

REDEMPTION

THE ADVENT

KIMON ALEXANDER

It may be – I hope it is – redemption, to guess and perhaps perceive that the universe, the hell which we see for all its beauty, vastness, majesty, is only part of a whole, which is quite unimaginable.

William Golding

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info@quickfox.co.za
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PROLOGUE

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

William Shakespeare (Hamlet)

The bright sign flashed in the dark void above the central podium. At the same time, a holographic image of the third planet orbiting the Sun hovered above the assembled delegates, as if a new world had suddenly been created. The sign, made of illuminated purple smoke, circled the illusory globe like a ribbon, moving from the North to the South Pole, shifting its axis along the equator and back towards the poles.

The clear image resembled a photograph taken from a satellite in close orbit. The blue waters of the oceans dominated the globe. The shapes of the continents were distinct, except where obscured by the white, cotton-like clouds scattered over the surface. It was a sight the delegates had seen often. It was also the reason for consternation among many of those present. They had faced the same predicament several times.

All eyes were fixed on the inscription:

SOL III – FINAL DECISION

A consensual sigh was sensed rather than heard. For a very long time, voice communication had taken second place to thought interaction in the life of the Valdors. The sigh was widespread and spontaneous. The council had debated Sol III for ages, and the result always was that a final decision had to be made. They wished it could, in fact, be the Final Solution. Had it not been for

the undisputed law, there would be no Sol III to contemplate and the delegates could carry on with more constructive debates.

During the countless eons that the Valdors had been entrusted with their vigilance, the unrecorded law had been well established. The Final Solution, which meant complete and utter annihilation, could be implemented only by a unanimous vote of the council. In matters concerning Sol III, this unanimity had so far eluded them. They were all hoping that this time, at last, the trend would be reversed.

Valianx stood in the middle of the podium amongst 14 other consuls, his head slightly bowed – evidence that the immeasurable time he had expended on leading the council was beginning to take its toll.

The faint pink aura that emanated from the core of his being was only just discernable amidst the dominating white hue surrounding each of the other consuls. The color of his aura was constantly changing intensity along the edges, betraying his inner conflict. The variations were unnoticed by the gathering. It took an experienced thought to sense the anguish that Valianx felt for Sol III.

Valianx knew that once obliteration was approved, the decision would be irreversible. He sensed the ennui of the delegates and wracked his thought patterns, trying to reach a workable compromise. He needed more time to formulate a fledgling plan, his last-ditch attempt to avoid such a drastic decision.

His main concern was that perplexing uncertainty, which he believed was caused by what he termed the H factor. Humans had an uncanny way of taking irrational but intuitive actions. In retrospect, however, was that intuition not a blossom that had to be nurtured to fruition?

In accordance with intrinsic custom, if there was to be a correction, it had to be minimal and subtle. In this instance however, not

only did it have to be specific enough to bring the desired factors into play, but also self-sustaining, for Valianx knew there would be no other opportunities. In the cosmic context, the evolution of Sol III was reaching the point of no return.

Valianx remained deep in thought. The other consuls could not assist, as they had nothing new to add. All they could do was wait.

The serenity and patience of the assembly was rewarded.

Above the podium and slowly rotating around the illuminated image of Sol III, an array of 15 white spheres appeared, evenly distributed in an elliptical curve. Each sphere was distinct and its perimeter swirled, as if made from a ring blown from a smoker's lips. The purple sign gyrating around the image dimmed. In a fraction of a second, it gleamed again with the words:

SOL III – FINAL SOLUTION

This was the moment everyone had been waiting for. Once again, a sigh permeated the assembly, indicating the relief experienced by the several hundred participating delegates. If Sol III could not be saved from destruction, it was certainly not due to a lack of trying on the part of the Valdors. The futility of further discussion had been acknowledged and a final vote was about to be taken. The moment of truth had arrived.

