**Olympia**

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**Prologue**

3.1.23, 13:30 PST

“All ships proceed to landing coordinates via assigned trajectories.”

Relief and anxiety commingled. In the 165 sleek black triangular ships coursing the thermosphere, the passengers and crew fought their fear by rechecking their vaccination kits and reviewing procedures on their handheld computers. In *Ahmahri* 56, the tall, youthful pilot stood, deft hand within the ship’s directional pillar, manipulating the spherical controls with his electrostatic glove exactly as predetermined. The holographic display of the flight path was marked by blinking blue triangles, directing them over one of the most dangerous destinations in the world.

“Flyover in five minutes,” the slender, dark-haired navigator announced, her voice shaking as she stood firm on the metal floor grid, her magnetized boots transmitting the ship’s vibrations as they swept through the troposphere at almost 1300 kilometers an hour.

Only twenty hours before, they had succeeded in seeding the last satellite required for true worldwide broadcasting. Their observational data indicated that it was highly unlikely that any country on earth had the capacity or willingness to launch an attack, but all aboard knew nothing was impossible. By now, the remaining humans were reportedly massing at the 164 points on the globe chosen by the Council, to receive the injections that would perpetuate the remains of the beleaguered human race.

All the ships were mandated to fly over one zone of potential interference to ensure that no large military bases were combat ready. *Ahmahri* 56 was scheduled to fly directly over Joint Base Lewis-McChord, 14.65 kilometers south of Tacoma, Washington, U.S. on its way to Seattle. NORAD’s Western Headquarters was said to be unmanned, but a thermal imaging scan of the hangars was required before a flight into a high population area. Since the limit of an accurate scan was only 12 kilometers, the close fly-over was required. The engineers had reduced their weight by eliminating the large weaponry aboard; a fully armed F-22 could obliterate their ship with one missile, and with it, eliminate any chance that anyone in the states of Washington, Idaho, or Oregon would survive.

“Mehtan, are we within range?” Clea asked, her hands poised over the instrument panel that controlled the thermal scanning equipment carefully cosseted in the well beneath the ship, next to the mechanical arm assembly.

Mehtan cleared his throat. “Fifteen seconds.”

As three of the twenty-five flight crew in the dimly lit interior of the ship studied the incessant, hypnotic variation of the blue digital readouts on the consoles before them, their peers sought comfort in each others’ faces. Two females held hands, interlocking their fingers tightly. One male uttered a hushed prayer.

“Begin, Clea,” Mehtan commanded.

Thirty seconds elapsed. Clea’s hands scrolled over the square meter of space in an exacting sequence that she had practiced for the previous eight hours. “No mechanical heat signatures. Some minor human or animal activity is present.”

Their sigh of relief was accompanied by a pervasive, overriding anguish. Whoever remained alive at the airbase would soon perish; those too far from the ship’s landing site to receive the vaccine that could save them faced the suffocation brought by their mortal enemy, its mere 100 nanometers in length deceptively lethal.

The precisely sculpted ship silently regained its maximum speed as the slight shuddering resumed.

“Rakuna, 56 is clear. On our way to Seattle,” Mehtan’s deep voice reported quietly. “We begin the local broadcast directive in 50 seconds.”

Some of them held each other’s hands as the equipment for the announcement was tested by the elderly communications officer. “Keep your voice calm and steady, Lani,” the male seated next to her reminded gently. “Panic is our worst enemy.”

The biologists closed the vaccination kits nearest them. Though it had been days since those aboard ate their last meal, hunger was a minor inconvenience, for the long wait in orbit had cost them something of great significance: their ability to return home in anything that resembled the near future.

When the critical vote to intervene on earth had finally been tabulated, the population of Esharra had committed themselves to saving the few human beings that had survived. Seven among the twenty-five on *Ahmahri 56* had dissented, but their race’s obligation to sacrifice had been absolute. The five youths among them would remain inside with one guardian male, but nineteen of them would step out into earth’s more oppressive gravity and vaccinate as many in the crowd of desperate humans as possible. Their blood pressure would rise slightly and their strong muscles would work less adeptly, but they would function well enough to perform the tasks they had been assigned.

Their leaders had anticipated the humans’ surprise upon their arrival. All the more reason to remain unmasked, the Council had reasoned. But to enter unarmed? Ultimately, this singular moment would be the test of both races’ ability to coexist at the worst of times. The only hope for either themselves or the human race was the experience of bonding over a trauma shared. Do or die: mutual heroism through defeating the virus that had devastated the human species, or utter destruction. Below the large black triangular craft, Lani’s slowly, carefully spoken message played in English, Spanish, and French:

**“Do not fear. We are here to help you. You are not alone.”**

The ship’s gently uttered mantra, the rhythm of those comforting words did not console the passengers of *Ahmahri* 56, which swung slowly past the immense dark block of Safeco Plaza, beside the iconic, arching Space Needle, and then into the stadium between the wide swaths of the awnings of Century Link Stadium.

“*Hatamu.*” Mehtan brought the ship to a full stop with a single verbal command and removed his gloved hand from the pillar. Maintaining his poise would be crucial, but even he was concerned that he could not master his assigned tasks perfectly. He had requested the leadership post at Century Link. As one of only thirty males with the important role of site manager, he bore the ultimate responsibility for every failure. Anxious hands checked earpieces. Integrated responses at all times ensured maximal success.

Mehtan’s large, dark eyes shone as he issued his final directive. “Only .5% of the humans are left. Treat the survivors gently. They have lost everything.”

An angry member of the defeated *Eda* partyspoke out of turn. One of her sisters stood beside her, brimming with spite. “You *Ursani* have cursed our race, marooned us on this world of death with these violent, inferior beings. Voted down for 2,500 years, but now you have a full measure of revenge. So say a poignant prayer to your non-existent Deity for the defeated before we all leave every shred of our sanity behind.”

The eighteen *Ursani,* including four of the children, raised their left hands, palms up.

“*Tahditu*,” they prayed, their voices soft and tone respectful. “Blessings for our brothers and sisters who do not believe, for us and for our offspring, for Paydan and human alike.”

“Open the door,” Mehtan commanded.

Within the *ahmahri*, silence had reigned; on the torn, artificially green turf of the field dwelled only noise and madness, the smell of filth and death under a cold, icy gray sky. A few lone law officers exerted heroic efforts to maintain sufficient order. Somehow, life prevailed.

On that late winter day, the truth ground all the bizarre, grandiose fantasies that humans had entertained about first contact with another civilization into dust. Suddenly, no “grays” or reptilian species explained the presence of the mysterious black ships. For those survivors who received one of *Ahmahri* 56’s 30,000 doses of GK329 on 3.5.23, the few who had held out hope when everything was lost, their eyes looked into the faces of a race alien to them, and recognized themselves.