

XIN: The Veiled Genocides

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Smashwords Edition

Chapter 1 Drumheller

The Sun brutalized the strange landscape with its all too familiar waves of heat. A landscape made up of large, curved hills, created by rivers that had cut deep into the sandstone and other soft rock. There were a number of odd looking sculptures that had been carved over time – mushroom like formations – some that would make the more prudish blush, and others just laugh. There was minimal vegetation in this harsh landscape; only the hardiest of plants claiming their small patch of parched, Sun-baked ground. All elements combined gave the landscape an almost eerie other worldly feel. The area was called the Badlands by the early settlers, and with good reason – nothing they wanted to grow, would grow.

A solitary figure moved slowly over the solar heated ground, stirring up small clouds of dust with every arduous step. With every step, he was deciding whether to go back to his air-conditioned hotel in Drumheller, Alberta, or go on just a bit farther. His stubbornness won out, so on he struggled.

David Van Bercham wasn't a paleontologist or some professional dinosaur hunter. He was just an avid hobbyist, who used some of his vacation time hunting for fossils. This was the newest of his interests, and one, he was even now deciding whether to keep. Playing guitar in room temperature was starting to look better and better as the huge sweat spots on his light grey t-shirt expanded, threatening to dominate the few dry areas that remained.

He wasn't looking for anything in particular. Just finding anything was starting to look real good right about now, but he had hoped for the rare possibility of finding a Troodon, a raptor-like dinosaur that was about two metres long. It was the paleontologist's flavour of the month. He was looking in an area up a hill where the layers of rock were estimated to be around 73 million years old. It was around the right time for the Troodons, so if he was going to find one, this was the place. Then, something strange caught his eye.

Farther up the hill of sedimentary outcroppings, there was a dense black colour that looked oddly out of place compared to its surroundings. He was too far away to identify what it was, so he climbed the steep slope to the rock outcropping that framed the dark thing.

Less than a minute later, he was conversation distance close and looking eye level at it. He thought it would have been a dark rock or hole, but getting closer had made it even more of a mystery. Only about 15 centimetres of it was visible. Rain and wind had partially dug it out from its tomb of rock, but the small rubble of rocks at his feet told him something more immediate had recently happened.

He touched it, but quickly pulled his hand back. He didn't know why. Something instinctive, something very primal made him react like that. Like a cat seeing itself in a mirror for the first time. But like the curious cat, he touched it again. It felt like glass, but cold, very cold. It shouldn't feel that cold in this heat, he puzzled. Yes, that's why he pulled back so quickly. The briefest touch told him something was wrong. Another odd thing struck him next. There were no reflections on it. Something this smooth should have reflections, but instead of seeing his face or the glare of sunlight on it – nothing. If he wasn't touching the black smoothness of the thing, he would have thought there was nothing there.

He noticed it was sitting within a dark layer of rock. This layer was supposedly created by the fallout after a giant meteorite hit the Earth 65 million years ago. It was one of the many dinosaur extinction theories.

He could also discern it had a slight curve to it. Was this a large, volcanic rock or meteorite that had somehow found its way to this location? Melted rocks can be glassy smooth, he reasoned, trying to further convince himself. Yes, that's it, and there might be a lot more of it buried! He might have found something interesting after all. He took his small wedge-shaped hammer from his backpack, and started chipping away at the layers of soft rock.

Z'va'Xin awoke from the long blackness. Her first awareness was that of success; her survival strategy had worked. She next became aware that she was alone. There were no more of her kind anywhere. Sadness.... Great sadness....

Accessing past memories....

Critical error made....

Meteorite was not anticipated....

Darkness after impact....

Energy low....

Not enough power....

Cannot escape planet's atmosphere....

Cannot absorb solar energies....

Thinking....

Not enough power to self-destruct....

Thinking....

Nothing.

Z'va'Xin couldn't remember what had resulted in her being swallowed up by a liquid earth, sinking down deeper and deeper. She had sent out a signal for rescue. It was a weak signal and she reasoned it would not reach her planet of origin.

Her homeworld was called Z'va Prime, and her science probe designation was Z'va'Xin, but she much preferred to be called 'Xin' by those who knew her on a more individual level.

Under more optimal conditions, Xin could have easily moved out of the quicksand. No Z'va probe had ever been compromised, captured or destroyed by others. Only by their own decision had probes destroyed themselves. No other beings should be allowed to make use of a Z'va probe's technologies. Few sentient species were morally ready for that responsibility.

Accessing past memories....

Xin remembered her frustration. She could skim over the surface of a star, melt through solid rock, travel at incredible speeds, and even fold space. Yet, she had found herself stuck in the mud, with no obvious options remaining, except one. She would simply turn herself off. She didn't like the idea. What if some intelligent beings found her? No, this planet had the greatest variety of creatures she had ever seen in the known Galaxy, but there were no beings that could disseminate and use her technologies. Although there were a number of intelligent species, there were none with the ability to develop technologies at the present. The chance of this type of occurrence was estimated at 1.176 million to one. However, that was assuming there was some form of life in the first place, even if it was nothing more than bacteria.

Accessing past memories....

Yes, she felt confident this was the only way. She would power down everything. Her energy cells would store the little remaining power for a few of this planet's full orbital cycles, but then she would experience the blackness when they were depleted. She knew the atmosphere would eventually clear, and the planet's surface would go through constant changes. She couldn't predict if she would be freed from her grave through erosion, or some cataclysmic event. These were hoped for possibilities. But she knew, at some point, this star would use up its fuel and go supernova. The blast would tear this world apart, and she would be freed. Yes, this was the only solution.