The appearance of the sign caused a stir among the consuls. They looked at each other for a fleeting moment, then in unison focused their gaze on the image hovering above the podium and remained motionless, concentrating on the shifting display of light.

One by one, the swirling whiteness of the circles began to fade, to be replaced by a dense red vapor indicating agreement by each of the consuls on the implementation of the final solution.

One by one, the white spheres turned to red orbs spinning on their axes, until 14 of them surrounded the holographic image.

The vapors of the last remaining white sphere whirled, as if in protest at the appearance of the others. At earlier meetings, Valianx had been the only consul opposing consensus, and the conference now waited for the one vote that would make the resolution unanimous. By logical analysis, there was no reason that it could be otherwise.

"People of Valdor," Valianx dropped his shield so that his thoughts could penetrate everyone's mind. *"I thank you for your patience and beg your indulgence. For a very long time I have reflected on the merits and shortcomings of this predicament. What compounded the difficulty was that my interactions with Alpha were not always harmonious. It is therefore not easy for me to make an unequivocal decision.*

"The most important aspect of our deliberations is that a mistake is not made. The situation is very delicate and the problems appear insurmountable. I wish there was more time to observe further interactions, but time is running out and I am committed to giving you an answer."

Then just as quickly as he had dropped his shield, he raised it to shut out all interference. The pattern of his thoughts and the composure of his form gave the impression of utter calm. Only the pink hue of his aura, now markedly shifting in intensity and intermingling with a multiplicity of other colors, revealed the turmoil he was experiencing.

Valianx elevated his ethereal form slightly above the other consuls. His gesture stilled the assembly and subdued the thoughts interpenetrating the minds of the delegates. As if mesmerized, they shifted their attention between the podium and the image above it.

Looking around him, Valianx glanced at the delegates. He slowly lifted his head towards the holographic image, focused his mind on the elliptical curve rotating around it, and then spoke aloud.

“I am sending Balthazar to Sol III.”

With these words, the last white sphere turned green and a shudder of astonishment reverberated throughout the assembly.

* * * * *

BOOK I

THE KING

*Men are so simple and so much inclined to obey immediate needs
that a deceiver will never lack victims for his deceptions.*

Niccolo Machiavelli

CHAPTER 1

INTRIGUE

The virtue of the upright saves them, but the faithless are caught in their own intrigue.

The Bible - Proverbs 11:6

Ethanael Kingston Vanderbyl, commonly known to friend and foe alike as King, sat at the round bar in the Pier Top revolving lounge of the Hyatt on Pier 66. King was 42 and stocky, with a muscular build. He measured five foot eight, and that when wearing shoes with lifts. What he lacked in stature however, he made up with arrogance and self-confidence.

Clutching a scotch on the rocks in one hand, he twiddled the cocktail menu with the other. He was visibly annoyed and bored – his appointment was late, it was a hot mid-afternoon, the air conditioning somehow felt inadequate and he despised someone else calling the shots.

The lounge had spun once in slow motion around the city and King had already downed three double scotches. Fort Lauderdale was a panoramic sight from the top of the 17-story building, but he hadn't come up here to look at the golden coastline stretching for miles, nor to admire the various luxury yachts berthed at their moorings in the marina below. Curiosity and, to a large extent, necessity, had brought him here.

The stranger on the phone had sounded well informed. He knew about the project on the Berry Islands; he knew King's private cell phone number; and most importantly, he knew that King needed money. Real money. And lots of it.

The conversation had been short and to the point.

“Is that Mr Vanderbyl?” The strange voice had enquired a few days ago.

“Who wants to know?”

“My name is not important. However, I represent certain interests who believe they can be of assistance with your project.” King discerned a hint of a foreign accent.

“Which project are you talking about?” Queried King. “And what type of assistance do you have in mind?”

“I am referring to the Berry Islands, sir.”

“What about the Berry Islands concerns you?”

