion for justice.

You are part of the help...begin restoring...do something before the evil infects us as well...

Then Ernie remembered the dream he had the night they first arrive, of the evil overtaking the heavens like a black shadowy hand.

To maintain his equilibrium, Ernie looked back at the fourth star, which said, *You are loved more than you will ever know, but now, begin to know it more than you ever have before.*

He was struck by the fact that, far from being a mushy sentimental feeling, it made him feel better prepared to face the challenge being set before him.

Again, he took the crystal down from his forehead.

Now, the moon looked just as it always did, and so did the stars. But his insides still reverberated with their message -- that he was loved, there was hope, and that he was on a mission.

Then, he remembered that the colours and shapes inside the crystal had also said he would begin to know his part in the mission.

Chapter 8

He put the crystal back on his forehead, but this time he didn't look at anything. He just began remembering.

With the crystal on his forehead, he could discern many things that would be impossible to recount here, so the following is what he remembered of his memory after he again put the crystal down.

He remembered living on a planet -- one far different from this one though it didn't strike him as a strange place. He was remembering it, after all, and what one remembers doesn't strike one as strange as it would, visualising it for the first time.

There were trans-pods flying back and forth carrying their passengers, buildings hovering here and there, individuals riding on their personal carriers from building to building, and a vine-like vegetation strung all about, thick enough to provide a good shade in spots. Some walkways were suspended from the vines.

No ground was to be seen. There was no solid ground on Zuz, only atmosphere that became denser and denser as one went down, so that near the crust of the heavy core of the planet, the pressure was too great to sustain life of any kind.

The others looked like him for the most part. There were differences. Some had wings, and didn't need personal carriers. Others had long slender legs that doubled at the knees to enable them to leap great distances. A few of these also had an extra set of arms. These were not interstellar travellers, but lived more simply among the giant vines -- more simply, but by no means less intelligent. The interstellar travellers were wingless and had a single set of arms, and legs suited to normal walking. All had exoskeletons of various shades of yellow and light green, and all had greenish bluish compound eyes that glittered and sparkled, so that they gave Ernie's human mind the impression of warm, amiable grasshoppers.

His most recent memory of Zuz was that of entering the common transport facility where all the ships were kept, on his way to this mission. Drovshi, whom he knew well, was walking with him, questioning him regarding the details of the mission. Zhondri was walking close enough behind to hear.

He remembered having a firm dedication, knowing with almost certainty that he wouldn't return to Zuz in his life as a Zondon.

A Zondon is what he was. Phondesh was his name. The other members of the team were Drovshi and Zhondri, who were walking with him just now, and Draz, Zikh, Tsav and Vrosh, who were to meet them inside the terminal.

He was telling them as much as he could, and struggling himself with the explanation, because there was much that he didn't understand himself.

'It's a solar system on the opposite edge of this galaxy.' He didn't tell them that it was, in fact, the forbidden star. 'There are strengths to be gained there that will be invaluable to us in containing and pushing back the evil.'

'But it would be good to have some specifics, Phondesh,' said Drovshi. 'We're willing to give all to save the universe, but we don't know any details.'

'We can only know one step at a time. First we must get there. All I know is there could be opposition, even at the first stage. The Glaat already have wind of this.'

He remembered the departure, the first stage of the trip through familiar parts of the galaxy, and then into the uncharted regions.

Just when they thought all had come off without any complications at all, a Glaat vessel picked up their trail in a location they least expected. Obviously it had been waiting for them.

This, Phondesh thought, would make the mission more difficult. However, there was a plan of action already in place in case this happened.

The seven sent their essence into the crystal, which then sped to the forbidden solar system. An explosive device had been set inside their abandoned ship that would destroy both it and the one in pursuit. It might not totally rid them of the Glaat threat, but it would greatly handicap it.

Meanwhile, the crystal found a resting spot on the only inhabited planet of the forbidden solar system. On landing, the seven parted ways, each reduced to a nucleus of their being. They took with them only key fragments of memory to enable them each to search for a suitable human host, and maintain a subconscious awareness of their past that would appear in their dreams. When they found a host, they waited for the right moment, and joined with the mother's egg as it was in the process of conception and became the twin of the child thus born to the human parents. The rest of their memory was resident inside the crystal.