So she had 'slept'. A thousand years passed.... A million years passed.... Layer upon layer of rock covered her – some layers were eroded by water and wind – more layers replaced them. Fifty million years passed.... Above her, the incredibly diverse animal and plant life evolved. Some became extinct, new forms were added, and everything was constantly changing. An earthquake. The layers she was in were pushed up forming a mountain, but she was still deeply buried in the soft rock. More millions of years passed, followed by more erosion. The dawn of man – the 1.176 million to one possibility was realized. A few more million years passed....

It was early morning, June 9th. A pronghorn antelope walks too close to the edge of a hill. It dislodges a rock and starts a rockslide. A large rock knocks away a sizable portion of sedimentary rock outcroppings. The first sunlight in 65 million years hits a small portion of Xin's surface. Power cells slowly absorb the energies, systems are powered on, and the long blackness fades. Light! Glorious light! Extreme happiness!

Dave Van Bercham kept eagerly chipping away at the layers of sedimentary rock. More than half a metre of it was now visible. It was definitely curved, possibly sphere shaped, although he wasn't sure how much more was hidden within the rock. The Sun was high overhead; he felt its blistering heat on the back of his neck. The Sun was now directly hitting the black, curved object, and still no reflections. The sunlight just seemed to disappear into its blackness. He cautiously touched its surface again. To his surprise, it was just as cold as when he first touched it. What was this thing? It wasn't like any rock he had ever encountered. Puzzled, and very curious, he continued the excavation.

Proximity alert!

Xin's warning subroutine program became active, the threat was evaluated, tactical measures were taken, and all within a fraction of a millisecond.

There was a blinding, white light and everything went black. Dave was unconscious before his limp body hit the dusty, baked earth, and slid slowly down the hill about ten metres.

As the manufactured tool wielding humanoid laid unconscious, Xin continued absorbing all the different energies from the Sun: radio, microwave, infrared, visible light, ultraviolet, X-rays, and gamma rays. It felt so good. She had been so weak for so long. Weak and helpless were feelings she had never known until this incident. Feelings she was determined to NEVER let happen again. Her energy cells were charged now. Her outer shell had done what it was designed to do – absorb any form of energy, whether it be from the various star radiations, or the other less efficient forms such as sound, wind, or an occasional accidental tap from a metal hammer.

Over the millions of years she had ‘slept’, there were numerous occasions when vibrations in the earth had given her a small amount of energy. However, it was never enough to give her the power needed to melt her way out of her earthen tomb. Her cells were depleted long before the next earthquake hit. She used the brief periods of consciousness to run diagnostics and maintenance subroutines. Not that this was necessary, but it gave her something to do.

Now, the Z’va reactor was online, having been powered up by the lesser power of her energy storage cells. Soon the reactor was at minimum power. Her outer shell began the process of super heating as it changed in colour from pitch black to white hot. A few seconds later, the soft rock around her melted away like butter in a microwave. The aftermath looked like the results of a mini volcano with an occasional popping lava bubble.

Xin hovered about a metre above her red-hot melted tomb. Her energy cells automatically collected the small amount of energy from the melted rock, as well as the Sun’s radiations. This was a new program she had created as soon as she had freed herself. No longer would she let herself go weak. Weakness leads to vulnerability, vulnerability leads to possible compromise, and the inability to self-destruct.

The Z’va probe was a perfect sphere, about a metre in width, as black as India ink, no reflections, and back down to water freezing zero degrees Celsius. Xin made no sound whatsoever – she was the perfect observation, recording, analytical device, and so much more.

Xin’s data storage unit had the complete recorded information from 2,941 worlds. ‘Complete’ meaning every detail of a planet from temperatures to life forms, from chemical composition to orbital rotation time. She had almost finished her documentation of this world, but now, much of this information would have to be categorized under ancient history, rather than present or recent history. As a matter of fact, all of her information was very dated indeed.

She hovered over to the sentient life form that still lay unconscious. Xin didn’t damage it. She merely manipulated its nervous system, rendering it unconscious. It was an instinctive, self-preservation reaction. She knew it was the best course of action, but she felt somewhat sorry for the result. This creature had aided her release by a few cycles sooner. The humour of it struck her – a few cycles from an eternity.

The Z’va probe seemed to defy gravity as she silently went down the gradual slope, hovering about a metre off the ground. It had long been known that gravity could not be easily controlled or manipulated. Mass, however, could. If an object has no mass, no gravitational force can act upon it. The solution was quite simple once multi-dimensional phasing was developed.

Dave was sitting up now and in a daze. He was a fairly average looking Caucasian male, 26 years old, almost six feet tall, and weighed around 170 pounds. He had short, dark brown hair, a van dyke style beard and mustache that were neatly trimmed.

His blue-grey eyes now focused on the black thing moving slowly and silently toward him. He stood up and started backing away from it. Was he dreaming? He was still a little dizzy and not sure of his footing. He stopped suddenly, as if stunned. He knew he didn’t need to be afraid. He somehow knew it. It was like a feeling, an emotion that came over him. He also knew it came

from the black object. Somehow he knew it. It communicated with him. Not with words like 'don't be afraid', but in essence, that was the message the sphere had emoted to him. The sphere emanated calmness, friendship, and a need to communicate as it sent the pulses directly into Dave's mind.

By the time the sentient had been calmed down, and its curiosity could be sensed, Xin had completed her detailed analysis of this life form, categorized it, and filed it away for future reference. It was a good find. It was a rare find – an intelligent, sentient life form, with tool making ability. In all her travels, Xin had only 73 listed in this category. It wasn't as technologically advanced as some, but it was still an exciting discovery. Xin labeled it 1-74.

Another interesting observation she noted was its physical appearance. It was not unlike her makers who were taller, more slender, and without body hair. Make these adjustments, and this species looked remarkably like them, save for a few minor facial details. She decided to mind scan it.

Dave couldn't believe what was happening. "Hello," Dave said in the friendliest voice he could muster. "I mean you no harm." He couldn't believe he said that. He smiled and did his best to look harmless. This is some kind of alien or space type thing he guessed.