Ever so calmly, the man had replied: “It’s not my business, sir. My instructions are to inform you that 500 million dollars can be made available to facilitate your project. Should this be of no interest to you, I apologize for wasting your time. You will not be bothered again.”

That is how King found himself waiting in the bar of a popular hotel on a Friday afternoon to discuss business in full public view. He was dressed in a black Armani T-shirt that matched the color of his long, well-groomed hair. His contrasting white trousers were tailor-made and immaculately pressed.

He had been told to come alone. He had been given the time and the place, and he had been told to wait until he was approached.

King never liked anyone telling him what to do, and no one did. But, by the same token, no one had ever dangled that kind of money in front of him. He was a great believer in playing the part. So, his dress was casual and he tried to appear relaxed, portraying an air of indifference.

The wait however, was getting to him. He cast a quick glance at Buffy a few tables away and was about to signal that they should leave, when a tall, slim blonde in her late twenties entered the lounge.

Her long, blonde hair was tied back in a classic chignon. Her ears were adorned with sterling silver earrings in the shape of interlocking circles. A long-strapped red handbag hung from one

shoulder in a way that exuded confidence. She looked elegant and she looked hot.

In a loose, transparent chiffon blouse and a tight-fitting grey skirt, she walked with poise, balancing gracefully on her stilettos, the color of which matched the bag and the thin silk scarf around her neck.

King dropped the menu on the counter and, with a stupefied look on his face, watched her traverse the floor towards the bar.

She glided between the tables, went straight past King and sat three stools away. She gave him a fleeting yet indifferent glance and faced the barman, crossing her legs in full view of King's gaze. She had long shapely legs and she showed plenty of them.

Good-looking women were one of King's two prime passions in life. The other was power. He reveled in them equally, indulged in them without restraint and made sure he had the money to fuel them both.

Whenever he saw a good-looking woman, he was overcome by an instantaneous impulse to copulate. He could not imagine that any other man was capable of satisfying a woman's sensual desires; which, of course, he assumed were as lecherous and rudimentary as his.

He quickly ignored Buffy who, having worked for King many years, understood the situation perfectly. King had found a distraction for his boredom.

"The drinks are on me," he blurted to the barman. Holding the whiskey glass in his hand, he took a few steps toward the young woman. "Do you mind if I join you, or are you expecting company?"

She looked at him as if she hadn't noticed him before, and smiled.

"Why, not at all!" Her voice was pleasantly husky. "It would be a pleasure, and thank you for the offer. A martini will do."

What an easy mark, thought King. All these young bitches are the same. They just crave the right man. Looking at the barman, he said: "A martini for the lady and the same as before for me."

Then turning to her: "Excuse me a minute while I attend to unfinished business. I'll be back in a sec."

He gulped the last few drops of scotch, placed the glass on the bar top and walked over to exchange a few words with Buffy. Buffy shrugged and looked around for a waitress to place another order while King made his way back to the bar.

When King returned, the drinks were already on the counter. He picked up his scotch, pointed it toward her and said: "Cheers! Glad to meet you."

"Cheers!" She raised the martini glass to her lips and sipped very daintily.

"Enjoying your drink, Mizzz...?"

"Verna – Veronique Garnier." She didn't pronounce the 'r'. "French origin...and it's Miss. I'm not married."

I am scoring, he thought. "Kingston Vanderbyl." He almost never used his first name. When he was a teenager, some young punk had referred to him as Ethel, which earned King a night in jail because the punk ended up in hospital. Since then, King avoided such altercations.

"It's Dutch. You can call me King."

"Pleased to meet you." She leaned closer to shake his hand.

King took her hand in both of his and shook it firmly but gently. His many years of pursuing the opposite sex had perfected his charm. He was playing his prey, preparing it for the kill.

"As I was saying, how's the drink? They make a damn good martini here."

"Drink's good," she said, after swallowing a sip. "But, I have a feeling the price is going to be steep."