Ernie laid the crystal down. He was amazed at how it all fit together. His dreams had been nothing more than left over fragments of his own memory.

But, what about the mission? The colours and shapes inside the crystal told him that he would learn about his mission from remembering it.

He placed the crystal back on his forehead and realised that his newly found Zondon memory had already given him that information. Now, came some fresh impressions, like a communication.

There were six more Zondon, beside himself, who were born to human hosts. The next task was to find them, and awaken them.

But where will I find them? And how will I awaken them? Ernie wasn't sure if he had asked out loud or if his mind were just sending the vibes back into the crystal. The crystal seemed to answer, nonetheless.

One question at a time. One step at a time. Ernie suddenly knew that Zhondri was the next one he needed to find. She was in Thailand, but living as a foreigner there, from a neighbouring country.

Ernie waited for more. His mind was asking what to look for.

Just go.

Ernie suddenly remembered that the details of this mission would only be made known one step at a time. He also had an impression that the crystal wouldn't be the only source of information. He had inherent Zondon sense.

Between that and the crystal, he knew he had only enough resources to accomplish the next step -- to find and awaken the next Zondon, Zhondri. The next step would be to find the next, then the next. The more of them there were together, the sharper would be their Zondon senses, and the more vital the crystal. Only when all seven were awakened would they be enabled, through the strength of unity and interdependence, to carry out the mission.

Suddenly, the colours and light stopped, as though switched off.

He placed the crystal on his forehead again, but nothing happened. It was now no more than an ordinary rock.

As he walked back to the caravan, he tried to analyse the language he had spoken. He couldn't isolate a single word or phrase. Try as he might, it was like trying to remember a dream.

He remembered what was said, however. As he gave up trying to analyse the language structure and thought about what was said, suddenly, he found he remembered what it sounded like, and could even say things to himself. But the moment he tried to figure out what individual words meant, he was suddenly helpless.

He put the crystal carefully in his shoulder bag and placed that under his bed, and lay down. Before drifting off to sleep, his mind went through a few more rounds of recalling the whole message, remembering the sound, only to be stumped again while trying to make linguistic sense out of it.

He slept restfully and dreamlessly until morning.

Chapter 9

'Thailand!' thought Ernie, still lying in his bed. That place would pop back into his life.

The others were already at their breakfast. The ones assigned to unearthing the outside of the tomb had already been at it for two hours, taking advantage of the coolness of the morning. The others would start after finishing their breakfast, as their work was mostly in the cool underground chambers below.

On most days, Ernie's duties weren't called for so early, so he would sleep till a bit later. Today, he had to go into town.

As he sat up and began pulling on his clothes, his mind went over the details of the night before.

He was on a mission. He still wasn't sure exactly what that entailed, and wouldn't know until he had awakened the other six -- presumably all total strangers to his human mind. All he had to go on for now were the instructions, 'Go to Thailand, and use your Zondon senses', -- all in all, a rather daunting task.

What was he going to tell Eddie?

'As you've always suspected, brother, I'm not really human. I'm a Zondon, and I'm on a mission to save the galaxy.'

No. Eddie would just call for the men in white coats.

He would have to think of a different approach.

When he went for his breakfast, most of the others were already finishing. Eddie was announcing the agenda for the day. Any talking to him would have to wait till afternoon tea, as Ernie had to go with Abdul into the closest town for routine business.

At least Abdul had an understanding ear.

As soon as the two were on their way, Ernie said, 'I've been getting communications through the crystal, Uncle Abdul.'

'Allah has spoken?' Abdul's words burst out.

'I guess you could put it that way.'

Ernie described the experience of the previous night.

'But how will I tell Eddie?' he said, when he had finished. 'He already thinks I'm a bit batty on account of all the dreams I had about this!'

'I think you must not ask him, but go straight away to Thailand,' answered Uncle Abdul abruptly. 'Consider that perhaps the state of the galaxy is of more importance than your brother's opinion of you.'

'B-but how can I just go there from here?'

'Is the crystal with you?'

'Yes,' Ernie replied.

'And your passport, and return ticket?'

'Yes, but not a lot of money. At least none of my own.'

'I will forward you the cash you need to get there,' said Abdul. 'I have a company account I can withdraw from in town. There is a small airport, and a plane leaves this afternoon on a weekly flight to Cairo.'

