

Turning Point

By

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PROLOGUE

The old woman sat in the shade of the tree looking out over the sea towards the snow capped island. Beside her, a small child lay with his head on his grandmother's lap.

'Grandmother,' Horus asked, 'please tell me about them – please!'

The old bird ruffled his feathers and stropped his beak on the branch above their heads. It seemed like only yesterday, not seventy-five years ago to Auramooth as Auset began the tale.

CHAPTER 1

The dust created by the departing bus gradually settled around Tom and his equipment. At last, after what had seemed an eternity, he was at the beginning of his vacation. Ahead lay the vast expanse of the South Westland National Park. To him this was the best place on Earth. Largely unaffected by man, the park was one of only a handful of places in New Zealand where you could feel what this beautiful land was like before man had arrived and raped the place. He hoisted his backpack, muttering to himself about the weight he now had pressing down on his shoulders. He knew this was possibly the last time he would be fit enough to attempt such an adventure, middle age and many years of back-packing had taken its toll on his wiry frame.

The cool of the beech forest was a welcome change from the harsh dry heat of the open country. This was what he loved the most about the bush, the silence, occasionally broken by bird song and the wind rushing over the canopy shaking free small leaves, which descended in slow motion to the forest floor. The magical quality of the glades he passed through from time to time.

He had a month to himself, a chance to go back to nature. He had often thought he was born in the wrong century. Living off the land, like the mountain men in nineteenth century North America, appealed to him. However, this was the late twentieth century and he had to admit that even if it was possible to live like that, his age was against him now.

As usual, he had carefully worked out the route he would take, how many hours he would be on his feet each day, and above all how far he would go before he had to reverse his course back to the road. Usually his friend Mike would accompany him whenever he escaped into the bush; but their excursions were day trips, to pockets of bush close to where they lived. They had been friends for most of their lives, growing up together, going through school, and military service. He had been Mike's best man when he and his childhood sweetheart Mary had wed. Now Mike's responsibilities were to his family and although Tom knew this, he still liked to tease his friend about being under Mary's thumb. Tom was too much of a loner for most women. Over the years, he had been romantically involved on more than one occasion, but nothing in the long term ever developed. The fact was he simply preferred his own company, a trait that annoyed his female companions immensely.

By mid afternoon, he had covered almost eight kilometres, and it was time to make camp. His path took him along a ridge, which lay in a line running south-east from the road. He had calculated he would need another five days before he came to the point where the ridge changed course to the south-west. Then it was only a matter of two to three days crossing the valley floor westward towards the opposite ridge, which would bring him back to the road once more. The smell of tea brewing in the billy over a fire brought back fond memories. Small pieces of ash rose into the air, carried aloft by the heat. Some found their way into the billy, settled on the surface of the liquid and were dragged down by the simmering action. Tom always liked billy tea. To him it was simply the best cuppa a bloke could ever taste.

He lay with his back against an old beech trunk sipping tea from his chipped enamel mug. In front of his camp-site, a small snow-fed stream flowed gently past. He watched with amusement as the birds chased flying insects, which had been disturbed from the safety of the trees by the smoke from the fire. The stream at this point ran slowly through a large pool. Tom watched for a while for the tell-tale signs of life, if he was lucky he might be eating fish that night. As luck would have it, all he sampled were the dubious delights of a freeze-dried concoction, made palatable by adding generous amounts of Oxo cubes. Tomorrow his luck would change – he hoped. With the dawn chorus announcing a new day, Tom awoke stiff and sore. His shoulders and the small of his back ached like hell. After breakfast, he broke camp and continued in a south-easterly direction.

For the next four days, his routine changed little, broken only by the need to stop for a breather and take in the view. The sixth day found him on a new course to the south-west ahead of him lay the vast expanse of a valley, formed long ago by a glacier. The valleys smooth sides rose up several thousand metres and as far as the eye could see, broken only by the occasional windblown spray from a waterfall. The floor of the valley was covered with lush vegetation showing signs of its normally wet nature, for this area held the record for the highest rainfall in the whole country - metres of it. It was not pure luck which had saved the valley from man's attempts at logging in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. It was the weather! The floor was divided by a large fast flowing river, which ran northwest eventually merging with the dark waters of the Sounds, then into the Tasman Sea.

According to the map, there were two possible places to cross. In both cases, they should only be attempted during the summer months, but as Tom knew, no matter what the season, if the weather cut up rough he would be stranded for days by the inevitable flash flood, which would carry all before it. To attempt to do so would be suicide! But this was summer so the chances of flash floods were remote. He camped above the river for the night, deciding to stay for a couple of

days and relax; after all, it was the reason for being here.

Seven days past, during which time Tom swam, fished, slept, and explored his little piece of paradise. After crossing safely to the other side of the river, he began the slow ascent of the valley wall to the west. Stopping yet again for a rest, he noticed a small opening in the cliff. With the light failing, as dusk merged afternoon into night, Tom made camp beside the entrance to a cave, he told himself, that he would explore it in the morning, before he continued to the top of the ridge. That night the weather changed for the worse. Winds whipped up, forcing him to abandon his camp-site for the relative safety of the cave mouth. With the morning came peace and quiet. The storm had passed causing little damage.

Tom awoke from a fitful sleep, yawned, and gazed around him. Cuts and bruises attended to, he enjoyed a leisurely breakfast, topped up with a cup of his precious billy tea. After packing everything but his map, compass, torch, climbing rope and knife, which he always had to hand, he hoisted the heavy backpack once more and moved towards the rear of the cave. Moving slowly, he was aware that the cave was narrowing down with each step he took. After approximately ten minutes, he reached a point where he could no longer go on without removing his pack; he stopped and put it down. By now his eyes had adjusted to the dim light of the cave, so he moved on carefully, avoiding any rocks underfoot. To break a leg or sprain an ankle here would be fatal.

Finding himself at a fork in the narrow passage, Tom took the path to the right. He had become used to the sound of his footfall on the hard floor of the passage, so when that sound suddenly changed he was taken by surprise. A barely audible click followed by the sickening rumble of sliding rock behind him, launched Tom forward into the darkness beyond. His nostrils clogged, his eyes on fire from the irritation caused by the dust, he checked himself over. To his relief, He had no broken bones, merely some scratches, and a few bruises. Groping around in the

dark, he found his torch, which had dropped and bounced away from him in his headlong dive for cover. The glass was broken but the bulb was intact. From the direction he had come, an impenetrable wall of rock blocked his way. He only had one option, to continue deeper into the cave.

Covering only a few more metres, Tom saw a niche in one of the passage walls, using his torch he gazed into it. At the back was what looked like a small platform, definitely not naturally formed? By the torches light he could see a pattern scribed into its surface, the lines divided it into three unequal parts. Beside the platform was a group of small rocks. Tom dropped one of the rocks onto the platform – nothing happened. He dropped another; still nothing happened. Gathering up the rocks, he sat and began to take stock of his situation. He was trapped inside a cave and all he could think about was that damned platform! Then it dawned on him. He had been turning the rocks over in his hands, when he realised they fitted together in a rough pyramid shape.

When he turned the pyramid over, he saw the identical pattern that was inscribed on the platform. Carefully he placed the rocks onto the platforms surface, ensuring he ended up with a pyramid. From behind him, he heard another click! An opening appeared on the opposite wall of the passage. Looking into it, Tom could make out the rough shape of a lever. With nothing to lose, he pulled it. Nothing happened. Pushing it had no effect either, but when he twisted it, he heard the same sickening rumble once more.

Retracing his steps towards the rock fall, he was greeted by the still impenetrable wall. So turning back, he moved beyond the niche and lever. The passage continued on, but at a point, roughly the same distance from the niche and lever, as the wall of rock, there was a channel cut into the passage walls on both sides. Above the channel, in the torchlight, dust drifted down from the

roof. Peering into the gloom above, Tom could make out the shape of a large rectangular block. The second lever had somehow raised a giant door! Someone had been to a lot of trouble booby-trapping this passage! He continued on winding left and right, sometimes climbing, sometimes descending. Thinking that he would never see daylight again, he suddenly felt movement in the air around him. In the distance, he could see daylight filtering through into the passage. Standing in a shaft of light, he looked up. There was no way he could climb to the surface, the walls of the shaft gave no hand and footholds, and it was too far for the rope to be of any use in an attempt to haul himself up, so he continued on. The total absence of cave dwelling insects and spiders this far into the system didn't register with him. Therefore it didn't strike him as unusual, the only thing he could think about as panic took its grip, was that he was trapped beneath a huge hill, with no way out! Eventually he lay down, tired and exhausted, and drifted off to sleep.

He awoke to the sight of sunlight playing in the cave mouth where he had collapsed and gone to sleep, not realising that the night had fallen. The air was still and the sun felt good as it washed across his weary body. By now, hunger and thirst were beginning to take their toll on Tom. Moving to the cave entrance, he shielded his eyes against the bright sunlight. As his eyes became accustomed to the light, he saw stretching before him, a long lush valley.

But this was no ordinary valley; there was something different about it. It was almost as if the valley had a presence of its own. Gathering his senses, he took his compass and map from the deep pocket of his bush-shirt. The valley did not match the map, and another thing; the needle of his compass was spinning wildly! Maybe the rock around him was affecting the needle. He sat down and tried, as best he could, to get his bearings. The sun, as far as he could tell, was in the east. The valley appeared to run in a north, south direction. At the southern end, he saw a hill, which reminded him of something. But for now his thoughts were of descending into the valley to find food and water, perhaps there were a few possums or the occasional rabbit; at this point, he would

even contemplate a rat! To his right the wall dropped to the valley floor, to his left a narrow path. As his eyes followed the path, he could see a small rock bridge, beyond which the path began to descend to the valley below.

With the thought of his narrow escape the day before, or was it night, he made his way to the bridge. Casting a wary eye, he saw what looked like a rod, protruding from the stone in the centre of the bridge span. Dropping down, he crawled to the edge of the path. Beneath the bridge, he could see that the rod went through the central rock and into its neighbours; there was a second rod, which extended all the way back to where he was. Its end nearest the central rock was adjacent to a second hole. Tom looked at the rods position – deadly, very deadly. Whoever had been this way before, did not intend to allow anyone to follow.

The tricks and traps would take care of them in no uncertain terms! The technology was familiar and judging by the condition of the two traps he had encountered, he would have sworn it had never been put to use until now. Tom crawled back from the edge. After a short time, he caught sight of a small overgrown crack in the wall. Inside was another lever. Very carefully, he pulled the lever. A low grinding sound beneath his feet signalled the movement of the final rod to lock the bridge.

The path, after twisting and turning, eventually brought Tom to the northern end of the valley floor. As he descended, he noticed the trees were different somehow, as if they were the older cousins of the ones outside the valley. Once he was on the valley floor he felt a little safer, at least here, no rocks could slide down and crush him, or loose stones cause him to drop to his death. Finding himself beside a stream, Tom drank his fill, and then began to look and listen for game. There was no sound, no movement, at least nothing he had ever encountered before. The only

sounds he heard came from the stream and the wind through the tree tops, no birds, not even an insect. But, there was a sound of sorts, far off in the distance, an almost imperceptible hum. Tom dismissed it from his mind. Getting to his feet, he noticed the valley floor rose gently towards a low hill covered in trees at the northern end. For an hour, he climbed until he reached the summit of the hill. There beyond the outer fringe of trees stood a building!

This was no ordinary twentieth century poorly constructed box, or for that matter from the nineteenth century, this was a design from antiquity itself, constructed from the finest marble that he had ever seen. As far as he knew, marble was not found in this part of the country! A large veranda whose roof was supported by tall elegant marble pillars surrounded it. The building itself was oblong, its front facing south. He slowly made his way towards the building. As quietly, as he could Tom crept to the door. He could hear no sound; indeed, there was no sign at all of the building ever being occupied.

The great door opened with little effort from Tom's hand. Inside, a large corridor cut across his path from east to west, directly in front of him a smaller one opened out into an enclosed garden. A fountain, surrounded by paved pathways with marble benches, an open framed roof supported by smaller marble pillars, dominated the garden. Tom sat down. He just could not believe what he was seeing! He explored the building further. In the western end were bedrooms, while at the eastern end he found a kitchen. At the rear of the building was a large, comfortable dining area. Inside the kitchen, besides benches, terracotta pots, and assorted utensils, there was a large built-in, wood-fired oven, made of earthenware. He looked around amongst the pots and found all he needed to make bread. Cautiously sniffing and tasting the ingredients, Tom could stand it no longer. He fired up the oven.

After a delicious meal consisting of the freshly baked bread, with sweet water from the

fountain in the garden, and some fruit he had found growing behind the building, he became drowsy. Here he felt safe and secure. He had a roof over his head and the bed was not too uncomfortable, a little hard maybe, and sheets would have been nice. Once more sleep took over and he drifted off.

CHAPTER 2

Tom woke suddenly, bathed in sweat, his heart pounding; he dived for cover under the bed. The large bump on his head reminded him that this bed was solid marble, he had been dreaming, at least he thought he had! A giant eagle had sat in the window and talked to him in his dream. He had felt the touch of its massive wings across his face. He laughed nervously to himself as he lay there nursing the bruise to his forehead. He felt foolish, but then there was no one around to poke fun at him over it. 'Why did you do that, stranger?' Tom leapt up and ran for the door. Now in a blind panic he ran into the enclosed garden. 'Bad choice!' he said to himself.

He heard the sweep of giant wings, and then the largest eagle he had ever seen in his life, landed on a beam overhead. 'Don't be afraid, I mean you no harm,' said the eagle. Tom thought he was going crazy! 'I've been out here too long,' he said to himself, 'I'm cracking up!' 'What is cracking up?' asked the eagle, shifting its position on the beam. 'The bloody thing is talking to me!'

He needed to think. So he slowly got up, keeping a wary eye on the eagle, and made his way towards the kitchen. Once he was inside, he barricaded the doorway as best he could. At least if he was cracking up, he would do it on a full stomach! As he ate some of the bread he had made the previous day, Tom wondered what to do next.

'How do you get past a talking eagle, with talons large enough to grab a man?' As the effect of a full stomach and his isolation from the terror outside began to take effect, Tom became more rational. 'I remember seeing a skeleton of an eagle like the one outside, in the museum in Christchurch,' he thought to himself, 'But it can't be the same type, surely, can it?'

Haast's Eagle used to be the largest in the world until it became extinct. With a wingspan of some 2.5 metres or more, talons the size of a fully-grown tiger's claw, it was capable of attacking, and carrying off, the largest flightless bird in New Zealand, an adult Moa. It eventually died out after coming into competition with the early Maori, who also liked to kill and eat Moa. When the Moa died out, the Maori moved on and *Harpagornis moorei* was no more. 'And yet here he is, sitting outside, large as life,' Tom said, out loud.

Tom gathered up some bread and fruit, took down the hastily erected barricade, and went back to the garden. The eagle was slowly pacing up and down along the length of the beam, stopping every now and then to strop its massive beak. Tom threw a piece of bread at the eagle. With lightning speed, the bread was guillotined by the beak and swallowed whole. 'Thank you.' 'You're welcome,' said Tom, before realising he was indeed communicating with an eagle. 'This may sound silly, but how is it you can talk?' he asked. 'You must come with me to the Old Ones,' said the eagle, preening its magnificent plumage, 'They will answer all your questions.'

Tom and the eagle talked for the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon. By now, he had named the eagle Jojo, why he could not say. After all, when confronted by a talking specimen of a long extinct species, giving it a name seemed logical somehow. Besides, Jojo was amused by it. He cocked his huge head to one side when the name was suggested, stared at Tom with those fierce dark eyes, fluffed out the feathers on his chest, and shrugged his wings. He had gained Tom's trust.

If it amused Tom, then he saw no harm in it. From Tom's point of view, it was nice to know he had the eagles trust as well, and that he was not to be the next item on Jojo's menu. Jojo told him there were more examples of extinct fauna in the valley, Flightless geese, Adze bill, Huia, to name a few. There was another group Jojo called the 'Tree Eaters', which from his description, sounded a lot like some form of dinosaur. But Jojo said, 'All species lived in harmony in the valley.' Besides being a meat eater, Jojo lived on a diet of berries, grains and grasses; hopefully the 'Tree Eaters' were just like the rest. He also said, 'The valley and everything in it is protected by the Old Ones.' Tom's fears of being eaten disappeared. Jojo took his leave, telling Tom, 'He had to go and announce his arrival to the Old Ones.'

For the rest of the day and night Tom was alone once more. An overwhelming feeling of safety and contentment washed over him as he sat in one of the windows, staring out across this lost world. He felt he could stay here forever, protected from everything outside the valley. Far off in the distance, he could hear the humming noise. He wondered what it was. Who are the 'Old Ones'? And what was it about that damned hill he had seen, which looked so familiar?

The next morning he awoke to the sound of pounding feet, large pounding feet! Carefully he sat up and peered out through the window. There, not two metres from his face, was the large beak-like head of an Ankylosaur. Tom's heart pounded, and then relaxed as he heard the familiar voice of Jojo.

'Tom, it's time to go to the other end of the valley, the Old Ones want to talk to you.' Tom went outside to meet his new giant companion. The Ankylosaur, a member of the theropod family, and herbivorous by nature, gently swayed from side to side. Its back and tail covered with giant spikes like rhino horns, with legs as thick as tree trunks. At the end of a short neck the head was just like a turtle, except much, much bigger! Despite its fearsome looks, it was a gentle creature. While

Jojo and Tom talked, it quietly grazed. The 'Old Ones' had sent it to carry Tom to them, as it was a considerable distance to the other end of the valley. Although how in hell he was going to ride on what amounted to a large bed of nails for several hours, or days, puzzled him for the moment! After the trio had eaten, Tom began to look around for something to protect himself from those fearsome spikes.

A short distance behind the building he found what he was looking for. Jojo, perched high above, watched as Tom began to construct from the material at hand, a large basket. Using vines and branches, the basket soon took shape. Fastened to its frame was a large belt of plaited vines, which Tom hoped would act as a belly strap. He began to drag it around the building to where the Ankylosaur was still grazing. What he had not thought about was how to get it up onto the beast's back. Jojo swooped down and grabbed it in his talons. With effortless ease, he flew up and circled overhead, before gliding down and dropping the basket onto the spiky back. The Ankylosaur screamed and took flight! Jojo flew off after the rampaging dinosaur, and after a couple of hours, the pair returned. This time the basket was successfully installed, and Tom secured the belly strap. After loading the food and water into the basket via one of the windows, Tom climbed aboard.

Sad to leave his home, Tom settled back and took in the view as they began heading south towards the other end of the valley. Along the way, he saw some of the other inhabitants, busily feeding. Huia flew back and forth across the valley floor. Adze bill searched for worms and insects. Flightless geese roamed the marshy areas and small lakes adjacent to the river. Tuatara soaked up the sun's rays. As the sun began to set, the trio stopped for the night.

Tom made camp inside a large hollow tree. Jojo roosted above him in its branches, and the Ankylosaur wandered off to graze. In the glow of his camp-fire, Tom found he was not alone. From

time to time, eyes peered at him from nearby. Occasionally a creature would venture closer to look at this 'stranger', but nothing harmed him. Curling up in a blanket of foliage, Tom drifted off to sleep, while all around him the creatures of the night went about their business.

The next few days for Tom, Jojo and the dinosaur were largely uneventful. Each day they drew closer to the hill. During the fourth day, they met up with an entire herd of Ankylosaur. Tom's mount, on seeing its family, took off as fast as it could, with Tom hanging on for dear life! Once inside the herd it slowed down, and eventually stopped altogether. From now on Tom had to walk the rest of the way. He cut the belly strap and collected his provisions. Jumping down, he weaved his way through the herd and began heading south once more. The things he would have to tell his friends Mary and Mike if he ever got out of here – they just would not believe it! With Jojo's guidance from overhead, he eventually arrived at the base of the hill. The hum, by now had grown in intensity.

As it was now late afternoon, Tom decided to make camp and rest before climbing the hill. He had no choice in climbing it, as it completely blocked the entire width of the valley. The next morning he began the long climb to the summit that was made difficult by the bush, which covered it. Somewhere overhead he caught glimpses of Jojo, as he rode the warm air currents, which swirled around the hill. Several times impenetrable curtains of spiked vines tore at his clothing and skin leaving nasty scratches and obstructed his path.

By early afternoon, he could see the summit. No tree grew there, only a thin layer of grass, parched from the sun's glare. At its centre, there was a cone of rocks. A beam of light rose from the cone; this was the source of the hum. But what was it! Jojo kept his distance from the beam, gliding in wide circles around it. Tom moved to the southern side of the summit and sat down in disbelief. Beyond the hill in the valley below, stood the most beautiful city he had ever seen in his life! After

an equally difficult descent, the valley before him opened out into a wide expanse of cultivated fields. A road ran from the base of the hill to the city, crossing the river in several places via soundly constructed stone bridges. This part of the valley was like a large basin, surrounded on three sides by high mountains and the hill, which generated the light beam to the north, yet, where were the people? No one tended the fields; no one met him on the road?

As he drew closer to the city, it began to dawn on him where he had seen architecture like this before. It was identical to the pictures he had seen of ancient Egypt. Then it struck him! The hill he had climbed was the same shape as the pyramids, but this one was definitely not a tomb! After a while, he reached the outskirts of the city. Walking through a giant gateway, he made his way along avenues flanked by tall buildings. There were temples, libraries, granaries, and vast workshops. And off in the distance what looked like houses, similar to the one he had found days earlier. At the centre of the city stood a large imposing palace covering several hectares with a broad set of steps leading up to a long hallway, at the end of which was a set of double doors several stories high, covered in studded bronze sheets. As Tom drew closer, he could see hieroglyphic writing on the door. He stopped for a moment to gather his wits.

Jojo appeared close by in a small inner garden to one side of the hallway. 'The Old Ones are beyond those doors Tom, I can go no further. We shall meet again soon - farewell.' The great bird flew off. Now Tom was alone.

CHAPTER 3

The massive double doors swung inwards without Tom's touch. Before him in the middle of a large room stood a group of five people, dressed in clothing similar to that worn by the ancient

Egyptians. Around the walls of the room, Tom could see other people operating vast consoles, the lights of which flickered with a soft eerie glow. The group at the centre were looking at a large screen set into the flat circular table in front of them. One member of the group raised his head and met Tom's gaze. 'Welcome Tom, you are the first to arrive.' Anpu took Tom back through the large doors to the small garden. Over the course of several days, Tom learned why he was 'the first'.

Several million years ago, Anpu's ancestors, the Nephile, had lived on a planet called Cydonia, similar to Earth, but in the galaxy, we know as Andromeda. For countless millennia, peace and prosperity reigned. The Nephile were the most advanced civilisation in both the Andromedan and Milky Way galaxies. There were other civilisations, which had advanced at differing rates, but none to quite the same degree of sophistication and technological advancement as the Nephile. Then two million years ago, the Drana found their way to this part of the cosmos. The Drana are a warrior breed, whose only purpose is to subjugate and destroy all other civilisations.

After many years of bloody conflict, the Nephile sent out several groups to find safer places to live. Each group carried with it all the accumulated knowledge and technology of their parent world. Part of that technology was a means of seeding barren rocky planets. After a long period, Anpu's ancestors arrived in our solar system.

Along the way, they had unsuccessfully attempted the 'seeding' five times, but had failed. Within our solar system, they successfully transformed two of the planets, which revolved around our sun, Mars and Earth. The process was completed in a few short weeks. Bases were established and community's rose up, vast areas of the newly formed land were cultivated. One of the by-products of the 'seeding' was a series of proto-form species, found on the home world, one of which was a bipedal hominid. It carried all the necessary elements needed for the Nephile to create an army of workers to do their bidding. Most were used as gardeners, farmers, builders, and house

servants. All were docile, at least on the home world. They were looked upon with affection in the same way we regard our household pets, living for approximately fifty years, and when they died, they were replaced.

As a result, a vast drone army, devoid of emotion, vices, and ambitions together with limited intelligence, developed. The plan was, that once having established these 'colonies', word would be sent to the home world so that mass migration could begin. This would allow the Nephile to start anew in another part of the cosmos. But the Drana foiled their plans. They had an advanced guard largely made up of the 'Khaz', an equally loathsome species, completely devoted to their masters the Drana, who were employed to seek out any other civilisations and report their strengths and dispositions.

One method used by the Khaz involved sowing seeds of discontent within weaker sentient species. When they found crude humanoid worker armies on Mars, and here on Earth, they altered the neural pathways of these simple creatures, giving them approximately ten percent use of their crude brains. This resulted in planet wide anarchy, which amounted to the outbreak of Civil War. The Nephile were taken by surprise, and the Mars colony of Cydon was quickly abandoned in favour of the Earth.

The Nephile found an army of discontented, dangerous, warlike humans (our ancestors) surrounded them. A war broke out between the Drana-led army of humans and the Nephile, more terrible than any nuclear conflict, in an area we now know as the Middle East, centred on the plains between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Whole cities were destroyed, melted, and vaporised, the ground turned into vast sandy wastelands. Millions died in the destruction. Other battles were fought in the land, which the Drana used as their base, India. The result was always the same –

catastrophic! The long and short of it, according to Anpu, was that the Nephile abandoned their cities with their pyramid shaped hardened shelters, which protected their technology, and retreated back to the home world in Andromeda, abandoning mankind to his fate.

Approximately five hundred thousand years went by before they returned to Earth. On arriving, they found not only the offspring of those early humans, but also those of other civilisations. In effect, a whole new species of human had evolved, made up of differing racial origins. There were examples from all over the cosmos. Negrans, Drana, Babbalia, Sumari, occupied the area surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates and to the near east. To the north were Nordine, Caucasi and Ruz, to the west, were the Latans. In the east, the Asiaz had settled the land. Each had evolved at different rates. Some were Neolithic; some had progressed and had a crude form of Nephile-like civilisation. A certain amount of race memory had been retained, which over the generations had degenerated into a crude form of religious fervour.

Gods, whose names bore a remarkable resemblance to various long dead leaders of the civilisations mentioned, were being worshipped. The hardened shelters were used to bury dead kings and queens. Their clothing was a colourful attempt at copying that worn by the Nephile. Copies were constructed when the original 'pyramids' were filled. They now all shared a common group of emotions, anger, lust, and greed, to name but a few. War had been refined to a point where it dominated everything. A warrior culture had taken over. Conquest was all. Slavery of entire nations, the gathering of riches and racial hatred, existed across the surface of the entire planet. A vast majority of other proto-life forms had survived as well. Vegetation had evolved from the simple single celled variety into many new forms of trees, shrubs, grasses, succulents, mosses, and lichens. Microbial life had become the building blocks for most of the mammalian life forms here on earth. Some retreated into the vast oceans, which now covered most of this planets surface.

Many species evolved in this relatively safe environment.

The land-based animals, when not preying on each other for food, avoided the presence of the humans, because by now humanity had developed a taste for meat also. The Khaz were the only species, which had not successfully interbred with mankind, remaining in their original small grey-skinned form. Legends were told over the centuries to countless generations of young humans about the Khaz. They were usually depicted in the form of goblin-like devils, or Trolls who roamed the world leaving evil in their path.

Over the centuries as man evolved, the Khaz were largely forgotten, except in songs and tales, where good triumphed over evil. Memories of the Nephile and all the other races from beyond the solar system faded as well. The Khaz remained hidden from the vast majority of humanity, appearing from time to time to mould the leaders of various countries to their will. The Nephile settled in inaccessible parts of the planet. But each time they established a new home; the Khaz found them and turned the local population against them.

During the last six thousand years, the Khaz have taken control of mankind's destiny more and more. Since the Drana had moved on to conquer other parts of the cosmos, leaving the Khaz as custodians, they have developed empirical notions of their own. Using mankind's need for power and greed, wars have gradually expanded, culminating in the two major holocausts, which have dominated most of the twentieth century on earth, World War I and World War II. At the end of the Second World War, the Khaz began to assume total control of the governments and business interests of the most dominant nations on the face of the planet, largely leaving the rest to starve – the so-called Third World.

Currently the Khaz are conducting military operations worldwide, with the willing assistance of governmental and military organisations, together with multinational business cartels.

This involves the capture and impregnation of human females, in an attempt to produce a Khaz/human hybrid, which it is hoped will be strong enough to resist the Drana when they return to this part of their empire. So far, this process has met with little success, merely causing a lot of distress among the women involved. When reported, the incidents were put down to hysteria, brought on by emotional problems.

While the Khaz were preoccupied with their plans, Anpu's ancestors had managed to establish several bogus hardened shelters and their accompanying cities, in various parts of the world over the centuries. Most were situated in the central and southern parts of the Americas, while others were set up in parts of the Indian subcontinent and the Far East. In each case when the primitive, nomadic local human groups observed these 'gods' constructing the vast cities, they were encouraged through the idea of 'religion' to remain in the cities, giving the impression of Nephile expansion, thus diverting the Khaz attention away from this part of the world. While all this was going on, Anpu's ancestors led by Aton quietly went about the business of setting up the hardened shelter and city within this valley in South Westland, here in New Zealand. 'From here we will begin again with your help,' said Anpu.

