

Chapter 29

NORDVULK:

Hardin drives into the parking lot at the auditorium, and is surprised to see Sliven standing on the front steps with the receptionist, who is wearing a coat and carrying her purse. She normally works from 10:00 AM to 7:00 PM, like the director. His curiosity piqued, Hardin climbs out and rushes to catch up with Sliven just before he enters the building. “Hey, Director.”

Sliven recognizes the voice, and turns around. “Mister Hardin. I’m glad you stopped by. I wanted to thank you in person for rescuing those people.”

“Yes, Director. That’s why I came to talk to you. I suppose you know the spaceship is gone. Cave and his friends took it somewhere. That’s what nearly killed us.”

Sliven crosses his arms. “It belongs to Mister Essex, so I suppose it could be called a spaceship. I heard you were given plenty of warning to leave the area.”

Hardin wonders if Sliven is right. Perhaps it really was one of Essex’s experiments, but it doesn’t explain the sudden rise of magma. “What’s going on here?”

Sliven lowers his arms. “Some dignitaries are using the auditorium for a meeting with Essex about his experiments. They are not too happy about it crashing in other territories.”

“I’ve been a big fan of Essex for a long time. Let me attend the meeting so I can shake his hand.”

Sliven shakes his head no. “It’s a private meeting. Perhaps you can meet him some other time.” He turns and walks into the building, closing the door behind him.

Hardin leaps down the stairs, runs over to his car, and jumps in to head over to his research station just off campus. He runs inside and grabs a go-cam and a laptop computer off the shelf, then drives to the back entrance of the auditorium.

As he climbs out, he looks around to make sure he’s alone, then walks quickly up to the stage door. He looks around again before reaching into his pocket for a set of keys to unlock the deadbolt. He slowly opens the door a crack and peers inside, but doesn’t see anyone back stage, so he hurries inside and closes the door.

All three dressing room doors are open, so he moves cautiously inside and stares through the curtain at the small seating area. Now all he has to do is sneak up to the camera room without being caught. If the meeting is so private, perhaps Sliven has cleared the building. He runs up the stairs and enters the small room without any problem.

The return trip to his car is even quicker. He climbs inside and drives to a secluded parking spot near the corner of the building, where he can see the front entrance. He plugs the receiver into the laptop and turns it on. An image of a podium on the stage appears near the top of the screen, with the first four rows of seats in the middle of the room clearly visible. He grins, shuts everything down, then leans back in his seat to wait for the meeting.

Several minutes later, he sits up when a black limousine stops in front of the entrance. He grabs the small binoculars off the seat and watches, as Okana appears first, followed by a small woman with red hair he assumes is Jadin. He leans closer to the windshield when Essex climbs out, so now he knows that part of the story is true.

He notices Okana carefully studying the surroundings, and slides down behind the dashboard. When he hears the car door slam shut, he peers over the steering wheel and sees the back side of a tall woman walking into the building with the others.

THE AIRPORT:

Alex waits until the small private jet stops, then walks over as the side door opens. A Secret Service agent appears in the doorway, surveying the area. When he looks down, Alex waves the two limousines over. The agent hurries down the steps, holds out his hand, and Alex accepts.

The agent feels a tingling sensation as he lets go. "I've heard a lot about you, Mister Cave. I'm Special Agent Lewis Mecklenburg, but everyone calls me Mack. It's nice to meet you. Excuse me."

The first vehicle stops a few feet away, and Mack opens the door and looks inside. He does the same with the second one, then walks back to the bottom of the steps and looks up at the doorway. "We're clear."

Shaw walks down the stairs and steps out of the way, so she can talk to Alex. "What's so important you couldn't tell me on the phone?"

"The spaceship now has full control of the SV1. They are both in geosynchronous orbit directly above us. Everyone was scrambling to get our satellites out of the way when it began changing course."

"We could be in big trouble."

Alex does not recognize any of the people exiting the plane, and turns to Shaw. "What countries are being represented?"

"Most of them. A few more will be informed once we know what we're up against."

"We already know, ma'am. I think this meeting is just a formality to let us know what she wants."