'I'll make sure I pay you back.'

'No. It's a privilege to serve Allah in the fight for the galaxy,' said Abdul emphatically.

So it was decided.

They arrived in town. Abdul found the ATM machine and withdrew some cash. Then, they went to the airline office and bought a ticket for that afternoon's flight. There was still time left, so they did the usual items of business, such as checking the email at the cyber-cafe.

There was one from Pop:

Your mother is doing poorly. She suffered a stroke last night and is in a

coma in intensive care. Say a prayer for her if you will.

Abdul first reacted with dismay, but that suddenly changed to elation.

'This is a gift from Allah!' he said.

'How?'

'I take this to Edward, and explain that you have gone to visit your mother. You must visit her, of course, but after that, make haste to go to Bangkok.'

So it was that Ernie, his head still spinning, set off for Ireland.

From Dublin, he immediately got on a short flight to Belfast. There, he took a taxi to City Hospital on Lisburn Road, but not before purchasing a ticket to Bangkok for a flight leaving the next day.

His father met him in the waiting room and told him how things stood.

'They let family members in one at a time,' he said. 'You can see her for five minutes. She's in a coma so she is, but they say people in a coma can hear what we say.'

As Ernie put down his shoulder bag, he suddenly heard a hum. It was coming from the crystal.

Instinctively, he reached in, took the crystal and put it discreetly in his pocket.

Then they took him to the door and he went in.

Before him was his mother on a respirator, with tubes going in and out of her.

He walked up and took her hand.

'Hello, mum,' he began.

Then the hum of the crystal in his pocket distracted him.

With his other hand, he took the crystal and placed it on his forehead.

Suddenly he could see, not only his mother, but also the molecules, the atoms, and the sub-atomic particles that she was made of.

* * *

One major difference between this planet and others he remembered was that the sub-atomic structure here was off. Something in the history of this planet had affected everything in a negative way. Things continued to exist and to live, but only as though limping along.

The zoetrons were all out of kilter in mum's atomic structure, just as they were in all other matter on this planet. But if they could be made to act normal -- even if just for a short while -- that would serve to pull everything else back into their proper pattern.

Phondesh placed both hands forward and exerted mu-force. The crystal stayed where it was on his forehead. Immediately the zoetrons began to behave themselves. To keep them that way long enough to pull mum back into a normal state, he had to create a zeta field. It would dissolve in a matter of minutes, of course, but that would be long enough to complete the healing process.

Just as the zeta field was in place, he felt the crystal begin to slip. He caught it as it fell.

He was about to turn around to leave when mum said, 'Oh Ernie, the shooting star -- you found it.'

'Yes, indeed,' he said, as he displayed it briefly, and then put it in his pocket. 'It's time for me to go now, mum. You'd better get some sleep.'

He bent over and kissed her.

'Thank you, Ernie.'

By evening, mum was in a regular room sitting up in bed chatting with the family, acting like nothing was wrong with her. The doctors were amazed at her speedy recovery, but insisted on examining her some more.

The next day, Ernie was on his way to Thailand.

Chapter 10

To: Sam <sam@xx.com>
From: Ernie <ErnieMag@xx.com>
Subject: Re: How's Egypt

Sam wrote:

> Hey man! Good to hear from you.
> How's Abdul doing? Tell him we
> remember him...
>

Ernie replied:

> Will do. He's still spry as ever,
> though he's 60++ now. His business
> does very well.
>

Sam wrote:

> ...and say 'hello' to that old
> earth-digging mummy-rousing Eddie
> dude.
>

> I was just down to California to
> visit my folks. We had a birthday
> party for my mum in the rest home. I
> think I told you, she has Alzheimer's.
> ...
>

Ernie replied:

> Speaking of mothers, mine has just had
> a stroke. It looks like I'll be
> popping off again, first to see her,
> and then for some urgent business in
> Thailand. Speaking of which, I'm not
> sure if I have Boz's email. Do you
> have it?
>

Sam replied:

> Thailand? Cool! Boz is <bozobrian@xxxx.co.th>
> Remember to email me when you get there
> and tell me what it's like. Tell Boz
> hello for me.
>

Ernie wrote:

Well, here I am, in good old steamy and seamy Bangkok. You wouldn't recognise the place at all. I did, only because I was here a few years ago, and even then, the skytrain construction has changed the looks of a lot of places.