The next day Tom awoke after a peaceful night. His old friend Jojo sat on the window ledge, peering at him. 'Anpu awaits you in the library Tom,' said Jojo, snapping his large beak at a passing moth. 'I'm so hungry I could eat a horse,' said Tom. 'No time to eat,' said Jojo, 'there is much to be done, now go to Anpu!'

The great bird departed with a powerful beat of its huge wings. Tom's hunger would have to wait. He wanted to know what the beam of light was for, amongst other things. So gathering up an apple, he made his way to the library and Anpu.

As Tom crossed the city from the house, which had been put at his disposal, he saw its inhabitants for the first time. In the light of day, the almost flawless perfection of the Nephile was revealed. Here were the remnants of a race in which Tom saw a determination to survive, brought on by millions of years of carefully constructed and executed plans, made necessary by the evil intentions of the Drana Empire. Here was a race unlike anything seen on earth. And yet Tom recognised in them, elements of all the peoples of the earth. While the Nephile were not a dominant war-like people, they dominated in other areas. Through their influence, indirectly mankind had 'learned' and begun to question the wisdom of some of its actions over the centuries. Men of learning like Plato and Aristotle had forged paths of learning and knowledge for mankind to follow.

Thanks to the Khaz, counterparts of these men were encouraged to cause problems. Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Ivan the Terrible and more recently men like Hitler and Stalin all created havoc. During many of the conflicts that had occurred over the centuries, vast libraries of accumulated knowledge were destroyed by invading armies.

But in each case, the 'Nephilian' influence prevailed. Artistic endeavours were encouraged, resulting in the beautiful statuary of days gone by. Paintings, frescos, schools, universities, libraries, medicine, trade, all made possible, thanks to the Nephile influence. And yet mankind went about its business unaware of the Nephile. Tom was about to find out why.

Inside the library, Tom found Anpu was not alone. He was talking to the most beautiful woman Tom had ever seen. Her hair the colour of jet, her eyes like deep bottomless pools, which sparkled whenever she looked at Tom. Her flawless alabaster complexion, long slender legs, slim waist and firm breasts, cast a spell over Tom. 'Tom this is Auset, the keeper of all our written knowledge.' Auset looked at him and smiled. 'Welcome Tom,' she said, extending her delicate hand in friendship. Tom remained transfixed. Never since his youth, had he felt this way. Auset's heady

perfume invaded his nostrils; his knees were about to give way! Adolescent hormonal memories began to return to his body. If Auset noticed Tom's physical embarrassment, she said nothing. Instead, she quietly sat him down and began to expand his knowledge of the Nephile people.

From her, Tom first learned about telepathy, but unlike us with our limited cerebral capacity and therefore rather 'hit and miss' attempts, the Nephile were able to use the gift to influence mankind's path without our knowledge. The Nephile placed the so-called great ideas, which had sprung up over the years in our minds. This was something the Khaz were incapable of, relying instead on direct intervention. Auset gently guided Tom through a mind-boggling range of topics over the next few days.

From time to time, the lessons were put aside and the pair went outside the city into the vast plain. Auset and Tom spent many happy hours in each other's company. Their favourite place to escape, however briefly, was a small meadow beside the river, which was a perfect picnic spot. As Tom lay with his head on Auset's lap, she continued his re-education.

Each night as he lay in his bed he yearned for the next day to begin, so that he may be close to Auset once more. Auset taught him about the home world of Cydonia and all aspects of Nephile culture and family life. She answered all of his many questions, sometimes patiently repeating her answers, because Tom found it hard to concentrate in her presence.

By now, he was hopelessly in love with Auset. Besides, he found a lot of what she taught him, difficult to comprehend from his limited human point of view. Auset and Anpu were the sixth generation of Nephile to be born in the valley. Each generation lived for approximately one thousand years.

Unlike Tom and the rest of humanity, they were also blessed with one hundred percent cerebral use, which enabled them, amongst other things, to utilise their increased number of senses. In addition to the five senses mankind had, they possessed the ability to use telepathy and levitation, the latter used to construct their new home. The reason they needed people like Tom, was because over the more than six thousand years of their present occupation, their ability to reproduce was being affected by the very existence of mankind. Or, rather by humanity's headlong drive to destroy the very environment in which he lived. Because of the vast amounts of man-made pollution, the by-product of our industrialisation of the planet, toxins had wreaked havoc within their anatomy, which if allowed to continue, would inevitably lead to sterility.

So the need for a fresh gene pool largely unaffected by pollution was necessary. A marriage between the Nephile and some groups of humanity was the only solution. Aton, the founder of the city, decided it would take two hundred generations before a group, or groups, of humans would be sufficiently advanced to allow such a 'marriage' to take place.

'But why me of all people?' asked Tom, 'and how did you know I would enter your valley?' Auset looked at Tom angrily through those beautiful black eyes and scolded him saying, 'Tom, have you learned nothing from me in the past days!' Then with a hint of a smile, and an almost imperceptible shrug of her slender shoulders, she began again.

'We chose you to be the first, guiding you to this place,' she said, softly. 'Anpu's devices did not stop you, nor were you overly frightened by the presence of the inhabitants of the valley beyond the pyramid. In fact, your acceptance of this place, your openness, convinced us Aton was right in his estimation so long ago; to wait until the two hundredth generation of humanity had become established. This country, above all others that man has colonised over the last three hundred years, has not degenerated into a cesspool of intrigue and discontent. True there have been small

skirmishes between settlers from the northern parts of the world and the earlier settlers from the islands to the north. But because of its relative isolation, this countries people have largely remained peaceful, choosing instead to farm rather than war against other nations.'

Tom sat for a long time, deep in thought, and then he said, 'If I'm the first and it's taken all this time for someone to find the path into the valley, why has no-one attempted it before me?' 'The path was not open before now,' said Auset, 'It remained hidden until a few short weeks ago. We had selected you and sown the idea of coming here in your mind,' she said with a smile. 'In short Tom, you had no choice! Besides,' she added, as she stretched out on the lush grass beside him, 'You don't regret coming here, do you?'

CHAPTER 4

Night fell and Tom was once more alone with his thoughts. His mind was totally occupied with all Auset had taught him. So much so, that he did not hear her soft footfall as she entered the room and sat down beside him. His heart raced as she kissed his cheek. All his pent-up longings for her were stripped away as she led him by the hand to the bedroom. Without a word, she undressed him and gently pushed him down onto the large marble bed. While he lay there gazing at her, his chest at bursting point, his manhood aroused, her clothing dropped in a heap around her delicate ankles.

The closeness of her, the firmness, the moonlight reflected in the sheen of her hair, the touch of her soft skin as they lay together, overwhelmed him. For what seemed like an eternity, but in reality was only a few hours, the lovers were oblivious to everything around them. To them the world consisted only of the space they occupied at that moment. The first shaft of daylight fell upon

their entwined bodies. Auset lifted Tom's arm from across her stomach. Careful not to wake him, she arose from the bed and kissed his forehead. Then slipping into her clothes, she left as quietly as she had arrived.

Tom awoke as the sun climbed higher. Had he been dreaming? He made out the impression left by Auset's body on the bed beside him. Her perfume filled the air. He dozed as the sun's rays bathed his weary limbs. He felt renewed. For the first time in more years than he cared to remember - he was alive!

Anpu stood looking down at him. 'Tom, wake up!' 'It's time for your transition my friend,' he said. 'Although maybe it has already occurred, judging by the look on your face,' he said, with a smile. Tom felt embarrassed, then angry! 'He knows,' he said to himself, 'Damn him!' But Anpu's disarming look quickly dispelled Tom's anger.

'What transition?' Tom asked, as they crossed the city. Anpu said nothing, but Tom's persistence finally wore him down. They sat down on a bench in a huge square behind the palace and Anpu explained what was in store for him. 'Auset has explained why we need you and others like you, has she not?' 'Yes,' said Tom, 'Your people are fast approaching sterility and extinction!' 'Correct,' said Anpu. 'To enable both your genetic make-up and ours to strengthen requires a transition to take place within your biological framework. Your DNA has to be changed to match our own. Plus we need to remove all the barriers which were necessary to control your ancestors, back on our home world.' 'You mean we'll have full cerebral use like you?' Tom asked. 'But what if we turn against you, after all we are a barbaric mix,' he continued. 'Trust us Tom,' said Anpu, reassuringly patting him on the shoulder. 'We would not have brought you here if we thought you presented any danger to us now.'

They entered a vast medical facility unlike anything Tom had seen before. There were no

beds, instead caskets, standing upright with clear Perspex-like lids. Each connected by a series of tubes and wires to a large console at the centre of the room. Some of the Old Ones were being treated for various medical conditions.

As they moved further into the facility, Anpu led Tom towards a small operating room in the east wing. Inside, a team were waiting to begin Tom's transition. Long after it had happened; it occurred to him that he had never felt any fear during the process, or immediately after.

They lay Tom down on the table and began to prepare him for what amounted to the ultimate change of life. He began to laugh quietly to himself, 'So this is what male menopause is all about,' he thought.

The surgical team worked quickly and quietly on his brain. Opening long dormant neural pathways, patching in existing ones to where they should have gone in the first place. The Khaz crude intervention, despite the passing of two hundred generations, still caused a whole lot of problems in the human cerebellum. Tom remained conscious throughout the whole operation. From time to time as they worked in repairing the damage caused by the Khaz, he was temporarily shut down. But as the shut-down was only momentary, Tom was not aware of it. Nor did he remember being given any form of anaesthetic either! Through a window above him, he could see Auset smiling down at him, beside her stood Anpu and some others he did not know.

After it was all over, he was taken to the large room he had first entered, and was placed in one of the casket-like chambers, where his DNA would be changed forever. The lid was closed and the last thing Tom remembered was Auset standing there in front of him.

He awoke to the caress of Auset's hand on his brow. She leaned down and kissed him lightly

on the lips. 'You have been gone from me for a long time my love,' she said, with tears of relief, as she gently propped him up in bed. 'I was worried the transition might have harmed you.' Over the next few days, Tom's strength began to return to him. He explored Auset's home from top to bottom. He loved to doze in the afternoon sun in her garden.

From time to time, Jojo came to visit him and they would spend many hours talking about things in the valley to the north of the pyramid. Sometimes Jojo would ask about the world outside the valley, to which Tom would do his best to explain. By now, he had realised that their conversations, or rather Jojo's were nothing more than telepathic processes.

'I don't feel any different Auset,' he said one morning, as they sat in her garden eating the delicious breakfast she had prepared. 'Be patient Tom, you will have to learn how to use your neural system all over again,' she said. Gradually, with Auset and Anpu's guidance, Tom began to experience a whole new range of sensations. Some were initially scary, like climbing a tree for the first time, or learning to swim by being thrown in at the deep end! But eventually he began to learn to control his initial apprehensions, and then to overcome them completely. As each day passed, it was as if a great cloud was being lifted from his mind.

From time to time, the new sensation of hearing others, communicating telepathically was overwhelming to say the least. His original five senses were heightened also. His sight, which because of his age had degenerated, was restored back to a 20/20 standard. His hearing, which was damaged by long periods using power tools, was cleared up. He could close his eyes and use his sense of touch to 'see' what an object was. His sense of smell returned with a vengeance. He became conscious of a range of strange new odours above and beyond those he was used to.

Auset was out of the house, so Tom thought he would try using levitation. He chose

something small like a pair of dice. A lot of effort was required, but eventually he managed to make them fall off the table onto the floor. Over the next several days as he improved, Tom began to lift larger objects. He was concentrating on lifting a rather ornate vase, when Auset appeared directly in front of him. His concentration broken, the vase fell towards the marble-flagged floor. But for Auset's intervention, her mother's favourite vase would have been smashed into a million pieces. Tom felt like he had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Auset, hands on her hips, glared at him. Then she began to laugh, and Tom relaxed.

His re-education resumed once more. This time including practical lessons using his seven senses. Each day Auset and Tom went to their favourite spot beside the river. Each day he fell in love with her more and more. He asked her about the pyramid and its beam of light, but all she would say was, 'Its part of our technology.' He asked her about the valley and why it didn't appear on any map. To which she replied, 'the valley is protected from the outside, by a series of cloaking devices controlled from the palace, and powered from the pyramid.'

Because the valley had been cut off from the outside world for millennia, in fact since the Gondwanaland break-up, all forms of life within had been trapped also. Besides the fauna Tom had seen, there were other examples as well.

For instance, Ankylosaur were not the only dinosaur living peacefully in the valley. There were a small herd of Hypsilophodonts, also herbivores, lizard like with long tails, which acted as a counterbalance when they ran, extremely timid creatures and fleet of foot. These ones had looked in on him while he sat at his camp-fire beside the hollow tree. A species of giant penguin, pachydyptes ponderosus, which stood as tall as a man, giant Gecko and Haast's Eagle together with Huia, had entered the valley when periods of seismic activity, weakened the protective cloak surrounding the

valley. He wondered why the settled weather pattern differed from the outside world, only to be told it was controlled from within the palace.

Then one day, he was reminded of how long he had been here in the valley with his beloved Auset and his new-found friend Anpu. 'Tom, it is time for you to depart my friend,' said Anpu. 'You must go back to your home and collect your friend Mike and his family and bring them to us, for they also are needed.'

With a heavy heart, Tom said his goodbyes to Anpu and others of the community. Auset was nowhere to be found. And so he began to retrace his path back to the other end of the valley.

Tom reached the base of the pyramid accompanied by Jojo. The climb back to its summit did not tire him now as it had earlier. Beside the other improvements made to him, his muscle tone, together with his stamina had returned to the level of a man in his early thirties. As he approached the summit, Auset stood on the parched grassy area close to the beam. She hugged him and held him close, neither of them saying a word, audibly or otherwise. After a while, she said to him, 'Take this amulet and return safely to me.' Then, turning quickly away, she disappeared over the edge of the pyramid.

At the base of the pyramid, Tom and Jojo found the Ankylosaur waiting for them. It had dragged the basket along with it. After the basket was once more secured, Tom climbed aboard and the trio set off towards the northern end of the valley. Tom and Jojo said their goodbyes at the cave mouth, and then Tom retraced his steps back to where he had left his pack, this time resetting the traps as he went. After a few days, he emerged at the roadside once more. Hitching a ride on a passing cattle truck, he eventually arrived back home.

The next morning he awoke to the familiar sounds of his old existence. Alarm clocks, radios, traffic noise, all now seemed to annoy him immensely after the peace of the valley. Around his neck, Auset's amulet caught the weak rays of the sun, as it tried to break through the thick cloud, which covered the city.

After breakfast, Tom went to see his friends Mary and Mike. He found them in their usual frantic morning routine, trying to eat breakfast and get the kid's school lunches, as well as their own, organised. 'Christ Tom, where the hell have you been?' said Mike. 'Do you realise you're in big trouble at work mate!' Tom had not even thought about how long he had been away until Mike brought it up. 'It doesn't matter Mike,' he said, as he helped himself to a piece of freshly buttered toast. 'I won't be going back there anyway, and neither will you come to that!' The silence in the kitchen was deafening as Tom's outburst hit home. 'What do you mean Tom?' asked Mary, as she sat down at the table. She was worried about him. 'Perhaps he's been spending too much time on his own in the bush,' she thought to herself. 'No I haven't Mary,' said Tom. Mary's mouth hung open in disbelief, 'How did he know what I was thinking?' she said, to no one in particular. 'I'll explain everything later, but for now you'd best get the kids off to school and go to work yourselves. Come round to my place tonight and I will try to tell you all that has happened to me, although I warn you, it may take some swallowing on your part!'

After eating the meal Tom had prepared for them, Tom began to relate what had happened to him over the last few weeks. From time to time, he demonstrated his intensified senses, plus the new ones, to the amusement of Mary and Mike's kids, Lisa and Tony.

Books floated around the room. Ideas popped into their heads, repeated to them by Tom. Auset's amulet, Jojo and the other inhabitants of the valley were explained to them. Both Mary and Mike found it difficult to take in, while their children accepted it all at face value. He told them they

had to return with him to the valley, but when pressed, would not reveal why. By the time midnight rolled around, Tom had somehow managed to convince them that he was not a candidate for the 'funny farm'. The kids were tired, and frankly, both Mary and Mike were a little shell-shocked from Tom's revelations.

A couple of days went by during which time Tom did not see his friends or anyone else for that matter. Then Mike came round to see him.

'Tom are you really sure you didn't just dream all this up?' he said, uncertainly. 'No mate, it's all for real. How long have we known each other Mike, in all that time, have you ever heard me say something like this, which I honestly didn't believe was the truth?' Mike sat for a while and pondered over what his old friend was telling him. Beside what Tom had told them, there was something about him which neither he or Mary could quite pin down. Tom could have been playing some sort of magic trick on them the other night, when he made the books float. And maybe he had learned how to trick people into thinking he was a mind reader.

Then it dawned on him! Tom's physical appearance had changed, reversed somehow. Here was a man close to fifty, with all the muscle tone of a man much younger! Mike decided to take a chance and go back to the valley with his old friend. But how he was going to convince Mary he did not know.

With Tom's help, a plan was hatched to get the family to the valley. Tom using his new-found powers of persuasion would implant the idea in the minds of both Mary and the kids, easing the way for Mike to persuade them. And so it was that a few days later the group stood in the cave entrance at the northern end of the valley, ready to begin their new adventure.

CHAPTER 5

The house at the northern end of the valley was like nothing Mary and Mike had ever seen before in their lives. Lisa and Tony ran around exploring every nook and cranny of the place. Jojo re-appeared soon after their arrival. Mary and the kids ran and hid, but soon emerged as they saw, and heard, how friendly the great bird was. For several days, as they acclimatised to their new surroundings, thoughts of the outside world, friends and family, faded away. The sense of peace and contentment Tom had felt when he first arrived in the valley, overwhelmed Mike and his family. The kids played happily with the Ankylosaurs. Lisa even managed to entice the Hypsilophodonts to feed from her outstretched hand.

The sun heralded another day and within a short time after sunrise, Jojo alighted on one of the beams in the garden. 'Time for your friends to go south Tom,' he said. After preparing for the journey, the group set off aboard several Ankylosaurs. Tom watched with delight as his friends saw what he had seen so many weeks before.

Both Lisa and Tony were spellbound. Animals, birds, trees and shrubbery they had only ever read about in books on prehistory, could be seen wherever they looked. The controlled weather meant they were never cold. Mary and Mike finally began to relax as they realised how benign everything in the valley was. Nothing presented any form of danger at all.

The day came when they finally arrived at the base of the pyramid. The kids waved goodbye to their new pets as they wandered back to the herd, and then the group began the climb to the top. Auset ran towards Tom, her arms outstretched. For a long time they held each other, their kisses re-establishing their love for one another. Then Tom introduced Auset to his friends.

The group sat for a while on the summit looking down towards the city in silence. It was as Tom had described, truly beautiful to behold. Auset's beauty was not lost on Mike, as the sharp pain in his ribs from Mary's fist reminded him! After descending to the valley floor, they made their way into the city past the carefully tended fields. Auset and Tom left the family to settle down in their new home, which was close to where Tom had first stayed. Now he would be sharing Auset's house. From now on, nothing would keep them apart for long.

Over the next few weeks, Mike and his family underwent the same process as Tom had earlier. Auset took it upon herself to teach Lisa and Tony. But this was unlike any schooling they had ever experienced in their short lives. No stuffy, boring subjects, designed to equip them for the inevitable rat race, which was the lot of adult mankind. No prejudiced viewpoints about other races, no home economics classes, no enforced sports periods, no older kids to bully them. In fact, none of the dangers to which young children are subjected, on the streets of the cities of this world. Television, or video games, cars or buses, now seemed to be totally irrelevant. Only what Auset taught them mattered.

Anpu and his brother Seb took Mary and Mike's re-education in hand. Seb's expertise lay in the field of technology. His task was to maintain and use their technological achievements for the good of all. Mike would find himself being trained in this area later. For several months, their idyllic lifestyle amongst their new friends made them completely forget the world beyond the valley. Days were spent helping wherever they were needed. They worked in the fields, and sometimes in the hospital, library, or the granaries and workshops.

At night in the company of others around the dining table, they spent hours talking about all manner of things. Gone the mindless chatter, which was the norm in many households across the world. No ridiculous arguments about kids curfews, the mortgage, what 'so and so' had said about

this and that, all that was thankfully gone for good. From this point on, their lives would be changed forever in more ways than one.

Seb appeared at the home of Auset and Tom, his face troubled. 'Anpu has called a meeting,' he said. 'We've learned the Drana are returning!'

The vast square behind the palace soon filled as the population of the city arrived. Auset and Tom found Mary, Mike and the kids and sat with them. 'What's going mate?' said Mike. 'All hells about to break loose,' Tom shouted, over the noise of the crowd.

Anpu and the council of Old Ones appeared on the steps behind the palace as the crowd waited in anticipation, and raising his arms, he gestured for quiet. Then a frail, yet majestic figure stood and addressed the crowd. This was Amun, the oldest surviving member of the Nephile, noblest among the Old Ones. The Nephile looked to him for guidance. In him was everything their culture stood for, wisdom, tenacity, certainty, and above all, compassion for others. He was also one of the principal architects of their technology, continuing the path set by Aton centuries before. Seb was his pupil and had learned well from the old man.

The way the crowd responded to Amun's every word or gesture, clearly demonstrated to anyone watching, how much he was loved by all those present. Amun leaned on the ornate staff he held in his thin right hand. For several minutes, he seemed to be lost in his own thoughts. Then with unrestrained emotion in his voice, he began.

'My friends, our worst fear has proved true. The Drana have once more set their sights on this peaceful part of the cosmos!' The crowd sat in stunned silence. A murmur spread across the square, increasing in volume. Amun raised his staff. 'Please friends, let me continue,' he said,

regaining his composure and lowering his staff. 'The council and I have asked you here today to inform you of our intentions. Immediately after I have finished talking to you, we will begin to put into place the contingency plans we have formulated. In the meantime, please, please do not worry. The Drana are still many months away, there is no immediate danger.'

Then Amun turned and spoke to Anpu. Anpu gestured to Seb, who then addressed the crowd. 'Immediately on dispersal from the square, all technicians will report to their sections, where they will remain until further notice. Those of you who work in the pyramid will now begin the first process!' Tom sensed a feeling of shock from the crowd around him. Seb continued, 'Citizens not engaged in technical areas will report to central operations for assignments. All storage areas will begin emergency operations, as instructed by the council edicts. Now please disperse as quickly as possible, we have a lot to achieve,' he said. He then turned, acknowledged Amun, and quickly left the steps.

Tom looked at Auset for answers as the crowd melted away from the square. 'What is the first process Auset, and why did I get the feeling of panic from the crowd?' he asked. She led Tom, Mary, Mike and the kids back to the house in silence. Once inside, they went into the garden and sat down while Auset began to explain the true nature of the pyramid, and the beam of light.

A sombre mood engulfed Tom and his friends after Auset had finished. Both Lisa and Tony sat crying in the arms of their parents. Tom sat in silence, his arm around Auset's trembling body. Could it be true? As hard as it had been to accept finding Auset and this beautiful place, what she had just revealed was inconceivable!

Gradually over the coming days and weeks, life assumed some semblance of normality. The coming events were put aside while the council edicts were followed. Mary worked in the hospital, Auset was kept busy in the library, and Mike was co-opted by Seb onto various technological

projects around the city. Tom worked in the fields, harvesting the crops.

One day as he was busy loading sacks of freshly threshed wheat, Tom's attention was drawn to an imposing figure, standing at the edge of the field. Hor, the leader of the military arm of the Nephile, was a man who until now Tom had only heard about. 'Anpu and Seb have told me about you Tom,' said Hor. 'Your previous, limited, military experience in the outside world has stood you in good stead for what we must shortly do,' he added. Then with a grin he said, 'If I fail to keep an eye on you, my sister will never forgive me!' So this was Auset's brother.

That night Auset and the two men she loved shared a pleasant meal, accompanied by fine wine. Both Auset and Hor shared a common interest in Tom's welfare. In Auset, it was the stirring of a new life in her body, a fact that she kept from Tom for the moment. In Hor's case, he needed Tom's help, bringing in the other groups from various parts of the world.

There were six groups in all, who like Tom, were drawn to specific geological points around the world. It would be Tom's task to collect them, once he had been trained in the gentle art of handling one of the ships deep inside the pyramid! Hor kissed his sister on the cheek, took Tom's hand in friendship, and departed.

Auset leaned back in Tom's arms as they watched the moon scribe a path across the night sky. With what was about to happen, Auset needed to give him something wonderful to look forward to. He hugged her with tears rolling down his cheeks. In all his wildest dreams, he never thought he would be a father. Yet his beloved Auset was pregnant! Everything, which would unfold in the months ahead, paled into insignificance when compared to the new life Auset now carried. Mary, Mike, Lisa, and Tony would never believe it! At that moment, he wanted to shout out to the world, how happy he was.

Tom's training began in earnest. Under Hor's patient tutelage, he learned the mechanics of flight. But unlike conventional flying skills, the craft he would eventually pilot were handled differently. On the first morning, Hor took him to the vast hanger in one part of the pyramid. Before him, stood the finest examples of Nephile engineering constructed of materials unknown in the outside world, the craft sat in readiness. Transport craft, fighters, and cruisers, all defying gravity by their shape. It would be one of the transports, which he would pilot. The shape was very familiar.

Hor took him aboard the vast, circular craft. Inside were large cargo areas, which at a moments notice could be transformed into passenger areas, hospitals, whatever was needed. Situated on an upper level surrounded by an array of touch-panels, was the pilot's chair. Beneath the main level was the engine room. The crew numbered seven, consisting of a pilot, two engineers, and four weapons technicians. The guns would not help much under sustained Drana attack. But against conventional weapons, like those used on earth, they could wipe the floor with anything thrown at them! Four groups of twin particle cannon, remotely controlled from the tech's station beneath the pilot's position, covered all points of the compass. Above and beneath the craft, plasma torpedoes could be launched, automatically homing in on their targets, should the need arise.

All the craft, while inside the earth's atmosphere, utilised the power necessary for propulsion, from an electromagnetic grid, which had been installed aeons ago by the first Nephile, after the seeding. From time to time mankind had witnessed fighters, sent to seek and destroy Khaz installations, flashing across the sky.

Passed off as UFOs, the governments of the world had largely played down their existence to appease their Khaz allies. On occasion, people had incorrectly associated them with abductions. This was a cover-up on the part of the Khaz, in their attempt to breed with mankind. Because of the

original devastating battles between the Drana and the Nephile, the Khaz fleet had been destroyed. Instead, they relied on conventional land-based transportation to carry out their evil intent, provided by covert human organisations, both military and civilian. Sometimes witnesses experienced close encounters.

One such case, which had been related to Tom, involved a group of hunters, kilometres from the nearest habitation, here in New Zealand. During the early hours of the morning, they had been driving their four-wheel drive vehicle through the forest to check on some traps they had placed the night before. After stopping for a quick tea break, and the inevitable call of nature, one of the hunters saw something out of the corner of his eye. There across the valley was a craft, its shape almost indistinguishable from its surroundings. Before he knew what had happened, the craft had travelled the three or four kilometres across the valley in a matter of seconds! It hovered in front of the hunters, making no sound. From the glow of instrumentation, they could see a figure looking back at them. Then it was gone. They never spoke about it to each other or to anyone else, because to admit to seeing a UFO at that time, amounted to an admission of insanity in the eyes of society. If Tom had not had a similar experience himself some twenty years before, the witness would never have revealed his tale. The Khaz had done their work well.

After weeks of simulation, Tom was ready for his first real flight. A small fighter was placed in readiness on the apron, which was part of the road at the base of the pyramid. A twin-seater, Tom sat in the front with Hor seated behind. After Hor had lifted the craft into the air, he handed control over to Tom. It took a while for him to get used to the fact that there were no conventional controls. Despite his time in the simulator, when it came to actually controlling the craft for the first time, it felt strange not having a set of pedals and a joystick.

The pad in front of him controlled everything aboard. Yaw, pitch, acceleration, weapons, all

at the touch of a button. A heads-up display showed his speed, altitude, location, weapons status and target information. The thing, which really got his attention, was the lack of any sensation of movement. No G-force, no effects from outside sources like air pockets, nothing! And another thing, you could hear a pin drop inside the cockpit, the engine made no sound at all!

For this first flight, Hor directed him into a series of manoeuvres, which involved flying, and navigating the grid beneath the surface of the valley below. From time to time, he looked at the speed they were travelling at in astonishment. With the blink of an eye, they travelled the length and breadth of the basin in which the city stood.

'Just imagine what this puppy could do to the radar-traps on the roads outside the valley!' he thought to himself.

