

Humans Only

Jake Dani is alarmed when his daughter Alena comes to the planet Rossa. When Jake and her mother go to the airport to pick up Alena, an explosion protests Bingers and robots. Later, Alena discovers a link between mercon, human, Binger, and native nape DNA, alarming a supremacist group called “Humans Only.” Jake figures he can still ignore them. Then Alena turns up missing.

The first five chapters are available for reading on www.crayne.com.

Praise for the novels of Victory Crayne

“I was going to finish this tomorrow but I just couldn’t stop reading. Great story.”

- J. Bowers

“Solid sci-fi spy thriller. One thing I particularly liked is that many of the supporting characters are well developed, atypical, and just plain fun. ...I recommend it to anyone who likes sci-fi, thriller and/or [espionage] combinations. I'll definitely be buying the sequel.”

- S. Barnes, Editor of NewMyths.com

“...you hit the ground running and you're compelled to turn the page. I'll conclude with a final warning to potential readers of this book: Jake Dani is addictive.”

- R. Murray, speculative fiction writer

“...a beautifully woven rug, every piece of the story, yet complex, fits perfectly with the other pieces.”

- T. Khan

“The story drew me in early and maintained its pull on my imagination as the plot included many twists and turns and surprises. I especially liked the way [the author] established a link between earth and the planet Rossa, and the fact that people travelled back and forth between the two. This picture grounded the story in a level of reality not common in some science fiction stories. I like the way [the author] developed the key characters and created webs of intrigue. I found the story to be powerful and entertaining.”

- D. Sainsbury

“As a SciFi and mystery fan since childhood, blends of both are high on my reading list. Ms. Crayne's novel does an excellent job of merging the genres, allowing her character's story to unfold naturally, with neither genre's elements seeming forced or clichéd. The pacing is quick, the characters are well-drawn and the story grabs the reader from the get-go and leads to a satisfying conclusion.”

- Gil C. Schmidt

Novels by Victory Crayne
Freedom
Humans Only

For a free ebook of short stories see www.crayne.com.

Humans Only (Chapters 1-5)

By

Victory Crayne

Chapter 1

Leanna and I had just passed Gate 4 when the bomb went off.

I was watching the six humanoid robots and their human guards when the flash backlit them and the blast slammed me backwards against the beige cement wall. Dazed, I tried to catch my breath as I surveyed the scene—the robots had disappeared, but the ground around them was littered with body parts.

Leanna was my ex and our daughter was due to arrive in sixteen minutes at Gate 7.

Leanna had on a light brown pantsuit, yellow lace shirt, and matching brown low-heeled shoes. I had strode beside her in jeans, white dress shirt, and work shoes. We had left our weapons in the car. We'd just have to give them up passing through Security.

There was no sign of the dozen human males in green uniforms who had escorted the robots. Nor of the taller robots themselves.

What the hell?

The scene near the gate was chaos. Sounds stopped. Body parts and blood lay scattered everywhere. Faces appeared to scream in the absolute silence.

There was nothing where the six bots had been. Nothing. Nor was anything in a radius of twenty feet. Bright red lights flashed from exit signs over the doorways. Fresh cool air streamed in from the broken windows that overlooked the landing strip.

A bomb had gone off?

My eyes opened wider as I struggled to peer through the smoke. Dozens of people near me lay injured or still—and probably dead. I smelled cordite from the explosion.

Destruction and death lay around me.

But no sound came. Everything was quiet.

Hands pushed on my sides. My ex-wife Leanna lay behind me, pressed against the hard wall by my body.

I struggled to move away from her. My limbs didn't want to obey my commands.

Her lips moved and she had a glare in her eyes I had not seen in a long time, with eyes lit up like the fiery ends of ecigs. After ten years of marriage, I recognized the signs of anger.

“Sorry,” I said but only the vibrations of my voice rattled through my skull. My ears ached in the silence.

Wonder how long it will take for my hearing to return.

As I moved off her, her straight brown hair flopped on the sides of her head. Her eyes gazed behind me and opened wider. Her jaw slid down as her mouth opened.

I examined at my clothes. Blotches of red lay on my gray pants and suit jacket. Somebody's blood. A human finger stuck on my white shirt.

Yuck!

Despite the daze in my head, I forced two of my own fingers to grasp the finger and throw it off. It landed next to a robot hand with wires dangling from its wrist.

Then I realized my daughter might be hurt.

Alena!

My gaze snapped to Gate 7 where she would arrive in a few minutes, but folks at Gate 6 blocked my view. Dozens at Gate 5 lay still. The explosion had not gotten as far as her gate.

My daughter had escaped the worst.

Movement on the floor near me grabbed my attention. Four people tried to sit up but most of the others lay still. All wore the red of blood. Most of the people close to the blast stayed prone, without motion of any kind.

It dawned on me that the dozens of people between us and the blast had saved Leanna and me.

A woman reclined in a nearby chair. She sat still with unblinking eyes gazing at the carnage. A blue scarf covered her hair and I saw blotches of red on the blue. In her arms a baby rested with its mouth open and frozen in a scream.

Was it the father who had died?

Another movement caught my eye. A man with clothes covered in red sat up from the floor and stared without expression on his face. Then his eyes closed and he fell. Blood poured from his mouth. Another victim.

Other bodies lay shattered beyond recognition, a pile of arms, legs, heads, and torsos. A sea of blood covered most everyone near me. Blood that just a short while ago was deep inside a living, breathing human being and now was outside, where it didn't belong.

In one bent chair rested a green and black backpack, miraculously free of red.

Had its owner left it to greet a loved one coming off a plane?

He was lucky. Perhaps he had gone to the men's room instead and had lived.

The odor of fresh blood hit my nostrils. It could be from the goo on my clothes or from the sea of red in front of me. I tasted salt and spat out something red.

Was that mine or someone else's?

Since I felt no pain, I assumed I was uninjured, but experience had taught me that sometimes I didn't feel pain immediately, even if I had been shot.

Leanna's eyes opened wide. Her lips moved and I read the name "Alena."

Motion caught my attention. I looked up as police and airport security straggled in one by one from the hallway in their blue and green uniforms.

I had never been this close to a terrorist bomb.

Instinct took over and I wanted to get away. So I pulled Leanna up and led her away from the chaos toward Gate 7.

As we went past people with eyes drawn toward Gate 4, many stared at the blood on my clothes. One lady rushed her hands to her mouth.

I still couldn't hear anything.

On the way, I passed an overhead sign of "Restrooms." So I halted Leanna and pointed first to my ears, then at the blood on my clothes and then to the men's room.

She watched my motions and nodded. Then she crossed her arms and leaned against the wall.

Inside, I washed off as much blood as I could.

When I came out, a cop in a blue police uniform blocked my path.

What the hell is this? Does he think I did it?

His lips moved. I shook my head and pointed to my right ear. With his right hand he grabbed my arm. At least he hadn't pulled his gun.

As the guard led me away, Leanna pushed away from the wall.

“Leanna!”

The sound pierced the bones of my skull but I heard nothing.

I pointed with my finger in the direction I walked. She nodded, put her arms down, and walked away toward Gate 7. At least she wasn't splattered with blood. It was a good thing I was in front of her when the explosion occurred. I wondered if she could hear.

I felt a jerk on my arm. My cop nodded his head in the direction we had been going. There was no sense in fighting him so I let myself be herded back toward Gate 4 and the other people.

On the way, I scooped up a leaflet someone had discarded and read as we walked.

The words across the top of the page stated, “Rossa is for humans!”