I went by the old Salem Hostel on Soi Pikun. The big two story house that you all stayed in is still there...

Behind Chulalongkorn University, there is a street called Henri Dunant. In Thai, the name comes out, 'Angri Dunang'. Someone opened a restaurant there, sort of on the edge of Siam Square, and aptly called it, 'The Hungry Donut'. It featured tarts, meat pies, curry puffs, cream buns, sausage rolls,

bagels, and donuts of the home made variety, along with coffees of every blend and ilk. Ernie had discovered it on his back packing excursions, and it quickly became a favourite.

Now, he was back. He wasn't over his jet lag yet; in Dublin it was still three a.m. The ultimate cure was several cups of the strongest espresso that could be had, downed with curry puffs and sausage rolls. That, and the pleasant setting of the Hungry Donut made being awake more attractive than sleep.

He had done a minimum of sightseeing the day before, but now something told him he didn't have time to throw away. He would soon have to start using his Zondon senses and find Zhondri.

How does one go about using Zondon senses when ones crystal won't cooperate? It seemed to have a mind of its own, turning on just whenever it chose to. The colours had said the crystal wasn't his to use at his own whim.

When it did turn on at Ernie's prompting, it was usually to look at the stars at night or something related to boosting his inner strength, but rarely just to satisfy his idle curiosity. It seemed to know the difference.

One thing he did while using the crystal was, remember. The more he did, the more the bits of his Zondon history became part his human memory.

He could remember Zhondri. The visual memory, of course, would be of no use now, unless she had a face like a grasshopper. There were other things, though, that radiated from within, a pleasantness, an open heart. Perhaps he could recognise her by those?

Not that this made his task any easier. What was he supposed to do, meet personally with every female foreigner in Bangkok? He needed a starting point -- an inspiration.

Ernie downed the last few drops of espresso from his cup and leaned back resting the back of his head in his hands. His mind wandered to the stars as he saw them with the crystal. He could, even now, almost feel the effects of the star that radiated parental love. Just thinking about it began to settle his mind. He went over all the stars, one-by-one.

Finally, there was the star that was always prompting him to do something about the evil. Restlessness began to stir inside him. Even now it seemed to be reminding him that all the while he was flopping about the town like a decadent fool, he was on an urgent mission. He began to imagine the stars disappearing one by one as though the dark hand were snuffing them out.

Before he knew it, he was signalling for the waitress to bring the bill.

It was only when he was already half way through the network of one-way lanes criss-crossing Siam Square that he began asking himself why he had to leave the coffee shop in such a hurry.

Instinctively, he was moving towards the bus stand on the opposite side of Siam Square, on Phya Thai road. Several bus lines passed that way and he could get one that took him close to his guest house.

He got to the bus stand but kept on walking. He just didn't feel like going back to the guest house just now.

Now, he was by the university. He knew the campus well since the days his father lectured there.

Chulalongkorn University enjoys an expansive campus, situated on both sides of Phya Thai road. On Ernie's left, stretching all the way to Henri Dunant Street, were the more showy parts, including the auditorium, where concerts were often held, as well as some of the faculty buildings. On the right were more faculty buildings, the admin building, some of the dormitories and the library. Ernie crossed the road and went towards that.

Students were milling about near the dormitories; some walking from one class to another, and a few were going in and out of the library.

Ernie went up the steps to the main entrance. On one side of the foyer was

a coffee stand selling Nescafe and various sweets and biscuits to go with it. Ernie had just had his fill, so he went on to the entrance of the reading area.

For outsiders it cost 20 Baht to get in. He got his money ready as he waited in line.

The woman in front of him produced a card as she approached and routinely showed it to the lady behind the desk.

'Is Khun Lec in yet?' she asked in a clear Asian accent, though definitely not Thai.

'No, she not in,' came the answer, in a halting Thai accent.

'But she should be in today, am I correct?'

'Yes, she come, but not here yet.'

'Could you please tell her, when she comes, that May Lin is here?'

Ernie caught the name Tan May Lin on her library card just as she said it. As she walked towards the lounge area, Ernie looked at her, almost forgetting to give the lady his 20 Baht note.

Why was his attention so taken up with that woman? He hadn't even seen her face yet.