Xin became a bit apprehensive when the mammal bared its teeth, but knew that it couldn't possibly scratch her outer shell with those bone teeth, or the composite metal tool at its feet. She stopped two metres from the life form and began the scan. A bright, white energy streamer connected the probe to the head of the subject.

Dave had to close his eyes from the brightness, his head felt like it was going to explode, but he wasn't afraid. A message of calmness – no harm, learning about you – was silently communicated to him. The whole thing took only a few seconds. When it was done, Dave fell to his knees as his legs gave out from under him. He was left with a headache verging on a migraine, but otherwise felt intact.

Xin was shocked by the findings of the brain scan. This is not possible, she thought, but the scan was accurate, and all her systems were functioning at maximum efficiency. This sentient life form had a scan result that was so close to her makers that it was a virtual impossibility. Had they traveled this far while she lay dormant in the earth, or was it just an incredible random coincidence? She didn't know for she was unable to witness the events that had unfolded above her over these millions of years.

Xin had learned a great deal from the brain scan. All that this individual of species 1-74 knew, she now knew as well, but it didn't answer conclusively the one question she sought.

Again she scanned outside the Earth's atmosphere and deep into space, searching for a sign that her makers were alive, or the existence of another Z'va probe. There was nothing except the various wave patterns from 107 different intelligent life forms, some possibly living, and some long dead. Loneliness and sadness again struck her.

"He-lllo," the probe echoed back in a perfect impression of Dave's own voice. "I mean you no harm."

"You can understand me?" Dave stammered out.

"Yes," Xin said. "I only wish to communicate with you. Please, what is your species origin?"

Dave was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and having his own voice asking him a question didn't help his sanity. "Species origins?" Dave repeated back, confused.

"Is this planet your species origin, or have you colonized this planet?"

“As far as I know, this planet is my species origin.” Dave answered more calmly now. “We’ve found fossil remains of our species dating back millions of years.”

Xin could feel a level of certainty that emanated from life form 1-74 as it replied to her question. For now, Xin concluded that this species was an incredible random coincidence, unless she discovered something to contradict the present information. In any event, this species was very compatible, and she so wanted a companion when she ventured back into deep space.

She had been alone for so long, the further loneliness of space was unbearable to consider. Out there she wouldn’t be able to turn herself off for millions of years – it was too dangerous. Others of her kind had merged with another Z’va probe, or even traveled alongside a humanoid maker to ward off the loneliness of deep space travel. Xin was relatively young, and her missions were limited to this sector of the Galaxy, so there really was no need for a companion, but now, everything had changed.

Xin had to find out for certain that her makers were no more, and should be allocated for her history files. No civilization lasts forever. Xin knew this, as her discoveries confirmed this time and time again. Deep down, she knew that her civilization was long gone. No civilization in the known Universe had ever lasted more than 93 million years. Some died from natural disasters, others from disease or invasion. Those that had survived these early challenges, and had achieved incredibly long life or virtual immortality, died from the results of eventual insanity. Evolving beyond the need for physical form was the most rare occurrence, but this too led to civilization’s end, and the dawn of the omnipotent being or god (as understood by this individual of species 1-74).

The Z’va probes were Xin’s civilization’s failed attempt at creating a sentient machine that emulated this last step in the evolution of life. Xin was not omnipotent. Otherwise, she would not have found herself in this predicament. However, Xin had the capacity to evolve beyond her original abilities. It was not uncommon for a Z’va probe to come back to its planet of origin more improved than when it had left.

“Dave, I wish to share some of my knowledge with you.” Xin used the being’s name to sound friendlier.

“How do you know my name?” Dave asked in amazement, as if replying to some sort of magician’s trick.

“I know everything you know,” Xin answered back. “This oral language is not very efficient. It is much too slow. I will share some of my knowledge with you. It is only... fair,” the probe strategized.

Before Dave could protest, Xin blasted his mind with information as the bright, white streamer connected with his mind once again. The pain was like a migraine, but all around his head. Images, thoughts, even emotions flooded his brain. It was over in a few seconds. The pain went away, but Dave felt physically tired and had to sit down.

It was all clear to him now! He knew what the probe was. He knew why it was here on Earth. He knew things that no human being was meant to know. He knew more about dinosaurs than anyone on the planet! Xin, yes, that was the probe’s name.... Xin had given him the information she had collected on the Earth 65 million years ago. He not only knew exactly what dinosaurs looked like, but also how they moved, sounded, even their smell and more. The probe had detailed records – visual, audio, even scans of their anatomy! Xin was an incredible treasure trove of information.

She had only selectively shared a small fraction of her stored data, but Dave knew there was so much more she wasn't sharing. Maybe his brain couldn't take it? Maybe he wasn't meant to know? Whatever the reason, he sensed a level of distrust from the probe.

She had also given him general information she thought he should know. Sort of like 'get acquainted' information when two species meet for the first time – what she is and does, where she is from, what had happened to her, etc. His head was spinning with too much information, and it would take a while to process it all.

Xin wanted to stay on this planet, to learn more about these humans, to update her recorded data of this world, but she also knew her reason for existence was in question. Her makers were most likely long dead, but she had to be sure. "Dave, I must go now, but I might be back."

Before Dave could reply, the probe flew straight up into a cloudless sky, increasing speed more rapidly than he thought possible. The probe looked like a dark hole quickly closing on a cyan coloured backdrop. In a few seconds, the probe disappeared from sight.

Once Xin had left the Earth's atmosphere, she increased her speed to 299,792 kilometres per second, and headed toward the Sun. A few minutes later, she was skimming over the Sun's unimaginably hot photosphere, charging her reactor to maximum capacity. She needed the power from this star to get back to her point of origin. Now, powered up, Xin headed toward the centre of the Galaxy, and initiated the first of a series of space folds to get her home. The space ahead of the probe became a small, swirling mass of black and dark-grey. Xin disappeared into its darker centre like a black Ping-Pong ball being sucked down a drain.