In the first column, I read “We all came here to get away from the damned robots on Earth. Since the middle of the twenty-first century, robots have taken over our jobs and the military. Now they want our bodies as more and more people have artificial body parts. Where will this madness end? When they take over our souls too?”

The angry face of Guy Coocher filled the left column. He was head of the Human Only organization and an elected member of Parliament.

“We came to Rossa to get away from the sameness of Earth. We came here to get away from the damned hybrids and the robots. We came here to get away from half-human half-robots. Let us keep our humanity. It's precious. We deserve a place to call our own. We deserve Rossa to be free of robots and aliens.”

Quite an appeal.

I read on.

“If we let the damned robots come here, we're just inviting the Devil to dine with us.”

The Devil?

I must have stopped because I felt the cop tug on my arm. As we walked past Gate 4, I peered at the carnage.

Hope there's no second explosion.

Chapter 2

As I strode back with the guard, a crowd rushed in the opposite direction. Wondering what I had missed, I glanced their way.

At Gate 5 two black aliens, mercons, stared at the crowd as it got closer to them. Shorter than adult humans and with almost black skin, their nose slits came up to the spot between their eyes.

I wish I could hear, damn it!

As the crowd got near the mercons they blocked my view of them. Arms waved in the air. A few carried signs but I couldn't read them from my angle. They acted like a mob.

I must have stopped because the guard grabbed my arm and pulled me in the opposite direction.

Pushy little bugger.

He led me down the hall to an open area crowded with people. A man got up from a chair and I was about to sit on it when I noticed an older woman entered the room wobbling on a cane. So I surrendered the seat to her and sat on the floor next to a blue wall with my knees tucked up under my chin.

She mouthed, "Thank you."

Maybe she had lost her hearing too.

I bobbed my head a couple times in reply.

Over the next a few minutes, the guards and staff got organized. Nothing like this had ever happened in York. Maybe they were more used to it next door in Algebra, where immigrants settled from the Mideast, but we weren't used to it here.

With nothing to do, I checked my comm, figuring I could learn more about the explosion. But before I could read much, a guard positioned himself in front of me and covered my comm. He pointed to the top of a digital pad in his hand, where I read, "Your comm will be returned to you after you are interviewed about your experience."

I sighed and presented my left arm. He pulled off my comm and attached a rubber band and sticker to it with a number. He presented a clipboard. I printed my name in block letters next to the number on the pad and memorized the number, thirty-seven.

Great. That meant I would have no idea how bad the damage was or how many had been killed.

Spies like to know that stuff. But I could understand his point. Someone wanted my report before I interpreted my responses based on what I learned from my comm.

I remained on the floor, bored, and in silence. A clock on the wall showed the time, fifteen minutes past ten. Ever notice that no matter how you try to speed up the second hand, it still maintains its sluggish but relentless pace? You can't slow it down nor speed it up. Time is like that. Seconds slip by and turn into minutes, minutes into hours, and soon a day is gone. Forever.

I read someplace that ten thousand days pass in about twenty-seven years. That meant I was working on my second ten thousand.

When a man sitting in a chair along the wall opposite me rose and made off, I took his seat.

Beats sitting on the floor.

Two minutes later, a guard in a green uniform drew near me. He motioned with his finger that I should go to my left. I rose and went as directed to a gray plastic chair next to a gray desk. A black male nurse took my blood pressure, pulse, and temperature. Then I got in line to get my photo taken, bloody shirt and all, and in yet another line to be interviewed.

Waiting is not my favorite game.

Finally, they let me have a seat in a chair with black plastic for the seat and back, and with stainless steel legs ending in rubber feet. The kind you see in school auditoriums. Must be easy to clean, easy to stack.

On a bench opposite me a boy rested with a dark-green toy army man in his lap. The boy's pants and shirt had red blotches and he stared tearless. Probably in shock. I waved my hand and grabbed his attention. I pretended to duck and fired a finger-gun at him. He smiled in return. Somebody was playing with him.

I remembered myself as a little boy after my older brother Ken had been killed. That happened a long time ago, but it was one of those key moments in my life that changed me forever. It drove home what it meant to be a Binger and face discrimination.

Years before I came into this world, Dr. Bing inserted snippets of mercon DNA into human children to copy some of the alien strength and intelligence into humans. The children of those experiments became known as Bingers.

That was during the war against the alien race who lived on the planet Durr, at about the same distance from Earth as Rossa. The three planets' stars formed an equilateral triangle with its corners spaced twenty-five light years apart.

My father was a full-blood Binger and my mother a full human. So I had half my DNA altered. Most people on Earth treated Bingers as part-alien. The resulting discrimination was hard for a boy of twelve to grasp until the day I learned Ken was dead because someone suspected he was a Binger.

Two seats down and across from me, a girl sat next to a woman with the woman's left arm wrapped around her. The girl had puckered lips and her body shook. I figured she was crying. On the floor a few feet away lay a stuffed giraffe. I stooped, picked up the giraffe, and held it out in front of the girl. She reached out with her arms and pulled the toy animal close to her body. I detected a brief smile on her face. Then she spotted the blood on my clothes. In seconds, the edges of her mouth turned down and her jaw dropped. Her eyes squeezed shut. I figured she cried again.

The mother mouthed, "Thank you."

I pointed to my ears and her head went up and down an inch. She was probably deaf too, another victim of the explosion.

The boy on the bench across from me waited until I parked in my chair. Then he used his fingers to fire back. I grabbed my chest and winced. Another smile was my reward. He fired again but a woman in white came up in front of me and grabbed my arm. It was my turn for interrogation.

As I rose from my chair, I waved to the little boy. He gave a small wave back. At least I had broken his loneliness for a few seconds with playtime.

All this happened with the ringing in my ears as the only sound I perceived. Weird.

This time I parked myself behind in a brown metal folding chair while a middle-aged woman wearing a Zor-Franken Airport badge on the front of her green uniform asked me

questions via a digital pad. She took my blood pressure and pulse. Why they did that twice I didn't know. Then my training kicked in. They were checking to see who went into delayed shock.

Being deaf put me at a disadvantage. So I scanned around me every ten seconds to see if anyone came up behind me.

The nurse spoke into a microphone and her words appeared on her digital pad.

“Is there something you're worried about?”

“Yeah, being killed.”

“I assure you, Mr...” She paused to read my name from her pad. “...Snyder, you're safe. Try to relax.”

Easier said than done, sister. You're not a deaf spy.

We'd received a tag a few hours ago that our daughter would land at the airport from the Meda Space Elevator and needed a ride.

Which was a shock to both Leanna and me. We had kept Leanna's presence on Rossa a secret from Alena. We never expected her to come to Rossa.

“Serves us right,” Leanna had said, “for deceiving her like this.”

Before Leanna and I had left for the airport, one problem had been what names to use. I didn't think it was wise to give our own names “in the open.” Leanna agreed. But what to do with Alena's last name of Dani?

I had searched for a name to call myself and hit upon Snyder. Ralph Snyder was the protagonist in the current novel I was reading. The name sounded nice.

I had suggested to Leanna that she use Ebonta Snyder. We could say Alena Dani was her daughter from a former marriage.

I had Vincent cook up fake identities for both of us. Mine said I worked as a private investigator as a consultant. Which was true. Leanna didn't like pretending to be married to me—again. But I thought it was better to travel as a married couple.

The nurse used a black funnel on a handle to peek into both of my ears. When she finished, I read her words from the digital pad. “You're fortunate. There's no damage to your ear drums. Your hearing may return in two weeks.”

That was the first bit of good news since I had arrived. I expected my hearing to return sooner than that, a gift of my Binger genes. We healed faster than mundanes, the name we used for “normals.”