The girl gave him an entry slip, and he went into the reading area. He began to linger near the periodical section where May Lin was now seated with the current edition of *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

Was this his Zondon sense at work? Was this Zhondri?

He got a closer look at her. She had a squarish, pleasant face, and her hair was permed into ringlets. She was just a bit plump, but pretty.

She looked up suddenly and caught him staring.

'Oh! I'm sorry,' said Ernie, hurriedly. 'I'm trying to figure out if I've met you before somewhere,' he said.

That was the truth, wasn't it?

'I don't think so,' she replied thoughtfully. 'Have you ever been in Malaysia?'

'Actually, I have, long ago when I was young. I attended a boarding school in Penang, right by the sea, near Hillside. My dad was working in Bali at the time.'

'Oh, did you really? I used to live in Tanjong Bunga, not far from there!'

That got them started. Ernie took a seat near her, and they began talking about what they remembered of one another's worlds.

May Lin was from a family of Straits Chinese. These were Chinese who had been on the West coast of Malaysia, primarily in Malacca, Singapore and Penang, since the time of the Portuguese. Many had Portuguese blood mixed in, and their food was a blend of Chinese, Malay and Portuguese influence.

May Lin's family had a corner restaurant that sold *pao* (steamed rolls) and strong coffee in the mornings, and *char kwei tiew* and *mee goring* (two types of fried noodles), and other dishes from noon 'til evening. They still had the restaurant, but her sister had branched out and started up in a brand new shopping centre near Fettes Park road. Hers was a more modern restaurant, specialising in Straits Chinese cuisine.

May Lin had majored in history, and was now teaching History of Ancient Civilisation at Chulalongkorn University. She was intrigued that Ernie had studied Archaeology.

At one point in the conversation, Ernie decided to show off his fluency in the Penang vernacular dialect: 'Ah, yes, Penang a nice place lah!'

This drew a peal of pleasant laughter.

Ernie remembered *char kwei tiew* and *mee goring* from his school days in Penang. He even thought he had been to that very shop.

'I might have actually seen you there,' he said. 'I suppose I should have introduced myself, but I was a bit of a shy one, I was. But now that I think of it, maybe it did look like you.'

'Or my twin sister, maybe la,' said May Lin, obviously comfortable enough with Ernie to use her native dialect. 'My sister, Sue Ling and I are identical. Even our parents mix us up. She spent more time in the shop than I did.'

'Twins!' said Ernie. 'I'm an identical twin too!'

May Lin remarked on the coincidence, while Ernie felt like this was something much more.

'May Lin, does the name "Zhondri" mean anything to you?'

Slowly, she said, 'Yes la -- it does.'

Then, suddenly, as though remembering, she said, 'Oh! You must be a friend of the old doctor, ah?'

'What doctor?'

'Doctor Nicolai Stanovitch. I thought I saw you somewhere!'

Ernie was confused.

'I don't think I know this doctor. How do I remind you of him?'

'He keeps saying the word, "Zhondri" to me. It's strange, you know. I think maybe psychic one, ah? I seem to know that word from before that. He says we meet in a previous life.'

'Who is this doctor anyway?'

'Oh, he knows some of the board members at this university. I think he's trying to gain my affection, but he's way too old for me la. He's supposed to meet me here with *Acharn Lec*.'

Ernie decided to take another stab.

'Does the name "Phondesh" mean anything?'

'Why, yes it does. I don't remember where, though. Ah! Here they are! I'll introduce you.'

Approaching them were a young smartly dressed Thai lady and an old but well built European man, with a square shaped burn scar on his bald forehead, who looked as though he could pass for a military trainer. Ernie's first impression was, this was someone he'd rather not tangle with if he got up his wrong side.

'Dr. Stanovitch,' May Lin began, now in proper English that sounded almost British by comparison, 'Meet Ernie Magawan.'

'Very pleased to meet you, I'm sure,' said the doctor, in a heavy Slavic accent.

'I think you two may have a lot in common,' May Lin went on.

'Well then, we must do lunch sometime.' He handed Ernie his business card. 'Give me a call. I'm staying at the Dusit Thani Hotel, room 733.'

Then, he turned to the others. 'Shall we?'

'Let me get my things, and I join you two in the car, okay?' said *Acharn Lec*.