Shaw heaves a deep sigh of resignation and looks around the area. "In other words, we're screwed."

"I'm hoping Pandora can persuade the A.I. to make a few compromises."

"I hope you're right." She turns and climbs into the second limousine.

Alex follows her inside for the short ride to the auditorium.

Hardin is digging through the storage compartment in the dashboard for a power bar. He notices two stretch limousines stop in front of the auditorium. He straightens up and grabs the binoculars just as the door of the first car opens, but he doesn't recognize any of the people climbing out. When the door on the second vehicle opens, he watches Cave climb out and turn to help a woman through the opening. When she stands up, he recognizes the President's Chief of Staff. *Now why would Shaw be here?*

Alex leads the group into the auditorium and invites them to sit down. He indicates for Sliven to start the meeting, as he walks around the stage. He finds Okana and Essex in the first dressing room. "Everyone is ready."

Okana stands. "Who did Shaw bring with her?"

"I have no idea. None of them looks familiar. I believe they are the back channel representatives for all the major countries. I'll get the ladies."

In the next room, he interrupts Jadin demonstrating some of her cosmetics to Pandora, who appears to be ignoring her. "They're ready."

Alex looks into Pandora's intense sparkling blue eyes and knows the ship is still in control, then looks down at Jadin for confirmation.

Jadin realizes what Alex wants to know, and indicates it's the ship without speaking. Pandora's eyes look perfectly normal to her.

Alex turns back to Pandora. "You and I will wait here until our friends are seated and we're announced."

Pandora waits until the others walk away. "Don't you like the woman, Alex?"

"At the moment, I'm finding it difficult." He watches the sparkle in her eyes increase in intensity. When she shoves him aside and walks toward the curtain, he grabs her arm and pulls her back. "What's wrong with you? Let me talk to the woman."

She stares at him. "No more. I thought you would want a relationship with her. Since it is apparent that you do not, there is no need for you to speak with her. I'm taking over permanently."

Alex lets go. "I'm not looking for a relationship. I have a job to do, and you are about to threaten my entire race." He hears Sliven running out of things to say to a quiet audience. "Let's get this over with." He pulls back the curtain and follows her out onto the stage.

Sliven feels relieved when Alex appears. "For those of you who may not know him, this is geophysicist, Professor Alex Cave."

Alex steps up to the microphone. "You all know why you're here. This is Pandora."

He steps back and indicates for her to take his place, and when she turns to face the audience, their stunned expressions indicate something is wrong. He looks down at Jadin, who waves him over. He walks down the steps to see for himself, and the intensity of the sparkle in Pandora's eyes nearly blinds him. Apparently, everyone is able to see what he sees, although not the intensity he sees.

He looks around at everyone, and notices Sliven's baffled expression. Apparently, he can't see the sparkle because he has brown eyes. He notices Pandora turn to look directly at him, so he sits down next to Jadin, a short distance from the representatives.

Pandora looks into each person's eyes, noting their color. Four of them are GREENS, and the rest are BLUES, except for one BROWN. "I am here to inform you that we will not share our planet with you. Not unless you do as instructed. You have violated genetic law by allowing BROWNS to over populate our world. They must be eliminated."

Alex stares over at the angry expressions and tries to hear the muffled conversations, but all he can distinguish are a few obscene words.

Shaw stands up. "Absolutely not. You can't possibly expect us to kill our own people."

"All of you must agree. If you don't, I will eliminate your entire species."

Shaw is not about to follow her instructions, and tries to think of a way out of the situation. She finds it difficult with those radiant eyes staring at her. "We don't know your genetic laws. At least do us the courtesy of explaining who you are."

Pandora is about to walk away when she sees the curiosity in Alex's eyes. She turns and looks down at him. "We travel through the galaxy colonizing suitable worlds to harvest their natural resources."

Shaw raises her hand. "Why our planet?"

Pandora glances at her, but speaks to Alex. "This planet has a perfect orbit around a perfect sun, and has a permanent moon of sufficient mass to stabilize the rotation. All these elements are

necessary for complex life to evolve. We know of only thirty-seven planets that meet these conditions, and I found this world one-hundred and twenty-million years ago. It is mine.”