The whole experience of being deaf made me realize what it would be like to be deaf all the time. The quiet was nice but not being able to hear conversations was a bitch. I was an outsider trying to eavesdrop without success.

My interrogator asked more questions on her pad. At one time, she wanted my ID and I showed her my PI card. She asked, “Gun?” with her index finger thumb extended and her thumb closed on an imaginary hammer.

I replied, “In my car.”

My voice still sounded muffled through the bones of my head.

She looked in my eyes and mouthed the words, “Why are you here?”

I answered, “To pick up my daughter at Gate 7.”

“Her name?”

“Alena Dani.”

“Spelled that, please.”

“A-L-E-N-A space D-A-N-I.”

A few clicks on her keyboard showed that name on her monitor.

She asked, “What did you see at Gate 4?”

“Six humanoid robots, each seven feet tall, came out of Gate 4. They were accompanied by a half dozen humans in light green uniforms. The robots looked like humans with flesh-colored skin and wore blue and white clothing. The edges of white shirts were visible near their collars.

“Then a blast came from behind them.”

She asked another hundred questions. At least it seemed like that many.

The nurse reached in a box and searched for a tag with a number attached to a comm.

I said, “Thirty-seven.”

“I know,” she added. Her words appeared on the ereader in front of me.

When she found mine, she removed the tag and handed it to me.

She pulled out another piece of paper. It said, “You must go to the hospital to get x-rayed for metal pieces stuck in your body.”

I replied, “But I don't feel anything.”

She mouthed, “Go anyway.”

She jerked her thumb in the universal sign of “You can leave now” or “Get outta here.” I couldn't tell which but I got the message.

She wiggled her right index finger three times to a guard standing nearby to bring the next person in line to come sit in the chair.

I put my comm on my left wrist and I proceeded out of the roped off area and through a crowd sitting on benches. Some had the red of blood on their clothing. As I went on foot by them, I wondered if they expected the hundred questions. Didn't matter. They'd get asked anyways.

Then I strode toward a crowd of gawkers beyond a rope. A guy in a light green uniform opened the rope for me to pass.

When I got beyond the gawkers, I saw two familiar faces sitting on a padded bench. My ex and my daughter.

Leanna and Alena rose as I got near them.

I had last seen my daughter several years ago when I left LA to come here. Alena no longer was a skinny and clumsy teenager. She was a woman now.

But the look on her face wasn't warm. Her lips were pursed and narrow. Her eyes glared under lowered eyebrows.

A beige sweater hung over her left arm. She had on black slacks and a beige short-sleeved blouse. On her feet were low-heeled brown shoes. She stood beside a luggage carrier. On it were six large suitcases. Four were of the same blue color and hard-shells. The other two were dark brown with cloth covers.

She was an inch taller than me and about my weight but with muscles bulging in her short-sleeved blouse. She might be 210 pounds. Good for her but she would stand out on Rossa.

You could tell who came from Earth by their height. With the fifteen percent higher gravity on Rossa, those born here did not reach the heights of most Earthers.

When I approached, Leanna smiled and said something. "...daughter..."

I looked my daughter over while she held her arms out. She took one look at my bloody shirt and shook her head. She decided against a hug.

Can't say I blame her.

I said, "I have a lot of questions."

Alena said something.

I pointed to my ears and shook my head.

"I can't hear. Comm," I ordered. "Use subtitles for translation."

Thank heavens for voice recognition software.

I pulled Alena's luggage cart while the two women strolled ahead of me.

As we entered the garage, the air felt muggy. Rain was coming.

When we got to my black sedan, I put her luggage in the boot while Alena sat in the rear seat behind her mother. I put on a spare shirt from my trunk. There was blood on my slacks but not as much.

When I sat in the driver's seat, I said, "Car. University of Zor. Unlock seat."

I felt the click as my seat came unlocked and I swiveled to face my two women.

"Did the news say how many had died?" I asked of Leanna.

She looked at me with a frown. "You didn't use your comm?"

I had to look at my comm to get her message.

"They took it from me. I didn't get it back until a few minutes ago. Guess they didn't want me to read the news before I told my experiences."

"They said that over fifty people were killed." She said that so fast I asked her to repeat it. She flashed her hands with her fingers spread five times and then stuck out her tongue on one side of her mouth and tilted her heads sideways with her eyes closed in a pantomime of someone dead.

"No robots?"

She raised one eyebrow. "Silly."

Guess robots don't count as people.

I wondered how long that would last.

Chapter 3

We loaded Alena's luggage into the BIS van. As we drove out of the garage and onto the main streets, I saw sprinkles of rain on the windshield.

Warm air blasted out of the vents and soon the windows fogged. That didn't last long as streaks of clearness expanded between tiny black wires on all the side and back windows. On the windshield, I saw a growing clear view expand upward from the dashboard.

We soon came to a stop light and more rain hit the windows. I didn't mind because we needed the rain. Zor was in the midst of a drought.

So far, nothing had been said. The tension in the air grew to be unbearable. I had to say something.

"How did you get your mother's comm number?"

From the backseat, Alena didn't answer right away. What she said made little sense until I checked. Reading their words on my comm was becoming a nuisance.

"What I'd like to know is how long are you two gonna to keep this pretense up?"

Did she mean her mother being on Rossa or our being spies?

Leanna said, "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Alena to her mother, "how long were you going to pretend you were in Germany?"

We had had Alena's messages sent to our contact in Cologne and then be forwarded to the next courier to Rossa. Leanna had said she held a training job that required her presence in different parts of the world so she couldn't respond right away. We hoped we could delude Alena into thinking her mother was on Earth.

"I asked you a question," I interjected. "How did you get your mother's comm?"

Our daughter responded in a quieter voice as she stared out her window. "I knew she married Vincent Stone, so I looked up his business. I finagled the receptionist to give me her number."

Like a good spy. Damn it! There I went.

"Why are you both on Rossa?" she asked. "Why did you pretend the whole time?"

Because we're spies and didn't want you to know Leanna was here.

But I couldn't tell her that.

I stared at my ex and she looked back at me. Her eyebrows went up. It was my turn.

I returned my gaze to my daughter in the back seat. "We wanted to protect you," I said.

"From what? From knowing you were both here? Didn't you think I'd want to come?"

Yeah, we knew you'd want to come. That was the point.

"I'm sorry, Alena," I replied. "We were just trying to protect you. Why are you coming here anyway?"

Alena crossed her arms and answered back while staring out the window, "I'm attending classes at the University of Zor. The official reason is for my degree of

xenoanthropology. Rossa is the only place where there are three species—humans, mercons, and napes. So I want to get my degree here and go on to my Ph.D.”

I knew she was studying xenoanthropology. And her argument made sense. If I wanted to get a Ph.D. in alien lifeforms, I’d want to come here too.

“And the unofficial reason?” I asked.

She peered out the window. “Because my Mom and Dad are here.”

“Why didn’t you tell us you were coming?”

She fired back as she fixed her eyes on both of us, “You didn’t tell me. Why should I tell you?”

Silence. That would explain why Leanna had received no emails from our daughter in two weeks. Travelers on their way to Rossa, or back to Earth, cannot send or receive emails for two weeks.

“Why couldn’t either of you come to my graduation for my bachelors?” Alena asked.

I looked at my ex and sighed through pursed lips. Alena was hitting hard with her questions. Maybe she had them stored up.

“You surprised everybody by graduating from college in two years,” I said. “I was busy here, organizing my team.”

“And I was busy in training school,” answered Leanna.

I kept my eyes glued to my comm as I tried to keep up with the three-way conversation.

“Spy training?” Alena asked.