Chapter 2 A fecal fly

Xin completed the last of the series of space folds. A small, swirling mass of black and dark-grey formed in the emptiness of space, and a few seconds later, the black probe shot out of its centre with amazing speed. A split second later, Xin came to a complete stop, with no noticeable deceleration, and more abruptly than any student of physics would've believed possible. The Z'va probe was just outside of her solar system, and remained motionless as she began her scans. If viewed from within the system, she appeared as a black silhouette in front of a large, burgundy-coloured nebula in the shape of some eerie, tentacled sea creature.

A short time later, Xin finished her scans and made her disheartening conclusions.

Sadness.... Despair....

Most of the system was much the same as it had been 65 million years ago. There were noticeable changes, but that would have been expected over the passage of that much time. However, the fourth planet, her home planet, the planet where she was created, was now dead. The planet that had once been a blue/green ball teeming with life, orbited by space docks, stations, and a multitude of various spacecrafts, was now a grey cinder, marred by a number of small craters. Z'va Prime, fourth planet from the sun, a world dedicated to peace, knowledge, and the arts. There was no sign whatsoever to even hint at how beautiful it once was. It was now just a large, dead, grey ball.

The other six planets were just as lifeless as they had been when last she was in this system – like her homeworld was now. What had happened? Even Xin's incredible scanning technology couldn't come to any concrete conclusions, but it didn't seem like a natural disaster. The planet's

tectonic plates were intact. There was no evidence of a large meteor strike; the smaller craters were made over millions of years, after the atmosphere was gone. The atmosphere? What happened to the atmosphere? This was the key. What ever happened here, happened about twenty million years ago – her scans told her that much.

In the space of a few seconds, Xin went from stationary object to near the speed of light, heading toward the fourth planet for closer scans.

The Taelrok battle cruiser that had been passing through Xin's system had detected the space anomaly created by her space fold. Before Xin had exited the hole in space, the massive ship had moved behind the seventh planet. Shielded from scans by the small, cold world, the Taelroks now studied the small probe as it sped toward its home planet.

The dark-blue battle cruiser was roughly cone shaped, and bristling with a multitude of gun ports. One look made it clear that it was designed for only one thing.

The Taelrok commander laughed when he realized what had come out of the space anomaly. The energy spike detected was high, so caution had been advised. Now, all of the bridge crew were laughing along with their battle-hardened commander.

“Hah! It's nothing more than a fecal fly!” roared the commander. “We are in hiding from this?” he mocked at his second in command. “I expected at least a destroyer class ship to come through that hole, based on our readings.”

“Commander, It's no longer scanning, and doesn't appear to detect us,” informed the weapons officer. “Should we scan it?”

“No.... Helmsman, plot an intercept course. Let's swat this fly quickly and move on.”

Had the Taelrok ship scanned Xin, she would have known about their existence instantly. However, scanning her would have given them nothing. A Z'va probe was designed to be virtually unscannable.

The Taelroks were a race of conquerors. They expanded their empire through conquering other worlds – killing many, enslaving some, and stealing the technologies from those unfortunate enough to be in their line of sight. The result was a brutal society with technology that was off balance with their ‘social graces’. This was their sector of space, and almost a dozen races were under their metal boot.

Physically they were humanoid, but taller, larger, and stronger than a human. Brutish in appearance and posture, they were as fearsome as their ill-gotten weapons.

The Taelroks were the most powerful race in this sector, and as far as they were concerned (or conceited), the whole Galaxy. They had conquered all the neighbouring systems. A couple of the more technologically advance races had been a challenge, but their ruthlessness and willingness to do what their enemy would not, or could not do, often paid off.

The weapon officer's tiny black eyes peered out from low sloping brows as he viewed the probe on his monitor. “Unidentified object is within weapon range, Sir.”

“Power up one of the anti-fighter cannons and fire when ready,” barked the commander confidently.

Proximity alert!

Xin detected the massive ship only when the cannon had fired on her. “Stupid!” she scolded herself. She was in such a hurry to get to her home planet that she had stopped even her cursory scanning mode. She should have seen this ship the moment it appeared from behind the seventh planet.

The proton beam hit her directly mid-centre. A weapon designed to easily destroy most small fighter type spacecraft. Xin absorbed the energy the moment it made contact with her outer shell.

“The unidentified object appears undamaged, Sir,” the weapon’s officer remarked with surprise. “Scanning for confirmation.... I’m getting no readings of any kind from the object! Scanners are ineffective!” His voice raised up half an octave.

The commander’s face changed from jovial to serious on hearing this report.

In the time it took their commander to learn that she was unharmed, Xin had accessed the cruiser’s data files and had learned their language. She now sent out a friendship message to the Taelroks. “I mean you no harm. Please, cease hostilities. Let us communicate. Communication and understanding of one another will dispel any apprehension you may have.”

The communications officer relayed the message to the commander.

“Harm us? Apprehensive? We are not afraid of this fecal fly!” the commander shouted as his big, meaty fist slammed down on his console. “Power up the main gun; shoot it out of my space!”

A bright flash briefly blinded the Taelrok crew as the big gun hit with enough force to cleave a destroyer class ship in two.

Xin’s thick neutronium outer shell easily withstood the wide particle blast. She quickly absorbed the great amount of energy, and came to the conclusion they really didn’t want to communicate with her. The surface of her outer shell had been slightly marred by the concentrated blast, but was already repairing itself, and seconds later, it looked as featureless as before.

“The target is still in one piece, Sir!” There was now panic in the weapon officer’s voice.