Pandora looks around the audience for a second, then turns back to Alex. “One of my mineral extraction processes caused a massive shift in the tectonic plates, and the surface became uninhabitable. I stayed behind to maintain possession of this planet. At least one ship was supposed to return and wake me when the atmosphere was once again capable of supporting life. When I sensed your technology in orbit, I brought my people to the surface. I was disappointed to find your backwards society.”

Alex stares up at her. “There must be some way we can coexist. How many people do you have in your ship?”

“That is none of your concern.”

Alex tries to think of a way to reason with her. “There is no way we can do what you ask. Ninety-five percent of our people have brown eyes.”

“Yes, and look what they do. That genetic abnormality makes them prone to violent behavior, as demonstrated by their use of war to enforce their own moral philosophies. That is why CRUDS are not tolerated in our society, so we have no moral issues to distract us.”

Shaw had sat back down, but she stands up to be noticed. “Isn’t murder a moral issue?”

Pandora turns to look at the woman. “No, it is not. It is a means to an end. My only concern is the survival of *this* species, not yours. You have ruined this planet with your clunky machines. You waste a priceless resource, and you are destroying the atmosphere. You do not deserve to occupy this world.”

Shaw looks around at the other people, who appear speechless. She turns back to Pandora. “So, just out of curiosity, what will happen after we eliminate all the brown-eyed people?”

“I will scan the remaining colors for genetic traits I can use to enhance our race. They will be allowed to live here with us. From what I’ve seen of your species so far, only a few will have a gene I can use. The rest will be recycled into the planet.”

Shaw crosses her arms and stares into the radiant eyes. “We will not murder innocent people.” She looks at Mack. “Arrest her.”

Alex watches Mack stand and run up the stairs onto the stage. He leaps out of his chair and runs up after him. “No, wait! Don’t do anything to her!”

Pandora holds her palm out to try to stop Mack, but he grabs it and twists it behind her back. She struggles to get free, but it becomes too painful, so she stops. “You are making a big mistake.”

Alex spins around and looks down at Shaw. “You have no idea the damage she is capable of doing when she’s pissed off. You have to let her go.”

Shaw uncrosses her arms. “I’m sorry, Alex. This is a group decision.”

Alex throws his arms in the air in frustration. “Who the hell are these people anyway!” he roars. He reins in his emotions. “They sure as hell are not diplomats.” He looks at their faces. “If you do this, you will be responsible for killing millions of people.”

Shaw stares up at Alex. “She is going to kill all of us no matter what we do, so what’s the point in being nice?”

“There are always other options.” He can see he isn’t getting through to her from up on the stage, so he runs down the steps to stand in front of her. “Listen, Ms. Shaw. You have to trust me on this issue.”

“The decision has been made at the highest level.”

Alex gives her a pleading expression, but she stares back evenly, so he lets his shoulders slump in despair. He turns to look up at Pandora, and her eyes are blazing with fury. He shakes

his head no several times, hoping she will stop. The intensity slowly fades back to how they looked when she was talking to the group.

Pandora stares down at Shaw. “You leave me no choice. I will demonstrate my power on an international level. Alex should be receiving a call any moment now. He will tell you what I have done.”

Shaw turns to Alex. “What is she talking about?”

His phone rings. “I don’t know, but I think we are about to find out.”

The ID is from the SV1 control station. “I’m here, Paul.”

“The SV1 is moving again. Oh my god! It just melted a GPS satellite.”

Alex looks at Shaw. “She just destroyed a satellite.” He looks up at Pandora then back to Shaw. “I don’t think she’s finished.”

Pandora stares down at the woman. “Let me go, or the International Space Station will be next.”

Hardin stares at the screen, finding it difficult to grasp the magnitude of what is going on inside the auditorium. When the woman is escorted off the stage, he loses sight of her. The rest of the people in the room stand huddled together talking, but the conversations are too muffled to understand. He shuts down the equipment and stares through the front window. “Oh, my God,” he whispers. *I have to tell MUFON about this.*