'Call me tomorrow, Mr. Magawan,' said the doctor, in a tone that made Ernie think of Jedi mind tricks from Star Wars.

Whatever it was, it had an unnerving effect on Ernie. The very atmosphere around the giant Russian was oppressive. Ernie took his leave and -- lest May Lin think he only came into the library to see her -- walked towards the nearest bookcase where he pretended to browse the titles while the doctor and May Lin decided to wait there for *Acharn Lec*.

He had no idea what the titles were, as they were in Thai. However, he had to hold his pose while he waited for them to go. He picked up a book that was lying on its side and began leafing through it.

Suddenly, there was that feeling again. He looked up abruptly, and there was Dr. Stanovitch, looking straight at him as the three walked to the library entrance.

'Tomorrow, Mr. Magawan,' he said forcefully. Then his eyes looked at the book in Ernie's hand, and his mouth broke into a smirk.

They were gone.

Ernie closed the book and noticed the cover. Under the large Thai letters was the title in English, *A Case Book of Women's Internal Ailments*. Ernie had been holding it in such way that anyone could see what he was reading, as Russian doctor obviously had. A total stranger *could* have concluded that Ernie was interested in such a field of medicine, had he not been holding the book upside down.

Chapter 11

Ernie had found this guesthouse during his backpacking trip. He had done some business at the Irish consulate, which in those days was in the most unlikely of places, right in middle of Yawarat, the 'China Town' of Bangkok. He had asked the lady there to recommend a cheap hotel or guest house, and she had directed him to this one, right on the Chao Praya river. It immediately became his favourite. At high tide the waves from passing boats would lap over the veranda floor of the downstairs restaurant.

Nobody minds a bit of water in a hot climate. In the evenings it was the place to sit and watch the long lines of rice barges float slowly by.

Now, Ernie was sitting downstairs in the restaurant with a dish of fried rice and a bowl of *tom yam* seafood soup, one of his favourites. Normally, he would be dining with gusto, but he was still unnerved by the Russian doctor.

Obviously, May Lin was Zhondri, but how did Dr. Stanovitch know about her? Was he a Zondon? Then why was there such a sinister aura about him?

May Lin seemed a pleasant good-natured young lady -- attractive, even. Nice face, slightly plump but that didn't detract from her over all beauty. It's no wonder the Russian doctor was attracted to her. Russians prefer a bit of fat on the bone.

But that wasn't it, Ernie thought again. There was something about him. He was sure his reasons for wanting her went far deeper than that.

Ernie had never thought of himself as having a strong stable mind, especially when his brother Eddie repeatedly told him otherwise. But he was sure that anyone with a weaker mind than his own would have buckled at the doctor's looks and his Jedi like hypnosis, and would be on the phone to him the first thing the next morning.

Now here he was with his favourite food in front of him, but not in a mood to eat it.

The peace of the river was broken by the boom boom boom of a double-decker party boat with disco lights flashing. It passed, and then the waves from its wake began to lap the side of the veranda.

The boom boom boom faded out, but now Ernie heard another sound. It was a humming coming from his pocket.

He immediately got up and went out as though having to answer a mobile phone without bothering the other diners.

Upstairs in his room, he took the glowing crystal from his pocket, placed it on his forehead, and immediately knew what he had to do.

He was off -- except he didn't use the door. He went directly through the roof, bodiless.

Like a bolt of lightning, he sped straight across the city towards the tall three-sided building across from the park, with the spire on top -- Dusit Thani Hotel. He came down directly on the roof and through several floors until he reached the seventh. Then he found the door to room 733.

After a slight pause, he went through the door, and looked.

What he saw was a being consisting of an outer shell of a human, Dr. Stanovitch, but animated by, not one, but two zoetron fields: one that should have formed his nucleus -- the imprint matched the DNA -- and a foreign one that was actually in control. The native life forcefield had become a prisoner of the foreign.

The foreign life forcefield, Phondesh realised, was what had given off the aura of evil that he had sensed earlier. In fact, it wasn't Dr. Stanovitch at all.

The outer shell of Dr. Stanovitch turned in his seat, as though sensing that something was amiss.

He looked about the room for a few seconds, and then back to his lap top computer.