Leanna and I glanced at each other.

“What are you not telling me about you?” asked Alena. “I can see it on your faces.”

I answered, “Nothing.”

“Right. Do you expect me to believe that after you lied about being on Rossa? Great-uncle Berry told me he knew both of you were on Rossa. Every Binger knows he’s the head of BIS.” She looked back and forth at her parents.

“Are you spies for Uncle Berry?”

Leanna turned her eyes to me. “Jake?”

I studied my comm to catch up on what Alena said.

I inhaled a deep one.

Here goes.

“I guess you’ll find out soon enough. Yes, I’m a spy for BIS. And so is your mother. She works for me here. I’m the station chief on Rossa. And now that you know, you’re in danger.”

Alena leaned back with a smile. “That is so cool.”

She crossed her arms and stood silent for a few moments.

“I wanna be a spy too.”

I stared at her.

“It’s not all glamor. Ask your mother. Sometimes it’s boring and sometimes it’s dangerous. I was captured a year ago and tortured. I thought I’d die. The explosion we saw

back there is a good example. We often go for long periods of time with little danger, and then we are frantic with fear as we deal with a problem.”

My daughter snapped back, “But you do good work, too, don't you?”

Leanna spoke next. “Alena, your father’s right. It’s dangerous work. And you never know when it could get more dangerous. We become paranoid.”

“Uncle Berry talked with me about it. I already know all that. He let me see training vids. I know it can be dangerous. But I want to fight prejudice and find out the truth.”

I had to respond to that. “You'll have plenty of opportunity to do that in your research.”

Leanna added, “You may have to kill someone. Have you thought of how you'd react to that?”

Silence.

So she had not thought about it.

I had to change the subject.

“The trip here is expensive. How'd you manage it?” I asked.

Alena stared out the window.

“Scholarship. Uncle Berry provided some help, too.”

So he could get his books in her.

She returned her gaze to me.

“I still want to join,” she added.

“Oh no you don't!” I exclaimed. “It’s far too dangerous.”

“Listen to your father for a change,” said Leanna. “He’s right. It’s very dangerous.”

I asked the question on every father’s mind.

“Got a boyfriend?”

“Nope. I want to get my Ph.D. first. Boyfriends can wait.”

Which meant a family of her own. Then it hit me.

Good grief! I might become a grandfather in a few years.

My car turned to the right at the light onto University Avenue.

It said, “Destination, please.”

“What’s the address of your dorm?” I asked.

Alena told me.

Our BIS van’s AI Chima acknowledged, “We should be there in two minutes twenty-five seconds.”

The rain turned to a few sprinkles now and then.

I asked my daughter, “Do you have a local comm number?”

She nodded.

“Let’s share comm info,” I said.

We touched our three comms together.

We turned left at a light and soon pulled into a parking lot with dozens of cars. I turned my car seat back to the front and when we stopped, I got out. The rain had let up.

For now. Dark gray clouds filled the sky from horizon to horizon. The air felt sticky with humidity.

I looked around but couldn't see Alena.

Where is she?

Soon she came out a door pushing a luggage cart. I hefted all six of her pieces onto the cart and was about to push it when Alena stopped me.

She fixed her eyes on me and we embraced again. This time was warmer. Leanna came next for a long hug from her daughter.

"I'll tag you after I get settled in," said Alena as she pushed her cart up the ramp and into the building.

I watched her as she strolled away, pushing the cart.

My daughter was on Rossa.

I said, "Well, she's here now."

"She's changed."

I nodded. "Not a kid anymore."

"Do you think she'll contact Acorn?"

"I doubt it."

"He won't stop trying, you know."

I sighed. "Unfortunately."

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"Chima, Gerges," I ordered. I had an unscheduled appointment there.

"Telly on."

Both of us viewed it on the dashboard. Sure enough, the explosion at Gate 4 was the big news.

I could not see the two black mercons. The mob may have taken their anger out on the two small aliens. Next came a vid of the two being rushed to an ambulance, wrapped in white with red stains. Their dark skin contrasted with the white of the bandages and the red of their blood.

Poor little buggers.

The scene changed to show the entrance to the mercon embassy as the ambulance pulled through the gate. Black mercon guards in military uniforms closed the gate.

The scene changed again to show a woman speaking into a microphone. I glanced at my comm.

"News of the explosion has spread over Rossa."

The next scenes showed angry crowds with parts of the Meda Spaceport behind them. I read the text across the bottom of the screen.

"Hundreds of flights cancelled."

Our van made a right turn at the Main Street light and a block later we pulled into the large lot at the hospital.

Inside Gerges and not knowing where to go, we stopped at the receptionist's desk just inside the front door. A gal sat behind the window in a light brown jacket and yellow

lace blouse. From the dark areas under her eyes, I figured maybe her ancestors came from India or Pakistan. She moved her lips but that wasn't much help.

So I replied, "I was at the explosion at the airport. Lost my hearing so you must speak slower while I try to read your lips."

She turned to my ex and spoke.

Guess that was too much to ask.

Leanna took the directions and pulled my arm. I felt like a child brought along with my mommy.

We walked down what seemed like a mile of hallways. We made lots of turns and I lost track of where I was until we got to an overhead sign that said "Radiology."

Leanna chatted with a male receptionist seated behind a glass window through a round hole.

She turned to me. "You're supposed to get undressed before your x-rays."

She pointed to a sign over a door. "Men." Beyond it was another door labeled "Women."

I wondered what they did with aliens. Probably didn't get many.

I went into the men's room and undressed. After counting my cash, I locked my clothes in a cupboard with a plastic card that hung around my neck on a cord. To hide my nakedness, I had to don a blue hospital gown that might have weighed four ounces. I slipped my feet into matching blue thin-soled slippers.

When I entered the cool x-ray room, a sign said, "You may take off your slippers when on the x-ray table."

The monitor reported, "Please remove your comm."

So I did.

It didn't take over fifteen minutes to get my whole body x-rayed. I watched a small monitor where a cartoon man dressed in a similar blue hospital gown went through the motions. As instructed, I held my breath and froze in each position for two or three seconds before I received orders to change to another.

I had watched old vids where a human technician moved the patient before walking out of the room between x-rays. The patient was supposed to lay still in each position. That must have taken hours.

When the ordeal was over, the monitor said, "You may exit and change your clothes. Remember your comm."

I put on my comm and returned to the change room. There, I used my neck card to open the small locker. Sure enough, my clothes waited for me. Being a spy and a bit paranoid, I checked my cash and ID, but they were as I had left them.

I dressed and walked into the nearby small waiting room where my ex sat. The room had chairs and two sofas that might be comfortable for tall people like me and I wondered how short folks or children found them. Or adults born on Rossa. I guessed the hospital staff person who ordered the furniture came from Earth and was tall. The décor left a lot to be desired. Dark green upholstery on the furniture, light green walls, and speckled yellow vinyl plastic on the floor.

I must have read every damned magazine on a tablet attached to a metal cord while we waited for the results.

The junk people read these days.

Celebrities, sports, household items, cars, trucks, meds for every ailment, etc. What I wanted was news of the explosion. When I found the news button, I watched as reporters spoke in front of the screen. I clicked on the “subtitles” link and selected Amerish. I must have watched several reruns of the explosion. The cameras weren’t close to Gate 4 so the explosion was in the background. Other than the big bang and the debris around the gate, I looked for Leanna and me. Sure enough, we were visible along one wall.

Damn.

This coverage would get to Earth too. I hoped no one recognized me. Being a spy means avoiding your fifteen minutes of fame in front of cameras.