"It's a five-star joint!" He exclaimed, casting a glance around the lounge. "And I did say I'm buying. Besides, this kind of money is peanuts."

"In the long run, Mr Vanderbyl..."

"King!" He interrupted. "Remember? King!"

“In the long run, King, it’s most likely that I will be paying.” She smiled broadly, gave him a mischievous wink, and added: “And in my book, half a billion dollars is not peanuts.”

That took the wind out of his sails. He resented being taken for a sucker, especially by a good-looking broad. My turn will come, bitch, he thought, but responded without losing his composure. He gave a loud, forced laugh, the way he always did when pleased with his witticism, or when trying to cover up a shortcoming.

“Wow! What took you so long? I was about to leave. You should really make an effort to be more punctual. Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“It’s not my fault,” she cooed sweetly. “You were supposed to come alone. I had to make sure everything was in order.” She glanced at Buffy and continued: “I was told that your friend was forced to hand in his gun to security at reception.”

There’s more to this bitch than meets the eye, he thought.

“I see! You must have an ‘uncle’ in management. Okay! Now we’re even. We can start trusting each other.”

“Deal! Let’s move to somewhere more private.”

They moved to a table near a window. King stared into her emerald-green eyes. They sparkled, exuding intelligence. She returned his stare without flinching. She was strikingly beautiful. He slowly lowered his eyes, following the lines of her neck, mentally caressing the smooth, white skin on the way to her shoulders, and x-raying the firmness of her breasts through the chiffon blouse.

Geez, but I could make this bird sing, he thought. Looking into her eyes, he said: “It’s your call.”

She felt uncomfortable. “I don’t know where to start,” she replied hesitantly.

He deliberately delayed his reply, thinking, I’ll soon have you eating out of my hand, bitch.

“Suppose you start at the beginning.”

She shifted uneasily on her seat. “Okay. My father was the commercial attaché at the French embassy when I was a toddler. After completing his tour of duty, he decided to make America

our home.” She blinked. “I think his affair with a senator’s wife was the real motivation for the move. Eventually, they both happily divorced their spouses and lived unhappily ever after.”

“That’s in keeping with good old French tradition”, thought King and, unusually for him, spoke the words out loud.

“I suppose it’s in the genes,” she replied with a laugh.

I hope those genes have found their way down the ancestral line, he thought. “He must be quite a man.”

“He is good to me.” She raised her glass, taking a sip. “Anyway, the family settled in DC, and that’s where I grew up. My father sent me to finishing school at Neuchatel in Switzerland. I completed three years at the Swiss Business School in Zurich, worked there for a while, then came back home.”

“My, but you’ve been around!”

“Not as much as you have Mr...err...King!”

“Carry on, this is getting interesting.”

“There isn’t much more. Because of my proficiency in French, I ended up working at the embassy and, until recently, lived in Washington.”

“Did you meet any interesting senators when you were there?” He grinned.

She acted as if she didn’t catch the innuendo. “Not really, but I have been propositioned...” she smiled surreptitiously and continued, “...in a business context, that is, by a certain gentleman who offered...”

“And the name of that gentleman?”

“I call him Sir,” she replied, and again gave a mischievous wink.

“Okay! Okay! Carry on,” he said, thinking there was no use persisting.

“Well, that’s about it. I have accepted the offer and I am now stationed in New York where I represent the interests of a Geneva-based company, which among other activities, provides venture capital for promising and innovative industries.”

“And what makes you, or that particular ‘gentleman’ think that I’m interested in venture capital?”

“Simple. You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t.”

King had no doubt that it wasn’t that simple. This so-called Sir, or his minions, must have done thorough research on him, his activities and his project. He would have to be on his toes if he was to deal with them. This broad, however, he felt he could handle.

“Good! Then let me have a check and I’ll get back to you when we start making profits.”

Verna tossed her head back and laughed. “I was told you’re a comedian at heart.”