'Concentrate! Up here there is no place for daydreaming,' said Hor, in answer to his unspoken words. 'Damn,' said Tom, to himself. Hor chuckled, 'I heard that; now back to the task at hand.' As Hor brought the craft back down to the pad, Tom's head was still up there in the sky. For someone who had previously been scared out of his wits about the idea of flight, he was now hooked.

Each day his confidence, and competence, increased. Hor stressed the importance of becoming one with the craft. 'Let it become an extension of you Tom,' he said. 'It must become second nature to you, to the point where your mind can concentrate on the task at hand, rather than worrying about the angle your flying at, or whatever function of the craft troubles you.' Each night at home with Auset, who by now showed all the signs of pregnancy, he would tell her of the days events, like a child, hardly stopping for breath.

Eventually the day came when Hor was satisfied Tom had learned all he had to teach him, which to Tom's great delight, coincided with the birth of his daughter, Auramooth, named in honour

of the mother of Auset and Hor. For a brief moment in time the entry into the world by this tiny, defenceless being he now held in his arms, made them all, Auset and Tom, Hor and Anpu, Mary and Mike, Lisa and Tony, forget about what lay ahead for all inside, and outside, the valley at the bottom of the world. And what of the others Tom had to collect from various points on the globe, what was going on in their minds at this moment?

CHAPTER 6

The highest point of the Sierra da Estrela hills is approximately nineteen hundred metres above sea level. From here, you could see the town of Coimbra and the Atlantic Ocean. From all along the Portuguese coastline, men had set out on many adventures over the centuries. Now high above the coast another group of adventurers gathered together in long-abandoned shepherds huts. Domingo and Reyes looked at the faces of the people with them. All were strangers and yet they all shared one thing in common, their need to be in this place.

Further north a band of skiers sat around a fire, in a small farmhouse at the farthest end of the Tanafjord, protected from the ferocity of the storm, which howled its way up the fjord, from the Barents Sea to the north.

To the east, on the last collective farm in this part of Belorussia divided by the Berzina River, the small group of summer workers, who had stayed on during autumn, tended their makeshift camp.

Further south, in the valley to the north of Mount Smolikas, volunteers worked steadily, unearthing pottery shards, and the occasional fragments of Etruscan arrowheads or a spear, all that

was left of an abortive incursion into northern Greece over two thousand years ago.

South-west in the marshes surrounding the town of Ash Shatrah, in the still-troubled southern part of Iraq, the strange group of newcomers carefully went about their task, clearing from the field the debris left behind by the recent 'Desert Storm', which had devastated the area. And to the north, the swirl of men from the village, dancing the age-old steps of their dervish heritage, amused the party of hikers from Ankara, on the south western slopes of Mount Ararat.

The transport stood ready on the apron. Tom's crew were already aboard, doing their last minute pre-flight checks. Inside the large cargo bay, all was in readiness for the passengers. A medical team was aboard to take care of their every need. All Tom had to do was get them - ha! Auramooth gurgled as she lay in her mother's arms, her tiny hand, gripping her father's finger. Tom kissed the small, smiling face of his daughter, and then embraced them both. Auset kissed him goodbye, then retreated to where Hor, Seb, and Mike stood at the edge of the apron.

Slowly the huge craft lifted into the air, then moved west towards the distant hills, which marked the border of the lost world. Concentrating now, Tom entered the recognition code, necessary for exit and entry through the cloak, which surrounded the valley. Beyond was the Tasman Sea.

Far below he caught glimpses of squid-boats at work. He programmed in the course to his first destination, Mount Ararat. Its zigzag path, following the Electro Magnetic field, looked strange. Providing there were no hitches they would be approaching northern Turkey in about four hours from now. An hour passed, and then another, Tom began to relax. Amsu, the senior weapons technician shook him out of his daydream.

'Tom, look!' On the screen in front of him, he could make out six targets on a collision course with theirs. He could easily outrun them. But could he afford to take the chance they had not seen and reported the large 'UFO'? 'Take your positions, arm all weapons, there must be no survivors!' he said. The crew sprang into action, the four twin particle cannon locked on to the closest targets, still well over two thousand kilometres away. Tom eased the huge craft onto a direct collision course with the unsuspecting group of aircraft.

Colonel Anatole Tiempkin was the third generation of his family to serve his country from the skies above. His grandfather had been one of the first pioneers to take to the air during the Second World War against the Nazi offensive. His father Mischa had participated as a test pilot during the early days of the space race in the 1950's. The MIG-29 was the most advanced military aircraft ever built; surpassing anything the Western Alliance had to offer. He found some solace in this fact. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, he and his comrades, had for a while, become largely redundant in the new Democratic Russian Federation. Now with the troubles caused by dissident factions all over the federation, he and his brother pilots were needed once more. This training mission was necessary to keep them on their toes. Fully armed, the MIGs were to proceed to a way point, one thousand kilometres south-south east of their base on the Kamchatka Peninsula. There they would engage and destroy an old freighter, which the navy had towed there for the purpose. This would again clearly establish the superiority of the air-arm of the Russian military, over that of its comrades!

The alarm sounded in Anatole's helmet! 'What is it for Christ sake,' he said to himself. 'Bushka, what do you make of it?' His second in command was at a loss! 'I'm not sure comrade colonel; I've never seen anything like it in my life!' 'Whatever happens boys,' said Anatole, 'keep your camera's...' The particle wave rolled across the flight of MIGs The last thing Anatole was

conscious of were the bones in his hands as they gripped the yoke.

Before the blast from the cannons had obliterated their targets, the transport had resumed its heading, and by now was passing over the Manchurian Plain. Tom felt sick at what he had initiated. Now he knew why the old veterans of the Second World War, were reluctant to discuss what they had seen, and done, in the name of peace. It was necessary, no vital, that their mission went undetected. If the Khaz learned of it, the next time they may not get a second chance!

Night was falling as they approached the resting place of Noah's Ark. The great craft, under Tom's careful control, landed on a saddle on the southern slopes of Mount Ararat, bisected by the border between Turkey and Iraq. The 'Sumari' came on board and quickly took their seats. The medical staff immediately swung into operation. The cargo doors silently closed and the craft lifted off once more. 'No time to hang around,' Tom thought. He now swung south towards Ash Shatrah. The great Ark hovered over the marshland as the 'Babbalia' were ushered aboard, to take their place in the vast cargo bay.

Turning in a wide circle to the Northwest, Tom piloted the transport towards its next destination, Mount Smolikas. The Pindos Oros Mountains ran north-Northwest towards Smolikas, its highest peak, affording the transport perfect cover as it travelled along the cloud-covered slopes. In the valley below the mountain, Tom brought the great craft gently down, not far from the dig.

'Amsu, go and find them quickly,' said Tom. 'Take Nuit with you, if they see a woman as well as a man, then maybe they'll come out of hiding.' Nuit and Amsu vanished into the night. They searched the archaeological site for well over two hours before returning to the transport. Nuit collapsed sobbing into one of the seats in the bay. Amsu sat beside her, anger on his face. 'What happened, where are they Amsu?' Tom said, already guessing the answer.

The assembly point chosen for the 'Caucasi' was the only one remotely close to a Khaz outpost. The council had weighed up the risk in determining the pick-up points. This was the only area, which presented the least threat for the mission as a whole, within the borders of Greece. The Khaz, in typical fashion, had got someone else to do their dirty work for them. They never soiled their spindly grey hands with something as loathsome as murder! Tom's anger rose from deep inside. His Caucasi brothers and sisters needed to be avenged, to hell with the mission for the moment! 'Amsu, Nuit,' he said, 'prepare the plasma torpedoes! We're going to make those grey bastards rue the day they were born!' 'Nuit, activate the cloaking device.' 'Amsu, maximum power to the particle cannon, I want them to fry in hell for this!' The transport quickly rose into the night sky. Tom laid in a new course north east to Pirin Planina, an area of mountains in the southern part of Bulgaria. The mountains hove into view.

West across the valley, the Mesta River flowed in a southerly direction towards the Aegean. Due west, the town of Smolyan nestled in the hills at the headwaters of the Tundzha river, close to the border with what had once been Macedonia. Below the town, and deep into the hillside, was a vast underground system of caverns and old mines, which had been turned over to the Khaz. They now ruled the area to the west as far as the former Yugoslavian confederation, north to the Romanian/Hungarian boarder, east to the coast of the Black sea and south to Crete, although this was under review by the Khaz high command. Had the general population who lived in the area known, the result would have been panic.

Nuit scanned the hills, searching for any tell-tale signs of occupation. The scanner registered an exhaust emission from the underground energy generators, used by the Khaz. They were located on the hillside, eight hundred metres above the town. 'Lock onto the exhaust and fire all banks of torpedoes on my command,' said Tom, as he steadied the huge transport directly over the target. Tom gave the order, 'Fire!'

A seething ball of fire engulfed the entire slope of the mountain, as the massive force of the sixty plasma torpedoes was unleashed deep inside the cave system. Large areas of forest were blown sky-high by the force of the blast. Vast landslides rolled toward the town at frightening speed, engulfing buildings, which had seen many centuries pass, and many generations of occupants within their walls. It would be a long, long time before rats built a nest in this part of the world again. The Caucasi would rest in peace now. The great craft once more resumed its course, this time north to Belorussia and the 'Ruz'.

The Carpathian Mountains were bathed in moonlight as Tom piloted the transport towards the north, cursing the revealing brightness of the earth's moon. Romania disappeared below and behind, as the transport crossed the mountain range towards the Ukraine. Beyond lay the Berzina River in the vast flat plains of Belorussia. This was no place to hang around. There was no place to hide for kilometres in any direction. Everyone on board, both crew and passengers were anxious to be well away from here as soon as possible! The pick-up went without a hitch; thank god for vodka! Some of the 'Ruz' had seen to it that their hosts were fast asleep, passed out from drinking the potent colourless liquid. Two more stops to go, then he could point the ship homeward to his beloved Auset and Auramooth.

After crossing the Gulf of Finland on his northward course, Tom deliberately flew as low as he dared, while crossing the vast area of forest and lakes, which made up the southern part of this country. The White Sea Fleet at Archangel to the north east may have been placed on alert, not to mention the First Strike MIG squadrons on the Kola Peninsula. Crossing Lake Inari, in the north of the country, he began to descend even further, to reduce the chance of discovery. For at the speed they now travelled at, they could easily find themselves surrounded by 29's, or worse, ground-based missiles! The craft landed softly on the snow-covered field, south of the farmhouse. The only sound, which could be heard, came from the 'Nordine' skis as they cut across the fresh covering of

snow.

The transport rose into the night air, and Tom headed north towards the open sea, before heading west, across the relative safety of northern Denmark. By now, the moon had dipped sufficiently in its path across the sky, allowing them once again to take advantage of the mountainous terrain of the Danish coastline. Now daylight would dog them on the journey south to the last group, the 'Latans'.

Crossing the northern islands, which marked the ragged coastline of the Netherlands, he headed due south towards Luxembourg, passing over parts of Germany and Belgium with breathtaking speed. At Nancy in France, he altered course to the south-West toward the high plateau of the Massif Central. Here he would find cover for a brief time before he had to make a run for the Pyrenees Mountains, the border between France and Spain. Passing over Pamplona, he headed due west for Santiago, on the northern tip of the Iberian Peninsula, before turning south for Portugal and the Sierra da Estrela range.

Domingo Leit, one of the 'Latans' made himself known to Tom as soon as his group were aboard. 'Your progress has not gone unnoticed my friend,' he said, with a wry smile. 'At this moment the entire might of the NATO alliance is on alert.'

Word had filtered through from the towns below their hideout over the past hours, of an invasion by forces yet unknown. The Russian President, on behalf of his Bulgarian friends, had charged the United States with the wholesale massacre of a town in the south of the country, claiming that, 'The American F16's based in Turkey, had delivered a cold blooded attack on innocent civilians of a peaceful nation.' While in New York, an emergency meeting of the United Nations was under way to try to avert a potentially explosive situation from escalating into all out

war! The Secretary General had asked for calm on all sides. In Washington, the American President was even now taking advice from his civilian and military advisers on the possibility of limiting the damage after a first strike.

Oh god, what had he done! In avenging the murder of the 'Caucasi', it looked as if World War Three was about to start! What the hell! Let the stupid fools argue with each other, after all, that's what they're good at! Soon it would not matter a damn anyway!

He changed his course at Marrakech in Morocco. This time he headed south, south-west, destination Fortaleza, on the northern coast of Brazil. As the transport travelled west towards the Andes Mountains, his passengers were going through their transition. By the time they were home once more, the population of the city would have increased. From this nucleus a new seventh generation of Nephile would be born, to take their place alongside the first member, Auramooth.

At the junction of the Japura and Amazon rivers, Tom altered course to the south. At Mar Chiquita in western Argentina, the craft turned south south-east travelling quickly across the lush grasslands of the pampas, they left Argentina's coastline at Montevideo and passed over the northern banks of the Rio de la Plata.

Passing north of the Falkland's, Tom's next landfall was South Georgia, before heading straight for the South Pole, the heart of the Antarctic continent. From there the transport skimmed the Queen Maude Mountains on its path north-north west to South Westland, and home to the safety of the valley, hidden behind the cloak surrounding it, where Auset and Auramooth waited for his return.

The Council sat in silence as Tom related what they already knew. Amun rose from his seat

at the head of the table and walked over to Tom. He stood directly in front of him and straightened his bowed frame. For a long time, the old man's eyes bore straight into his. Then he moved forward and embraced him.

'My son, it had to be done. While we do not condone bloodshed, nevertheless the importance of the task we set you depended on one factor, and only one, your instinct for survival.' Then turning to the members of the Council, he walked back to his seat and sat down, his head in his hands. Anpu took Tom to the antechamber beyond the council room. 'Go to your family Tom, you did well, and must be congratulated on your success, my friend. Go now.'

Over the next several days the Council were locked in debate over what moves the Khaz would be likely to make in retaliation. Tensions were beginning to rise throughout the northern hemisphere, the NATO and former Warsaw Pact countries were re-arming at a rapid rate. Diplomats spent more time in the air than on the ground, shuttling back and forth from one set of negotiations to another.

A lot of the nuclear weapons, supposedly destroyed under the disarmament agreements, negotiated after the fall of the Soviet Union, magically reappeared. All service personnel stood down from active duty were immediately reactivated. Never since September 1939, were so many mobilisations seen to take place. Fleets were ordered to sea, armies choked up their embarkation points as ships were hurriedly commandeered for service as troop carriers. Squadrons of Stealth Bombers were put on ten-minute standby.

Borders were sealed, bridges blown, commercial airline flights cancelled, embassies closed for the duration. The Khaz High Command was at its wits end over the entire matter, they were fast

loosing control of the situation. If something were not done soon, their lives would also be in jeopardy - from the Drana! All they're carefully laid plans to forge an empire vanished before their large, evil, black eyes.

CHAPTER 7

All through the night and the best part of the next day, men and women arrived by car, bus and helicopter. By now the Mount Weather facility, west of Washington in the hills of Virginia, was beginning to assume control of the most powerful nation in the Western Alliance.

Deep inside the mountain, the President sat alone in the room. His Command Centre was not much more than a hole in the solid rock of the mountain. The only really visible sign of luxury inside the hole was a high-backed leather chair and oak desk. On it were three telephones and one speaker, a large writing pad, a desk lamp and a picture of his family and behind him on the wall, the Seal of the United States of America, flanked by two Stars and Stripes flags. In front of the desk were a couple of less ostentatious chairs.

He hoped his wife and family would be all right! It was up to his Chief of Staff to ensure their safety in an emergency, and, 'Boy was this ever an emergency!' The twenty-four hour clock on the wall in front of him slowly spelled out the passage of time. The red phone in the small case, which dominated the tabletop, was silent.

'Ring damn you, ring!' he said to himself. He knew the man on the other end of the line would be in his rock coffin by now as well. He liked Pavel; in fact, he liked him a lot. But their countries old hatred for one another, made it impossible to become firm friends. Like him, he hoped

Pavel's family were safe somewhere. While the new democracy was still in its fledgling stages, elements of the old regime still held the balance of power within Russia's parliament. When push came to shove, the military would take over, and men like himself and Pavel would be nothing more than pawns in a suicidal game of chess.

In the United Nations building, the mood was anything but diplomatic! In the large room, which housed the representatives of all the nations of the world, various member state were beginning to take sides. Outside in the corridors, junior members of the delegations were doing the real work, trading off measures and countermeasures deemed necessary in an eleventh hour attempt to end the coming holocaust before it began. None could return to their respective nations because of the worldwide shut-down of all travel. This was the best incentive to achieve a face-saving peaceful solution, before they all became so much toast in the first strike!

The representatives of the two nations, which had been reluctant to sign the nuclear disarmament agreements in the past, India and China, now sat back with smug expressions on their faces, which to anyone who looked at them said, 'We told you so!' Both countries, vehemently opposed the anti-nuclear lobbies proposition for total disarmament. Because of their unspoken quest for expansion into their neighbouring nations, they were now acting like circling vultures over a wounded animal, waiting to clean up the inevitable spoils, which would come their way.

Inside a mobile-launch vehicle, the crew dozed. They had done everything they could for now, at least until the targets for the multiple warheads in the nose cone of the large rocket on board, were transmitted to them.

All along the western border of the Russian Confederation of States, units like theirs were in position. Most of the Russian Pacific Fleet, based in Vladivostok was somewhere at sea, well in

range of the United States.

On Diego Garcia, a tiny speck in the Indian Ocean, all American long-range bombers were being fitted out with multiple warhead missiles, knowing full well that they would not be able to return because the base was a primary target for the other side.

In the facility at Pine Gap in Western Australia, communications experts, code-breakers and makers, contributed to the picture that was slowly unfolding, egged on by their need to feel justified for having set up such a place in the beautiful desert surrounding this listening post.

High above the earth, long forgotten military payloads, turned their deadly gaze towards the planets surface, talking to their earthbound counterparts, acting on the commands sent to them in microseconds. In the Mediterranean, the Sixth Fleet stood in readiness, backed up by British and French flotillas.

The Anzac replacements approaching the Straits of Hormuz, for their tour of duty in the Gulf, now headed towards Aden and the Red Sea. Here they would refuel, take on extra ordinance and set sail for the Suez canal, to join the build-up in the Med. Across the Bering Strait, military personnel on both sides, strained for the first sign of aggression.

Vast dome-shaped buildings housed the early warning listening devices, which would show the paths of incoming nuclear missiles being fired by both sides. In the Black Sea, the former Soviet fleet which had fallen into the hands of the Georgian led states, was now back under Russian Naval control. Hunter-killer submarines had quietly slipped through the narrow straits passing Gallipoli, the resting place of countless Australian and New Zealand soldiers killed in World War I, their

targets in the Mediterranean already in their sights.

Throughout Europe, the populations of the countries making up the European Community stayed put, preferring to gather in their family homes, instead of trying to carry on as if nothing bad was going to happen.

Parliaments sat late into the night debating what to do, not willing to realise, or accept, the widely held notion of just how useless they really were in a crisis like this!

Boardrooms were full of business men determined to turn a profit from what lay ahead. Civil unrest began in some cities within the United States, increased looting, theft and murder all contributed to the general feeling of panic, which now grew with each passing hour.

Self-styled militias came out of the woodwork to assume command of their communities. Survivalists hid behind their barricaded arsenals in the mountains of many states.

The National Guard units, without any direct Presidential Order, instigated marshal law, shooting on sight, anyone who opposed them. The light blinked on the red phone.

David James Piedmont had only one ambition in his whole life, to become the President of the United States of America. All through school, he had achieved straight A's. He had won a Rhodes scholarship, which opened doors for his political ambitions. While the former President, recently felled by an assassins bullet, had become one of the best to achieve the political office of Commander in Chief, David, at thirty-two, became the youngest ever President in the history of the United States.

His meteoric rise through the political quagmire had left no stain on his character. Try as they might, the muckrakers could find nothing to use as a weapon to undermine his career. His charm and clean-cut youthful appearance, which had not been seen in the Oval Office since the days of John .F. Kennedy, galvanised the voters behind his landslide victory over his opponents.

He had married the middle daughter of one of the more prominent New England families, a beautiful, highly intelligent woman, groomed for the part of the First Lady, or even the first woman President! Calming himself, he picked up the receiver.

'Good morning Mister President,' said the thickly accented voice. Pavel was trying to stay calm as he spoke to David. 'Good morning,' said David. 'I am advised that you continue to build up your aggressive forces around our borders,' said Pavel. 'I to, am advised of your increased activities along your borders, and ours Mister President,' said David. Both were hedging around a situation, which they knew was fast getting out of hand. 'If only Pavel had not gone off half-cocked,' thought David. Pavel was thinking along the same lines himself, but could not admit to it. It would be seen as a sign of weakness on his part, particularly now. 'I have to inform you that a short while ago the Politburo...!' 'The Politburo! What the hell happened to the democratically elected parliament Pavel?' said David, with panic in his voice. 'To continue Mister President, the Politburo has informed me of its decision regarding the blatantly overt, aggressive actions of the reactionary Western Alliance, who have clearly demonstrated their intention to invade the weaker countries surrounding our border!' 'Balls!' said David. 'You tell them from me Pavel Sergei Vlasov, we did not, I repeat did not, destroy that town in Bulgaria. You and I both know it goddamit!' He slammed the phone down in disgust. 'Your move I think,' he said, to the now dead phone.

Inside the room, the Council sat and listened to what Tom had to say. Hor had presented a convincing argument on Tom's behalf, perhaps his idea posed another solution to the ever-growing

danger in the outside world.

For many days, Tom had sat in the garden of their home, sickened by what he had started. Nothing Auset could say or do could shake him out of this self-pity. Even little Auramooth hardly raised a smile on his face. He needed to be on his own for a while, so he had gone to the northern end of the valley with only Jojo for company. He busied himself making some breakfast. He missed Auset and Auramooth badly. But until he could find some way of living with himself, how could he expect others to do the same!

He wandered down the hill to the stream and sat for a while, watching the surface of the water as it was broken up by the boulders that formed the rapids in front of him. Jojo remained motionless in the branches of the tree, above where Tom sat. He knew his friend was troubled, but did not know why! The branch on which the great bird perched was covered with all kinds of bugs, the kind Jojo liked to eat. As he walked along the length of the branch, his talons dislodged a small dead twig. The splash as the twig hit the water startled Tom!

'My god Jojo, that's it!' he said, jumping to his feet. Quickly he ran back to the house on the hill and gathered his meagre belongings. 'Come on Jojo, time to return to the city old friend,' he said excitedly. The Ankylosaur stopped at the base of the pyramid and Tom leapt from its back. Stopping for a moment beside the beam of light, he was sure the plan would work. All he had to do was convince the Old Ones. Rushing headlong down the other side of the pyramid, he almost ran down Mike in the process. 'Whoa, slow down mate,' he said, 'what's the rush?' 'Where's Hor?' said Tom, breathless from the breakneck descent. 'In the hanger, level seven,' replied Mike, as Tom took off towards the massive hanger.

He found Hor chewing out one of the technicians who had accidentally destroyed, through no fault of his own, a week's work. Hor worked them around the clock. Just because he could survive on less than three hours sleep, he expected them to do the same! Tom, much to the relief of all in the hanger, dragged Hor out into the sunshine. Unlike the rest of the Nephile in the valley, Hor was a warrior. Generations of his family had stood guard in the name of the Nephile people. During the bloody campaigns of millennia ago, on, and around Cydonia, his ancestors had managed to stall the Drana long enough for the groups to escape to other parts of the cosmos. What Tom was suggesting stirred the warrior within. This was why he now sat down to one side of the council room, as the father of his little niece began to explain his idea.

The council sat for a long time as Tom presented his arguments. Occasionally one of them would pose a question which, for the moment, he had no answer. At this point Hor would take over, giving his professional military opinion. Then Tom would rise and answer the question to the best of his ability. Eventually the council thanked them and said they would now have to consider whether Tom's idea was not only feasible, but also acceptable, according to the minimal force code by which the Nephile lived.

A few days later, Anpu delivered the councils verdict - they had the green light. Now all they had to do was make it work! The device, which utilised the mergiddon, was housed in a large chamber, deep below the ground, in a second pyramid over which the outer was built. Over six thousand years ago, it had been at work deep inside the great pyramid at Ghiza. But when the Khaz turned the local population against them, it was dismantled and brought here. Aton and his group had worked day and night to get it back into operation, because without it, the mergiddon's power could not be utilised.

The mergiddon is the endless energy source generated by the cosmos, named for Anmurgid, the Nephile scientist who first found a way of tapping into it, eighty-five billion years before. While

it flows freely about the cosmos, it is relatively harmless. But when contained and concentrated, its instability can and has led to the wholesale destruction of worlds. In some cases, whole star systems.

Anmurgid found a relatively safe containment system, which, over the intervening years, has been steadily improved upon. The device acted something like a step-down transformer, tapping off power to run everything the Nephile used. The Electro Magnetic field, which covered the earth, was one such use. The cloaking system around the valley was another.

When Seb spoke of the 'first process' to the assembled crowd that day, he meant the first process necessary in a series of seven designed to destroy the system, rather than let it fall into the hands of the Khaz or worse, the Drana!

Thankfully, at least for now, the Old Ones had countermanded Seb's order. But if all else failed the inevitable countdown would occur. Fortunately, there were several fail-safe procedures in place, which had to be negated before the Earth became nothing more than a trail of dust in space. The light beam on top of the outer pyramid made the mergiddon visible. Tom had thought when he first saw it, that it emanated from the pyramid, when in fact the reverse was true. The fact it did not extend beyond the cloak surrounding the valley was due to the localising effect of the containment field.

Tom's original idea had been to increase the power to the Electro Magnetic field, thereby rendering all communication devices worldwide, useless. However, it was pointed out that if the Electro Magnetic field's power were increased, it would become too unstable for the Nephile to use as well. He asked Hor if it would be possible for Seb to come up with some sort of portable

localised version of the Electro Magnetic field, which could stop any signal being transmitted to the nuclear weapons systems around the world. Seb had ruled this one out as well. Then while he had been sitting under the tree, Jojo had inadvertently given him the idea he needed, which, if it worked, would stop the inevitable holocaust! An idea, which required several, carefully planned and executed operations, carried out simultaneously in strategic points around the northern hemisphere. They would have one chance only - it just had to work!

Deep inside Cheyenne Mountain, headquarters of NORAD, the mood of the assembled senior military leaders of the United States Armed Forces was tense. Tachket looked at each of them in turn, his large black eyes showing none of the panic, which welled up in his emaciated frame. As the self-styled leader of the Khaz High Command here on Earth, he would have to explain to his Drana masters, why it was that he had failed to contain the situation, which now lay before them, let alone why they were trying to become a powerful force themselves.

Across the vast circular table from the Joint Chiefs sat their counterparts from throughout the world. High-ranking officers from Russia, China, Germany, France, Japan, Great Britain, behind them, prominent representatives of the governments of these nations sat together with their respective senior spy masters. Behind them sat the Chief Executive Officer's of the world's largest business cartels.

Tachket sat for a long time saying nothing. The other members of the High Command now looked to him for answers, each knowing what lay in store for them when the Drana returned. Their pale grey-skinned bodies exuded a foul stench; a sign the humans in the room knew only too well - sheer terror!

Because of the Khaz, all assembled in the vast room had benefited in more ways than one.

Riches, position, power, limited technological advances and the misplaced respect of the general populations of their countries, were just a few of the benefits for keeping the Khaz happy. So what if a few thousand innocent unsuspecting females had been abducted over the years, for their hideous experiments to create a master race capable of standing up to, and defeating, the Drana. If that was the price for their wealth and position, so be it!

Through the translation device on the table in front of where he sat, Tachket began his tirade. 'Marshal Blinski,' he said, his voice hissing like a venomous snake. 'Both you and General Adams assured me you had your respective political puppets under control. And yet Vlasov was allowed to create the situation in which we now find ourselves. What have you to say concerning this traitorous act?'

Both Blinski and Adams began to shake uncontrollably. Every single human in the room had experienced, at one time or another, some form of Tachket's wrath.

'Now thanks to Vlasov's stupidity, the former leaders of the old regime in your country Blinski have placed all of us in grave danger! And you Adams, your puppet has also increased the danger by reacting in a like manner!' he said, spitting out the words with uncontrolled rage.

General of the Army, Howden E Adams, began to bluster. 'Commander Tachket, you can't blame us for Blinski's blunder sir,' he said. 'We, at least have no old guard to worry about. At this very moment as we speak, President Piedmont is doing his level best to avoid any form of nuclear conflict. He realises the Russian President acted in haste.'

Tachket silenced him with a flourish of his long scrawny fingers. 'Enough! Unless we

intervene immediately, there will be nothing left alive on the face of the planet for the next thousand years! Adams, you must assume control of the situation now! Begin formulating foolproof plans to defuse the situation immediately!' Tachket slumped back into his chair knowing it would take a miracle to get out of this situation with his skin intact. 'Take Blinski away,' he ordered.