My comm vibrated on my wrist. When I looked at it I saw it was a call from Ron Boscoe, fellow spy and best friend.

He asked, “How did your meeting with your daughter go?”

I showed Leanna my comm and she tagged Ron on hers. They chatted for several minutes. When she finished, she mouthed, “That was Ron. I told him about the explosion and that we’re okay, minus your hearing.”

Five minutes later, a guy from Radiology came in and spoke to Leanna. After he left, she turned to my face and spoke with exaggerated lip motions.

“X-rays showed no metal fragments. We can go.”

I suspected the tech had said a lot more than that. My hearing couldn’t return soon enough.

I appreciated how deaf people must feel when talkers don’t tell them everything. It was like being a kid left out of adult conversation.

Chapter 4

I dropped my ex off in front of the Channel One building where she worked part-time. I stayed in the van while she walked through the glass double doors. The big “1” in a circle marked both doors. My staying existed from an old habit. Never abandon a woman until she was safe inside.

“Home.”

When I climbed the steep stairs inside my apartment on the second floor above a real estate office, I found Tut, my robocat.

To my left I saw my living room, complete with a bar, and on its right was the doorway to my small office that overlooked Abby Lane. My gaze swept in a circle. On my right lay the dining room, kitchen, “guest” restroom, and a small storage room. Behind me on my right lay the guest bedroom, and on its right the main bedroom with its own bathroom. The hallway around the stairs joined the rooms.

Most rooms held prints of art. Mine was a functional home, not a decorative one. But I was a guy, so what could anyone expect?

Come to think of it, much more artwork rested on the walls of Ron’s house. What art I remembered there came from photos of the buildings Tos designed. Tosten Carrel was gaining a reputation in Zor for his curved designs. The two gay men lived together. Were married, as a matter of fact.

Tut’s head tilted to the left, showing me no one had visited my home in my absence. I still played back his recording at fast speed. Other than the changes of light through the windows from passing clouds, nothing moved. Tut, of course, stayed still on his cat bed at the top of the stairs. He’d appear to be sleeping and would move only when someone came up the stairs. Then he would act like a normal cat, stretching and yawning, but always keeping an eye on the human in front of him.

We spies are paranoid about being spied upon. So when I got to my office, I still checked my hidden cameras, figuring someone might have learned how to bypass a robocat’s recordings.

My desk faced me with the back of my chair against the window overlooking Abby Lane. Since the office was a corner room, the wall on my right overlooked the parking lot. I used the white wall facing my desk as a monitor sometimes.

Next I reclined in my chair and checked my computer. One email message dated this morning caught my eye.

“We are as concerned about explosion at airport and mob action against aliens as you are. Maybe we can pool our resources.”

The message was signed by someone named Deeter.

I avoided touching my keyboard lest I alter the message. I tagged my communications expert Zetto Teasely and explained.

I spoke into my com.

“Can’t hear. My ears were damaged in the explosion at the airport. You must speak slowly so my comm can translate. Can you figure out who sent the email from Deeter?”

He already had the codes to see what I saw on the public access part of my computer.

“Give me a few minutes,” he replied.

I got a cup of coffee from my kitchen and waited.

“Whoever he is, he's hid himself well,” replied Zetto on my comm pad. “I can't trace him any closer than the Harper Hotel.”

After thanking Zetto, I wondered about this new message. If it had not included the word “explosion,” I would have deleted it. The Harper Hotel was right across the wide boulevard of Shoreline Drive from the mercon embassy. Which brought forth memories of those two black aliens just before they went out of my line of sight with the mob descending on them.

I figured my spy boss on Earth, Acorn, would not send me new orders until another day had passed while he learned more of the incident at the airport. So I had a little time to investigate this email. Besides, from the pamphlet I picked up off the floor at the airport, it might relate to the bigger problem of the explosion.

I recorded a few notes on my afternoon's experiences, encrypted them, and sent them off to Earth. In another two hours, Acorn would receive it via the fast news couriers. Since the couriers had no humans aboard, they could speed up much faster and made the twenty-five light-year trip to or from Earth in less than two hours via the jump gates. In that way, the residents of Rossa and Earth kept in touch.

As I checked for any further emails, I read a new one.

“Let's talk. Harper Hotel, room 43. I have information you may not have.”

Once again there appeared the signature of Deeter.

I doubted that was his real name. Maybe he'd recognized me standing next to the wall. The message had all the features of a trap.

Before I responded, I sent another message to Acorn to update him on this new development.

Next, I needed to find out how long I'd be unable to hear. I searched on the Net and learned the name “acoustic trauma.” Left untreated, it might take two weeks for me to fully recover. Fortunately, we Bingers healed faster than normal so my hearing might return in a couple days.

Then I checked the news. The explosion at the Zor-Franken Airport captured most of the attention.

“Computer, use voice recognition. Display as subtext on the bottom of the screen.”

The Humans Only organization denied responsibility for the explosion. Why would they when they were giving a talk close by and could get hurt themselves? That made sense.

But I wondered about that. They were on the other side of the security area when it happened. Far enough away to avoid injury.

And no one claimed responsibility for inciting the mob that attacked the mercons. From the photos as they were carried to ambulances on gurneys, the two aliens were dressed in white bandages that showed only a little of their dark skin. Poor guys must have taken quite a beating. Then I noticed there were five mercons in the hospital at the embassy. I saw only two being attacked, so why five? Then I read that three aliens working a small food shop in the airport took a beating too.

Since I had not paid much attention so far to the HO group I did more research. Besides, what else could I do with my time while I waited for my hearing to return?

HO opposed robots on Rossa. The face of Guy Coocher, head of HO, appeared on almost all the news reports. He was also elected to the House of Parliament from a rural district west of Zor. A short guy, he obviously didn't work out much. I deduced that from his large belly and double chin. He claimed he didn't trust doctors because they always tried to get him to exercise, lose weight, and have surgeries.

One quote of his showed up several times. "I'd rather be the way I am than have some frickin' doctor make me a damned hybrid."

It didn't take me long to form the opinion that most of HO presented a platform for hate groups. Hatred against robots. Hatred against hybrids, the people who had mechanical or computer-driven implants. Hatred against gays. Hatred against the medical profession. Hatred against Bingers. Hatred against the alien mercons and napes. You name it and they probably hated it. Except their own kind, of course.

The problems came when many folks in York believed the same things. Folks may have immigrated from Earth but that didn't mean they'd left behind their fears, prejudices, and biases. Oh no. That's what they considered part of their humanity.

I shook my head.

When will they learn?

Several articles mentioned explosions at medical facilities that provided robotic body parts and at the Nape Museum. Some even mentioned explosions at the University of Zor where classes taught tolerance of different species, including hybrid humans. In each case, the Humans Only organization denied responsibility. But the fingers did point.

The information on acoustic trauma suggested lots of sleep. When I found myself yawning, I went to my bedroom, pulled the covers back, and lay down.

I dreamt of running from an angry crowd of people waving guns and knives while carrying hate signs. Every time I looked at myself, I saw fingers pointing at my eyes. Just the fingers. No person attached. Naturally, I walked into a bog where my feet moved sluggishly and the crowd gained on me.

I woke from the little nap more exhausted than when I went into it. My body odor reeked of sweat, so I took a shower and put on fresh clothes.

Gotta do something else besides study HO and these damned mysterious messages from Deeter.

So I went to my living room and opened my comm to read a book about Daniel Snyder, spy-detective for the US Navy in New York City. Unfortunately, the novel focused on a terrorist group and my mind kept wandering back to HO. This group needed more watching.

I made coffee and out of habit, set a timer. Then I remembered I couldn't hear it so I checked it visually several times. During my first cup, I felt vibrations through the floor as someone came up the stairs.