Wow, was she sexy! She turned him on big time. “That’s not all I am.” If it weren’t for the charming smile, she would have noticed the underlying cunningness. “I also have other attributes, but we can leave those for a more appropriate time,” he said, concluding with his typical forced laugh.

Talking generalities made her feel more confident. “Okay, let’s get down to business then,” she said, assuming a serious, professional tone.

The sudden change in stance made him uncomfortable. He didn’t like the aloofness. He loathed not being in control.

“Tell me what exactly are you offering. I know, the money, but what do you want in return?”

“You have recently purchased, or I should say acquired, an interest in Assisted Intelligence Corporation.”

That was no secret – it would be easy to find out. There are plenty of agencies specializing in this sort of thing. One could search on Edgar.com. The method of acquisition, however, was not public knowledge. They had to have inside information.

The Nerd who founded AIC had total faith in its potential, and he did have an impressive degree – something like a DhP, or was it PhD? He wasn’t too sure. Those boffins identified themselves in peculiar ways. He was an academic who enjoyed the good life, the kind that King could provide. The Nerd wasn’t CEO of the company any longer, but as long as he was surrounded by glamour, he showed no concern, and King doubted if he had

the nerve to interfere. He had him pretty well wrapped up, but one could never be too certain. He made a mental note to check it out.

“So I did. It’s perfectly legal.”

“That’s a matter of opinion, but you do have a legal business, and so far you’ve done well. You’ve established a top-class private laboratory and research base in that remote corner of the Bahamas. And the tax advantages...”

“It’s all above board. Since you’ve obviously done your homework, you should know.”

“We know very well. We also know that you need the best brains in the business to be able to outdo the competition. The microchip patents AIC holds are potential blockbusters, however research in this field has wide socio-political implications that will have to be investigated well before any production licenses are granted.”

“You’re not telling me anything new,” said King, wondering how much they actually did not know.

“You do, however, have a one major drawback,” she continued, as if she hadn’t heard his remark.

“And that is?”

“Money.”

“I’ve been doing fine so far.”

“Let’s not beat around the bush, King. We live under the Financial Intelligence specter. Your methods of generating funds are questionable, to put it mildly.”

The muscles in his jaw tensed, but he said nothing. Verna realized she’d touched a nerve, but her tone remained unchanged.

“You have to formalize your source of funding. When you start spending on a large scale, especially on controversial undertakings, somewhere along the line you’ll come under the scrutiny of the FBI or Interpol. Maybe both.”

She waited for his response, but seeing him thoughtful, she continued: “You have to be able not only to project the right

image, but also move among people who influence the powers that be. We can pave the way to success.”

King was aware of the difficulties. He had managed to regularize some money through the casino in Vegas, but it was becoming more and more difficult. The damn Gambling Commission was keeping tabs on percentages, and their infernal Regulation 6A reports were like a leash around his neck.

“And how do you generate funds?” He asked.

“We don’t need to. We have them already.”

“And the cost?”

“We get 51% of AIC, and the funds are introduced as a loan.”

“Interest? What percentage? And how do you get paid back?”

“No interest as such. We take 100% control of all marketable products. After we recover double our investment, it’s 51/49.”

“Is that all?” he asked sarcastically.

“Yes,” she replied with a straight face. But after a short hesitation: “No, one more thing. The Nerd gets his job back and you stop screwing his wife.”

“What the...?”

“Nothing personal. It’s good for business.”

He was taken aback and she used the moment to her advantage. She smiled broadly, looked him in the eyes and, imitating his earlier behavior, said: “It’s your call.”

She took a business card from her handbag and passed it to him. “I’m staying in the hotel. I’ll be here for a week.”

“What if I decline?”

She slid along the seat, stood up and said: “Then all I can say is, it was nice meeting you and enjoy the rest of your ‘holiday’ in the Bahamas.”

She half-winked at him and King sensed a veiled threat in her demeanor.