The two marines roughly dragged the screaming, kicking Russian outside into the corridor, where they promptly executed him. Adams and the others in the room quietly thanked their lucky stars that for now, at least, Tachket's fury seemed to have abated. The echo from the shot travelled the full length of the vast underground complex. 'One less goddamned commie to worry about,' the sergeant said, smiling to his buddy, as the wisp of smoke from his weapon was carried away by the ventilation system.

Around the pyramid, all was now in readiness. The attack force consisted of five cruisers, which would be protected by a screen of fighters. Ten transports commanded by Tom would each carry a small commando assault team and two squadrons of fighter-bombers under the command of Hor himself. Amun addressed the assembled group of Nephile and humans who would soon begin the impossible task.

'Friends,' he said, his voice cracking from the emotion of the moment. 'There is no margin for error in what you are about to do. Not only our lives, but also those of all mankind beyond this peaceful place, depend on your success in the coming hours. The insanity which even now grows with every passing moment must be stopped!'

The old man staggered for a moment, and then leaning on his staff, he continued. 'We are all that remains of our brethren. The Drana has wiped out all other pockets of our race from the cosmos. We owe it to the memory of our ancestors to remain alive. Go remembering this and know

that in your thoughts we shall be with you. We shall remain here in the valley, awaiting your safe return.'

Tom held Auramooth and Auset close, not wanting to leave them, but knowing he had to. He had no choice in the matter, things were now well beyond his control. The coming events would determine whether both the Nephile and mankind would have any sort of future at all.

Adam's plans had failed. A combination of factors had seen to it that communication links between Cheyenne Mountain and Mount Weather were for the moment, unavailable. The weather had closed in preventing any means of air transportation from taking off. The nations road and rail system was choked with people trying to evacuate the major cities of the United States, in favour of the various mountain ranges across the nation, despite the best efforts of local authorities to maintain an air of calm and order. Lightening had severed major telephone and power systems, and to top it all, unprecedented increased solar flare activity rendered all satellite communications networks inoperable.

'Find me a way of getting in touch with the President goddamit,' Adams shrieked. 'Alex, have you heard anything from your colleagues in Russia?' 'Nothing' said Alex. 'Either they are experiencing the same problems, or have decided to ignore any further talks, Howden my friend,' said the now, Senior Russian officer. 'For the love of god, can't anyone do anything to get communications re-established quickly?' said Adams, in a panic.

The junior officer stood behind the general, his ashen look betraying the news he now held in his hand. He pushed the clipboard, containing the last communication before the blackout, in front of the general and stood silently as Adams read the note from the cryptography section.

'Gentlemen, World War Three commenced at 22.35 GMT. The first wave of intercontinental nuclear missiles from opposite sides of the Bering Strait, were launched two minutes ago!'

The great blast doors at the entrance to the Cheyenne mountain facility began closing, cutting off all inside from those outside. In his Command Centre, deep inside Mount Weather, David sat in his chair with tears flowing freely down his youthful face.

In a wooded area, north of Moscow, outside the Dacha that sat above the underground complex, Pavel's face exploded from the bullet, as it exited towards the ground in front of his now lifeless body. 'One less traitor of the state to worry about, eh Tovarich?' said the KGB colonel to his comrade, as his breath froze in the crisp dry air.

The fleet dispersed over the Azores. Two cruisers accompanied by their fighter escorts, together with three transports, headed east towards the Mediterranean. Two more cruisers, plus their fighter escorts and three transports, headed west towards the United States.

Tom led the remaining four transports high into the stratosphere towards the point where the climbing missiles would reach their zenith, before descending to deliver their deadly payloads.

Hor took one squadron of his fighter-bomber force directly to the eastern coastal waters of the United States, leaving Domingo Leit in command of the other squadron, which flew directly towards the western border of the former Democratic Federation of Russian States.

The remaining cruiser headed directly for New York City and the United Nations carrying Anpu, protected by a personal bodyguard of commandos, to carry a message to the General Assembly, which was even now still locked in debate.

Seb and Mike were making last minute adjustments to the array in the cavernous cargo bay on board Tom's transport. 'By god,' said Mike, 'this thing had better work Seb, otherwise mate; we'll be up the creek without a paddle!' Seb raised his eyebrow at Mike's last remark not understanding what his friend said.

The Armag Array was the most powerful weapon in the Nephile arsenal, capable of destroying even the most heavily protected Drana craft. But it was designed for use within the vacuum of space, not within a planetary atmosphere. Seb had mentioned it to Tom when he was showing him around his vast workshop beneath the pyramid.

Initially Seb had dismissed the very idea of using it anywhere near the thin envelope that covers the Earth. Both Tom and Mike came from a nation used to cobbling up something out of nothing for any given situation, commonly referred to in the New Zealand vernacular as 'number eight wire technology'. Eventually they persuaded Seb to build a small experimental prototype of the Armag device, which hopefully would perform its task without blowing them all to kingdom come; a point Tom had made to Seb during its construction, 'If it doesn't work Seb, who's going to be around to take the blame?'

Amsu watched the missiles on the scanners as they climbed steadily from both sides of the narrow strait far below. Seb reluctantly switched control of the array over to Tom's console. The cargo-bay door opened and the array was lowered into position. 'Approaching zenith now, now, now!' said Amsu.

The disrupting wave from the jerry-built weapon engulfed all within its path. The massive explosion as forty missiles exploded into a billion pieces, was witnessed by most of the population of the entire northern hemisphere. At this altitude a fireball brighter than the sun, quickly spread in

all directions and then was gone. The blast wave, from the combined effect of explosion and rarefied atmosphere, travelled at lightning speed towards them. Before Tom could react, his huge craft was being buffeted by winds travelling at speeds that would be inconceivable far below on the Earth's surface.

Despite the distance between him and the three other transports, the great craft collided with one of them, before he managed to bring it under control. 'Amsu, any damage,' Tom asked. 'Minor damage to the upper outer hull only,' said Amsu. 'Teth, are you and your crew OK?' he said, to the pilot of the other transport. 'We're fine. The hull has a minor breach but we can fix it as soon as we get lower down,' Teth replied. 'OK Teth, as quickly as you can get yourselves in position over the bunker north of Moscow,' said Tom. 'Let's go get the bastards!' 'Seket, lead the way.' 'Aknet, you're with Teth,' Tom said, as he began to descend towards their next objective - Cheyenne Mountain.

The arrival of Anpu's cruiser coincided with the light show high in the sky. Initial panic soon subsided as Anpu and his party stepped out from the shuttle craft, in front of the entrance to the United Nations building. The vast cruiser sat directly overhead, casting a shadow over the Manhattan skyline like a huge bird of prey over its victim. This was, despite the circumstances, going to be one speech the delegates would never forget as long as they lived!

The cigar fell from his mouth to the deck as Admiral Thomas Fermann, Commander of the Sixth Fleet, jumped to his feet in utter disbelief! Directly above his carrier, the two cruisers and three transports hovered, as shuttles containing commando units descended towards the combined might of the NATO naval presence in the Mediterranean.

Off the eastern seaboard of the United States, his Russian counterpart, Admiral Vasili

Pochenko, stood aghast as he witnessed similar action by Hor's squadron of fighter-bombers in the air above his fleet, one hundred nautical miles west from the San Diego Naval base.

Below the ships of the Sixth Fleet, the commander of the hunter-killer submarine squadron, which sat patiently awaiting orders to strike, was aware that something out of the ordinary was happening fifty fathoms above on the surface of the calm sea.

The crew of the mobile-launch vehicle, deep inside the forest, which straddled the border between Russia and Finland, melted along with their deadly weapon as the particle cannon from Domingo's craft signalled their presence.

The buildings at Groom Lake exploded as the plasma torpedoes from the Nui's two cruisers delivered a very strong message to the inhabitants of the underground complex, which lay beneath the secret Air Force installation in the hills of Nevada. Their next underground target would be Dulce, New Mexico.

The blast doors that protected the inhabitants of Cheyenne Mountain evaporated as the particle cannon did their deadly work. Before the dust had settled, the commando team led by Lars Johansen made its way into the long tunnel entrance, en route to Tachket's lair. Mount Weather was now emptied of its inhabitants as they were quickly herded on-board the transport that stood overhead.

Below the Dacha, a minor skirmish between the commandos and the Spetznats unit, responsible for protecting the senior military elite within was brief. The surviving soldiers and their charges, stood beside the frozen bloodstained corpse, shivering in the crisp air as they waited to be loaded on-board Teth's transport.

Lars' team neutralised the largely inexperienced marine contingent inside the NORAD headquarters, as they steadily made their way towards the sealed conference room. Beside the door lay the body of a dead Russian senior officer. Disrupter rifles on maximum, they concentrated fire on the thick titanium-sheathed door.

The stench from within the room made some of the commando's wretch. Their quarry frantically scuttled for cover in the shadows away from the circular table, as the team forced the assembled group out through the still hot remains of the door. Tachket spat at Lars, as the big man held the diminutive pathetic grey creature at arms length. 'Guard this one at all costs. Don't let him escape!' he said, as he thrust Tachket at the nearest commando. 'He has an appointment to keep at the UN,' said Lars, with a sparkle in his intense blue eyes. The men and women of his commando unit laughed. Mission accomplished.

Now the world would learn how it had been cruelly deceived by this disgusting creature's quest for power. All was hushed as Anpu began his address. Before the seated delegates, thanks to the success of the operation, stood the corrupt 'International Gang' who had till now controlled the world, and at its centre a small trembling grey figure, stared up at the members of the United Nations, through his large, evil, black eyes. The delegates sat in stunned silence as Anpu spoke. From time to time, eyes looked towards the various members of the assemblage of traitors standing before them, as their identities were revealed.

Around the world, the news media kept the public informed of the proceedings via the satellite network, which was now on line once more. The temporary blackout, thanks to Seb making a slight increase in the Electro Magnetic field's power supply, had been lifted, as soon as all target groups were safely in custody.

Anpu briefly detailed the history of his people and their involvement here on earth over the millennia. He also spoke of the Khaz involvement over the years in their attempt at world domination, together with their programme involving abductions and their need for a stronger new breed of Khaz hybrids. He spoke of the Nephile's struggle with the Drana on the home world of Cydonia, several million years before. He gave a detailed account of the various groups of abandoned pyramids scattered around the world and how they had been abandoned, when the Khaz had finally located them.

Occasionally he would pause, as his now spellbound audience hung on his every word. He spoke of Aton and Amun, the two great leaders of the Nephile here on earth, and of their knowledge and leadership, their compassion for all other peaceful species. He told of the Nephile's need to be able to live in peace. In return for which he had been authorised by the Council to offer assistance in the coming years and months, to put right everything that the Khaz had corrupted.

He spoke of the benefits of the one hundred percent use of their brain and their longer lifespan. He introduced various members of the attack force to the gathered assembly, both Nephile and human. He urged the governments of the world to now sit down and begin talking to each other, instead of fighting. Then he sat down, and for a moment silence descended on the room. Then thunderous applause filled the air as, row by row, the delegates, and the others who had crowded inside, showed their approval for what had been accomplished.

Across the world in cities and towns, in villages and on farms, the realisation that these newcomers had averted a major catastrophe at the last possible moment, began to sink in. People came out onto the streets, church bells pealed out their message of peace; strangers hugged one another in the euphoria of the moment.

The Nephile cruiser above the city of New York exploded in a massive technicolor fireball, sending debris flying through the air. High above in the inky blackness of space, the Drana armada had returned, death and destruction the only item on their agenda. Tachket and the rest of the Khaz totally lost all control of their bodily functions, as they lay in their own filth, whimpering on the floor of the room. Now the fight for survival would begin in deadly earnest.

CHAPTER 8

Indra Ashah languished on the chair, his dark pitiless eyes surveying all around him on the bridge of his flagship. Second in line to the house of Mahl, the ruling family of the Drana Empire, this rather tall slightly effeminate twenty-sixth clone held control over the Drana fleet by fear.

Ashah, like all his previous incarnations, had been born in space. He had never been to the home world of Dranaa, never met his brother Dranaa Nazir the emperor, in any of his cloned incarnations and yet Ashah's loyalty to Nazir was unswerving. Ashah was dressed in the manner of the royal household in flowing brightly coloured garments, made of the finest fabric in the empire. The fingers of his exquisitely manicured hands were covered in rings made from rare metals, unknown in this part of the cosmos.

Each of his clone incarnations lived for three hundred years. Then was replaced to continue command of the Imperial Fleet, which is his birthright. By the time, the cloning process had produced thirty or so Indra, the gene pool began to weaken. In Ashah's case, the degenerative process had already taken hold.

His obsession over his appearance combined with his eccentric behaviour towards his crew,

especially the younger male members, was causing increasing concern within the ranks of his senior officers. His favourite amusement involved watching with lecherous eyes as some of the younger male members of his crew danced for him in female attire, a sight that sickened his second-in-command Hanseer Amash, the captain of his flagship.

Ashah's overriding fear of revolt amongst his fleet, made it necessary for him to have spies everywhere. His most trusted spy was his personal Khaz servant Nikhiz, the brother of Tachket. Nikhiz, unlike Tachket, was totally loyal to the Drana emperor and his brother Ashah, and had proven his loyalty to his master many times in the past. The fact that Ashah and most of the crew aboard the flagship despised him did not concern him, at least on the surface.

Ashah's fleet was old and battle scarred, but still fully functional after over nine thousand years continuous service. Over the many centuries of Ashah's brutal conquest throughout the cosmos in the name of his brother, the emperor, its ships, and their crews had met with resistance from time to time. But in each case, the weaponry thrown at them had caused little damage to the heavily armed fleet.

Hanseer sat in his quarters deep in thought. Unlike the Indra Ashah, he and every other crew member of the fleet were born and brought up in the conventional sense of the word. His parents had been stationed on Janus Omega, in the Varga sector of the empire. Both his father and his mother held government posts in the capital city of Pranash. Young Hanseer was destined to follow the family tradition, but was press-ganged into the imperial fleet on his sixteenth birthday. His natural ability to command over the years had stood him in good stead. Quickly rising within the ranks, Hanseer now found himself running the largest of the battle cruisers. A job, which despite Indra Ashah's constant meddling in day-to-day shipboard matters, he enjoyed. He was well respected by all officers and men within the fleet, a fact not unnoticed by both Ashah and Nikhiz.

Unlike Ashah, Hanseer treated Nikhiz fairly. Not because Nikhiz was Ashah's spy, but simply because he felt sorry for the way, Ashah treated the pathetic little creature. Nikhiz in turn, felt relaxed around Hanseer. The rumblings of mutiny throughout the fleet had reached Hanseer's ears, even before Ashah's spies had brought it to his attention.

Ashah had publicly demonstrated his wrath towards the leaders of the mutiny, by randomly choosing a group of people from each ship within the fleet and having them forcibly ejected into space. His insane girlish laughter could be heard each time a living being vanished into the vacuum of space. His cruel eyes then turned back to the boy dancers entertaining him in his stateroom. From time to time, their ruined bodies were found by a crew member, gently picked up, and if they were still alive, spirited away from Ashah's sick attentions.

For the moment, Hanseer kept his own council. When the time was right, he would see to it that Indra Ashah's cruelty towards his people was stopped once and for all! But for now, he must concentrate on the task, reasserting Drana authority on the beautiful blue planet below.

The spectacular announcement of the Drana fleets arrival over the Manhattan skyline had caused a panicked stampede away from the UN assembly building. In their haste to get back to the ships, Tom and his Nephile-human assault force had not had time to count heads. Inside the General Assembly room, the prisoners now found themselves standing alone. Tachket quickly took charge of the situation. Perhaps he could save his pathetic grey skin after all. He had a gift for the Indra Ashah – he had Anpu!

The Drana fleet positioned itself over the major capitals, from the relative safety of space, covering every part of the world. The flight back to the valley in South Westland was fraught with danger, both from above and below. Fortunately, as yet, the Drana had not launched their

atmospheric cruisers and destroyers to begin localised attacks. But the combined might of the earthbound armed forces, had in their haste, begun to shoot at anything in the air, which they did not recognise, making it doubly difficult for the attack force to get back to base safely. Hor and his squadron evaded the MIG 29's, simply by accelerating beyond the range of the heat-seeking missiles launched after them, only to find more missiles ahead of him from the ships of the Soviet Pacific fleet below.

Domingo's attentions were kept busy by a wall of land-based, fixed, and mobile missiles, thrown up towards his squadron from the US army units below his path across the southern United States.

Nuit's cruisers headed for the relative safety of the North Pole then home, largely avoiding any trouble. Amsu kept up a constant barrage of information for Tom as they zigzagged their way back on a south-south west course, passing over Ascension Island, then south over St Helena, before turning due east to cross the coast of Namibia. Just north of Pretoria, in the northern half of South Africa, Amsu was kept busy, shooting down ground-to-air missiles launched by the South African armed forces.

As the transports quickly left the eastern coast of Madagascar, Tom changed course once more to the south and Kerguelen Island, deep in the Southern Ocean. Just off Wilkes Land on the Antarctic coast, he turned east towards Macquarie Island before finally heading north-north east towards the safety of the valley, where Auset and Auramooth were waiting. For days, the council sat in session deciding how and what must be done, now the Drana were here once more.

Meanwhile on board Ashah's flagship, Tachket began his plan to regain favour with the Indra, at whose feet he now lay prostrate. Not daring to look up, for fear of reprisal by Ashah for his

attempt to create his own empire on Earth, he began.

'My lord, I bring before you a humble present for your amusement,' he said slowly rising, still not looking directly towards Ashah. 'Behold my lord, the band of traitors who have seized control of the insignificant rock below, here in the farthest corner of the Emperors' domain,' he said, as he gestured behind him towards the group of military, political and business leaders he had recently led.

Ashah's cruel gaze cut across the faces of the assembled leaders of the Earth as Tachket named them. Ashah sat for a while saying nothing. The silence was only broken by the sound of his long manicured nails, tapping out a rhythm on the arm of the ornate chair in which he sat.

'So Tachket,' he said, barely able to contain the loathing and contempt he felt, for having his presence soiled by the vermin before him. 'Are you telling us you knew nothing of the way these insects were behaving?' he added, his voice now rising rapidly into its normal falsetto range. 'No my lord, I knew nothing of their traitorous intentions. I have been busy preparing for your return deep inside my humble headquarters. If I had been aware my lord, I would have taken steps to eliminate them all.' Tachket slowly backed to one side of Ashah's chair, trying to hide in the shadows, knowing from experience that out of sight meant out of mind.

Ashah's nose detected the familiar smell of fear from Tachket and his Khaz entourage, as he rose and walked towards the humans before him. 'What are you hiding from us Tachket?' said Ashah, as he looked beyond the Earth's leaders. Tachket quickly scuttled after Ashah, as he now looked at the lone figure standing securely manacled between two Drana guards. 'What is this?' Ashah said, looking at one of the oldest and most troublesome enemies of the Drana Empire. 'My

lord, I have kept the best for last,' said Tachket. 'This is Anpu, a member of the Nephile Council, who a short while ago, was inciting the human filth below to insurrection. He and his kind are even now spreading their loathsome doctrines within your human subject's great one,' he said, his old confidence returning.

'My Lord Indra Ashah, I fear a rebellion is about to begin on the planet below, led by Nephile and assisted by these humans before you. Unless you immediately take drastic steps my lord, you will no longer have control over them. Since you were here last, Indra Ashah, the humans have begun to think for themselves. They have multiplied many fold and as a result, we few Khaz left here to watch over and administer in your absence, have found it difficult to maintain any form of control over them! I would urge you to make examples of these humans, so the rest of the population below may learn who their true masters are.'

'Take care Khaz,' said Ashah, turning suddenly towards Tachket. 'You may yet learn of our displeasure first hand. Take them away for now. Keep the Nephile separate from the rest. We must consult our brother Nazir over this matter before deciding their fate.'

Ashah turned and made his way back to his stateroom on the arm of one of his young dancers. Tachket breathed a sigh of relief. He had almost gone too far in his willingness to gain favour with Ashah.

'Greetings brother,' said Nikhiz as he came forward from the shadows. As if Tachket did not have enough to worry about, here was his sibling as well!

Several hours passed before Ashah summoned Anpu and the humans before him. His cruel smile directed towards Anpu, gave no indication other than his hatred for all non-Drana. 'We have

decided to follow your advice Tachket, at least in part,' he said. 'The one named Adams, bring him before us!' he commanded. The general was unceremoniously thrown on the floor before Ashah's feet.

'You are, we think, the one largely responsible for what has occurred below, are you not?' said Ashah, leaning forward slightly. Howden started to rise, but was brutally shoved down onto the floor, breaking his nose in the process. With the intense pain he now felt, Howden's anger overcame his immediate fear, as he said, 'No Goddam you I'm not responsible!' Tachket was in control of everything which happened prior to your arrival Indra Ashah.'

'Enough! You dare to speak our name! Tachket has convinced us of your collusion with the Nephile, in their pathetic attempt to overthrow this outpost of the Drana Empire. The last time we were here, your kind willingly helped us in driving out the Nephile. I see now, we stayed away too long! It is time to make an example, so your brethren may know once and for all, who rules here. Guards, take him to the airlock!'

After Adams had vanished into outer space, Ashah's frame of mind changed somewhat. Instead of venting his anger towards the remaining assembled leaders, he entertained them and fed them. Better to utilise their talents than waste them, his brother Nazir had told him. He began to inform them of his intentions. Once the rebellion below had been put down, he intended forming a single world government, placing himself at its head. The government would be made up from the ranks of those now present. The mood of the group quickly changed from one of immediate dread to uncertain relief.

He had other plans for Anpu however, none of which would help the Nephile struggle. They would find in the coming months, what it meant to oppose Indra Ashah's cruel campaign of terror!

By now, the sheer insanity of what was happening engulfed most of the world's population. Anyone who even considered objecting to the complete take-over of the Earth became a target of Ashah's displeasure. The entire body of the United Nations were publicly executed, witnessed by all nations via the satellite television networks. All armed forces personnel were expected to blindly swear an oath of allegiance to their Drana conquerors. Old political regimes disappeared off the face of the planet with frightening speed, as the 'New World Government' swept to power. All religions were banned. The sick and infirm were put to death. Vast concentration camps were set up around the world on every continent, under the immediate control of the Khaz.

Tachket's cruelty knew no bounds, leading to many thousands of innocent ethnic minorities being worked to death. What happened inside the death camps of the 'Third Reich', paled in comparison to the suffering endured in these Khaz controlled camps. The world now entered a second dark age, thrown back to a time when all sense of fair play and tolerance for others ceased to exist. If there was a hell, then this was it!

CHAPTER 9

On the immediate return to the valley of the attack force, the mood of those who had remained behind changed from one of concern to one of joy and relief, as they saw their loved ones once again. Auset and Tom embraced amid the confusion all around them. Mary told Mike, 'She would never let him out of her sight again, as long as she lived!'

Nuit and Domingo, by now lovers, found one another and held each other close. Amun and the council, who quickly began an impromptu meeting on the apron in front of the hanger, met Hor.

Teth and Seket found their families along with Amsu. Only Seb stood alone.

Mike's children, Lisa and Tony, liked Seb. They looked upon him as a friend, which indeed he was. He had taken them both under his wing whenever Mike brought them to the pyramid. They now ran to Seb's side. Lisa hugged Seb as Tony grabbed his hand; glad to see he was safe. Seb squatted down and hugged the kids close to him as his eyes searched the crowd. 'What's wrong Seb?' Lisa said, with tears in her eyes. 'Have either of you seen my brother?' Seb asked, as he began to straighten up. Neither Tony nor Lisa had seen Anpu, nor had anyone else, when Seb and the kids asked. His presence in the confusion of the attack, or rather the lack of his presence, had gone unnoticed by everyone. Lars thought he had seen Anpu heading towards one of the transports, but he could not be sure. The mood of the crowd changed quickly, to one of concern for the gentle man who was loved by all in the valley. Seb slumped down on the ground, openly weeping for his much-loved brother. Lisa and Tony were beside him, their small arms around his neck. Mary and Auset tried to comfort him as well, but Seb's grief grew with every passing moment, changing the happy mood to one of sorrow, and then mourning.

Anpu sat in the cold dark brig on board the flagship. He tried to project his whereabouts to the inhabitants of the valley far below, but to no avail. The Drana had shielded the tiny cell, fully aware of the Nephile's senses. The chains, which bound him, cut into his wrists and ankles causing much pain, whenever he tried to make himself more comfortable on the bare cold floor.

From time to time the guards outside subjected him to all manner of unpleasantness. Sometimes he found himself the target of their relief whenever the call of nature came upon them. At other times, he was subjected to blasts of water from high-pressure hoses, which threw him mercilessly across the cell, smashing him into its walls. Whenever he lost consciousness during one of these brutal episodes, he was roughly dragged to his feet and slapped until he awoke, only to be

beaten unconscious yet again. The tiny light above him was turned on and off at irregular intervals to deprive him of any sleep.

He was dragged from his cell to a metal table where electrodes attached to intimate parts of his body, caused immense pain as high voltages coursed through his flesh. To add to his misery, he was burnt and beaten as well. When he was thrown back into his cell, he mercifully lapsed into unconsciousness before again being subjected to the vicious attentions of his captors. Eventually he broke under the enormous strain. Now they could use him for whatever purpose they required.

Indra Ashah had gone down to the surface after his invasion force had regained control, tired of shipboard life. His royal barge took him to his favourite location on the planet – the Indian subcontinent. He took up residence in the old palace in Jaipur, in the former state of Rajasthan. From here, his government would rule the world.

The members of the new government had apartments within the palace walls; each guarded by a Drana and served by a Khaz. The Joint Chiefs and others of the former ruling body began to wish Tachket still controlled them. Ashah did not tolerate failure. Ashah's demands became increasingly more difficult to carry out. Each day, members of his government tasted his wrath, usually by being beaten in the presence of the other members, by Ashah's personal guard.

Anpu was dragged from the cell and taken to the palace in Jaipur. The pitiful husk was dumped on the marble floor before Ashah and his government. 'So Nephile, are you ready to begin your new life serving our every need?' Ashah said, hardly able to contain the delight he felt at this very moment. Here was the key to the whereabouts of the Nephile stronghold! Now he would flush them out and destroy this last remaining pocket of the old Nephile Empire. He would not rest until they were all dead! Anpu slowly lifted his broken body into a kneeling position. 'I am ready my lord

to do your bidding, and to die for you if need be,' he said.

'Don't be in such a hurry to die vermin. We have much for you to do. In the meantime go and rest. Eat, sleep, and partake of the pleasures you find within the palace. When we are ready, we will send for you. Now begone from our sight!' Anpu dragged himself away into the corridor outside. Somehow, he would find his way back to the safety of the valley.

Over the next few weeks, Anpu slowly began to mend. If he had been at home, the process would have been much faster, owing to the advances the Nephile had made over the millennia in regenerative processes. As his strength returned, he began to appreciate the beauty of the old palace and its grounds. He found a delightful shaded garden, formerly used by the wives of one of its previous inhabitants, where he spent many hours in peaceful solitude.

His senses began to return to him also, and from time to time he practised levitating small objects, or listening in on whispered conversations throughout the palace. The small contingent of Khaz confused his sense of smell by their pungent odour whenever they were in fear of their miserable lives. His sight improved by the hour. From high up on the palace rooftops, he could see for kilometres in any direction. Each day he practised extending the distance of his enhanced vision.

In the evenings, he read great works of Indian literature from the extensive library within the palace. He gained an even better understanding of the Drana influence in the early years of the Indian peoples struggle for nationhood. He learned of their abiding belief in reincarnation, a religious idea passed down by the earlier generations of Indians, who had witnessed the cloning of the Indra Ashah when he ruled here countless centuries ago. He noticed similarities between the dances of Ashah's boys and those of the Indian population.

So much of the Indian cultural life and religious beliefs arose from distant memories of the

Drana occupation. Plus, the Indian people themselves came from Drana-human bloodlines. Their ancestors had fought alongside Ashah's troops against the Nephile, not too many kilometres from the palace. Their ancestors had witnessed the final catastrophic destruction of one of the largest Nephile held cities in this part of the world. The whole city was reduced to a vast solid lake of fused particles, as if someone had spilt molten glass across the ground.

Now Ashah was back, would they once again blindly follow his every wish as their ancestors had in the past? And what of the Asiaz to the north and east, in China, Burma, South East Asia, Korea and Japan, would they help the Drana once again as they had in the past? Not for nothing were they known for their complete disregard for anyone who fell captive to their invading armies over the intervening centuries. Collectively they made up the largest number of human beings on the face of the planet. If they willingly joined forces with the Drana, the rest of the world may as well just crawl away and die. There would be no stopping them!

While Ashah's attentions were occupied on the planets surface, the rumblings of discontent and mutiny within the fleet continued. Nikhiz received hourly reports from his spies throughout the fleet. Now Ashah was no longer present, he felt it his duty to report to Hanseer.