I pulled my Snap out of its holster, crouched behind the dining table, and aimed the gun at the top of the stairs where a head might appear.

The first thing to come into view was a handgun. Then a head.

#

It was Ron Boscoe in a white long-sleeved shirt, blue jeans, and dark blue shoes. In both ears, he wore gold stud earrings.

Much relieved, I eased my gun up and stood. When he saw me, he pointed his Snap upwards.

After replacing my Snap in its holster, I saw his lips move so I shook my head and used my left hand to point to my ear on that side of my head.

He frowned and said something else as he put his gun in its holster. Since I couldn't hear him, I hunched my shoulders, turned my palms outward, and raised my eyebrows.

I strode past him to my bar and fixed us two tall drinks. I reclined in one easy chair and he in the other. While we sipped, I used the voice recognition on my comm to display our messages.

"I came over to check on you," he said.

Ron said he had not heard anything from me all day. Ever since my unfortunate experience of being kidnapped, he got anxious whenever I didn't communicate.

It turns out his new husband, Tos, had moved in with him. They had met on a spy op four years in Campbell on the island continent of Braco south of the equator. Apparently vid and audio conversations didn't do it. Or maybe it just increased their affection for each other.

From the smile on his face, I knew my buddy was now a much happier camper.

I swear Ron is as romantic as I am.

He may be gay but I trust him with my life. Had on several occasions, as a matter of fact. And vice versa.

"Need any food?" Ron asked by slowly mouthing the words.

I shook my head. "Stocked up two days ago."

"Anything else? I can go with you to talk with clerks if it would help."

"Can't think of anything," I replied.

I filled him in on what I experienced at the airport, but the parts about Leanna and Alena were highlights only, since I was not there when the two women chatted. Couldn't hear them if I were.

"You worry about your daughter, don't you?" he said via my comm.

I had to nod at that one.

In a period of awkward silence, he mouthed, "Let's watch the news."

We sipped our drinks and watched reruns on the explosion at the airport. Living through the experience again helped me see how bland the reporting was. The most interesting commentary focused on who did it. All fingers pointed to either the Humans Only organization or to RUFF, the Rossan United Freedom Fighters. Since HO had presented a rally at the same airport, and could have been injured in the blast, suspicion focused on RUFF.

Craig Horton, head of that organization asserted, "RUFF had nothing to do with this! We don't believe in terrorism."

I studied Horton's face.

Had RUFF changed from a passive posture to a more aggressive one?

A few of the folks on the news interviews wondered if the Bingers were behind the explosions.

One gal said, “By eliminating robots that might be used as soldiers against an invasion, the damned Bingers were weakening the planetary defenses of Rossa.”

Of course, no one bothered to mention that the only aliens we knew about already lived on our planet—the mercons and the napes on Braco.

I shook my head. People react too easily with emotion without thinking it through.

My greatest concern was potential bigotry against Bingers. Having inherited half of my father’s DNA, altered to include genes from the alien mercons, had marked me as a threat to those with much less education or tolerant thinking.

You'd think by now I'd get used to this. But having blood and a human finger on the front of my shirt brought the danger home. I could be next.

Maybe I should avoid crowds for a while.

According to the interviews on the news, most folks in the city were frightened of more explosions. Many immigrants had come here from places on Earth where bombs terrorized them. They thought coming to Rossa would be different.

I sighed at that one. People may change their address but they always bring their old customs and habits of thinking with them.

Terrorism works by instilling fear of the bully. If we give in to that fear, the bullies win.

Chapter 5

When I watched the telly on the third day after the explosion, I noticed everyone mumbled. Some of my hearing must have returned. The low frequencies came through but not the high ones.

Ron knocked on my door. He may have knocked on his earlier visit, but I couldn't have heard it.

The monitor showed he wore a blue sports jacket with the Zor Screechies logo, jeans, and a low-slung blue cap. He had on a yellow shirt with wide lapels, the current rage in men's fashions. The sports logo of the local baseball team showed the face view of a single screechie with its mouth open in a run from home to first base.

On Rossa, screechies were an indigenous species that looked like Earth's prehistoric velociraptors. Mean little animals, they stood two feet tall and were famous for the screeches they let out when a group of them attacked. I had been on a screechie hunt and will always remember the terror of facing a herd of them as they let out their screech and rushed toward my group of four hunters.

Ron climbed the stairs and mumbled something.

I waved him into my office. He closed the door and I scanned the room for bugs with my comm. For spies, it's always a good idea to scan every room you enter, even if you've checked it before.

Then I took the desk chair and Ron reclined in the guest one. After making sure the blinds were closed so no one could see the wall opposite my desk, I displayed Acorn's message on the wall.

"HO on Earth has become a terrorist group. They are behind explosions in public places, even in developed countries. Watch HO there closely. They could become a problem. If that happens, deal with it. My sources tell me HO on your world is planning a surprise that will upset anti-HO voters. Find out if you can. You decide what to do with the mysterious messages."

I turned my eyes upon Ron, who nodded his head and pursed his lips.

He queried, "What were the mysterious messages?"

I could not make out what he said and it was important to get it right. So I turned to my comm to see what he had said.

Then I displayed both messages from Deeter on my monitor and let Ron read them.

This deserved more thought. I settled back in my black leather office chair, placed my elbows on the arm rests, and pressed my fingers together under my nose.

My boss would see the same news broadcasts so he might ask for more information. Maybe it was time to infiltrate that organization.

But who could I ask?

Andy Warden kept busy with his hardware business. His Mourtan Security was at the top of his industry. Some say it came from his genius. He needed to be left alone as much as possible. Besides, he was too well known to become an undercover agent. All one had to do was check his name or photo against his website.

Vincent Stone worked as my software guru and would have a hard time passing. Besides, he was a hundred percent Binger. Leanna was his wife and my ex. She couldn't

pretend to believe the HO line. Ron was half-Binger and gay and either could become a problem, so he wouldn't do.

Which left Zetto, my communications expert. Zetto lived alone and only wanted into my spy ring for the thrill of it. Being a hundred percent human, his DNA would allow him to pass HO inspection.

"We need to infiltrate HO. And Zetto appears to be our best chance."

Ron's words appeared on my comm. "Can't we turn anybody?"

"Do you know anyone in the HO organization? Got anyone in mind?"

He paused before shaking his head. "Just wonderin'. What about Deeter?"

"Find out what you can about Room 43 at Harper. Who rented it, et cetera."

"Vincent is better at that."

Might as well use the best brains I had on my team for hacking.

"You're right. Give it to him."

I opened my file on Zetto and studied it. My man lived alone in an apartment here in Zor and was an admitted introvert. He had no known girlfriends and considered himself asexual. As in not interested in sex.

For a moment, I wondered about that.

How could the man not enjoy the thrill of sex?

I thought his devotion to electronics came before that. He got more of a thrill tracing comm tags, a thrill that lasted days. Sex came a distance second.

He had taken part in special ops before and said he liked the sense of danger. That reminded me of Ron's getting a thrill out of B&E ops.

The real question remained. Could he go undercover in HO and pretend to be an alien hater?

#

Ash Getner sat at his desk behind the window in a gray business suit and white shirt.

He studied Alena's last name of Dani on the roster of those who had landed at the Zor-Franken Airport. He received a list, with photos, on all the people who came to York. With his two artificial legs, he was the half-man half-machine head of the York Security Agency, or YSA for short. He considered himself the master spy on York.

"Where have I seen that name before?"

Then it hit him.

"Ah ha! The spy."