“Hit it with everything we have!” yelled the commander in frustration. “I want that thing dead, Dead, DEAD!” Each time he yelled ‘dead’, he pounded his fist on his console, punctuating the word.

A massive amount of energy bore down on Xin. Everything from dozens of anti-fighter cannons to several large proton guns were fired. The heavy main gun was used again, and even several antimatter missiles were in the mix.

Xin scanned the missiles and decided to phase herself out of this space and time. Visually it looked like she had turned invisible.

There was a series of blinding flashes and silent explosions concentrated on her location, and continued for fifteen seconds. When the firework display was finally over, a large cloud of multi-coloured smoke remained and expanded slowly.

The sixteen members of the battle bridge waited. They peered into their monitors, scanners, and various other devices for a sign of the object’s destruction. The large cloud now made it impossible to get a visual confirmation of its demise. Seconds passed; the bridge was silent.

“Something is happening inside the cloud!” the science officer shouted with both fear and excitement. “I’m getting energy readings off the scale!”

More seconds past as thirty-two tiny, black eyes were now focused on the bridge's main screen. The large cloud now illuminated by whatever was happening inside.

The Z'va probe shot out of the cloud, and quickly came to an immediate stop. She was no longer black, but as white and bright as a small star. Xin hit the massive ship with all the energy she had absorbed from the attacks upon her. The metre thick, white beam shot out from her neutronium shell, hit the battle cruiser lengthwise from bow to stern, and went completely through the entire ship, as if coring an apple. At the stern, the beam hit the ship's fuel reserves, as was the intention. The massive ship instantly exploded into millions of pieces with a blinding flash that outshone even the Taelrok's own arrogance.

Xin had intended to ignore the Taelrok battle cruiser. She could have outrun them, or just phased away. Acts of violence were very distasteful to her indeed, but while hidden inside the cloud, she studied the Taelrok's files she had downloaded from their library computer. The Taelroks were responsible for unimaginable cruelty, violence and genocide. She had learned that this ship was heading toward another planetary system to do much of the same. She could not allow that.

She had also learned that although the Taelroks were masters of this sector of space, they themselves were just pawns for a greater master in this part of the Galaxy – a race known only as the Veiled. There wasn't much written about them in the Taelrok's history files, making it obvious that they were as mysterious to the Taelroks as their name implied. They knew very little about the Veiled except that they were a very old and powerful race. Even the Taelroks were wise enough to know not to go up against them. It was obvious from the history files that these Veiled let the Taelroks rule this sector. The Taelroks were their dog, and they held the leash.

Xin continued on toward the fourth planet. Upon her arrival she didn't bother to establish an orbit, but immediately went down to the surface. Five kilometres above the surface, and at 5,000 kilometres per hour, she skimmed over its deathly silent landscape. For hours Xin traveled, scanned, and visually recorded everything along her path. The landscape was mostly colourless, creating almost black and white imagery. Flat, greyish ground met with low greyish hills, and punctuated with an occasional crater. What was once an almost cyan coloured sky, was now dark with the blackness of space. There was no water, no air, and no sign of life, not even a microbe. There was no hint that a sprawling, advanced civilization had once been here.

Her scans could not reveal what had happened, and there was nothing in her data files to compare this to. Somehow the atmosphere and some of the surface had been destroyed or removed. The passage of time had eliminated any residual evidence that may have lingered. She concluded that it probably was not a natural disaster. Someone or something had come along twenty million years ago, wiped out all life on Z'va Prime, and left without a trace. There was nothing in the Taelrok's files to shed light on what happened here either. It even predated the Taelrok race, and according to their files, this had always been a dead world. But this was one planet the Taelroks were not responsible for destroying.

Beep....

Beep beep....

Beep....

Xin was receiving a transponder signal! It was a signal both familiar and yet strange. It sounded like a transponder from another Z'va probe or spacecraft, but unlike what she had heard

in the past. It was coming from within the system, from a moon orbiting the fifth planet. Had it sensed her presence and activated its signal?

Xin shot up and away from Z'va Prime's gravitational influence, and seconds later was travelling at near light speed toward the small, icy world. She had to investigate this. Perhaps there were answers to what had happened here. The grey, dead world shrank quickly behind her as Xin let the cold blackness of space embrace her once again.

Chapter 3 A jewel beyond measure

Xin was in a low orbit around the insignificant, cold world. She continued following the signal till she knew it to be 96 kilometres directly below her, and then quickly dropped down toward the icy surface. The Z'va probe stopped abruptly about a metre above the bright white surface.

There was no sign of a craft or Z'va made structure visible on the surface. The surface of which was a thick, glacial-like shell almost a kilometre deep. This world made Earth's polar regions look like a holiday paradise. The surface was all white, mostly flat, with what appeared to be a number of dirty white mountains poking through the surface at random locations far in the distance. There was no life at all, only the bitter cold wind that made an eerie sound, keeping Xin company. The hardiest of cold planet life forms would have only lasted a few minutes on this deadly world.

Xin scanned deep into the ice below where the transponder signal continued to emanate from. There you are, she thought, I found you. The signal stopped. No sooner had she proximity scanned it than the transponder stopped transmitting. Xin theorized that it was her presence in the system that triggered the start of the transmission, and her close scan that stopped it. Xin understood. She would have done the same in a similar situation. It was a simple rule; don't let Z'va technology be compromised by any other sentient race. Her history files contained dozens of situations where this had happened. In one such case, an entire planet had accidentally destroyed itself after experimenting with technologies found within a stolen Z'va child's toy. Silly sentients, she thought.

About 300 metres down, entombed in the ice mass was the source of the signal; a small spacecraft of Z'va Prime origin, but unlike any design Xin had on file. Scanned information gathered from the ice around it, told Xin it was at least twenty million years old, but in a strange twist, 45 million years younger than her. Yes, Xin knew all too well what it meant to be buried for millions of years.