Hanseer moved from ship to ship carrying out his duties as the Indra's deputy with Nikhiz tagging along behind him. Steadily the pair accumulated vast amounts of information concerning the ill feeling within the rank and file of the imperial fleet. Soon it would be time to choose sides in the inevitable rebellion, which loomed in front of them. The choice came sooner than they thought! Nikhiz was dragged from his bed and taken to the bridge of the flagship. Hanseer, owing to the esteem in which all held him, was asked to attend the meeting of senior fleet officers. Commander Jansha spoke for all assembled. 'Hanseer, we must act now! We look to you for your leadership, will you assume control of the fleet?' he said, as the others turned their eyes towards Hanseer's

handsome face, looking for a visible sign.

Hanseer stood motionless, peering out of the large viewing window, looking at the clouds scudding across the surface of the planet below. Turning towards the sea of faces, he said. 'On two conditions, you must reaffirm your loyalty to the emperor and obey, without question, any order I may issue. We have a cancer within our midst, which must be removed. Its very presence diverts us from the reason we came back here, to re-establish Drana control over this part of the cosmos in the name of our emperor Dranaa Nazir. You may be forced to kill some of your brothers, are you prepared to do this?' The officers spoke quietly amongst themselves, mulling over what Hanseer had just said. Hanseer looked at Nikhiz and asked, 'What about you my friend, will you be part of what is about to take place here? Will you accept me as your leader in the absence of the emperor? Or will you side with Ashah?' Nikhiz did not have to think about it. 'I will gladly side with you Hanseer; you will need my services in the future. Perhaps this time they can be put to good use instead of bad,' he added. Here was his chance to settle old scores with his brother Tachket. Perhaps Hanseer would allow him to take charge of the Khaz occupation when the fleet moved on. He would make his brother wish he had never been born! With the affirmation sworn, the officers departed to their respective vessels.

Within hours, all loyal to Ashah had been rounded up. Each was given the chance to come over to Hanseer's side. Those who initially refused were blasted out into space, to float forever more in the vast empty blackness. The remainder, seeing the error of their ways, gladly took up arms in the name of the Dranaa Nazir and his immediate representative, Hanseer. The remaining clone gene pool was destroyed and cast adrift into space, along with the rest of the shipboard reminders of Ashah's foul presence. Now the next step of the operation to remove the cancer would begin down on the surface of the Earth.

The arrival of the Drana troop transports went largely unnoticed around the world,

coinciding with the troop's arrival on the surface, Hanseer's fleet quietly shifted attention to their new targets, Ashah's heavily fortified emplacements on every continent. Anpu, by now largely forgotten by Ashah, was allowed outside the palace walls from time to time under guard.

On the day of the second invasion, he was studying an ancient temple a few kilometres from the palace, in the small lakeside town of Samphar. The shock wave from the disintegration of the old palace and the ancient city, in which it stood, blew Anpu to the ground. While his guards' attention was diverted by the destruction, he quickly escaped into the crowd of locals, who ran screaming in all directions. As night fell, he found sanctuary in an abandoned farmhouse beside the now disused railway lines, which pointed south-west to Jodhpur. His journey home was at last under way

Ashah and his government had been completely taken by surprise. He had been occupied with a local boy, when the combined force of no less than three of his former battle cruisers, concentrated fire on his palace. The various members of his government were hard at work trying to meet his demands, which daily grew more and more absurd.

By now, his degeneration was complete. He rarely rose from his bed. His ranting knew no bounds, the boys who shared his bed, were thrown from the window, when they failed to please his obscene need for their young bodies. His personal guard suffered if he was disturbed during one of his many sick lovemaking sessions. Several had been executed. Daily they grew less and less inclined to remain faithful to him. News spread quickly to the other bastions of his earthbound empire. The seeds of unrest spread like wildfire amongst the former faithful troops.

Word reached the many concentration camps run by the Khaz. The inhabitants heard

whispers as their cruel guards talked about Ashah's degradation, secretly taking delight, despite the circumstances they found themselves in, in it all. The time had come for the Nephile to act!

CHAPTER 10

Tom and Mike, together with Hor, Seb, Lars, Domingo, and the other leaders of the various groups, arrived in the council room. Amun and the Council had weighed up all the possible ways to hurt the Drana. When news came of the Drana mutiny and the subsequent death of Ashah and most of his immediate circle, the time to act presented itself.

Rather than face the Drana head-on in some suicidal attempt, it was decided to utilise the pockets of underground resistance which daily sprang up worldwide. With their help, the combined efforts of both human and Nephile would at the very least, give the new Drana command a headache, which would not soon go away! News of Anpu had also reached the valley. His presence grew stronger day by day. Soon it would be possible to pinpoint his location.

For now, the immediate task was to split the Nephile-human force into small commando units, which would rendezvous with the resistance groups spread far and wide. Lars and some of his 'Nordine' would return to the Scandinavian countries.

Domingo and his 'Latans' would return to southern Europe. Mike would be sent to the Australian continent together with Amsu to try and raise an army of Anzac's. Once this was done, he would return home with part of the force to drive out the Drana who presently controlled the three main islands, which made up the vast bulk of New Zealand.

The 'Ruz' led by Natasha, would hopefully link up with Lars' team, delivering a two pronged attack in northern Europe. Amal and the 'Babbalia' together with Farsi's 'Sumari' would infiltrate into the middle-eastern area, concentrating on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, around Israel and the Lebanon. Eventually they would cross over to southern Greece, island by island, to join forces with the rest. Hor and Tom would try to swing some of the Earth's armed forces over to their side, wherever they were at the time. Seb would travel with Tom in case they came across his brother Anpu.

As all was readied for the oncoming battles, Auset and Tom managed to steal a little time. Taking Auramooth with them, they went to the other end of the valley for a few days. Jojo was glad to see them and delighted in Auramooth's wide-eyed fascination with him, as she gently tugged on his feathers with her small chubby fingers. The peace and quiet of the valley rejuvenated Tom. The first time he had seen the house at the northern end of the valley, seemed so very long ago. So much had happened since that uncomplicated time. With Auramooth safely tucked up in bed, watched over by Jojo, Auset and Tom sat in the garden, wrapped in each other's arms, looking up at the stars above. Occasionally they were reminded of what was to come, when a Drana craft sped overhead, high above the protective cloak, which hid this safe haven from all outside.

The day eventually arrived when the operation would begin. Tom stood on the apron beside his transport, watching as the underground units loaded themselves and their equipment on board the fleet of transports. Lars, Domingo, Natasha, Farsi, Amal, Mike, and Hor, all stood beside him. By now, they were more than just a group of strangers. They were family. Each of them determined to rid the world of the Drana and the Khaz by whatever means it took. Each hoping that they would see their new brothers and sisters again, here in the safety of the valley at the bottom of the world.

Once everything was in readiness, the fleet rose into the air and proceeded to the various

drop points around the world. With Amsu now helping Mike in Australia, Hor took his place aboard Tom's transport, along with Seb. They headed for the Indian subcontinent in search of Anpu. Passing over the northern tip of Australia, they ran into trouble.

Hor had picked up a flight of Drana fighters on his screen. The ship immediately swung into action. Tom took evasive action while Hor and Seb tried to pick off individual fighters. But this time it would not be so easy to shake off the enemy. Tom headed due west towards the Indian Ocean with the Drana in hot pursuit. The transport was no match for the highly manoeuvrable, lightning fast fighters. There was only one option, turn, and fight!

'Hor, I'm going to head for the King Leopold Ranges in the northern part of Western Australia. Can you and Seb hold them at bay until we get there?' Tom said, as he began to put the huge craft into a tight left turn. 'Yes Tom we can. What do you have in mind? Why there?' Hor asked, as the Drana fighters began closing in for the kill. 'You'll see,' Tom said, with a grin. 'If only they continue to stick to my tail,' he thought to himself, as he quickly descended to just above sea level.

Crossing King Sound, he altered his course and altitude slightly to the north east. As he approached Mount Ord, he began an extremely hazardous game of chicken, running low and level along the range. The Drana fighters kept up their pursuit, despite the ever-present danger of the surrounding terrain. The great ship weaved and dodged its way around the mountains. Hor and Seb from time to time, managed to score the odd hit. The Nephile armament was no match against the Drana, but for some reason the Drana seemed reluctant to utilise the awesome fire-power in their possession. Then Hor and Seb saw why!

Far below at the point where the Leopold range met the Durack range stood a weapons

storage area for the Drana ground forces that had landed in Australia. 'Hang on,' said Tom, 'I'm going to put her in a dive straight at their headquarters. Hor, concentrate all your fire-power on the headquarters below. Seb, lock on to the ammo and supply dumps around the staging area, fire at will!'

Thinking Tom had taken leave of his senses Hor began to question his actions, then thought better of it as the ship began to dive straight for the headquarters below at breakneck speed. The fighters turned and followed intent on destroying the transport. As Hor's weapons did their deadly work, Seb's torpedoes delivered their payload of destruction to the ammunition and fuel dumps.

At two hundred metres above the ground, Tom suddenly stopped the transport and veered to the right, before levelling off. The fighter pilots realised too late their folly in following the great ship's downward path.

Unlike them, the Nephile ship's design enabled it to do near impossible manoeuvres, thanks to the electro-magnetic grid. One after another in a rolling fireball of destruction, they ploughed headlong into the ground. Tom had used their one weakness to his advantage, their design!

The Drana had built their fighters for use in an atmosphere, which meant they had used similar construction methods to conventional aircraft found on Earth. While the fighters were extremely fast and manoeuvrable at altitude, they were no match for the stop/start manoeuvrability of the transport, designed for use both in space and down here!

Turning once more for the Indian Ocean, Hor, Tom, and Seb began working out a plan to locate Anpu. Crossing over the Coromandel Coast of south-eastern India, Seb thought he sensed his brother's presence, but he could not be sure. 'Concentrate Seb,' said Hor. 'I'm trying!' Seb replied, as

he desperately tried to separate his brother's thoughts from the millions below.

As they approached the coastal town of Surat on the Gulf of Khambhat, Seb let out a chilling cry that Tom had never heard before. 'Seb, what's wrong? What's the matter?' 'It's Anpu Tom, he's very near!' said Seb, as he began to enter an almost trance-like state. 'Turn north, Anpu's presence grows stronger my friends,' he said. 'There, down there! Tom, down there, land there!' he said, excitement rising in his voice. The transport gently put down in a wooded area, a few kilometres south of Jodhpur.

Before the cargo-bay door was barely open, Seb leapt to the ground and began running towards the shelter of the forest. In a small glade, he came across an abandoned forest workers hut. Throwing caution to the wind, he burst through the door! In the shadowy single room lay Anpu. Seb knelt beside his brother and gently cradled him in his arms. 'Anpu, you're safe now, I've come to take you home,' he said, with tears of joy rolling down his face. 'Think again Nephile,' said the voice behind him. Standing in the doorway was a Drana commando. Quickly the pair was bundled outside into the harsh sunlight, where they were thrown on the ground. 'Your plan worked sir,' said the soldier, as they surrounded the brothers with weapons at the ready. 'Take them to the camp at Barmer,' the Drana captain said. 'Turn them over to the Khaz, they will know how to treat their new guests,' he laughed.

Hor and Tom witnessed what took place. Tom wanted to take matters into his own hands then and there! The Drana would pay dearly for what they had done to Anpu! 'No Tom, we must return to the transport for now,' whispered Hor. Reluctantly Tom agreed. 'We can't just leave them Hor,' he hissed. 'We won't! We must make use of their capture. Somehow, we are going to enter the camp ourselves. They will be safe for the moment,' Hor said, with a look of grim determination.

The Barmer concentration camp was a typical example of the worldwide network of camps,

built to house the local human population. The camp, built by its inhabitants, under the supervision of their sadistic jailers the Khaz, assisted by companies of Drana commandos, was vast.

Working all the hours of daylight and into the night, they were worked to a standstill. If they fell down exhausted, they were shot where they lay. One meal a day was served to them, consisting of a bowl of half-cooked rice, swimming in disease-ridden water. There was never enough food to go round, so inevitably fights broke out amongst the inmates over the meagre rations. Thousands starved to death, their flyblown bodies left where they lay. Once the camp was completed, the inhabitants were subjected to a daily routine of backbreaking manual work.

Inside the camps, workshops were set up to process raw materials into usable products for the Drana conquerors, textiles, furniture, machinery, transportation, to name a few. The average lifespan of a human was two weeks. No one was spared; men, women, and children, all had to work.

If anyone was injured, no medical facilities were available for treatment. Instead, they were driven even harder than the rest by the Khaz guards, who took great delight in their work. None more so than Tachket, under whose command, Barmer had been placed. Like Anpu, Tachket escaped the destruction of Ashah's palace and the city of Jaipur. When it happened, he was touring the continents, choosing sites for his camps.

Barmer was his choice of headquarters. From here, he ruled his evil network, travelling from time to time, to other camps to inspect their progress. On his return to Barmer, he occupied his time plotting his return to power. For amusement, he took great delight in personally interrogating new inmates, subjecting them to unimaginable new heights of pain, in an effort to gain knowledge of

Nephile activities. One such session had produced the whereabouts of Anpu. Knowing of the Nephile's ability to lock on to one another, he had dispatched a troop of commandos to lay a trap, using Anpu as bait.

The result of the trap now lay in the dust of the inner courtyard of his punishment block. Seb held Anpu close to him as Tachket approached them. 'So Nephile, we meet once more. This time it is you who are chained,' he hissed, staring at Anpu with pure hatred in his black eyes. Turning to Seb, he said, 'Who are you, what function do you perform? Why do you protect this weakling? What is he to you Nephile? Where did you come from? There are no Nephile colonies in this part of the world! Why are you here? Do you wish to die so soon?' Seb looked directly at Tachket; a look of anger crossed his face. His gob of spittle ran down Tachket's loathsome face. 'Take them to the interrogation cells, now!' Tachket screamed.

Hor and Tom lay on the rise overlooking the camp. From here, they looked for a possible way into the vast death factory. The perimeter fence was electrified and guarded by Drana troops. Towers commanded excellent all round vision of the entire complex. Beyond the perimeter, the area was covered in minefields. There were two gates, one on the southern side and one to the north. A small stream ran through the camp from the north, exiting to the south-west, they decided they would examine the fence around the streams exit under the cover of darkness. For now, there was nothing they could do except watch. Trying to get as much rest as they possibly could. Once they started, there was no chance of turning back.

As the last rays of the sun disappeared, the hunting cries of jackals and other animals could be heard. Hor led the way down the rise towards the camp. Keeping to the shadows as much as possible, they crawled towards the minefield at the southern end. Hor froze in his tracks.

'What's wrong?' Tom whispered. 'Laser mines!' said Hor, quickly dropping face down in the dust. As the small dust cloud formed around Hor's prone body, Tom saw the laser beams illuminated by the gently floating dust particles. 'What now?' Tom asked. 'We have to move with extreme caution,' Hor said, as he gathered a handful of dust. 'The beams are fired intermittently. To make them visible we need to mark where they are, and how long and from what direction they come from. If we break just one, it will trigger the entire minefield, possibly the others as well!' 'It looks as if we will have to cross one at a time Hor. In which case let me go first.' 'No!' said Hor, already moving forward. 'Auset and Auramooth need you in one piece, I'll go first,' he whispered from the darkness ahead of Tom.

For what seemed like an eternity, Tom watched Hor's progress through the mines, illuminated by the laser beams exposed by the dust. Then it was his turn. Crawling forward, not daring to raise his head, Tom began making small dust clouds of his own.

Countless generations of animals and man had contributed to the dust that he now breathed into his lungs. He wanted to cough, and from time to time, the urge to sneeze almost overtook him. Only those damned laser beams, centimetres above him, kept him from giving away his whereabouts.

Turning his head from side to side, he saw the direction the beams took as they cut their deadly path through the dust particles. North south, west east, south-West, north east, east west, never the same sequence. He would be glad when he was free of this nightmare! He found Hor on the bank of the stream close to where it flowed under the perimeter wire. Hor grinned at him. Tom looked like a ghost as he lay there beside his friend, covered in the choking dust.

Motioning to Tom, Hor began moving closer to the fence. Its lowest wires ran just above the surface of the stream, but not below. The pair sank into the cool water and felt their way around in the inky darkness. Hor's hand came across a stout fence post in the middle of a grill across the stream. Surfacing, the pair began to look for some way of getting through to the interior of the camp. The grill was weak.

Because of its position under the perimeter fence, the guards had not checked it when it was constructed. With a little effort and with the stream's current to assist them, Hor and Tom found themselves inside the camp. Now they were in, how were they going to find Seb and Anpu?

Tachket had personally supervised the interrogation. His fury at Seb knew no bounds. The metal table, to which both Seb and Anpu were manacled, was kept wet by a constant mist of water from a couple of shower attachments suspended from the roof. The table was wired to a hand generator, which when cranked, sent hundred of volts surging through its victim's bodies.

With each scream, each loss of bodily functions as the voltage was increased; Tachket's insatiable appetite for inflicting pain grew. Mercifully, both Anpu and Seb had finally passed out. Tachket left them on the table, he would return in the morning to begin once again. Slamming the door behind him, he instructed the Drana guard to protect the room and its contents with his life. Then turning away, he scuttled off to his lavish quarters in the staff compound at the centre of the camp.

Soon it would be light once more. Hor and Tom had little time to find Seb and Anpu, let alone escape with them back to the ship. As they slipped from shadow to shadow, building to building, the horror of the camp unfolded before them. Everywhere they looked, men, women and children lay dying. The stench of death filled the air. Occasionally they heard a child's pitiful cry for

food. Wasted bodies moved around the camp like ghosts. The Drana guards kept their distance, preferring to patrol the perimeter. Only the Khaz moved among the skeletal inmates, their power-prods constantly inflicting pain to bare flesh.

The punishment block did not differ in appearance to any other block in this hell-hole. Except for one thing, it was guarded! Tom and Hor looked at one another for an instant. There was time for only one try before they would have to hide until the next night. Hor marched Tom in front of him towards the guard at the door of the block.

'This one's due for interrogation in the morning,' he said to the guard, taking care not to show himself too much. 'I have orders from Tachket not to let anyone in or out until he returns,' said the guard. So Tachket was here! 'It was Tachket that ordered me to bring this one here you fool!' said Hor, with a ring of authority in his voice. 'Do you want to taste Tachket's wrath first hand? Let me take this worthless piece of human rubbish inside and lock him away securely, now!' The guard hesitated, and then turning, he began to unlock the door.

Quickly Tom and Hor overpowered him and closed the door quietly. Swapping cloths with the unconscious guard, Tom took his place outside while Hor began to search the building. He found the brothers, or rather their shattered bodies. Quickly he removed their manacles and carried them, one at a time to the door. Then after securing the guard face down onto the table, he returned. Tom and Hor half carried, half dragged their friends to the relative safety of the fence over the stream.

As dawn finally broke, they drifted under the cover of a grove of trees on the south-eastern bank of the stream, approximately half a kilometre from the camp. Soon the alarm would sound.

Tachket would not rest until he had them back in his clutches. They needed to find shelter, by now the sun was rapidly rising and soon there would be no place to hide.

The young Drana guard died a cruel death at the hands of Tachket. His charred remains were left on the table as a reminder to the others, should they fail to find the Nephile filth! Search parties began scouring the camp and the surrounding countryside.

Several times patrols came close to treading on the four men hidden in the hastily dug shallow graves in which they lay. Covered only by dead vegetation, they gasped for breath as the sun beat down on the parched ground. From time to time snakes and rodents explored their hideout in search of food and shelter from the sun's harshness. Scorpions, centipedes, spiders and beetles of all types, crawled over their rapidly dehydrating bodies.

Eventually dusk began to descend once more. Hor was the first to stir, carefully searching for any sign of the many patrols, which had passed by. He crawled across to where Tom lay hidden. Helping him up out of the hole, Hor and Tom then began to uncover Anpu and Seb. By now, darkness had taken over from dusk. Hoisting Anpu over his shoulder Tom followed Hor as he carried Seb towards where they had left the ship. From time to time they stopped, barely daring to breathe, as Drana patrols kept up their constant search. Not wanting to return without the prisoners for fear of what Tachket may do, the patrols continued to expand the search pattern. The cargo-bay door silently opened.

Leaving Hor to make Anpu and Seb as comfortable as possible, he lifted the vast craft into the night air. 'Now Tachket, you bastard, it's your turn to suffer,' said Tom as he readied all the weapons the transport had. 'Hor, I need your help mate! As quickly as you can, man the particle cannon. I'll look after the plasma torpedoes. We're going to settle a score before we head home!' he

said, as he headed towards the camp.

The punishment block was the first to vaporise. Tom's torpedoes found their mark, destroying the staff compound. Then Hor turned the cannons awesome fire-power loose on the laser minefields, causing a chain reaction blast, which destroyed fence and guards as it travelled around the camps perimeter.

Inmates and guards all ran to escape the attack, the inmates taking their chance for freedom in the surrounding forest, the guards preferring to be as far away as possible, should Tachket survive! They need not have worried. Tachket was now so much dust, settling among the other generations of particles, which slowly descended to the surface of the parched Indian soil.

CHAPTER 11

Domingo and his party made contact with the southern Europe resistance soon after landing. Now as they sat together in the cave, high above the tiny principality of Andorra, he thought of what Nuit might do, if he was not with her. The leader of the local French resistance brought him back to the immediate task. 'Domingo my friend, are you with us?'

Pierre Philippe Sangier had been a successful businessman before the invasion. His family traced their roots in this part of France beyond Napoleonic times. They had been an integral part of the southern French community for over a thousand years. Pierre boasted of his Catalan French heritage to whoever would listen. The idea of not being fully one or the other appealed to him. His family owned land on the north-eastern slopes of the Pyrenees, above Perpignan, where they grew and harvested some of the finest grapes for the local wine industry.

During the Second World War, Pierre's father and uncles had helped many allied servicemen escape the clutches of the Axis, through the very same mountains in which they now found themselves.

'We have a long way to go Domingo, and much to do. Is everything ready over the border?' he said, gesturing towards Spain. 'Yes, the Spanish resistance cells grow stronger every day Pierre,' said Domingo, as they began their journey. It would be difficult and fraught with danger. But if they were to link up with the main French resistance in the Auvergne, the risks were acceptable.

The party made their way silently through the mountain passes and down the northern slopes of the Pyrenees to the small town of Foix. Hiding during the day and travelling at night, Pierre and Domingo figured it would take about eight nights before they found themselves in the southern foothills of the Massif Central. Approaching the Canal du Midi at Carcassonne, they had their first encounter with the Drana occupation forces. The town was practically empty of its inhabitants. Only the odd stray cat and dog watched their silent progress through the streets of the town.

Gaspar, the young forward scout, froze in his tracks. Pointing ahead and to the right, he indicated the presence of at least three Drana patrols, making their way steadily towards their position. Slipping into the shadowy doorways of the ancient houses on each side of the narrow street, they waited with their knives at the ready. Angelique was the first to strike for freedom.

The Drana commando made no sound as her blade found its mark, between his ribs and into his heart. The small patrol would soon be missed. Disposing of the dead commandos' bodies and picking up their weapons, the party steadied themselves as the next patrol approached. Pierre signalled to let them pass. As the patrol turned left at the top of the street, the third patrol appeared

and stopped.

For what seemed an eternity, they simply stood in the centre of the cobbled street in silence, neither moving nor talking. They were listening! Domingo could hear the blood pounding in his ears as the seconds ticked by. He thought his pounding heart would be heard by the Drana patrol.

Then one of the Drana lifted his weapon and pointed it where Domingo stood, in the shadows. Surely this was not the end after all he had been through, and what of his beloved Nuit, would he never see her again? The Drana opened fire and a cat fell from the window ledge above Domingo's head. The patrol moved on, laughing at the sport the commando had given them. Once the poor cat had been carried round in the arms of a small child, who subjected it to love and affection, and now it had ended up as target practice for a bored, intergalactic grunt!

They slipped quickly and quietly to the canal bank. The canal was not well guarded, at least not here. Further west where the road crossed the river, the Drana had set up a barrier. As quickly as they had entered the water, they climbed up the other bank and slipped into the night. Fifty kilometres to the north lay Castres their next destination. Soon dawn would make its appearance, time to hide once more. They passed Castres without incident. Albi and Millau on the banks of the Tarn presented no danger.

By now, they began the climb through the foothills of the Cevennes range, the southerly arm of the Massif Central. Ahead lay Mount Mezenc, the birthplace of the Loire River. Nearing its peak, the party stopped and made camp. Tomorrow night they would be safe and sound in Le Puy, in the company of the Loire resistance group, who would guide them over the mountains to St-Flour, the headquarters of the French resistance. The moon rose early, illuminating the slopes of the mountain.

Giscard took over point from Gaspar, who led the way until now. Coming from this part of the country, Giscard spent his childhood wandering the slopes surrounding Le Puy, fishing the upper reaches of the Loire.

Climbing down, using the shadows cast by the undergrowth of the ravine for cover, the party reached the upper meadows of the valley. Across the river, they could see the lights of Le Puy, twinkling in the darkness. Less than five hundred metres from the outskirts of the town, Giscard signalled them to halt. Domingo and Pierre made their way to where he lay hidden, his attention fixed on what was going on in the town square.

'Regarde!' Giscard whispered. Drana commandos were rounding up the town's inhabitants. Domingo concentrated on what was being said. 'They are looking for the local resistance Pierre,' he said. 'How do you know?' 'Trust me,' said Domingo, concentrating once more, on what was going on. The Drana Major singled out the mayor and his wife.

'Tell us whom among you are the traitors we seek and we will let you return to your beds,' he said, brandishing his side arm. The mayor said nothing. His wife's lifeless body slumped to the ground, before the sound of the shot reached the surrounding hills. 'Tell me,' the Major said, calmly. The mayor joined his wife in eternity. Betrayal was not his way. 'Very well,' said the Major. 'The same fate awaits you all if you do not give up the traitors in your midst.' The citizens of Le Puy, to a man, remained silent. Domingo, Pierre and the rest, watched as people were dragged off and executed in groups of two and three at a time.

The last shot rang out, signalling the end of human occupation of the town. Gaspar and Angelique comforted one another in silence, their youthful anger growing. Before Pierre or Domingo could stop them, the pair broke cover and ran firing their weapons into the ranks of the

commandos. The fire fight quickly spread, becoming a door to door, house to house battle.

Hopelessly outnumbered, Domingo's party made every shot count, running for cover, behind the memorial to the men and women who had given their lives for freedom in the past, Domingo felt a searing pain in his leg. He could hear Pierre off in the distance, shouting commands to his group. The pain in his leg grew as he lay for a brief moment, his lungs bursting, his heart pounding. The Drana appeared out of nowhere.

Instinctively Domingo aimed his weapon and fired point-blank. The commando's chest burst wide open with the force of the armour-piercing round, which exploded his internal organs, turning them into puree.

Pierre worked his way around the western side of the town. By now, his resistance group numbered less than half, cut down by the Drana commando's deadly fire-power. The choice had to be made, whether to stay and fight it out, or to run for the hills to the west. Soon Drana reinforcements would arrive. The cost had been too high! Silently they slipped off into the darkness, leaving behind their dead and dying comrades. 'Where's Domingo?' he asked, while the survivors gathered around him.

The Drana Major looked at Domingo, his eyes betraying the loathing he felt for the human race. 'You are not like the others. There is something different about you human?' he said. The pain in Domingo's leg, caused beads of sweat to roll down his forehead, stop for a moment in his thick eyebrows, before dropping to his dirt-stained cheeks. The Major drove the heel of his boot into the wound, causing Domingo to scream in agony. 'What is it about you human? Tell me and your wound will be treated!' 'Go to hell!' 'We are in hell,' said the Major. He sat in silence, looking at Domingo for a long time. 'Very well, if you won't talk to me, then perhaps the Khaz can make you see the error of your ways. It's a pity really,' he said, 'you fight well for a human. Letting those

vermin loose on you goes against my better judgement. But, orders are orders! Under different circumstances human, you and I may have become friends. I'm thankful that most humans are not warriors. If they were, we would really have a fight on our hands – goodbye. Guards, take him to a cell and dress his wound.'

The guards dragged Domingo down the corridor of the town police station to the single cell, where the town drunks had slept off the effects of too much wine, countless times in the past.

The armoured personnel carrier bounced its way across country, jarring Domingo's wounded leg. The Drana had commandeered many military vehicles for their own use. This one had formerly been the property of the German armed forces. From inside its hot interior, he could not judge which direction they took. Occasionally the sound of the tracks told him they were on a sealed road surface. Sometimes he heard the splash of water as they forded small streams.

The armoured personnel carrier's engine roared, changed gear, and began climbing steadily. The Drana, who manned the machine gun on top of the vehicle, occasionally shifted his body, allowing Domingo brief glimpses of the blue sky dotted with small clouds. The heavy, armoured vehicle stopped suddenly, gently rocking back and forth from the effort.