To make sure no one could detect conversations by vibrations of the glass of the window, he had installed double panes with six random noise generators around the edges broadcasting into the space between the panes of the bullet proof glass.

He could change the blinds covering the window to allow light in whenever he wished to gaze out, but he seldom did that for fear that someone might take a shot at him through the window. To reduce the chance of that happening, he had the double panes offset so his image wouldn't coincide with what appeared on the outside. A shooter would miss.

The side walls had thick insulation to deaden the sounds of conversations. To reduce the chance of them being used by anyone who wished to eavesdrop, he had rented the adjacent rooms, one for storage and the other for a bathroom off his office. He didn't want to use a public restroom. Too risky.

He also used the space above and below his office for his pseudo-firm, Rossan Export-Imports, Ltd.

The walls of his office held photos of politicians and himself. He was most proud of the photo of the current Prime Minister Pierre Klava shaking hands with him in front of the flag of York. For security purposes, he preferred to use his monitor for displaying any images from the Net rather than use the wall opposite his desk. On that wall rested landscape images of York, something peaceful to calm his nerves. Being the head of YSA provided plenty of stress.

With a few right-eye blinks he went to the background file on Jake Dani but saw no reference to a daughter.

Could they be related?

Next he checked the interviews of witnesses to the explosion. Sure enough, there stood the name Ralph Snyder. But the photo yelled out at Getner. This was Jake Dani, the BIS spy. He had come to the airport to pick up his daughter Alena, accompanied her mother, Ebonta Snyder.

Getner leaned back in his tall black office chair.

Well, well, well. Has Fortune smiled on me or what?

He knew Jake was a spy for BIS but the real question became were this Ebonta Snyder and Alena Dani also spies? Since Alena was only twenty years old, she seemed too young.

He checked his databases for Ebonta Snyder but couldn't find anything. Puzzled, he checked her photo image from the airport records. In ten seconds, his computer found a match from his private files.

Well, well. If it isn't Leanna Stone.

With a few taps on his keyboard he brought up the information on her. She came to Rossa a year ago and was married to Vincent Stone. That name Getner knew. The artificial limb guy. Getner's own legs had been replaced just four years ago with a pair from Stone Industries. Naturally the head of YSA had used another name on his visit to Earth to have his legs upgraded to the newer model from Stone. Vincent Stone was a genius and got artificial limbs after his own legs became useless from a car accident.

Hmm, could Vincent Stone be a BIS agent too?

There was no quick way to find out. The display of information on his monitor gave no hint of Stone's being a Binger or part-Binger. Everybody in the Earth-based American CIA and the Rossan-based YSA knew of Berry Dani's recruitment of every Binger he could get his paws on into the Binger Intelligence Service. Getner wouldn't be surprised if Berry Dani resorted to blackmail. He knew he would in the same circumstances.

Getner spent the next fifteen minutes revising his plans on how to use this new information.

He made a mental note to ask for more money at his next session in front of the Senate Committee on Security. Conservative people were more willing to spend money on

espionage and the military. He looked forward to reaping the rewards of his helping Coocher and HO.

Ash Getner was the son of Ashton Stephen “Steve” Getner, a wealthy industrialist from Cleveland in the State of Ohio in the United States on Earth. His mother, Mary Love Beadley was a hard driving woman. She had been a beauty in her youth, and the elder Getner and she had found each other to be complimentary in needs and resources. Her family had lots of money, which Steve used to launch his companies. A genius, Steve built an industry around making computer parts used by hundreds of millions. Steve and Mary had two children and when the young sister, Louella Getner developed brain cancer at age ten and died a year later, they focused their attention on young Ash.

Mary molded the personality of Ash, driving him on to succeed at any cost. She was a sociopath in that she couldn’t feel others’ emotional pain—physical or emotional.

Young Getner graduated from Yale summa cum laude and went directly into the American CIA. Being only five feet seven and a frail youth, he tried harder in everything. After one drunken party, he crashed his motorcycle and ended up with paralysis of both legs. His father poured money and time into helping his son become whole again.

Being full of ambition fueled by his parents, Ash made a decision that changed his life. Getting around on useless legs with the aid of half-crutches wouldn't do for a man with ambition, so Ash had elected to have his legs amputated and replaced with not two but four artificial ones. Since four would be noticed, he didn't bother to make them look like human legs and chose a metallic appearance. It was impossible to knock him over and he could flaunt his uniqueness. He had also chosen to have longer legs so he could tower over everyone else at seven feet.

Four legs soon became a handicap, however, since any presence in public drew attention, which the CIA frowned upon. So he returned to Stone Industries to get the newest model of two legs. But he had liked being taller than everyone else, so he chose legs that would put his height at six feet even.

When the York Security Agency formed in 2100, Ash migrated at the age of 38 to Rossa on a First Class ticket, courtesy of his wealthy parents. There he grew the agency.

Six years later, with a black budget rumored to be over fifty million sols, Ash preferred to keep a low profile. He rented space outside the federal building under the name of Rossan Exports-Imports, Ltd.

Today, Getner made the first of several moves to expand his empire. Then he called in his top field guy, Ben Portal.

#

Ben was a big man, six four and two hundred and sixty pounds. He worked out to keep in excellent shape. He spent another half hour each day at a shooting range and took pride in being the top field operations man on the planet. Or so said Getner on many occasions.

Ben entered the outer office of Rossan Imports-Exports.

Getner's assistant, Shirley, recognized him. “Please take a seat, sir. He'll be available shortly.”

A scan showed he was the only one other than Shirley in the office. She wore a light blue top with long sleeves. He wished he could get a glimpse of her legs but they were hidden behind the front of her desk.

He took a chair without arms since he hated to squeeze between the arms of the others. Today he wore a gray suit jacket and slacks. His shirt was a pale yellow with wide lapels, which he thought would help him fit right in with current fashions.

She stared into space as she said, "Mr. Portal is here, sir."

Portal figured she was wearing an earpiece inside her ear cavity. Ten seconds later, she looked at him and pointed with her hand that he was to go through the double doors.

Ben rose to his feet and made his way into the inner office. Once inside, he first noticed the blinding light from the windows with his boss silhouetted against the light, standing his full height of six feet.

Getner motioned with his head that Portal was to sit.

Then his boss told him his newest assignment.

Chapter 6

At six o'clock I put the evening news on my office wall. Channel One often had something interesting. And having another chance to watch Sheila Fish was always a pleasure.

Sheila said on my screen, "We now take you to the Zor-Franken Airport."

The scene changed to show police preventing gawkers from getting closer. I recognized the mezzanine. The camera view zoomed in on a man and a woman hanging from an overhead rail. Signs of "Binger" hung from each of their necks. The reporter then showed the mug shot of another man in Satchel Prison who was killed because he was a suspected Binger. I didn't recognize any of them but all three had large skeletal frames.

When I read the subtitles, I thought of my brother Ken. When I was twelve and lived on Rossa, my brother was falsely arrested for theft and while he waited in jail, several bigots accused him of being a Binger and stabbed him to death.

#

I was in class when my Dad burst through door. He scanned the room and when he saw me, he rushed up to my desk and said, "Come on. We're going home."

I didn't know what to do. I looked down at my open book of algebra problems.

"Come on!" my Dad repeated. "No time for that now. We're going back to Cleveland."

My teacher riveted her eyes at both of us but didn't say a word.

Suddenly, my homework didn't seem so important. My Dad placed his hand on my arm and pulled. I ran to keep up with him as he pulled me by the arm from the classroom, down the hall, and out the front double doors to his car parked on the street outside. He opened the back seat door and shoved me in. I saw Mom in the front but no Ken, my older brother.