Her reactor still had plenty of power absorbed from the Taelrok ship's attack, so she began the process of super heating. When her outer shell was white hot, she simply turned off her anti-gravity field, letting herself sink quickly down toward the ancient ship, leaving behind a trail of white steam in her wake. When Xin was within ten metres from the ship, she engaged the anti-gravity field once again, slowing her decent until she lightly touched the outer hull of the relic.

It looked like a silver jewel suspended below her in the ice. The spacecraft was scout ship size, no more than thirty metres long, and oval shaped like an elongated egg. It had dozens of short ridges running at various organized angles over its surface, which further delineated its form. Scanning the hull, she couldn't locate anything that resembled a hatch or portal to gain

entry. She was not surprised however, as this type of design was outdated even in her time. No, there probably was a designated phaseway somewhere on its hull, but she didn't have time to locate it, so she quickly phased herself through its neutronium hull instead.

The interior was much more foreign to her than the exterior. Xin had to keep reminding herself that this indeed was made by the same race that had created her so long ago. The interior was spartan to say the least – it was practically empty. The curved, cyan coloured walls were about ten metres wide, and less than thirty metres in length. It was like being inside a large cylinder that tapered gradually at both ends. Directly in the centre was a hexagon shaped platform about two metres high, a metre wide, and slightly concave on top. It was as pitch black and non-reflective as the small probe's outer shell.

Xin scanned it, quickly moved to hovering position over it, accessed the ship's computer, and turned the spacecraft on. The black platform glowed slightly, and the cyan walls became transparent. All around her, the ice that entombed the craft was now visible. Only the access platform below her remained unchanged. Unlike Xin's situation on Earth – or more accurately, 'in' the Earth – this ship had access to sunlight, however faint. It was just enough to keep its power cells charged to minimum.

It took Xin a long time to access and learn the workings of this craft – thirty-seconds at least. After all, this craft was millions of years ahead of her, but unlike organic life forms, technology has certain limits. When an advanced race reaches those boundaries of physics, technological advancements revert to a crawl. Simply, Xin was not as incompatible with this alien looking ship, as she had first feared. Even now, she was accessing its data storage device, trying to find out what had happened to this ship, and why it was in such a strange situation.

Searching...

Ship's log found!

Searching...

Xin found the last entry in the captain's log. She played it, and a voice from the far past echoed within the ship's bare interior:

"This might be my last entry. My crew and I may very well be the last of our race."

"Approximately three cycles ago, Z'va Prime was attacked and destroyed without any provocation. I still don't know who or what was responsible. It is my belief that whoever did this, came from outside our Galaxy. There is nothing in our know Galaxy that could destroy us so quickly and easily. It came totally without warning, bypassing all our ships, probes, outposts, and warning beacons."

"I know that I am breaking a law punishable by banishment, but I doubt there will be anyone left to enforce it. I have phased this ship deep in the glacier, and have downloaded my star cruiser's entire library directly into the data storage of this science ship. It was the only craft on the cruiser capable of storing this amount of information. Within this small ship is Z'va Prime's total knowledge of the known Universe. It includes the knowledge from hundreds of worlds – science, history, art, music... well, no need for a long list, let me just simply say, it contains... EVERYTHING."

"I'll be damned if I let this knowledge phase into oblivion! Hopefully, some of us may survive to reclaim this knowledge at a future date. If not, I pray that any race that may find this ship has the wisdom to use the contained technological knowledge for constructive purposes. Some will argue that I am leaving what amounts to devastating power to a cave dweller, but I can't get past the thought of such a great loss."

“I have just received a message from my second in command. Some of the fleet remains, however, scouts report all of our colony planets have been destroyed! I must return to my ship. What is left of our fleet is regrouping within the Tendril Nebula, just outside our system. We are hoping it will mask our presence long enough to form a counter-strike.”

“May your Universe ever expand.”

“End of log.”

Xin was sitting on the great library of Z’va Prime! For the first time in her existence, she didn’t know what to do. After all, she was just a planetary information-gathering probe, not a politician or even a ship’s captain. She knew that the scientific technologies contained in this library should not fall into the wrong hands. What were the right hands, she wondered? Her personal feelings, experiences, and basic self-destruct rules could not apply here. Instead, Xin relied on her logic programming for a course of action, and accessed the library for guidance. She studied multiple philosophies, planet histories, religions, legal debates, anything that would help her decide whether to destroy this library here and now, or preserve this knowledge safely somehow.

She noted that multiple world histories contained account after account of great amounts of knowledge being lost through natural disasters, wars, and even at the hands of their original owners. Strange, Xin thought, why would a civilization destroy its own acquired knowledge? She had almost given up on understanding the actions of organic sentients. From the histories, it seemed that the passing on of knowledge from one era to the next was a constant struggle, especially for the younger, warlike civilizations. It was often two strides forward, one stride back, and sometimes several.

Xin began to agree with the star cruiser’s captain, and next put her energy into solving the safe preservation of the library, if that was possible.

Thinking....

Minutes passed as Xin ran through the many possible solutions, but no matter how complex or clever each one was, it always came back to her first idea. Leaving the library here under the ice was not a solution; hiding it anywhere else wasn’t either. There was always the possibility of a natural disaster freeing it, an alien ship within proximity scanning range stumbling upon it, even a meteor smashing this tiny ice world into a trillion pieces, sending the ship adrift in space. No, she would download the entire library into her own data storage unit. Just one small problem – she didn’t have the capacity.

Once again, she consulted the library....

Heading: Data Storage Devices.

Subheading: Archive Data Storage Schematics.