But the nucleus of Dr. Stanovitch, his real zoetron forcefield, looked as

though it were silently calling out for help, and aware of Phondesh's presence.

Help me! I'm in a prison!

Phondesh felt moved inside.

Help will come. I'll find some way to get you free, said Phondesh, in the language understood by human energy force.

The soul of the doctor began to respond, but suddenly, it was squelched.

The Glaat was now in full control. The doctor spun about, and began to look frantically at different points of the room, until finally he sat staring straight at the spot where Phondesh was hovering.

Phondesh stayed still, letting out no vibes nor anything that would give away his presence.

Dr. Stanovitch sat there staring. There was no essence released, no aura that wasn't there already, no Jedi tricks -- if anything, it was a fear of whatever was in that room with him.

Suddenly he turned and reached for a telephone, and began dialling a number. Ernie knew immediately it was May Lin's.

Phondesh made a dash for the phone and entered the telecom system. He could readily recognise each component. It was extremely primitive, and this would be an ideal situation.

May Lin's voice came from the direction ahead of him, as electrical impulses. He easily deciphered them.

'Hello?'

From the direction behind him came, first, an aura of seductive control. Phondesh dispersed that right away. Then, came the voice, that intended to say, 'Hello, Zhondri. Nicolai here.'

Phondesh rearranged the electrical impulses to sound like his own voice: 'Hi, May Lin, Ernie here.'

'Hello, Ernie,' was rearranged to 'Hello Doctor,' on the return circuit.

Then, 'I have a proposition for you that I think you will like,' was rearranged to, 'I need to speak to you about the doctor, and about the name, "Zhondri".'

'Oh!'

That didn't need rearranging.

Then, the forceful, 'Meet me in half an hour at the Bubbles Lounge in the Dusit,' was transformed to a more polite, 'Could you meet me at the Hard Rock Cafe in about half an hour?'

The answer was affirmative. Both sides hung up, and Phondesh was off at the speed of light for the guesthouse.

Chapter 12

The crystal fell into his waiting hand just as Ernie was barely aware of being back in his own body.

Now he'd revert to a different form of transport, albeit more primitive. He grabbed his shoulder bag, locked his door, rushed down the stairs and went out the front entrance.

The guesthouse shared its parking lot with the export company next door who used it as an offloading area for goods to be shipped down the river. The air smelled of dried peppers and cardamom.

Ernie quickly crossed the small street.

Just then, along came a man on a motorbike wearing bright coloured vest -- a motorcycle taxi.

Ernie flagged him down, and said '*Siam Sa-quae, tao rai*' (meaning 'How much to Siam Square?')

The motorcyclist gave a price he could agree on, and he hopped on the back.

In a neighbourhood full of one-way streets and heavy traffic, a motorcycle was the ideal way to travel and probably the only hope of arriving at Siam Square within half an hour.

He got off across from his destination, crossed via the pedestrian bridge, and then retraced the path he had taken earlier that day, until he came to the Hard Rock Cafe on the right.

He went in and asked the hostess if a Malaysian lady had arrived yet. The answer was negative, so he asked for a seat near the door.

Even apart from the whole business with the crystal, Ernie looked forward to May Lin's arrival. In a way, he couldn't have hoped for a better set up. What other excuse could he possibly find to approach such a pleasant attractive lady and ask her out?

Presently, she arrived, and he motioned to her. They asked the waitress to take them to a more private booth. She found them one just below a *Rolling Stone* cover picture of John Lennon and Yoko Ono. They ordered drinks and the waitress was off.

'It's weird lah, you call just when you did,' she said.

'Why's that?'

'I dozed off, and I had a dream, you know? It was uncanny one! But tell me about the doctor la!'

'I think I should start with the word, "Zhondri",' began Ernie, but he changed track. 'First, I want to show you something.'

He pulled the crystal out of his pocket. It glistened in the light of the booth, not giving out any of its own light.

'Wah! That's a big stone!' was May Lin's response.

'You didn't ever, by any chance, dream about a stone like this, did you?'

'I dreamed about a crystal that was shining blue and green, and then you called -- and -- yeah, it did look like this one, except it glowed.'

'This one will probably start glowing, if you say, "Vratzan Ghish Zhondri",' said Ernie.

'This really really strange la! I also dreamed you said that!'

'Have you ever had any other dreams like this?'