"Where's Kenny?"

That's when I saw Mom's face, scrunched up with squinted eyes full of tears.

When Dad got in the driver's seat, I yelled from the back seat, "Where's Kenny?"

"Your brother is dead," he yelled as he closed the door.

Soon the car lurched forward and raced down the street. We stopped only for traffic lights.

At one stop, I uttered, "Kenny is dead?"

Mom nodded and cried some more while burying her face in tissues. I looked to my father's face in the rear view mirror.

"Ken was murdered in jail," he said. "Some inmates called him a Binger and stabbed him. I found out an hour ago." Dad spoke with that don't-bother-me-with-questions voice. "Now be quiet. Fasten your seat belt."

I shut up and busied myself with my belt.

Dad replied, "I bought tickets for the airport. We're going home to pack."

When we got home, I went upstairs to the room I had shared with my brother in our small two-bedroom apartment. As I laid my only suitcase on my bed and pulled clothes from my dresser, I looked at Kenny's guitar hanging on the wall. Well did I remember his

strumming it as he learned a new song, while studying the sheet music in front of him on the stand. I expected him to walk in the door.

“Hurry up!” yelled my Mom. “We’re almost ready.”

I finished as fast as my little fingers and hands would allow me. All I remembered was it was hot in Cleveland. So I packed some of my summer things. As I struggled to lift and carry the heavy case out of my room, my Dad came up to me and grabbed it. I followed him down the stairs while he lugged two suitcases. Mom followed me with two more.

My parents and I went out the front door. Dad put the cases in the boot of the car while Mom and I opened the side doors and got in.

My father drove faster than I’ve ever seen him. When we got to the Zor-Franken Airport, Mom held my hand tightly as we stood in three separate lines. One to drop off our luggage, another to walk single file through the scanner, and finally to stand in front of Gate 17.

“What about my toys?” I asked Mom.

“We’ll get you some new ones when we get home.”

Something told me to be quiet and not ask questions.

Sitting between Mom and Dad as we waited seemed like forever. I studied both their faces. Mom’s was wet with tears. Dad had his jaw locked tight and stared ahead.

Finally, a man said, “Those with small children may board now.” All three of us got out of our seats and went in the line. Dad went first and presented his comm to the guard and we rushed down the long hallway.

I sat next to Mom on the plane and Dad took another seat several rows behind us. At one point, I looked over the back of my seat and saw him. He waved and blew me a kiss. I returned the air-kiss.

“Fasten your seat belt, Jake,” said Mom.

Hours later, we got off the plane and went inside the humongous terminal at Meda. We ate at a fast food place. I went into the gent’s room with Dad and relieved myself.

Next we stood in line and entered a small room with lots of seats. I put on the seat belt when I saw Mom put on hers, she on my right and Dad on my left.

Fifteen minutes later, we rose up. And up. And up. Outside the few windows I saw clouds as we passed through them. The sky got dark and stars came out. The trip up the Space Elevator took two long hours.

When we slowed, I felt vertigo while my arms floated in front of me. I knew the feeling from my previous journey to Rossa. We were in weightlessness. I followed Dad as we used handrails to make our way forward in the small elevator car and down a hallway.

My parents were by my side all the way.

We finally entered a small cabin and Dad closed the door.

“Are we leaving Kenny?” I asked.

Dad looked at Mom, but she bowed her head and cried. He looked at me.

“Ken is dead. We won’t see him again. You’re all we got now. You’ve got to protect yourself.”

I wanted to enjoy the feeling of weightlessness but Dad’s words kept going through my head. “Ken is dead.”

I grew up a little that day.

#

It took another twenty-four years before I came back to Rossa.

I transmitted a message to Acorn asking him if he knew of any Bingers here other than my team. He replied four hours later, keeping it short to frustrate decoders.

“You are only ones I know, other than twenty on Braco. How is your infiltration?”

Gancha Morentoss was half-Binger and ran the drug rackets in Zor, so I knew his information was out of date. I knew of the small group on the western edge of Braco who were trying to set up a colony for Bingers. I sent back information on Gancha but did not answer his question.

By Saturday, my hearing recovered to almost normal. I still had ringing in my ears but I could understand people when in face to face conversations. When I received a tag, I increased the incoming frequencies by a few decibels on my comm and it helped.

Being alone in my apartment for days on end stressed me out. I found myself watching the telly more than usual. Coverage of the explosion had passed off the top story. Even the Net showed less interest.

One segment showed MP Guy Coocher.

“We have to have government control of the jump technology. It’s too important for the human race to be left in the control of corporations.”

He meant Space Services, a conglomerate of major corporations. I wondered how the government would do any better.

The news from Earth got more alarming every day. Dale Avan, the lead male anchor from Channel Four reported, “Fighting continued in northern Pakistan after the seizure of the most of the Kashmir state by Indian troops.”

Vids showed artillery firing in the background. Another showed drones engaging in aerial combat with each other in the mountains.

“IIAP, formed by the mergers of Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan waged war with India with no end in sight.” Vids showed the devastated ruins of an unidentified city. “Radiation levels remain high in Mumbai and Karachi. Fortunately, they were the only cities hit with nuclear weapons in this conflict.”

The map changed.

“Meanwhile, the war in eastern Europe continues with Polish troops from NATO reported taking over Brest, Belarus from the Russian Third Army and German and Slovakian troops from NATO taking over Lviv, Ukraine from the Russian Fourth Army. Western Europe and the United States have increased their production of robot soldiers. There are no reports from Moscow. So far there is no progress in peace talks in Geneva.”

A vid showed animated conversations across a large table and both sides shouted.

NATO robotic soldiers had a decided advantage on the battlefield. I suspected they came from America. The robots could not be destroyed by simple gunfire unless hit in a vital spot and were not afraid to charge human soldiers. The most effective strategy was guerrilla warfare, with humans planting bombs wherever robot soldiers traveled. When NATO robots met Russian robots, fighting was fierce.

I grew tired of news of war and changed to Channel One.

Vids of a herd of six-legged beasts appeared. Sheila Fish reported, “Carl Nelson of Campbell, on Braco, announced success in cross-breeding Earth cattle with bopums.” A vid ran of several people in a restaurant, wearing the pointed hats typical of the inhabitants of Braco, with smiles on every face. Sheila continued, “Even though the new animals are sterile, meat from them appears to be a lot easier to chew.”

Next came the weather report.

The weather gal said, “Up to six inches of snow are predicted in the eastern mountain regions.” She stepped back to the left to reveal an overlay of York with the jet stream dipping down from the north. “We can expect cooler weather in the weeks ahead.”

The scene changed to show rows of trees with electric heaters between the rows. Energy was cheap in York with so many solar panels covering public parking lots and most buildings.

“Fruit prices are expected to rise since the garnot and other crops may experience frost overnight.”

Garnot was a cash crop grown in the temperate climates of York. The small brown-skinned fruit tasted between that of a plum and a peach.

After a sigh, I switched off the telly. This was another of the quiet spells. You’d think I’d get used to this by now. Being a spy meant long periods of relative calm, followed by maddening tension as we dealt with a crisis.

[This ends the first six chapters of “Humans Only.”]

You may want to subscribe to my mailing list to receive an email when a new book is published. Go to www.crayne.com and sign up today while it is on your mind.

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Previous novels

Freedom

Jake Dani gets a call from his girlfriend Mimi after her arrest for protesting slavery on the newly colonized planet of Rossa. Mimi disappears and Jake leads his spy team on operations to find her. But they are up against clever and resourceful crime lords and landowners who will do anything to protect their investments in slavery. Including going after Jake himself.

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