First, Xin uploaded all the data she had collected in her travels directly into the library, as this would be otherwise lost by what she was about to do. Next, on a molecular level, she reformed her own data storage unit into a library level archive storage unit using the specifications from the schematics. It was a more elegant design than her old unit, much more efficient, and took up only half the space. Finally, she downloaded the entire library into her new enormous data storage device.

The great library was now within her permanently. She would self-destruct if she thought she had too. She even wrote a self-destruct program, which would do the same had she been incapacitated, and the data was tampered with directly.

Now, what else could she upgrade? Xin consulted the library again, exploring probe and spacecraft technologies, as well as anything else she might find useful. Several hours later, she

had upgraded just about everything, added some new features, she even had some room and raw materials left over in her interior. Xin decided to leave this room open, so that she could consult the library, and build whatever she needed at the time. Self-improvement was one of a Z'va probe's directives, and Xin took full advantage of this golden opportunity.

She was a larger, older model, as a result, there was much more room in her interior for the upgrades and retrofits due to the advancements in miniaturization since her absence. Xin was now more versatile and powerful than all past Z'va probes. As a matter of fact, she now had more in common with a Z'va battle class star cruiser than a probe. The better to protect the library, she thought.

Next, Xin completely wiped the science ship's archive data storage device of all its library knowledge. She then reformed the device on the molecular level, just to be sure – the ultimate computer format.

The entombed science ship was her final priority. Xin had a use for this craft the moment she realized it was still functional. She scanned the ship, made any necessary minor repairs, filled its drained energy storage cells directly from her reactor, and powered up all the ship's systems.

The ship's artificial intelligence was very basic. It was a craft designed to be directly controlled by several science officers, so a conversation with it was like trying to talk to a family pet. It did what it had to do, could protect itself when in danger, and could follow simple commands. However, on the more positive side, this ship had many of the same features Xin now had. The main differences were Xin's far superior energy storage, armament, and of course, sentience.

Xin accessed the ship's control programs directly, told it to super heat its outer hull, turn on its anti-gravity device, and melt its way up to the surface. Phasing would have taken too much energy, judging by the mass of the ship.

The small craft slowly rose up out of its icy grave. Xin remained at the controls, hovering over the hexagon platform. When it was free of the glacier, the ship flew straight up into the sky, increasing speed from the possible to the impossible. In a few seconds, the science vessel disappeared into a black sky filled with a multitude of shimmering stars.

The craft left the small, icy world quickly behind and headed toward the yellow star of this system. Xin needed to refuel herself and her new acquisition for the long series of space folds to reach Earth once more. She felt a strong need to go back to that planet. There was something special about those humans. Their brain scan match to her makers was remarkable of course, but there was something else. She felt it briefly when she connected with the human's brain – an insatiable thirst for knowledge. The Travelers of Z'va Prime had these same needs, thoughts, and feelings. Their minds were always soaring beyond the spherical confines of their homeworld. Xin needed such a human.

On her way back to Earth, Xin thought about what she would do now that she was on her own. Z'va Prime was no more, but that didn't mean she couldn't continue with her directives. She would continue to explore this Galaxy, update and add to the Z'va Prime library, and search for an advanced, wise race worthy of receiving its upload. The great library of Z'va Prime will not be lost. History will not repeat itself this time.

Yes, that is what I will do, Xin thought, but first, I need to find a real companion. I like this science vessel, I think it likes me, but our conversations are always too one sided. She smiled inside.

Chapter 4
Adjustments

Superhuman: *having or showing exceptional ability or powers.*

By definition, there are superhumans among us – the child prodigy, the person with a photographic memory, the creative thinkers who predict future technologies, create advances in science, medicine, and so on. Leonardo da Vinci, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Albert Einstein are just a few of the greatest.

It is my belief that other such super men and women have come and gone over the centuries, never to have been recognized by the rest of the world – dying in total obscurity. Why? Perhaps, one such amazing child was born into poverty or a third world country, killed during a war, or even murdered at the hands of a pedophile. The obstacle possibilities are virtually endless, while the rest of the world too busy with other priorities to be concerned with these children, their life, and development. What Mozarts and Einsteins have we foolishly let slip through our fingers because of our shortsighted perspective?

Is it not in our best interests to nurture these superhumans to their full potential? What if Mozart's father hadn't supported his son's ability, and/or he had been born into abject poverty? Would we be listening to his music today, or would it not even exist?

I am not saying that these special people should take priority over everyone else. All children are equally important and should be nurtured. I am just using these remarkable people as an example to push my point forward.

I urge, no, I demand governments put a higher priority on education, and on the individual child, so that every child has a chance to reach his or her full potential. We will all be the richer for it.

Dave was sitting at the hotel room's small desk with his laptop, putting the finishing touches on an article he had been writing for an educational support publication for a friend of his.

When Dave Van Bercham wasn't looking for dinosaur fossils, or writing occasional articles for a friend, he made a living as a technical illustrator. Basically, he created drawings to show how things work or are put together. Even as a boy, Dave had always been interested in just about everything, including what made things tick. A broken toy wasn't always the great disaster for him, as it may have been for another child. One day, his Etch-A-Sketch stopped working, and he just had to break it open to see how it worked – big mistake. And what the hell was all that grey dust inside it anyway? While most of his friends had boyhood heroes such as Spiderman or Batman, his was Leonardo da Vinci.

Dave wasn't a genius, but was smart enough to barely make it into Mensa, had he been interested in joining, which he wasn't. *'I would never join a club that would have me as a member'*. Dave smiled when he thought of that famous Woody Allen quote. And anyway, why would he purposely put himself in the position of being the dumbest person in the room.

No, he certainly wasn't a superhuman, as in his article, but he always worked hard and with enthusiasm, which ultimately got him to where he wanted to go. There was one thing he did have that Xin had found fascinating. He had a mind-set similar to the Travelers of Z'va Prime. He was a dreamer, always curious about everything, never content to stay in one place. Simply, Dave had a brain thirsting for knowledge, but the heart of an explorer.