Shots bounced off its armour as the machine gunner returned fire. The driver slammed the vehicle into reverse and quickly accelerated, only to stop as suddenly as he had, seconds before! He turned quickly to the left, dropping its nose over the edge of the mountain track. The vehicle began its headlong rush down the hillside, with shots ricocheted off its rear. Gathering speed, it bounced and lurched well beyond its design capabilities, before coming to a sickening, bone-crushing stop at the bottom of a ravine.

The heat of the fire, which broke out, woke Domingo from his unconscious state. Climbing across the bodies of his captors, he forced his way up and out of the turret into the small stream, which was the vehicles final resting place. He crawled across the slippery boulders to the bank, just as the fuel tank ignited.

'Bonjour mon ami,' said Pierre. Domingo's head was spinning from the explosion that had knocked him out. Carefully the members of the Auvergne resistance placed him on a makeshift stretcher, lifted it up onto their shoulders, and began the ascent of the ravine's westerly slope. Domingo lapsed into unconsciousness, for a brief moment he was safely with his friends.

St-Flour nestled in a valley, which divided the Massif Central. The French resistance had chosen well when looking for a suitable location for its headquarters. From here, all resistance networks throughout central, eastern, and western France were controlled. Communication links were maintained using systems of runners and the age-old method - pigeons! They could fly freely without arousing Drana or Khaz suspicions. Bridges were blown, railway lines removed, phone lines cut, supply dumps destroyed, all on the orders issued from here. Word was quickly spreading of small victories won at the expense of the Drana, from many parts of the country. Word came, from time to time, from other European countries. Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Italy, Germany, the British Isles, all had their respective resistance movements working to rid themselves of the Drana. Many died; many more were taken prisoner and sent to the Khaz controlled concentration camps.

Domingo sat with the joint leaders of the resistance, telling them about the Nephile and their ancient enemies. He told them about the real history of mankind, and about the Khaz interference in mankind's struggle towards civilisation down the ages. He spoke of the way the Nephile had influenced much of the positive achievements of the various nations on Earth.

They listened as he told of the small band of Nephile-humans who were now spreading the word around the world, assisting where they could, in man's struggle to regain control of the Earth. The leaders sat for a long time, quietly discussing how best to co-ordinate and intensify their efforts. Now they knew they were not alone in their struggle for freedom, the need to increase their numbers became of paramount importance, in the weeks and months ahead.

'Domingo, will you stay here with us?' asked the senior resistance leader. 'Yes,' he said, 'with my help and others like me, perhaps we can become more than just an irritation to the Drana. We need to concentrate all our efforts towards freeing those held in the death camps. I would like to form a small party of your finest people to carry out a raid on the camp at Aubusson. Will you agree to this request?' The leader nodded his agreement. 'As soon as your leg is healed, you may begin training your group for the task. Until then, we will gather as much information concerning the camp and the Drana commandos in the area. By the time you are ready Domingo, you will have the full weight of the French central resistance behind you.'

Domingo had chosen well from the ranks of the resistance. Within his party were two former members of the Foreign Legion, a lance corporal of the Engineers, who had evaded capture, a mountain guide, policeman and three farmers who were crack shots and the explosives expert from a local quarry. His second in command was Pierre, who had refused to be left out of it. This was a seasoned, professional, armed assault force, capable of taking on anything in their path. They had melded together well in the previous six weeks intensive training programme, set by Domingo. He did not want a repeat of Le Puy! Once was enough for anyone. From now on, he would only strike when the circumstances permitted it. No more would he be ruled by the heart, no more bad decisions would be made. The party and their ultimate goal, the inmates at Aubusson, came first. Nothing else mattered. If they could achieve their aim, word would quickly spread across Europe to other resistance groups, hopefully spurring them on to do the same thing. To destroy those damned

camps and the Khaz, would deliver a strong message to the Drana! He knew his brother and sisters were even now establishing similar groups in and around their various drop zones, across the northern hemisphere. He wondered how Mike and Amsu were getting on in their attempt to raise an army in Australia. Nuit would be in the thick of it somewhere across the planet. How he wished they were together once more, if only for a moment.

From their vantage point on the slopes of Puy de Dome, Pierre and Domingo watched the movement in and out of the vast camp below. Aubusson had taken its name from the town at its centre. At any time, it held over five hundred thousand men women and children. The town itself became the residence of the Khaz and Drana commandos who ran this massive complex. Sitting on the banks of the Creuse River, Aubusson was no longer the sleepy provincial town it had once been. Now it was the main concentration camp for France. They watched as Drana troop carriers arrived from the fleet, high above the Earth, discharging their cargo. Armoured columns patrolled the surrounding countryside.

It would not be an easy task to free the people. The ground between their mountain hideout and the camp, offered precious little cover, even at night. The patrols were constantly on the move; the roar of their armoured personnel carrier's drifted across the plain towards the mountain. Drana fighter patrols buzzed the hills from time to time, causing Domingo's band to dive for cover. For three days and nights, various members of his group kept watch, while the rest dozed and thought of ways to get into the camp undetected. Then on the afternoon of the fourth day, their prayers were answered.

Rene, one of the former Legionnaires, spotted a small Drana patrol climbing the slopes towards them. Domingo and Pierre watched the slow progress of the patrol, as it wound its way steadily up a narrow winding goat path, a few hundred metres below. If they continued on, they

would eventually have to disappear temporarily out of sight, behind a large rock outcrop that had dislodged itself centuries before. The ambush was laid.

Taking up positions above and behind where the patrol would pass, they waited. The patrol was quickly overpowered and dispatched. The sound of necks being broken, the sharp intake of a final breath as a knife plunged into flesh, the frantic, silent cry issued from a severed larynx, hardly disturbed the wildlife browsing and hunting in the parched vegetation. Quickly the dead were stripped of their clothing and weaponry. From far below in the valley, the patrol could be seen as it made its way across the mountain and down towards the camp. Domingo led them back through the gates, crossing the river to the town itself. Something big was about to happen, but for the moment he did not have time to concentrate on the many thoughts of others that entered his head.

Slipping inside one of the houses via its back door, the group disappeared from sight. Pierre and Rene watched from the attic of the old house, as the streets of the town filled with troops and Khaz alike. Domingo sat in deep concentration, focusing on the conversations outside. Hanseer was coming! The Drana Fleet Commander himself was on his way to deliver an ultimatum to the surviving European leaders. This was a perfect opportunity to cause havoc. And hopefully, release the hundreds of thousands who were enslaved within the camp! Domingo's team swung into action during the night, booby trapping, laying explosive charges, setting up escape routes, disabling vehicles, rendering the laser minefields harmless.

By the time dawn arrived, they were as ready as they ever would be. To avoid the entire group being picked up, they split into pairs. Domingo took Paul, one of the farmers, with him. They quietly moved among the crowds, spreading the word to run the minute the fireworks started. By the time Hanseer's transport landed, word was spreading like wildfire throughout the camp. The

leaders of the European countries were waiting in the town hall for Hanseer. The mood was mixed. Some were resigned to their fate and that of their countrymen. Others saw ways of turning the Drana invasion to their own advantage, or so they thought. Hanseer entered the hall and walked to the stage.

He began his address to the assembled crowd. The building shook, plaster fell from the ceiling as his bodyguard quickly led him away to safety. Outside in the streets, shooting broke out between Drana commandos and resistance fighters, helped now by the former human inmates. Fuel and ammo dumps exploded, sending drums skyward as the expanding fireballs gathered momentum. The fence was breached in several places. Parents grabbed children and ran for their lives. Others acting in small groups attacked and disarmed some of the Drana.

In the confusion, Hanseer managed to escape back to the safety of the fleet. Khaz were dragged screaming and spitting into the cold light of day, where they were promptly set upon and beaten to death by the very people they had cruelly treated minutes before. A fight spread rapidly around the camp as more and more humans picked up weapons, glad to be able to turn the tables on their captors. Domingo and his group urged them on and by nightfall, this battle was won. But the war was only just beginning.

There would be many more Aubussons in the coming months. Thousands would die, millions would be dispossessed and succumb to starvation and disease. If the human race was to survive, then no price was too high, or was it! Only time would tell.

CHAPTER 12

The group moved quietly through the forest, the silence broken only by the sound their skis made as they sliced through the snow. Lars stopped for a moment to get a bearing, before motioning to continue on west. The town of Vassa lay approximately thirty kilometres behind them now. It had been a close call when they landed the previous night. The Drana had patrols everywhere; the skies were thick with their fighters. Something was going on, but they did not have time to investigate, at least for the present.

They had to link up with the partisans at Jyvaskyla, deep inside Finland's hinterland. The Fin's were the only unconquered people within the Scandinavian group of countries. Helsinki to the south was the only Drana foothold. Fierce, almost suicidal resistance kept the Drana within the confines of the city. Moonlight filtered down through the treetops, reflected back from the fresh coating of snow. The cloudless skies above were mirrored on the motionless surface of the lakes. The crisp night air seemed to amplify every sound of the forest surrounding them. They heard the sound of snow falling from the heavily laden branches all around. It would be another two nights before they reached their destination. With the extended hours of darkness at this time of year, they could cover greater distances.

Lars and the partisan leader went over their plans. Helsinki had to be taken before he could work his way south-east to link up with Natasha's group.

The more small victories they could achieve, the more the locals would realise that their position was not a hopeless one! A series of raids on the city had been the original plan, but the Drana had brought in heavy weaponry of their own. What they needed was the fire-power of a

Nephile cruiser! The problem was it meant committing precious Nephile resources in one area, far away from the valley. They would have to run the Drana gauntlet across the world, and there was no guarantee the cruiser would arrive intact!

There was one possibility however; part of the mothballed Baltic fleet was moored at the Latvian port of Riga. If they could get there, the Latvian partisans, combined with their Lithuanian and Estonian counterparts, might be able to muster a skeleton crew to man one of the surface vessels! It was worth a try.

Leaving Hango under the cover of darkness in a small sailing boat was easy. Providing the wind and tide remained in their favour, they should reach the relative safety of the small offshore islands near Paldiski, on the northern coast of Estonia, before daylight arrived.

Mauno motioned to Lars to secure the boat to the lower branches of the tree, while he covered it with camouflage netting. If they were going to reach their goal, they needed to contact the Tallinn partisans quickly. Lars found an old hand operated repair wagon sitting beside the rail tracks leading out of town. The men heaved it back onto the rails and climbed aboard. Once the ancient handles began to work, the wagon gained speed as they headed towards Tallinn.

Taking turns at pumping the handles, they covered the short distance in a couple of hours. On the outskirts of the ancient city, Lars and Mauno made their way through the back streets to the house where Mauno knew they would find help. In the relative safety of the enclosed garden, Mauno introduced Lars to the leader of the Tallinn partisans, Pavel Luga.

Pavel was a mix of Ukraine and Belarus After the disintegration of the old Soviet order, he

had stayed on in Estonia, long after his military unit had gone for good. He loved his adopted country. It had been good to him, despite his involvement in the oppressive Soviet occupation. He had married a local girl and settled down in this medieval northern port.

Pavel was a bear of a man. Whenever he entered a room, he seemed to fill it. 'Of course I will help,' he boomed, kicking a stray dog across the garden. 'The damned things are so hungry, they will steal food right off your table,' he said, in answer to the look Lars gave him. The dog lay panting in pain from the cruel blow, its ribs broken. 'Don't waste your time on it Lars, we've work to do,' Pavel said. 'Mauno and I need to find as many ex military personnel as possible if the plan is to work,' Lars said, forgetting the dog for the moment. 'If we can get one of the old warships going, with a lot of luck, we should be able to slip into Tallinn unobserved. How many men can you muster?' Pavel spoke to one of his men, standing off to one side of the group. The man quickly departed. 'Sasha will be back in an hour,' he said. 'Now eat, drink, and relax,' he said, as vodka, fresh bread, and cold meats were placed in front of the two tired men. The vodka soon took affect.

When Lars and Mauno awoke, night had fallen. The stars twinkled above the garden. All around them the members of Pavels' partisans lay. 'Typical of these drunken Russian bastards,' Lars thought, as his head began to clear.

'Ha, you're awake at last.' Pavel looked at Lars and Mauno while he busied himself with the information his man had brought him. 'Look at this! We not only have all the men you need, but we have a few little surprises for you as well,' he chuckled. The table groaned under the weight of the ordinance. Rocket propelled launchers, AK47 automatic rifles, light machine guns, boxes of mines, ammunition boxes packed with plastic explosive, detonators, rolls of fuse and the contents of a small, local demolition companies warehouse, filled the back room of the house.

'There's more where this came from,' Sasha said with a grin. 'We found one of our old ammunition dumps still intact. Someone forgot it in the confusion of the withdrawal back to Russian soil,' he said, hugging one of the AK47's in his arms with all the tenderness of a father holding a newborn baby. 'We managed to find enough explosives to fill the hold of a small coastal freighter. Plus, drums of diesel, and here's the best part - sacks of fertiliser!'

With the help of a couple of Pavel's men, Mauno and Lars began their journey south to Riga. Pavel organised the Tallinn end of the operation in readiness for their arrival.

At Ainazi on the border between Estonia and Latvia, Lars and Mauno were passed into the hands of the Latvian partisans. The Drana held Riga; it would not be easy to get to the old naval docks without being detected. There was some kind of Drana build-up. All the signs were there. Lars could not pick-up up much information from the Drana they passed on the way. Mauno asked his Latvian brothers and sisters what was going on, but no one knew anything – except something big was about to happen! From time to time Lars caught snatches of information, but they did not make any kind of sense at all. For now, his mind must be on Helsinki's recapture.

The dockyard gates stood unguarded. The whole complex was in darkness, as they made their way quietly through the abandoned buildings towards where the ships lay tied up and forgotten. Conventional submarines together with their nuclear counterparts lay rusting silently in rows. What remained of the once proud Baltic Fleet, frigates, destroyers, cruisers lay side by side. The only angry sounds they heard now came when their steel sides bumped together, whenever the wind whipped up a swell in the waters of the port.

Lars, Mauno, and the Latvians searched through the mouldering fleet looking for a vessel, which looked vaguely seaworthy. Eventually they came across a small supply ship that, if it were

suitable, would do the job. The Latvians began inspecting the engine-room while Lars and Mauno searched her from stem to stern. The ship was built for the near arctic conditions that prevailed in the northern waters of the Baltic and the Gulf of Finland. The bows were filled with concrete enabling her to push through the sea ice with relative ease. High bows like these were characteristic of vessels used in the area. Most of the waters in this part of the world were relatively shallow, which meant they soon turned into a frenzy of wind driven, foam topped waves, easily overcoming any vessel not built for the treacherous conditions.

The Latvians reported that with a little work, they could get the engine back into operation, but the old ship would be a sitting duck because of her slow hull speed. One thing was in their favour, she was built for shallow draft work and her engine noise could be muffled somewhat. Providing she was not pushed to her limits, the old engine would be relatively silent. Her fuel bunkers were half-full and her holds were empty. A few leaks had spread along her keel, because she sat on the bottom of the harbour at each low tide. But if they could get one of the pumps serviceable, this would not be a problem. On her foredeck stood a single 105mm gun, finding ammunition for it would be tricky, if not impossible! On her bridge wings, two light anti-aircraft guns sat under their canvas covers. Her wood clad wheelhouse offered little protection from enemy fire.

Working as quickly and quietly as they could, the four men prepared the little ship for its moment in history, each night they would forage among the other ships for whatever they needed in the way of engine parts. Ammunition was found for the anti aircraft guns, enough parts were available to patch up the bilge pumps to combat the leaks.

All the while, a constant vigil was kept in case the Drana came too close. From time to time,

someone inevitably dropped a tool in the cavernous expanse of the hull. At times like this, the men would remain motionless for what seemed like hours until the all clear was given by whoever was on watch. During the daylight hours, Drana aircraft patrolled the skies above - but never at night!

The Drana build up continued over the couple of weeks it took to make the ship seaworthy. One evening, Lars and one of the Latvians were searching a warehouse close to the street outside the docks. Lars peered out through the grimy window. He saw several Drana commando units lined up across the street. The officer in charge stood in front of the assembled troops and began to speak. What Lars heard made his blood run cold. The Drana knew of their presence, someone had betrayed them. Then in answer to Lars question, Sasha stepped into the light of the street lamp. He pointed towards the dockyards, then left. The Drana commandos crossed towards the gates. Lars and the Latvian made their way back to the ship as quickly as they could. If they were not detected, they could slip their moorings under the cover of darkness and drift for a while on the outgoing tide. But chances of that happening grew more remote, as the Drana drew closer to discovering their whereabouts.

Outwardly, the little ship looked no different to any other, especially in the dark. Mauno and one of the Latvians watched the Drana commandos spread across the docks. They seemed reluctant to board any of the vessels, instead preferring to stay on the dry land. The Drana were afraid of something, but what! A splash in the darkness beyond followed by blood curdling screams of agony gave the answer. After the commandos retreated to the street beyond the dock gates, Mauno and his Latvian companion cautiously approached the end of the dock. Lying on a pontoon, half in, and half out of the water was the body of a dead Drana. The flesh from his head and upper torso was gone, melted! Seawater, the liquid that covered two thirds of the planets surface, corroded their bodies somehow. It was no wonder they were reluctant to get too close to the coast of any country! The salt

air must play havoc with their complexion.

Lars waited until the tide peaked before casting the ship adrift, and as the outgoing tide quickened its pace, the little ship headed into the Gulf of Riga. Off the mouth of the Gauga River, her engine sprang into life and slowly she chugged her way north towards Ainazi. Stopping briefly to set one of the Latvians ashore, to warn of Sasha's treachery, the ship turned towards the open sea bound for the island of Saaremaa.

On the north-eastern tip of the island, the ship dropped anchor in the lee of a protective headland. Here they would stay until the following night. After disguising her shape from any prying eyes from the skies above, they took turns on watch while the others slept.

The sea mist engulfed the ship as it pushed steadily north through the offshore islands. Soon they passed Paldiski, and beyond they could just make out the glow on the horizon from the lights of Tallinn. Pavel came aboard to greet them, while his men loaded her deadly cargo.

Sasha had returned to Tallinn the previous night to a welcoming committee. News travelled fast. His fate was sealed before he entered the house. He was subjected to a 'kangaroo court', presided over by Pavel. Found guilty, then allowed to plead his case, Sasha knew he was wasting his time. The result was inevitable - his time was up. His lifeless body dropped into the sewers beneath the cobbled streets. At least the rats would not starve for a while.

The forward hold quickly filled. Drums of diesel and bags of fertiliser were lowered to waiting hands and the two parts of the deadly cargo were quickly stowed. A few rounds were found for the forward gun. Rows of silent, battle hardened men boarded the little ship and went below to the aft compartments. Inflatable dinghies were stowed on top of the hatches, after they were sealed

against the elements. A couple of light trucks and a small armoured car were lashed down on the deck. All was in readiness for the task ahead. On all sides of Helsinki, Mauno's partisans together with members of Lars' group, watched and waited. At Porkkala, eyes strained for the first sign of the ships approach.

Sven grabbed the rope thrown to him from the dinghy and pulled its bow onto the beach. Beyond, he could just make out the shapes of men loading themselves and their equipment, before setting off for the shore. A barge was towed towards the beach bearing its precious cargo. Pavel drove the small armoured car ashore, and then the barge returned for one of the trucks. The beach resembled the Normandy landings of the Second World War, only in miniature. Lars came ashore with the last dinghy. Mauno had elected to take the ship into Helsinki. Lars was glad to be on dry land once more, and to be well away from the time bomb which quietly disappeared into the night, and out to sea.

Mauno headed for the relative safety of the sea mist, several kilometres off the coast, before turning east towards his home town; the ship steamed on into the night. The throbbing of her diesel heart was felt by all who stood on her decks preparing for what was to come. In Tallinn, she had been given a new livery in keeping with her roll as a ship of war. Soon the lights of Helsinki hove into view. Mauno gave the order and the forward holds' deadly cargo was prepared. At the approaches of the harbour, the crew slipped over the side and headed for shore. Mauno aimed for the inner basin. The ships bow rose as her speed reduced the distance.

Swimming towards the shore, Mauno watched the brave little ships last act. Her reinforced bow smashed the dock to pulp. The inertia fuse triggered the cargo. A huge fireball engulfed her and the dock, quickly spreading through the dockyard buildings and into the streets beyond. Vehicles and bodies were blown sky-high by the blast; burning debris rained down and spread fiery

destruction.

A Drana commando looked at the broken freshly painted piece of timber, which had felled him. On the white background of the carved board in carefully painted red letters, was the name - Phoenix.

Phoenix's demise was the signal the waiting partisans needed. From all sides they began driving the Drana back towards the docks. Mauno and the crew were waiting for the first of the commandos to arrive. They had their own version of heavy artillery at the ready. Pavel drove the armoured car directly into the ranks of the commandos, spraying the area with rounds from its light gun. From time to time, he could be heard yelling abuse at the Drana and throwing a Molotov cocktail out of the hatch. The mad bastard was in his element!

Lars and the rest of his group from the beach did their best to keep up with Pavel's rampage through the streets. If they lost sight of him for a moment, it did not matter; the trail of destruction he left behind him was easy to follow. Drana, covered in burning petrol, ran screaming into the night in all directions. The drivers of the trucks bringing up the rear carefully picked their way through the debris.

Within the hour the partisans together with Lars' group and Pavels' vodka drinking mad men, had boxed the Drana garrison in. Behind them lay their only escape – the docks. Lars stood ready. 'Steady, steady, wait until they're within range...Fire!'

Phoenix's crew executed the coup de grace. Seawater rained down on the commandos from the hoses manned by the crew. The portable fire pumps were capable of delivering enough force to knock a man of his feet at twenty-five metres. They could push a jet of water in a high arc, a

hundred metres away. Combined with a fan spray of water, the streets and buildings were soaked in minutes. If any tried desperately to escape the effects of the salt water, by diving for cover down one of the side streets, their progress was halted by a barrage of small arms fire. Whichever way they went, the Drana commandos were trapped! The battle for Helsinki was over. Phoenix would be remembered for generations to come.

CHAPTER 13

'I agree, said Natasha, 'they are building up for something, but what?' Lars had brought news of the Drana build-up in the Baltic, together with his now considerably enlarged armed force. After the recapture of Helsinki, all the partisan groups had merged into one, under Lars' command.

Pavel's body was found in the burnt out remains of his armoured car. He was taken back to Tallinn and buried in his garden. The vodka flowed freely down the throats of these hardened men. Trembling voices broke into song, remembering Pavel. Tears rolled down battle-scarred faces. He would be missed. Natasha's group met almost no Drana after they landed. Indeed their progress went largely unhindered.

They headed towards Minsk, to recruit more people to their side. The streets of the city were filled with people going about their business, as if nothing had happened. Trams carried passengers along the avenues, passing groups of people deep in conversation. Street cleaners went about their daily tasks; vendors sold their wares, all seemed normal. And yet there was something in the air, something, which for the moment escaped Natasha's attention. Walking along the street towards the city centre, her armed group went unnoticed by all they passed. Whenever they spoke to anyone, asking what was going on, they got the same answer each time - nothing!

Turning into the city centre, she realised they were walking into a trap. In the square in front of the parliament building, a vast crowd was gathered. Standing on the steps addressing the crowd, was the Belorussian president, flanked by several senior members of the government. Guarding them, with guns at the ready, was a combined force of Belarus paratroops and Drana commandos.

A shot struck the wall above Natasha's head. They turned and ran for cover into a side street. It was bad enough being hunted by the Drana, but by your own people as well! Finding cover proved difficult. Now the whole city seemed to turn against them. Wherever they went, they were betrayed. Eventually they managed to find sanctuary in a ruined apartment block on the outskirts of the city. Crawling into the old abandoned building as dusk fell; Natasha set some of her group on watch, to be relieved in an hour, then every hour they remained here.

What had the Drana done? What had they promised, and why had an entire city turned traitor? The president was known for his extreme ways. His admiration for Adolf Hitler was well known. Had he finally turned Minsk into a fascist stronghold, assisted by the Drana? The thought was too much to bear. If it was the case, then perhaps the Drana with their new-found allies here in Belorussia, intended to expand their sphere of influence across the former Federation of States.

Deciding to put as much distance between themselves and Minsk, Natasha's group melted into the night, heading north west to Vilnius. Perhaps the Drana had not yet turned the Lithuanians into a fascist led Drana stronghold. Moving by night and hiding during the day, the group eventually arrived in Vilnius. Much to their relief the Drana influence was not yet established.

There were Drana patrols through the streets, but the people were definitely not on their side! The local resistance movement were more than willing to assist in any way they could. Their leader Vanye, himself displaced from his mother country, threw the entire network of resistance

over to Natasha's leadership. This force now joined Lars's growing army outside Kaunas, well within Lithuania's borders. Vanye's brow furrowed, his handsome angular face frozen into a grim mask. 'We have to wipe out all Drana strongholds!' his fist slamming down on the table, emphasising the point. 'We are not yet ready for an all out war with the Drana my friend,' Lars said, looking at the intense young man. 'For now the only thing we can do is strike and run. With each small victory, we grow stronger. No! We must target as many of the armed forces as possible. We need massive armed support, weapons, and ammunition. We must arm and train the general population somehow,' he said. 'They must become one vast armed camp from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the Mediterranean to the Arctic Circle. Meantime we have to get word back to the valley, we need help, and we need something to rally more support. It's time to turn the tables to our advantage!'

Hor sat in the shade of the trees branches. Behind him in the glade, his fighter lay hidden from view. The council had sent him in response to Natasha and Lars' plea for help. The process had very nearly betrayed their whereabouts to the Drana patrolling the streets of the town. They deliberately kept the message short, but it had been a close thing. Vanye, Mauno and the rest witnessed the pair concentrating their thoughts in an effort to be heard by the Nephile.

To the non-Nephile humans, they had never encountered an experience like it before. Thoughts not of their own making flooded into their minds, as contact was made. The overwhelming strength of the cerebral conversation between Lars, Natasha and Amun, caused Vanye to cry out in sheer panic! A Drana patrol had stopped in its tracks. They sensed the Nephile were nearby! Before they had a chance to raise the alarm, members of the resistance dealt with the patrol.

'I've been waiting here for ages,' said Hor. Natasha spun round, weapon at the ready.

Dropping the firearm, she ran towards him. 'You took your time getting here my friend,' said Lars, grasping Hor's hand. 'Put the girl down. We've got some work for you that I think you'll enjoy. Hor I'd like to introduce you to our new found friends,' he said, turning towards the assembled leaders of the partisan army.

Hor listened in silence as the events of the past few weeks were told. Mauno gave details of the build-up of Drana forces in Vassa. Natasha related the complete change of allegiance by the Belarus to the Drana. Vanye filled in the gaps concerning news from the other Baltic States. Hor in turn, told of the death camps run by the Khaz that had been destroyed. Both Natasha and Lars received news of Anpu's return to the valley with relief. At least the gentle man was back safe and sound.

Domingo and the French partisans were steadily increasing in number. Nothing had been heard from Mike and Amsu's group in Australia yet, nor from Farsi and Amal. Tom was somewhere in the Mediterranean, trying to convince what was left of the United States Sixth Fleet to join the fight. 'On my way here, I flew across the Black Sea. Most of the surface fleet seems to be intact. From what you say about the Drana reaction to salt water, it's a safe bet they are nowhere near the ports. Perhaps we may be able to utilise some of the ships there as well. The submarine fleet is still active Lars, although now they are no longer targeting the Americans, they seem a little lost. They need a new enemy. Let's give them one!' Hor said, with his customary chuckle. 'It troubles me though,' he added, 'why are they building up their forces and for what reason? And, why do they only patrol the skies during the day? Just what does Hanseer have in mind?' Then turning to Natasha, he took her hand and led her away from the immediate group for a moment.

The crusty old warrior would never admit it to anyone, especially Auset and Tom that Natasha had captured his heart. He was hopelessly in love with her, and she with him. The pair was

often seen slipping off out of sight to snatch a brief moment together. Everyone in the valley knew, but avoided eye contact with Hor lest their thoughts betrayed them, yet despite this Hor carried on in his characteristic fashion, acting out the part of the solitary, single-minded protector of the valley.

With Hor's help, they formulated a plan to win over the crew members of the Black Sea Fleet. Natasha and a couple of her most trusted people would be ferried to the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. There they would approach the local resistance to enlist their help in contacting the fleet. Meanwhile Lars and Vanye would take a force south across Poland to the Ukraine, then on to the Crimea. Mauno and the remainder would strike north to St. Petersburg, to contact the fleet there.