'Yes, la. Last week I dream about you, only you weren't human,' said May Lin. 'You were named, ah - ah - what's that other word you say this afternoon leh?'

'Phondesh.'

'Yes. You were Phondesh, and you weren't human -- like E.T. or Yoda one but more like - ah ...'

'But how did you know it was me?' asked Ernie. 'We only met today!'

Apparently, the logic of it hadn't had time to sink in.

'In the dream just now, I know that you and Phondesh are same.'
The attention went back to the crystal. May Lin picked it up, and then said it.

'Vratzan Ghish Zhondri.'

The crystal gradually began to hum, and then to glow.

'Look into the flat side of it.'

May Lin began looking.

After a while, she put it on her forehead.

Ernie could see remembrance returning to her face.

They sat in silence, as Ernie had a strange sensation of sitting with nothing but his mortal human senses, while his companion was feeling out her immortality.

Then, that was overtaken by a different one -- one of sitting with an old friend he had known well for ages, since long before arriving on Earth. This was no strange girl from Malaysia. This was Sister Zhondri of the Amieroo.

Suddenly, Ernie realised that he was fully functional in his extended Zondon senses, even without the crystal on his forehead.

Phondesh could pick up the message from across the table:

The more there were of them together; the sharper their Zondon senses. The one with the crystal could share the extended state. However, the viewing of matter as it would be seen through a Zondon eye could only be done from the crystal itself, but all can share the view. Interdependence would be important, because each would have unique abilities that the whole will need.

The next Zondon they needed to find and awaken was Tsav. He was the most cautious of the seven, therefore the last to find human parents. He was twelve years old and living in Afghanistan.

There was no time to waste, because the Glaat would shortly realise he has been tricked and would soon move with full force. Right now they were not yet strong enough to meet him head on.

Did I not face him just tonight? Phondesh wondered.

Suddenly, he knew that had the Glaat located his presence in the room with him, he could have blasted him to the opposite end of the galaxy, and then found his body and destroyed it before he could get back. The mission would have been lost.

How can we hope to resist him in the future then?

Through wisdom.

It was wisdom to keeping silent while in the room with the Glaat. Wisdom could come through the crystal, or through their inherent Zondon senses, and even, at times through their human. It could thus also come through other humans, just as it came through Abdul.

Abdul also knows me, though in a different way, the crystal seemed to be saying.

But, aren't you just a crystal? The exchange between Ernie's mind and the crystal was verging on being a dialogue.

No. I only speak to you through the crystal.

Who are you then?

I am Wisdom. The crystal is only one of the ways of hearing me.

Then, as the colours dimmed, Ernie and May Lin were left with the strong impression that they must leave for the airport immediately, and depart for Pakistan.

Both Ernie and May Lin had their passports with them, so they paid the bill and were off.

* * *

Nicolai Stanovitch had ordered a drink, but it sat untouched. He needed his mind thoroughly unaltered by any substance whatsoever. Or, to be more precise, Dosh of Asvork needed it.

Something was wrong.

He knew it ever since feeling the presence in the room with him.

Something was also wrong with the phone call.

It was no coincidence then that the other Zondon -- that one, Ernest Magawan -- had suddenly appeared on the scene. It was more than just a subliminal magnetic attraction of one energy force to a kindred one -- the same as had enabled Dosh to find the first four Zondon. The Magawan creature had obviously been awakened to his identity and knew what he was doing.

Now he had stolen Zhondri from him, and had awakened her to her Zondon identity. Dosh could feel it in the cosmos (in Star Wars it would have been called a 'disturbance in the force').

He hated himself for not having been on his guard all along. Had he remained tuned in to his senses, he surely could have been alerted to the awakening of the other Zondon. He would have moved quicker to make the conquest of Zhondri.

Dosh would never be caught off his guard again.

Now, the two must be destroyed at all cost lest they find the remaining two, and then return to steal the three already in Dosh's power.

He reached for his mobile phone. From the menu, pulled up the number of his friend at the Criminal Investigation Division.

'...that's right, two suspected terrorists,' he was saying, once he had come to the point. 'Their names are Ernest Magawan, male European, probably Irish or British, and Tan May Lin, female, Malaysian. I would advise alerting Don Muang immigration. They may attempt to leave the country.'

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