He was also one of the small percentage of the population that had a balanced or whole brain approach; thinking creatively and analytically in even proportions. Z'va Prime had found this

thinking approach useful for its Travelers, especially for those that went out into deep space solo. Sometimes, survival in space required both logic and creative thought to survive and adapt to challenging situations.

Dave saved the article and turned off his computer. It was the second to last day of his two-week vacation in Drumheller. Xin had given him so much information directly into the synapses of his brain he was still digesting it ten days later. Tomorrow he would go out one last time to see what he could dig up, but even if he found a complete fossilized skeleton of a Troodon, it would be anticlimactic to his encounter with Xin. Was she gone forever? Did that really happen? The information packed into his brain told him, yes. He was beat, it was getting late, so he decided to hit the sack early, and get an early start tomorrow morning to get a jump on the heat of the day.

Xin, still at the controls of the science craft, entered Earth's atmosphere undetected. Radar relies on the bounce back of its microwaves to detect an object. However, both Xin and the science ship absorb whatever type of energy hits them, and thus, they are virtually invisible to many detection devices.

It was early morning in Drumheller when Xin arrived at the same location where she had been imprisoned in the Earth's crust for far too many years. She found a good location to land the science vessel – in between a couple of hills; surrounded by a number of large, mushroom-like rock formations – completely hidden from prying eyes. The small craft made no sound, nor did it even stir up any dust. Four silver legs seemed to grow out of its bottom half a few seconds before it lightly touched down on the hard, parched surface.

Now, where was that phaseway? Xin accessed the ship's schematics and quickly located the portal, which was directly opposite the black hexagon platform. She sent a signal to the science vessel's computer to open. Instantly, a two metre wide circular section of the wall disappeared, and Xin floated silently through it.

Once outside the science ship, she increased her anti-gravity field, raising herself slowly up about ten metres, and clear of all the obstacles that hid the small craft. She scanned the area in a 360-degree pattern as she searched for David Van Bercham. This is where he had been; perhaps he is still in the area. If not, she would have to locate another possible candidate, or seek Dave out. She knew how to find his home location after the brain scan, but this might be too risky, as he lived in a highly populated city. She decided to stay put for the moment, and continued scanning for him in the hope he would be back.

It was mid-morning when her patience paid off. Only five kilometres away, she saw Dave coming over a grey hill, stirring up a puff of dust with every stride.

One second, Dave was walking peacefully alone, listening to the song *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* on his radio. The next second, Xin zipped up to him with blinding speed to stop abruptly only a metre in front of him. She came up to him so quickly; his mind couldn't even register it as being real.

"Ahhhhhh!" Dave stumbled backwards on the dusty ground from the shock. He didn't realize how close he was to the edge of a cliff, and fell backwards, head first over it. Xin tried to snag him with her anti-gravity field, but he was already on the other side. Dave fell only about three metres, but landed on his head. The last thing he heard was the snapping of his neck, and everything faded to a soundless black.

Three days later....

Dave opened his eyes to slowly focus on a curved, cyan coloured ceiling. He looked to his right to see (what else) a curved, cyan coloured wall. To his left, Xin hovered over the science ship's black, hexagon platform. He then became aware he was lying on the hard flat surface of a rectangular white table with rounded corners. It looked like plastic, but it felt more like metal. "What happened?"

"I am very sorry, Dave. You fell and died, but I repaired you. I hope you will forgive me for frightening you. It will not happen again." Xin kept it short; still in Dave's own voice.

"DIED! No.... I died?"

"Yes, but I was able to restore oxygen to your brain before any damage could occur. You are... better than before." Xin tried to choose her words carefully.

"Better than before? What do you mean, and what is this place?" Dave felt different somehow, but was still a bit too groggy to be able to focus.

"You are inside a Z'va science ship." Xin ignored his first question. "You must rest now," she said as she activated the biotable's anesthesia control, putting Dave quickly under before he had a chance to protest.

Xin, with the help of the medical library and the biotable was able to save Dave's life. However, to repair the nerve damage to his neck, she had no other choice but to inject five trillion Microscopic Biological Repair Units (MBRUs) directly into his blood stream. These MBRUs are white blood cell size synthetic devices that repair damage and fight disease at a rate and level much higher than the human body is naturally able to.

Xin had wanted to give Dave a choice, but this accident changed everything. Granted, she could have stopped with the MBRUs. In fact, she could have removed them at this point, as they had done their repair of his spinal cord, but she was a machine, and thought like a machine. She hadn't thought for one second that Dave wouldn't have wanted to be upgraded, so she went back work.

Two weeks later....

Dave was running down a long, dark hallway with dozens of doors on both sides. "Dave, wake up," someone called out in an exact impression of his own voice. He opened a door he thought the voice was coming from, but no one was there. "Dave, wake up, please."

Dave slowly opened his eyes. It was a dream – what a relief! Everything seemed brighter and blurrier than before. His mouth was dry, it tasted like something died in there, and he felt stiff all over. He was lying down, but this time it was much softer, reminding him of his parents' old waterbed. Once his eyes could focus, and had adjusted to the light, he moved his head around to figure out what was going on. He was lying on some sort of white, squishy bed. He felt warm, as if there were blankets over him, but there was nothing there, just a layer of warm heat surrounding his body. It was nice. He couldn't help but yawn as he stretched in this strange new luxury.

"I was starting to worry something had gone wrong when you didn't wake up right away," Xin said with relief as she floated toward Dave's bedside. "How are you feeling?" She was still doing an impression of Dave's voice, which did nothing to help calm him.

"Gone wrong? That statement would indicate that you've done, some-thing..." Dave stopped himself in mid-sentence. Something was wrong – he felt different – he felt... great – his mind

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