Georgia's mountainous terrain afforded plenty of cover for Hor's fighter. When he had returned for the third time with Natasha, the local partisans were already talking with Natasha's people. Hor's presence unsettled them at first. They had never encountered anyone quite like him before. Gheorgi, the local partisan chief proved to be a true ally. Like most Georgians, he came from fiercely independent stock. His forbears had resisted change over the years, retaining their ways of old. All attempts to bring them into the fold by successive invaders had come to nothing.

Within two days, word reached them from the fleet that most of the crews were prepared to come over to their side. The Drana had their spies, but they could be quickly rounded up and disposed of. Hor sent word to hold them for questioning; he would get the truth from them his way! Gheorgi and Natasha arrived in the coastal port of Batumi, where they were met by a delegation from the fleet. Commander Lipetski stared at the partisans.

'So these were the people who were giving the Drana so much trouble,' he said to himself. They looked half-starved, ill equipped, and seriously undermanned. How were they going to do what his highly trained comrades had failed to achieve? The Drana had vaporised several of the

surface ships, caught out in the Mediterranean. The fleets' fire-power was no match against them. He didn't see how they hoped to win against such formidable odds! Then Hor arrived.

His fighter touched down behind the delegation. Quickly he stepped down from the cockpit and strode towards Natasha and Gheorgi. 'Commander, allow me to introduce the leader of the Nephile armed forces, Hor,' said Natasha with uncontrolled pride. 'This was one of the people who were responsible for what happened fathoms above him in the Mediterranean, on that day so long ago,' Lipetski thought. 'No commander I was not present in the area of the Sixth Fleet,' Hor said in answer to Lipetski's thoughts.

The commander needed no convincing after that. He turned the fleet over to Hor saying, 'we stand ready to serve the Nephile in any way we can. It will be good to get back to sea once more. Perhaps the Americans can be persuaded to join us?' 'First things first Commander, I believe you have some people for me to talk to?' Hor asked.

Lipetski led the way to the brig. Inside, the cells were filled with those suspected of being Drana spies. Hor quickly made his way down the corridor between the cells. He stopped briefly at the door of one of them and looked in on its inhabitants. 'Release everyone else except for these ones,' he said pointing to the cowering occupants. 'Clear the building commander, I have much work to do here,' he said.

From outside the brig, the men's screams could be heard. Lipetski looked at Natasha, saw the gleam in her eye, and looked away. He had seen fanaticism before, but never quite like this. He felt uneasy. Hor continued to probe the minds of the Drana spies. There was nowhere for them to hide, no escape from his powerful invasion into their heads. He took their minds apart, neurone-by-neurone, cell-by-cell. His age-old enemy had to be prevented from destroying this planet. If that

meant the men who were now being systematically driven insane by him became sacrifices, then so be it! Better that a few die, than millions. Too many innocents had perished at the hands of the Drana and the Khaz; both here on Earth and in other far flung corners of the cosmos. Enough was enough! Hor joined Natasha, Gheorgi, and Lipetski outside.

'They have told me all they can commander. I would suggest you let them out of the cell now. Have someone escort them to the dockyard gates. They are of no further use to us, or the Drana,' he said. The look on Hor's face spoke volumes. Lipetski knew he was in the presence of a very formidable warrior.

The babbling imbeciles were dragged to the gate and thrown out into the street beyond. From now on, they would be relying on their animal instincts to survive, their only thoughts being of food and shelter. The Drana were planning an all out offensive in the coming northern spring. Concentrating on the major capitals of the northern hemisphere, Hanseer's troops would be rapidly deployed across most of Europe. He needed a safe base, free of all resistance and far from the sea.

Minsk was to become the centre of his operations. Khaz controlled concentration camps would increase in number. Whole communities would be turned, echoing what had happened in Belorussia. The hunt for the Nephile base of operations would begin in earnest, once all of Europe was secured. America had proved to be too troublesome. There were too many factions to contend with. Besides, their cosmopolitan background had produced a nation of people who were uncontrollable and volatile. Better to concentrate on the older nations first.

Lars and Vanye surveyed Sevastopol from the hill above. Behind and beyond the range of hills that ran down the eastern side of the peninsula, lay Yalta. They had established a position above both towns. From the two positions, their partisans could keep watch on the Drana activity

below. Daily, transports brought in more commandos and equipment. From the two coastal towns the Drana moved north towards Kharkov in the Ukraine. Despite overwhelming odds, the Ukrainian resistance managed to slow down the Drana convoys. But it was not enough! If the Drana were to be stopped in this part of the world, then help had to arrive now! The partisan army had taken heavy casualties to get here.

In Poland, near the town of Lublin, the Drana had caught an entire contingent of partisans in open country. Drana fighters surprised the men and women, vaporising them where they stood. Fortunately, most of the remaining partisans were further south along the road to Stavnoje inside the Ukrainian border, high in the Carpathian Mountains. Following the line of the mountains south-east, their progress was fraught with danger from not only the Drana, but also the terrain itself. Several fierce storms hit them as they worked their way in single file across treacherous ice-covered rocks. In the white-outs that frequently struck, people stepped off the path into oblivion. Crossing the Prut River near the Moldavian border had proved less difficult than first thought. The ice held for the majority, as they crossed into the Ukraine at Ungeny. Unfortunately, the last few pack-mules disappeared through the ice, taking precious provisions with them to their watery graves.

Working their way across largely open country to Kishinev meant travelling by night, and hiding by day. Drana patrols were everywhere. Constant skirmishes with the patrols further reduced their numbers and their ammunition. The Lithuanian partisans bailed them out on more than one occasion with food and ammunition, taking in and treating their wounded. Vanye was able to enlist fresh troops to take the place of those lost in the hazardous crossing of the Carpathians. Lars set to work to convince the locals to help resist the Drana more than they had in the past. They were now blowing up bridges and railway lines, in an effort to slow the progress of the supply convoys on their northward path.

The ground shook as the barrage of shells landed in the streets of Sevastopol. Fires broke out as ammunition dumps obliterated everything around them. Off the south western coast of the Crimea, Lars saw the puffs of smoke from the massive guns, seconds before the sound reached his position. The fleet had arrived! From behind them, their scouts reported similar activity off Yalta. Lars set off down the hillside with Vanye and the partisans close behind. They worked their way towards the ruined outer buildings of the town. From a rise above the town, a Drana transport tried to take off, only to be hit several times by missiles from the ships of the fleet. Most had little or no effect on its hull. But whether by design or good luck, one found a weak point, disappearing into a vent in the hull. The resultant explosion sent the massive transport spiralling rapidly out of control, towards the staging area in the town below. Sevastopol was under siege once more. This time it would not recover.

A landing party arrived on the shore below the smoking ruin of the town. Lars and Vanye went down to meet them, while their partisans mopped up in the rubble-filled streets. Natasha and Gheorgi greeted them with a hug.

'Lars, Vanye, this is Fyodr Lipetski,' Natasha said. Lars nodded towards the commander. 'Fyodr turned over the command of the Black Sea Fleet to Hor,' she said.

'We have need of urgent medical attention commander. Many of our partisans are in a bad way. The Drana and the terrain have taken their toll,' Lars said, hardly able to raise his head. He had existed on adrenaline for so long his body now gave up. The big man completely exhausted, fell face down on the beach.

Inside the sickbay on board the light cruiser, the medics went about their business administering to the wounded, exhausted, malnourished men and women of the partisans. In both Sevastopol and Yalta, clean-up crews were sent ashore to salvage everything worth taking and to

find, and treat, the wounded civilians caught up in the barrage. Sometimes Lars woke for a split second before lapsing back into unconsciousness once again. He was so exhausted by the events of the past few months. He lay in the narrow bunk surrounded by thirty or forty of his brothers and sisters, he was proud of every one of them.

'Hey, you old bastard, how're you feeling?' Lars opened his eyes. There was Tom smiling down at him. 'Lars I'd like you to meet a mate of mine,' he said with a grin. 'Say g'day to Steve Purcell, don't be put off by the scrambled egg on his cap mate; he's only a bloody admiral and a junior one at that!' Tom said with a laugh. 'Fyodr and Steve saw the error of their ways after Hor banged their heads together. The long and short of it is we now have the combined might of the Black Sea and Sixth Fleets behind us! That'll make Hanseer's eyes water, don't you reckon?' Lars began laughing uncontrollably. It was so good to see the crazy Kiwi again.

CHAPTER 14

Mike looked at the faces of the men and women with him. The smoke from the fire hung suspended in a cloud above it in the still night air. Sparks lifted skyward from time to time, then disappeared from view. Canberra had been an unmitigated disaster. Flying in over the Great Dividing Range, Amsu touched down behind the town of Batlow just south of the Australian capital.

Hiding the ship as best they could the pair turned north, following the road to the capital. With the first rays of the sun breaking through the mist, they watched the Drana activity below their vantage point. A heavily armed Drana commando force surrounded Canberra. No one went in or out of the nation's capital without being checked by the Drana. Mike turned to Amsu.

'He has to be down there, he just has to be. Were else would the bastards have taken him?' Amsu shifted his gaze to the eastern perimeter of the capital. 'I think I see a way for us to get in unnoticed Mike,' he said. Amsu led the way in silence as the pair made their way steadily down towards the eastern perimeter.

Beside an overgrown abandoned golf course, the line of tall Blue Gum trees hid them from immediate view. Beyond the water traps and bunkers of the back nine holes of the course, lay a small shallow gully that would take them to a series of suburban back gardens. If they could reach one of the houses, then perhaps they could hide out until nightfall.

Mike had not seen Doug since he and Tom said goodbye to him, the day he flew from Christchurch to Australia to seek his fortune. Doug did well for himself. He had always been an ambitious man. The Australian army gave him the opportunity to advance at a much quicker rate than its Kiwi counterpart did. By the time he was in his mid thirties, he had risen through the ranks and had been selected for officer training, graduated, seen action in various small skirmishes, and become a colonel in Australia's Ready Reaction Force.

Before the Drana arrived, Doug's last letter to Mike mentioned he was about to be posted to the Federal capital for a time. A desk job was the last thing Doug wanted. But if he was to continue to climb the promotional ladder, he had to bite the bullet! Mike laughed at the thought of Doug behind a desk.

Night fell turning the green oasis to silver from the light of the moon. Drana activity in this part of the capital was practically non-existent. It seemed the Drana were not too concerned with what people did within the confines of the perimeter at all! There was no curfew of any kind. Drana

patrols occasionally stopped a pedestrian to check identification papers. But mostly they concerned themselves with their duties guarding the perimeter. Amsu motioned to Mike.

Across the street, a couple of shadowy figures crept around the front of a house. Stopping for a moment, the figures moved towards a lone Drana standing in the shadow of one of the many small trees along the verge. The Drana did not know what struck him. He was dead before he hit the ground. As silently as they appeared, the pair melted into the shadows of the house. Mike and Amsu ran across the road and to the back of the house. In the moonlight, Mike saw the assassins disappearing over the back fence of the garden. Giving chase, he and Amsu climbed over and followed their path. By the time they caught up with them, Mike realised they were nearing the centre of Canberra. The assassins turned to fight their pursuers. They were no mere amateurs. Mike found himself on the ground with a knife blade biting into his exposed neck.

'What the bloody hell are you doing here!' hissed the assassin. 'Doug?' Once safely inside the basement of the Federal building, Doug led Mike and Amsu through a maze of maintenance tunnels. At the end of a narrow passageway, they turned to the right and began a steady descent towards a vast underground complex. 'Welcome to my humble abode,' said Doug, throwing off his black balaclava. 'Meet what remains of the Australian Defence Staff in Canberra,' he said, motioning to the assembled group of men and women. Introductions done, Mike and Amsu filled in the gaps for Doug and his troops, about what was going on beyond Australia's borders.

Doug in turn, told of the Drana and their fight for control of the largest continent in the Southern Hemisphere. 'They don't always get it their way mate,' he said with a gleam in his eye. 'The good old Anzac fighting spirit kicked the crap out of them when they first landed outside Melbourne. If they'd read up on the history of this century, they'd have known we're some of the

hardest bastards in a fight! We held them in check for a couple of weeks before they finally got the upper hand,' he said, giving Mike a look that said we're not finished by a long way. 'The Navy is stuffed! Those bloody great spaceships sunk em where they lay. Most of the air bases were destroyed within the first couple of days. We lost communication with the outside world on the third day. Every time we managed to establish radio contact with one of the army bases, the bloody Drana destroyed it. They damn near found us down here a couple of nights back!'

'Why have they placed a cordon around Canberra?' Mike asked. 'Simple mate, the bloody politicians have gone over to their side! The bastards welcomed them with open arms. They practically fell over themselves making the Drana commander and the short grey bastard, who came with him, welcome.'

'So, the Drana established their head quarters here. What is the name of the Khaz?' Amsu asked. 'He goes by the name of Nik something.' 'Nikhiz?' said Mike. 'Yeah that's the bloke, nasty little bastard by all accounts. He's set up a concentration camp outside Broken Hill. The Drana are busy rounding up everyone they can find to work the mines there. It's a hell-hole!' 'We know; Tom and Hor managed to destroy the one in India run by Nikhiz' brother Tachket. They rescued Anpu from the place before flattening it with the fire power from the transport!' 'How in the hell can we fight them with conventional weapons Mike? We need some of the Nephile weaponry you're talking about,' said Doug. 'We came here to get some help to drive the Drana from New Zealand. It seems as if we'll have to try and fight them ourselves Doug. You've got your hands full just trying to stay alive mate,' Mike said. 'Perhaps we can help your cause Doug,' said Amsu. 'If you can pinpoint the Drana stronghold here, we may be able to destroy it from the air! We have the same fire-power Hor and Tom used on the Indian camp. If we can co-ordinate our attack with your ground forces, it might be enough for you to regain control once more, what do you say?' 'Amsu

mate, if you weren't so bloody ugly I'd kiss you!' said Doug.

The other members of the ragged band burst into laughter, Mike grinned at Amsu's apprehensive expression. The occupants of the underground room swung into action, making plans of attack, determining routes to be taken through the vast underground maze beneath Australia's capital. The whole operation had to be timed to perfection for it to work! Doug volunteered a couple of 'diggers' to man the guns aboard Amsu's ship. A small force of his troops would be placed on board under Mike's command. Demolition squads slipped from the room into the tunnels to set their deadly traps where the Drana commandos were billeted around the city.

By the time Mike, Amsu and the rest arrived back at the ship most of Doug's team would be in position, waiting for Amsu to strike. When they reached the safety of the tree line beyond the golf course, Mike and his party began the nerve-wracking task of getting past the Drana commandos undetected. The execution of one of their number in the quiet suburban street had placed the entire Drana garrison on alert! Bloody Doug; thanks to his actions a few hours earlier, the whole area surrounding Canberra was alive with commando units thirsting for revenge!

Corporal Des Caulder, formerly of the Catering Corps, now found himself acting as scout for Mike's troops. He froze in his tracks beside the large tree. Beckoning Mike forward, he crouched, semi-auto at the ready. Mike looked to where Des's finger pointed. Drana commandos surrounded the transport! Mike waved Amsu forward. Des indicated how many he could see and where they were, with a quick, precise hand gesture. The rest of the troops silently gathered around the trio. Marking the position of the commandos around the transport, in the dusty soil at his feet, Mike indicated his intentions to the group. This was no place for any kind of fire fight; knives were drawn in readiness.

Like snakes stalking their prey through the undergrowth, the two-man teams identified their targets and waited. Mike stepped forward into the clearing directly in front of the Drana officer. 'Looking for me mate?' he said, lunging his knife into the Drana's throat. The others sprang into action, quickly sending their targets to hell.

Des missed the commandos lightning fast reaction to his presence. He felt the skin of his right arm peel off as the charge from the Drana disrupter rifle hit its target. The knife flew from his hand in a high arc, landing harmlessly on the ground several metres away. The noise from the disrupter echoed around the clearing. Des dived for the Drana's legs, felling him in one of the best rugby tackles never to be seen by the supporters of the game.

Struggling with the heavy commando to gain the advantage, his arm forgotten for the moment, Des resorted to the only tactics he knew. The Drana screamed in pain as the Aussie's large left hand crushed the soft sack of flesh beneath his one-piece uniform. With all the strength he could muster, he twisted and pulled the commandos' scrotum from his body, before passing out from the pain in his right arm.

By the time Des regained consciousness, he found himself being patched up by Amsu aboard the transport. Mike was busy giving the 'diggers' a crash course in the use of particle cannon and plasma torpedoes. The rest of the troops prepared for the onslaught ahead. Providing the sound of the disrupter had not been picked up, they still held the advantage of surprise. Amsu smiled at Des as he finished bandaging his arm.

'Don't worry mate, I've had worse. Thanks Amsu, you're alright for a bloody ET,' he said with a grin. Amsu inclined his head, puzzled by the Aussie's curious turn of phrase. The big left

hand that gripped his in thanks, he understood. But it would take a long time for him to understand the way the Australian's spoke.

The transport rose silently above the bush canopy. Amsu steered towards the city. On his command, the torpedoes and cannon smashed through the fabric of the building housing the Australian Federal government. Doug's troops broke cover and began a deadly last ditch attempt to regain control of the city.

Claymore mines ripped unsuspecting Drana commandos apart while they quickly filed out of their temporary barracks. The transport dropped down to within a couple of metres of the ground allowing Mike and his troops to join in the fight, before rising once again to cause more havoc from the skies.

Doug saw the vast ship move off to the western side of the city, plasma torpedoes carving holes in the Drana ranks, particle cannon spreading death and destruction in the streets. God, what he could do with a squadron of those beauties on his side! The scream from the soldier to his left, whose face was torn off by the blast from a Drana commando's disruptor, brought him back to reality. Mike and the soldiers ran towards the small arms fire coming from the smoking ruin of the parliamentary building complex. Working their way through the rubble, they eventually found themselves caught up in a situation, which was rapidly turning sour. There were far more Drana than Doug had anticipated.

'Amsu, back this way fast,' Mike yelled. 'On my way,' he replied. Then turning to his gunners, he said, 'Mike and Doug need help, we're going back. Concentrate your fire on anyone you don't recognise. And remember, our friends are down in that mess, so be careful - particle cannon only!' The transport hovered briefly over the flaming ruin. 'Where are you Mike?' 'I'm under what's

left of the memorial. As far as I can tell Doug is somewhere near the centre of the complex. Can you get a fix on him Amsu?' 'No I ca...'

The transport erupted into a ball of flaming debris, scattering wreckage across the inner city area. A Drana fighter squadron swept across the city targeting every pocket of resistance they could find. The squadron commander could not believe his luck when the Nephile transport just sat there! Doug watched the transport erupt into a giant fireball of orange flame. In the microsecond before flames engulfed the entire ship, he thought he saw an escape pod break free. The immediate situation was hopeless. He had only two choices, to fight on against hopeless odds, or to run for it and fight another day.

'Mike, over there!' said the soldier, pointing towards where Doug and what was left of his band of clerks, cooks, typists, quartermasters, and medics were fighting for their lives. Mike broke into a run in the direction of the fire, motioning for the rest to follow. He had seen the pod also and noted which direction it went. Providing the pod remained intact, Amsu, and whoever was in the central core at the time, would be safe for the moment.

The Drana commando amused himself with the human kneeling before him, hands on his head. Doug waited for the inevitable. The bastard had surprised him when he came round the corner of the ruined corridor. The blow from the butt of the disrupter had sent him sprawling onto the floor. When he came to his senses moments later, the Drana motioned to him to get to his knees. The bastard was really enjoying the moment! The commando slowly moved behind Doug and cocked the rifle. Half charge would do for now. There was no need to kill the human just yet. Doug felt the muzzle prod the back of his head between his hands and the base of his skull. The commando stepped back and lowered the muzzle, aiming it at Doug's left boot. He had seen what happened to human flesh trapped inside the hide of an animal before. The foot expands and then

explodes, sending a fine spray of flesh and bone flying in all directions. The wounded human writhes around on the floor in agony, waiving what is left of its leg in the air. He loved his work here on this dreary far-flung outpost of the Drana Empire.

The charge from the disrupter hit the wall in front of Doug. Mike grabbed him by the shoulder, dragging him to his feet. 'Come on mate, we're getting the hell out of here!' 'Thanks Mike, I thought that was it,' said Doug, scooping up the Drana disrupter on the way.

Getting to the bush line beyond the city limits proved difficult, the Drana patrols had increased, assisted by the fighter's overhead. From time to time, pockets of resistance could be heard still holding out against the increasing numbers of Drana. But eventually all fell silent, the only sounds coming from the creatures of the night. The bush and the terrain were treacherous in the inky blackness, one step in the wrong direction and your body someday might be found at the bottom of a steep ravine. 'Mmmm.' 'Amsu?' 'Mmmm, Mike, help me plea...' 'Doug! Amsu's down there in the gully.' Mike scrambled down to the bottom.

A huge boulder blocked off most of one end of the narrow gully. When the pod had crashed through the thick canopy of trees, it had hit the boulder, splitting in half, and spreading its contents all around the gully floor. 'Amsu, where are you?' said Mike. 'Here, I'm here.' Doug found Amsu pinned beneath what was left of the pilots console and seat. 'I've found him,' he said. The search continued through the night for survivors.

When the sun's rays broke through the treetops, the crash scene took on a whole new look. It was a wonder anyone had survived at all. Des was still alive, although his left leg was broken above and below his knee. One of the gunners was dead, his chest pierced by a piece of wreckage from the initial blast from the Drana fighter. The other gunner, apart from a small cut above one eye, had

escaped both blast and landing, intact. Amsu was the main worry for the moment.

The medic looked at Mike and shook her head. She had done all she could with what medical gear she had. If he was to survive, he needed immediate emergency surgery. His ribs were crushed, his pelvis fractured. She did not expect him to last the next twenty-four hours. The gully afforded them protection from prying eyes. They could stay for a couple of days in relative safety, away from the Drana. Mike looked at the group as sparks from the fire rose into the night. 'What a bloody disaster!' he said quietly to himself, watching the flickering light from the flames, dance across the weary group of faces. 'But what a bunch of fighters we've turned out to be. I'm proud of all of you. We'll beat the bastards yet!'

CHAPTER 15

Tom had returned to the valley to begin organising resistance groups in New Zealand. Auset stood on the landing apron with Auramooth in her arms as the transport landed. It seemed like an eternity since they had last seen the man they both loved. Tom ran across the short space to embrace them. Gathering up Auramooth, he slipped an arm around Auset's waist and tenderly kissed her cheek. Later as Auset looked at Tom laying asleep in their garden with little Auramooth on his chest she saw how the events, which had taken place, had taken their toll.

Tom's face was no longer relaxed. Instead, she saw the face of a man committed to completing the almost impossible task, which now confronted mankind. As the last rays of sunshine retreated, Auset gently woke Tom. Once Auramooth had been tucked up in bed, Auset and Tom sat silently wrapped in each other's arms.

The next day he met the council. Amun related all that the council new from the sketchy reports coming in from around the world. The problem was no detailed reports could be transmitted, for fear of revealing the whereabouts, not only the groups, but also the valley itself. Tom in turn tried filling in the gaps in Amun's knowledge of the fight for freedom going on worldwide. He also told of Hanseer's intended build-up of troops and ammunition, and of his determination to turn more communities to the Drana side. Amun listened in silence as the Drana intentions were laid out before him.

'Go to your family Tom', said the old man. 'The council must decide what the next step to take should be. For now take a well earned rest, we will call on you soon.'

Jojo perched above the garden in the house at the northern end of the valley watching over Auramooth as she played. Tom sat with his toes in the water at the edge of the rapids below the house. Auset busied herself preparing a meal for her husband and daughter. She had made up her mind to go with him to organise resistance groups throughout the land. Tom had immediately rejected the idea.

The very thought of anything happening to any of his beloved family, particularly Auset and Auramooth was out of the question! Better that they remained here in the relative safety of the valley. It was bad enough that while he snatched a few precious moments with them, the rest of his brothers and sisters were out there fighting for their very existence. No, no way was Auset setting foot outside the valley!

Auset gave him a look he had never seen before; she stood directly in front of him, hands on hips, her dark black eyes flashing with anger! Now here he was, sitting beside the water like a

chastened child sulking, angry with himself, and cursing the Drana for what they had done. This had been the first time an angry word had been uttered between them. They sat eating the meal in silence; the only sound came from Auramooth as she devoured her food and fed Jojo from her plate.

The next day, Amun sent for Tom. 'Word has come from outside,' said Amun. 'The Drana have shifted their gaze to these islands. You must convince the population outside to resist. I fear they are looking for our valley,' he said. 'We need to delay their advance towards us. The council have made their decision to begin the countdown by initiating the second of the processes,' he said, with a note of resignation in his voice. So, the mergiddon device was to be shut down! 'Amun, is there no other way?' Tom asked. 'Sadly, no,' the old man replied, slumping in his chair. 'How long do we have before the seventh process begins?' 'A few weeks no more than five or six at best,' Amun continued. 'The valley will survive. We must get all our people back here or at least to places of safety on the planets surface,' he said. An awful thought crossed Tom's mind. 'Yes Tom,' said Amun to Tom's unspoken realization of what was to come. 'I am afraid it is the only way. For it to work there are certain tactical plans which must be carried out, Hor will help you to achieve them,' he said straightening up, once more in control.

Hor sat in the garden. Not even Auramooth could make him smile. The news of Natasha's death had felled the great warrior. Auset went to her brother to comfort him. The only thing that mattered now was to revenge his sweet Natasha.

She had returned to her beloved Belorussia with a group of her best resistance fighters to assassinate the president. The Drana occupation force had largely stood down owing to the turning of the population. There were a few pockets of resistance within the country's borders, and it was to their unspoken appeal that Natasha and her band had reacted.

In her haste to rid the country of the traitor, Natasha was a woman possessed. Even thoughts of her beloved Hor were pushed to the farthest reaches of her mind as she focused on the task. With the help of one of the local resistance groups, entry into the presidential palace was achieved. The ease with which they moved towards the private apartment of the president did not register with her, or members of her group. By the time the trap was sprung, it was too late. A microsecond before the Drana officers' disrupter ended her life, thoughts of Hor and the valley flooded back.

When the council had recalled him to the valley, Hor had brought news of Hanseer and his plans. The 'Babbalia and Sumari' led by Amal and Farsi had been wiped out in a pitch battle with overwhelming Drana forces outside Baghdad. They had been completely taken by surprise. Amal had been captured and handed over to Nikhiz for interrogation. Before he died, Amal revealed information concerning the whereabouts of the valley.

When Nikhiz told Hanseer the news, he shifted his gaze to the islands that made up New Zealand. The Drana until now had only kept a small force here. New Zealand was considered no threat by Hanseer. Living so far away from the rest of the world, the population tended towards a head in the sand approach to what was going on elsewhere. The Drana commandos' presence was accepted as inevitable. The Drana made no demands of them. Life went on. Indeed the pacifist government had welcomed them. A few young hot heads had made futile attempts at sabotage when they had first arrived. When examples were made of them, things quietened down. New Zealand had become a backwater on the world's stage once more.

Tom and Hor sat in the garden of the house at the northern end of the valley. Auset had suggested that Hor be taken there. She could do no more for her brother. He had retreated beyond his sister's tender loving care. Nothing she did or said consoled him. Tom had told him of his plans

to organise resistance groups outside the valley and Hor had leapt at the chance. Now as the two men sat planning their strategy for what lay ahead, Tom saw a new side of Hor's personality emerge, one frankly that unnerved him. There was a grim determination in his brother-in-law almost as if he did not give a damn about his existence anymore; only the destruction of the Drana and the Khaz mattered.

The valley outside was quiet. The rain lashed the pair as they made their way towards the road. After the long journey, the cattle truck pulled up in Cathedral Square in the centre of Christchurch. Tom thanked the farmer for the ride. They found a car hire company. Using a credit card to obtain a car instead of merely influencing the thoughts of the assistant at the hire company seemed old fashioned somehow to Tom. But any use of his new abilities could arouse suspicion, and probably be reported to the Drana.

They drove north towards Picton in the Marlborough Sounds, reaching the small town in the early morning. After snatching a few hours sleep, while Hor had a meal, Tom bought tickets for the next ferry crossing to Wellington. The beauty of the Marlborough Sounds and the Cook Strait was lost on Hor, even the entrance into Wellington harbour made no impression on him. All he could think about was revenge!

As they drove through the nation's capital, it was as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Drana patrols mingled with the pedestrians. Laughter and chatter could be heard. Newspaper sellers sold copies of the Dominion and the New Zealand Herald to people as they went about their business. Mothers with their children in tow shopped. Anger arose in Tom as they drove out of the city.

The car steadily drove northward towards the centre of the North Island. That night as they slept in the motel on the northern shore of Lake Taupo, the second process back in the valley was well under way. By mid morning, Hor and Tom reached Hamilton in the Waikato province. From there it was only an hour and a half before they reached the largest of New Zealand's cities – Auckland. Here was the highest concentration of the country's population, just over a million. It would be here that they would begin their work.

For several days while Tom began recruiting, Hor carefully observed the Drana occupying forces. Soon he had a picture of the build-up that was gathering momentum in readiness for an all-out assault on the valley far to the south. While Hanseer did not know the precise location yet, it would only be a matter of time before he gained the knowledge. Nikhiz was busily gathering intelligence while Hanseer redeployed the fleet overhead to concentrate all his resources in his quest to end the Nephile once and for all. Daily, cargo vessels brought more commandos and their equipment down from the fleet.

Tom's initial attempts at recruiting were met with apathy. The good old antipodean's 'she'll be right' attitude, was at first a stumbling block. But as the Drana build-up gathered momentum together with Nikhiz' methods of intelligence gathering, rumblings of discontent began among the general population. Both Tom and Hor were now working around the clock training the new recruits in the gentle art of sabotage. The Hunua range made an excellent location for honing the skills of these latest members to the Nephile cause. Situated to the south of the city and relatively close to the Hauraki Gulf and the Firth of Thames, ensured they were not disturbed by Drana patrols.

In the coming days, preparations were made for raids on the Drana supply dumps that

sprang up all round the city. Tom headed south to Wellington to get things moving there while Hor remained in Auckland to oversee operations. The groups formed from the nation's capital learned their deadly trades high above the city in the Tararua range to the north. It would be from here that they put into practise their new-found skills. By blowing up bridges, derailing trains and ambushing Drana supply convoys that daily came south.

At first, the acts of sabotage were a mere annoyance to Hanseer. But, as they increased in intensity, Hanseer's fury was unleashed on the people of the two cities. His troops carried out indiscriminate executions in response to his orders. Nikhiz interrogated at random. A total curfew was placed on the cities population. Anyone caught outside their home was executed on the spot. Still the saboteurs went about their business.

Hor joined Tom, satisfied with the work his people were achieving. And together they moved to Christchurch to once again establish groups there in the largest of the South Island cities.

It was while the Christchurch resistance cells were being trained on Banks Peninsula that Tom and Hor learned of Hanseer's first effort to unsettle the Nephile stronghold. Daily more and more people joined the resistance movement. The acts of sabotage were stepped up. Word spread across the nation. Roads were torn up, bridges blown, people failed to turn up for work. Soon the Drana found it almost impossible to move without one group or another biting at their heels. Hanseer's response came without warning. The combined fire-power of the fleet was directed on Auckland. The few who survived the blast from above, found themselves looking at a lunar landscape. The city was no more. It was as if it had never existed. Auckland had been vaporised right down to the volcanic bedrock it had stood on.

There was of course, no response by the valley. But the country did. Now the entire population rose up and began to fight the Drana in any way they could with whatever they had to hand. Hanseer's fleet next struck the nations' capital Wellington making it a wasteland. The Drana forces on the ground were also caught up in the destruction of the two major cities in the North Island. The few surviving commandos were cut off from the fleet with no way out.

Christchurch was the next target for destruction. The beautiful 'Garden City' disappeared in the blink of an eye. Nikhiz' reports of the land based commandos losses angered Hanseer. But one report, for the moment, did halt his wholesale destruction of the cities below. A Nephile leader had been captured in the hand-to-hand fighting in the city of Dunedin. Nikhiz had insisted that Hanseer come down to interrogate the prisoner himself.

The door to the cell was thrown open. Hanseer stood in the doorway looking at Nikhiz' prize. 'Guard bring her out,' said Nikhiz. Hardly able to contain himself, Nikhiz presented the prisoner to Hanseer. 'My Lord, I give you the Nephile female Auset, sister of Hor!' Hanseer's face remained emotionless, only his eyes gave away his joy. Here was the key to finding the accursed valley, which had been a thorn in the side of his beloved emperor Dranaa Nazir.

Auset had followed Tom and Hor when they left the valley. She had started organising resistance groups among the farmers of the Central Otago and Southland regions, preferring to stay away from the cities.

Tom had told her about the farmers, who were the backbone of the nation and the descendants of the pioneers who had settled the land. A tough breed whose ancestors had come here from the northern hemisphere in the middle of the nineteenth century, fought in wars in far off

places for 'Queen and Country' in the days of the old British Empire. Above all, they were survivors, able to turn their hand to whatever task or obstacle that arose. It was from these people that the nation had gained its reputation around the world.

Auset had been trapped when her raiding party had been taken by surprise in an abortive attempt to stop the Drana advance to the south of Dunedin. An unarmed column of Drana vehicles was heading south towards Invercargill when they were stopped by an ambush laid by Auset's group. The few commandos in the column were shot, and the content of the vehicles, mainly arms and ammunition, was spirited back into the hills. On their way to their temporary base camp, Drana commandos cutting across country ambushed Auset's group. In the fire fight that ensued, she was cut off from her friends. The Drana sergeant realised he had one of the accursed Nephile in his grasp and had her transferred to Nikhiz' makeshift headquarters in the Dunedin town hall.

Nikhiz enjoyed his talks with his new guest. Auset was subjected to the usual barbaric range of Khaz torture. But she had proved to be a tough nut to crack. This one was more than a match for his normal interrogation techniques. The electrodes burnt her flesh as the electrical current coursed through her. Under the beatings, she was subjected to on an hourly basis, which scarred her body, only once had she weakened. In her pain, she had cried out the names of the two men she loved most.

When he had given her to the Drana guards for their pleasure, she had not said anything more. Now Auset's broken body lay on the floor at Hanseer's feet. He sat for a long time staring down at the woman before him. Despite what she had endured at the hands of Nikhiz and the Drana guards, this female was to be admired. Hanseer realised that by now Hor would have sensed what had happened to his sister. She was the bait he needed to draw him into the open. Hanseer's

personal medic treated Auset's wounds, and she was sent to his flagship, where she was housed in his quarters. Guards were placed outside the door with strict orders to let no one near her.

Hor's anguished cry took Tom by surprise, then he felt Auset's presence close at hand. Why hadn't she stayed in the valley with Auramooth? They had enough to contend with, without worrying about the woman they both loved. The city of Dunedin lay below them bathed in moonlight. Both men waited impatiently for the first sign of action by their well-trained demolition team who were approaching from the harbour.

The shadows between the buildings surrounding the Octagon in the centre of the city swallowed the determined men and women of the assault groups as they prepared to invade the Town Hall. From their vantage point above the city, Tom and Hor could see Hanseer's personal transport under guard in the grounds of the university close by. Even now, a small squad of their best fighters were waiting to pounce on the unsuspecting guards.

The oil tanks erupted in a ball of fire that engulfed the buildings close by. It was the signal to begin the assault. Fierce fighting broke out in and around the Town Hall. Hanseer's commandos were caught napping by the sudden attack. The guards in the university grounds were overpowered and their places hastily taken by the fighters. Inside the town hall, Hanseer ordered his entire assault force to descend from the fleet.

Nikhiz retreated to Hanseer's transport where the guards quickly captured the loathsome creature, bundling him into a small cargo space. Hor and Tom by this time, had reached the town hall, caught up in the assault. Leaving Tom to conduct a frontal attack on the building, Hor and his band made their way to the rear. The fighters outside the building turned their attention to the

surrounding streets as Drana reinforcements arrived. Tom's party gained entry into the building and began fighting room by room with the elite who made up Hanseer's personal bodyguard.

Hanseer made his way through the basement of the town hall to the small door, which led into the alley behind. The blow from a disruptor rifle's butt felled him. Hor and his party vanished into the shadows, making their way to the rear of the university. The transport approached the flagship and settled in the landing bay.

Only a skeleton crew remained aboard the vast fleet. After all, nothing on the blue planet below could harm it. Hanseer and his personal guard made their way to his quarters. In the time, it took to return to the ship Hor had extracted Auset's location.

The sight of his beloved sister here in Hanseer's quarters broken by Nikhiz' cruelty, made him cry out in pain and anger. The foul stench emanating from Nikhiz filled the lavish room. In a blind rage, Hor tore the pathetic creature limb from limb; his crumpled grey body lay in its own filth on the carpet. His anger now turned on Hanseer. The fighters had never seen him so angry. Hanseer's mind was taken apart piece by piece. What was left was but a husk of the former Drana Commander.

Gently gathering up his sister in his arms, Hor, and the fighters returned to the landing bay. Telling them to guard her with their lives, he retreated inside the cavernous flagship. Making his way to the bridge, Hor found what he was looking for. Opening the panel, he inserted Hanseer's two keys and punched in the command. There would be enough time to get Auset back to the valley, but only just enough. The countdown had begun up here above the planet, as well as below.

CHAPTER 16

The transport landed on the apron in front of the hanger, back in the valley. Auset was taken to the medical facility, where the staff immediately went to work on repairing the damage caused by Nikhiz' cruelty, while Hor went to find Amun. His fighters had never seen the valley before. They wandered around the city awestruck. Amun sat listening to Hor's account of the past few days. He told of the wholesale destruction of the cities outside and of the massed landing of Hanseer's troops. The news that both Nikhiz and Hanseer were now out of the picture did nothing to ease Amun's mind. By now, the fifth process was under way and nothing Hor had said altered Amun's resolve concerning the close-down of the mergiddon.

Daily, reports were coming in from the other groups throughout the world. Most of the Drana commando units had been withdrawn back to the fleet to concentrate their efforts here. Only token forces remained, which had been overcome by local resistance groups. Now with Hanseer gone it mattered little, the Drana would stop at nothing in their hunt to find and destroy the valley.

The battle, which now raged into the late evening in the Mosgiel hills behind Dunedin, was steadily turning in favour of the Drana. Tom and his band found themselves driven back by the overwhelming number of Drana commandos. The fact his beloved Auset was once again safe in the valley eased his mind. But for the moment, all that mattered was survival. The Drana advance in the general direction of the valley had to be delayed.

The abrupt increase in light briefly brought the battle to a halt. Both human and Drana alike stood aghast as all witnessed the destruction of the fleet high above in the coldness of space. For

what seemed an eternity, they watched as pieces of the once mighty armada entered the atmosphere and burnt up; leaving fire trails across the evening sky.

Behind the cloaking system, the residents of the valley also witnessed the fleet's demise. Amun and the council said goodbye to Hor and his fighters as they set off for the northern end of the valley. They could not risk using the transport again for fear of giving away the valley's location.

Tom gathered his now considerable force together, taking advantage of the temporary lull in the fighting. Following long forgotten pathways through the hills, the group steadily made their way south-west towards the valley. It would be a long arduous journey now they were on the run. But Tom knew that if Amun's plan was to succeed, the Drana forces had to be drawn away from their supply base, which they had established back in Dunedin. And, knowing they no longer had the fleet to back them up would place extra strain on the Drana leadership trapped down here on earth.

All along the way at irregular intervals, small units of Tom's fighters dropped behind to delay the oncoming Drana commando units.

Central Otago at this time of year was one of the coldest places in the entire country. With lookouts posted in the frost-covered hills around the makeshift camp, Tom and his patrol leaders sat making their plans, while the fighters feasted on the remains of the barbecued mutton from the night before, courtesy of the flock that roamed through the camp.

A soft 'Cooeee' uttered by the lookout announced Hor's arrival from the ridge to the south. Hor brought news of the struggle in other parts of the world. The sixth process was now under way; time was short. They had to return to the valley immediately.

Tom told Hor of the plan to draw out and divide the oncoming Drana forces by sending parties to the south, south-east and south-west. When the situation had been explained to the battle-hardened fighters, there had been no shortage of volunteers. The group heading south would first back track to ensure the Drana caught their scent before heading for Southland and the town of Bluff on the extreme southern coast of the South Island. A stand would be made in Invercargill just to the north before retreating to the relative safety of Bluff harbour.

Hor would head south-west to the valley while Tom would lead the remaining group south-east toward Balclutha before turning west and home across Southland's farmland to the relative safety of the South Westland National Park and to the valley. The 'Southern' party said their goodbyes and departed in the direction of the Drana. A little while later Tom and his group headed towards Balclutha and the east coast, Hor led the way back towards the valley via the pass west of the Garvie mountain range.

Don O'Grady was a thirty-five year old farmer from Middlemarch. He played county rugby and had tried out for the 'Junior All Blacks' a couple of times. Now as he lead the group toward the Drana, his healthy life style, and fitness combined with his natural leadership qualities, made him the ideal candidate for what lay ahead. Don's group was largely made up of men and women who enjoyed the outdoor way of life, policemen, forestry workers, deer cullers, Department of Conservation field workers, shepherds, and farmers. They knew they were probably on a suicide mission, but what the hell – they had the advantage of knowing the terrain far better than the damned Drana! Plus they had a score to settle. Auset had been their leader with Don acting as her second in command.

Soon the hunt was on again. The scout crumpled as the bullet from Don's deer rifle

practically decapitated him. The commandos set off in hot pursuit as they were led back to the camp-site. By the time they arrived, Don and his fighters had turned south and were disappearing over the ridge. The Drana officer momentarily stopped the chase as he surveyed the land around the site. The plan worked.

The Drana invasion force divided into three and began following the footsteps still clear on the frost-covered grass. Don's pursuers were finding the going difficult. They were not used to the slippery conditions of the grassy slopes. They had abandoned all vehicles in their hasty departure from Dunedin, thinking they would soon track down their quarry in the hills behind the city. Now they found themselves in a vast area with few roads and precious little cover.

Leaving the small settlement of Lawrence behind them, Don's group headed toward the Clutha River. Picking their way carefully across the rivers braids, they stopped on the opposite bank to await the advancing Drana. The light was fading when the first commandos came into sight on the opposite bank. As they began to wade across the river, Don's group opened fire. The Drana retreated to the relative safety of the bank. Leaving a couple of people to delay the crossing, Don and the remainder continued south to Clinton.

After a couple of days, they crossed over into Southland. Just outside Wyndham on the banks of the Mataura River, they lay in wait yet again. With each of these delaying ambushes, their numbers dwindled as people were left behind, never to be seen again. But if it meant that the Drana numbers were reduced, it was worth the sacrifice.

The sun was at its noon position when the Drana commandos were spotted. This time, the gorge through which the river ran, slowed them down. Some of Don's fighters had blown the one

remaining bridge to be found for kilometres in either direction. It took over six hours to construct and use a makeshift bridge to cross the river. Many commandos perished under the deadly sniper fire of Don's group. By the time they reached the southern side of the river, most of Don's fighters had once again moved on.

When the lights of Invercargill came into view, the Drana officer had less than two hundred commandos left. The house to house fighting gradually moved south through the city as the Drana numbers were reduced. By now, the residents of the city had joined with Don's fighters. Many people were killed, or severely wounded by the murderous effects of the Drana disruptors. But it allowed Don to reach Bluff. With what remained of his gallant band, he prepared to make his stand in the large buildings that housed the aluminium smelter.

All entry points except for one were mined or booby-trapped. The Drana obliged the defenders by falling for the ruse and charged toward the large smelting hall. Once inside, the doors were shut behind them at either end of the smelting line and blocked by heavy bulldozers. There was no escape. Large pots containing hundreds of tonnes of molten aluminium were suspended above the floor by overhead gantries. When the button in the control room was pressed, all pots released their rain of liquid death over the remaining Drana, held there by sniper fire. Auset was revenged.

Hor and his group had been steadily climbing the slopes of Double Cone at the northern most point of the Garvie Mountains. The pursuing Drana commandos were only just beginning the long dangerous climb. Hampered by the combination of sniper fire from Hor's men plus the snowstorm, which now engulfed the range together with the mini avalanches that rained down on them from above, made the going extremely arduous for the Drana. Hor now turned west toward the

Remarkable range.

Night had fallen, as had the temperature, which was by now well below freezing. If Hor and his fighters were finding the going tough, the Drana found it almost impossible. Many perished during the night from the effects of hypothermia. The Drana Commander had driven them to exhaustion by his need to eliminate Hor and his fighters. Both groups huddled in hastily dug snow caves as the storm raged outside.

Morning arrived and the storm had gone, so had Hor and his men, heading south along the range. By the time the Drana were on the move once more, their numbers were severely reduced. Now there were only about sixty left from the original thousand who had split away to chase Hor. They silently cursed the planet that had claimed so many of their brothers as the Commander surveyed the peaks, which lay ahead.

By mid afternoon, Hor's group arrived at Kingston situated at the southern most end of Lake Wakatipu. As dusk approached, they had found shelter in the foothills of the Eyre Mountains to the south-west. From their vantage point, they could see what was left of the Drana commandos, steadily moving closer across the valley floor. Once again, the weather closed in. Torrential rain turned the streams into roaring rivers, cutting the valley into temporary islands and reducing the visibility to only a few metres. Despite the weather, Hor and his men pressed on climbing to the top of the range. At Jane Peak, the fighters stopped to rest, and, Hor included, turned in for the night.

The trail left by Hor's' group up the mountain made it easy for their pursuers to follow. Eventually the trail ran cold as the bush line gave way to exposed rocks just below the summit. In the inky blackness of the night, the commandos made camp. The Commander had to admit defeat,

at least for the moment. To go any further with his greatly reduced number would be suicide, even for him!

As the first rays of light appeared out of the sky to the east, the Commander roused his men. Carefully picking their way up the slippery rocks the Drana drew closer to the summit. A few metres below the top their progress ground to a halt below a rock overhang. To its right a small crack lead up from where they stood. The commander motioned to the commando nearest to begin the climb. His hand felt the ledge at the top of the crack. Carefully he hauled himself up and peered over it. The hail of small arms fire that hit him sent his now lifeless body tumbling back down the crack, where it came to rest upside down, suspended by a boot. The Drana commandos were trapped. When they tried going back down the rifle fire from above cut them to pieces. All went quiet for a few moments. Then an explosion from above dislodged the overhang, carrying the remaining Drana to their death far below in gnarled tree trunks of the bush. Satisfied, Hor and his men turned towards the south-west and the valley. The rest was up to Tom and his band of freedom fighters to the south-east and Amun back in the valley.

CHAPTER 17

Toms progress across country to Balclutha had been hampered by Drana patrols in hot pursuit of Dons' group. Turning east towards the coast and just south of Lake Waihola their progress was temporarily stopped. Drana convoys choked State Highway 1 south towards Balclutha. The few remaining Drana fighters circled overhead trying to locate and destroy any pockets of resistance in the area. Hastily patched up transporters moved men and ammunition south-west in readiness for a final assault on the valley when it was located. Beside the pack that

hunted them, they now found themselves surrounded by the entire Drana assault force!

Once night had descended, whispered instructions were passed down the line and Tom led the way to the coast. At least there, they would be relatively safe from the ground-based troops. By morning, they had the mouth of the Clutha river at Kaitangata in sight. Turning inland to follow the river back up stream, they carefully approached the outskirts of Balclutha. The townsfolk had been turned out and were being interrogated about Tom's whereabouts. Most, if not all of the people of this small town knew nothing, and paid the price. Disrupters melted flesh indiscriminately. Even if they had known anything about Tom and his fighters, none would have given them away. In the past few months, the exploits of the Nephile-human defence of the planet had filtered through and gladdened the hearts of the general populace.

At the point where the river was joined by a tributary, Tom and his group followed it to the west. At Kelso, they left the river and headed south-west to the Mataura. By now the Drana build up in the Waimea plain, was growing hourly. Their pursuers seemed for the moment to have given up and joined the vast camp, which now covered the entire area that stretched from Gore in the east to Winton in the west, south to Hedghope and north to Lumsden.

Near Waikaka, they turned north west hiding by day, travelling by night. Occasional patrols came close to where they hid during the daylight hours. At Waikara, they turned west towards Lumsden. By now, the Drana fighters were flying a grid pattern in search of the valley. Transports lifted off from the vast base to drop patrols in the beech forests to the west that were part of the South Westland National Park. Skirting the town, they followed the banks of the Oreti river north for a couple of nights before turning west towards Lake Manapouri.

Mountains surround the vast lake. To the south the Hunter Mountains, and to the north stretched the Kepler range, while to the west the Kaherekoau and Heath. It was to the Heath range that Tom and his party now trekked along the southern shore of the lake. By daybreak, Tom could see the familiar entry point to the valley beyond. Drana activity increased around them. All along the shoreline, Drana patrols searched the terrain, while overhead the fighters continued their relentless search pattern. Small advance camps were set up to house the steady increase of new arrivals from the base in the Waimea.

As dusk fell, the sleeping band of fighters awoke. They broke camp and silently began heading south-west along the ridge towards Dusky Sound. When they were less than half a kilometre from the entry point, the sound of disrupter fire halted their progress. Hugging the shadows as best they could, Tom and the men and women of his group crept forward. Less than a hundred metres ahead a fire fight was under way

'Glad you're here Tom. See if you can get above us and pick them off – be quick now.' Hor's unspoken request made Tom jump. So the great warrior had been caught with his pants down! For a brief moment Tom saw the funny side of his brother-in-laws predicament. 'Coming mate!' he said. 'Spread out and open fire Hor needs our help,' Tom ordered.

Below them, the muzzle flashes of disruptors gave away the location of the Drana commandos. As the fight took its toll of both sides, a Drana fighter flew over the ridge and joined in firing on Tom and Hor's' positions. The particle cannon ripped apart the scrub and rocks of the ridge, sending superheated shards flying in all directions. On one pass, the fighter suddenly erupted into a million tiny pieces that slowly floated down the side of the valley. A lucky shot had entered the air intake and seized the engine. The ground began to shake yet again, but this time it was not

the fighter's particle cannon, it was an earth tremor! The seventh process was almost complete.

The defence of the cave mouth leading to the valley intensified as more and more Drana arrived. While Tom and the fighters held the commandos at bay, Hor retreated inside to unlock the rock door. 'Tell everyone to withdraw back towards me,' shouted Hor from the depths of the tunnel.

An orderly withdrawal began with Tom and a couple of his best shots remaining just inside the cave. The seismic activity increased. Hor was now outside the opposite end of the tunnel on the path overlooking the northern end of the valley. The fighters poured out of the tunnel and formed around Hor. A massive tremor occurred knocking everyone to the ground. As the dust settled, a deathly silence gripped the assembled men and women. No sound could be heard from the battle outside.

Hor went back into the tunnel returning soon after, his face grim. 'They are trapped on the other side my friends,' he said, in a quiet voice. They filed down the pathway to the house in silence, Hor leading the way. As they drew near, Auset emerged carrying Auramooth. Running to her brother, she hugged him and then looked at his face. 'No,' she said, 'it can't be so Hor. I know he's still alive.'

At that moment one of the fighters pointed towards the pyramid at the other end of the valley, the mergiddon ceased to function. Auset fell against her brother's chest sobbing. Little Auramooth began crying. Jojo perched in silence above the assembled crowd. As they made their way along the valley floor towards the city carried by the herd of Ankylosaur, the earthquakes intensified. After what seemed an eternity, they finally reached the base of the pyramid and began the climb to the top.

Later, after they had entered the city and the fighters had been billeted and fed, Hor and Auset sat with Amun in Auset's garden, while Jojo watched over his little friend Auramooth.

All around the world the seismic activity increased causing massive damage. Whole cities and towns disappeared beneath the surface into liquefied ground. Fires broke out setting light to millions of hectares of land. Bridges collapsed; road surfaces became impassable because of the large cracks that appeared. Railway lines buckled. Vehicles smashed into each other blocking roads. Gas mains ruptured; power lines snapped spitting high voltage electrical sparks at whoever or whatever was nearby. Then all went quiet. Inside the garden Amun sat in silence looking at the brother and sister before him.

'Soon it will begin. Don't worry, the valley will survive,' he said, getting to his feet. 'I must return to the council we have much to do – farewell.'

Outside the valley for a moment all seemed calm. Around the entrance to the valley, the bodies of several hundred dead Drana commandos lay amongst the living. Then the earth gradually began tilting.

At first as the angle increased, both the living and the dead were tipped into the valley below. Then the motion stopped and the earth swung back in the opposite direction to stop once more. A deathly silence ensued. For a few moments, a bird began singing in the undergrowth. The Drana, who had managed to cling onto something when the tilting happened, watched as the sea retreated away from the coast draining Dusky Sound and the other inlets in moments. Some climbed to the top of the ridge and looked to the east. A similar situation was occurring there as well.

Again, silence descended. Then the wind began to pick up exceeding hurricane speeds in a matter of minutes. The terrified Drana on the ridge clung to the rocks for their lives as they watched the cause of the wind increase in size and speed smashing everything in its path, drowning anything that lived. The first giant tsunami reached the mountains from the Tasman Sea before smashing into its Pacific cousin, washing away the last remnant of the Drana on the eastern side of the ridge. All across the planet, countless tsunami wreaked havoc along the coastal plains and low-lying areas deep inland. Vast continents changed shape forever as the seawater swept everything before it. New seas were created where before vast heavily populated regions had existed. The Earth tilted once more, this time ninety degrees then stopped for good.

Auset turned and looked to the top of the pyramid then ran out into the street. Hor gathered up Auramooth and ran after her. By the time she had reached the apron, outside the vast hanger at the pyramids base, a crowd had gathered. Two fighters parted the crowd as Auset approached.

'G'day - miss me?'

Auset clung to Tom like a limpet, not daring to let him go. Auramooth held out her arms as Hor handed his niece to Tom. For a few moments, the four hugged each other. Later back at their home after Auramooth had finally gone to sleep, Tom related what had happened after the retreat began.

Just as Tom and his two companions were about to turn and run back through the tunnel, the roof collapsed behind them. With no way into the valley, they decided to take as many of the Drana with them as they could. Acting like men possessed, the trio broke out of the cave entrance and began to climb to the ridge firing as they went.

On the way up, another much larger earthquake occurred splitting the rock they sheltered behind. The rock tumbled down the ridge taking all before it. But where it had stood, a small space hardly wide enough to crawl through was now revealed. One of Tom's companions peered into it and said he could see daylight down there. So they dropped down into the space, with Tom bringing up the rear. No sooner had they reached the bottom than the tilting began to happen, sealing them in.

After the motion ceased, one of the fighters lit his cigarette lighter. In the weak light of the flame, Tom saw where they were. By the time the Earth tilted for the final time, the trio were out of the tunnel safe and sound at the northern end of the valley. Because they were so tired and the seismic activity was still occurring, they stayed the night in the house on the hill.

'But if the Earth has tilted ninety degrees on its axis,' said one of the fighters, 'why hasn't this valley done the same?' Amun looked across the council room at the assembled crowd of newcomers.

'A long time ago when we first came to this part of the planet to hide from the Drana and Khaz, we needed an impregnable, indestructible base. The valley was young then, part of the vast southern continent you call Gondwanaland. With our technology, it was possible not only to hide the valley with our force fields, but also raise it a few millimetres from the bedrock on which it sat, in effect completely sealing it off from the rest of the landmass. So when the mergiddon was shut down, the planets natural reaction was to try and right itself back to the position it had adopted aeons before. Because the valley was always afloat, it simply rode out the storm in its protective cocoon.'

'This isn't the first flood then is it?' 'No child,' said Amun, in response to the question from a young girl. 'There was one other. The circumstances were exactly the same as now, the planet and all that lived here were under threat from the Drana and Khaz just as we were, except the earth was tilted in the opposite direction that time, creating the landmasses your familiar with. This time,' said the old man, 'hopefully will be a turning point for this planet, a new beginning for all.'

Amun slumped down in his chair; he was beginning to feel his age. The last nine hundred and eighty three years had been fraught with problems. Maybe it was time for the council to vote in a new leader...

EPILOGUE

The power of the mergiddon was restored and the valley and its inhabitants returned to normal. Because of the increase in numbers, a new colony was established on the now ice-free Antarctic continent. Most of the new arrivals together with some of the council members and a core group made up from the various technical areas in the city moved to the new colony. The poles were now situated in what once had been the American continent and Asia.

Auset, Auramooth, Tom, and Jojo moved to the other end of the valley to live in the house on the hill. Mary and Hor, much to the delight of Lisa and Tony moved in together. The children would never forget their father Mike. He like countless millions had perished, when three quarters of the worlds' surface was inundated by the massive waves.

Lars and his group moved to what once had been the Swiss Alps thanks to the warning from

the valley. They established a new colony in the islands that now stood where the European continent had once been.

Domingo, Nuit, and Reyes together with a few other survivors eventually joined them and settled there. Teth, Seket and their families moved to the Antarctic colony. Anpu was elected to head the council with his brother Seb as his deputy. Amun died peacefully in his sleep, mourned by all.

Hor, Tom, Mary, and Auset stood on the ridge looking out over the new horizon, while Jojo circled overhead. Auramooth, Lisa, and Tony fed clumps of grass to the Ankylosaurs. In the distance, a snow capped island sat like a jewel in the late evening sunshine. Once Mount Cook had been the highest peak in the Southern Alps, now it was one of a new chain of islands.

Inside the battered escape pod in the darkness of space, the door to the stasis chamber began to close. The homing device was operational, the emergency beacon turned on. As his dark eyes closed, Shanath the sole Drana survivor and nephew of the late Hanseer knew he would be found in the future and revived to tell his tale. His uncle would be revenged!

To be continued...