As gracefully as she had entered, she turned and walked toward the elevators.

King sat staring at the business card. Not having fully grasped the situation, his mind was going around in circles. The card was

of a simple design. Black lettering on a white background. It gave no addresses and no phone numbers.

MONDFIN GENÈVE S.A.

International Finance and Development

Veronique Garnier

Director – North America Operations

The fucking bitch, he thought. She's so cocksure of herself. What she needs is a good hump to set her straight.

For the time being, however, King had more important things to contemplate.

King's empire operated on the fringes of the law. Illegal transactions were meticulously planned with subterfuge while camouflaged by legal enterprises that were intricately interconnected and interdependent. Operations were carefully balanced. – Rewarding friends and associates on the one hand, whilst coercing foes and competitors on the other.

It had, however, not always been so. In the early days, King had participated directly in ruthless activities. It was only after consolidating his position as a well-established leader in the city's underworld that he realized deception and cunning were preferable to brute force.

The son of a Dutch immigrant father and a Mexican mother, King was brought up in New York's South Bronx, a few blocks away from Yankee Stadium. His mother's influence and the fact that they lived in a largely Hispanic community resulted in him speaking fluent Spanish. This proved invaluable during his South American escapades in later years.

His father barely eked out a living as a small-time smuggler of an assortment of recreational street drugs. He travelled to Holland where he could buy them legally, then brought them into New York in various clandestine ways and distributed them

on the streets. King disliked his father for his violent temper. It had not been uncommon to see him verbally and physically abusive if either he or his mother had dared to contradict him in any way.

From his teenage years, his father had forced Ethanael to sell drugs to his schoolmates and then to hand over the proceeds. It was to pay for his keep, his father said. Not to be outdone, he learned from a young age to con both his classmates and his father. He resorted to selling at higher prices by diluting the merchandise and pocketing the difference. His teen years had set him well on his way to a life of insincerity and deception.

Raised in this atmosphere of deceit and humiliation, Ethanael dropped out of high school, left home and joined a local street gang. After a fight with a rival gang member who had mocked his name, he dubbed himself Kingston. Some months later, a few successful escapades made him the leader of the gang and earned him his nickname King.

A particular incident became a milestone on his rise to infamy.

At a disco one night, he had witnessed an unruly thug trying to cut in on a young couple sitting near him at the bar. The young girl was well dressed and seemed to come from a well-to-do family. She was in casual conversation with a young man; neither looked particularly interested in the other. The plainly dressed young man was a big lad with average looks, slightly rotund with long, unkempt hair, which even at his young age showed signs of thinning. They were definitely not a well-suited couple. The thug, thinking that there was an opportunity of which he could take advantage, accosted the girl. He had been unnecessarily crude in his approach,

“This guy belongs to you, babe?”

“He’s my friend,” she replied.

“I want to be your friend, too.” He laughed.

“Please leave me alone and don’t bother me.”

He gripped her by the arm. “Come, let’s dance. Then I’ll leave you alone.”

BOOK II

THE SHEIK

But they have denied the Hour, and We have prepared for those who deny the Hour a Blaze.

The Quran – Surah 25.11

CHAPTER 1

CONVICTION

Men never do evil so completely or cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.

Blaise Pascal

It was an exceptionally warm morning, one of those unusual November days that herald the advent of winter. The sky was almost clear, a gentle breeze had swept away the misty haze from the ground, and autumn leaves strewn on the sidewalks displayed a medley of colors as they danced a dervish whirl in isolated up-draughts.

Mo woke in a cold sweat at daybreak. He could not remember dreaming, but recently his mind had been muddled with disturbing thoughts. He sat up in bed to look out of the undraped window. Dawn was just breaking through the sparse cloud cover over the city. He thought that such a beautiful day for this time of the year must surely be a favorable sign, an omen signifying the justification of ensuing events.

Ignoring the clutter on the floor, he glanced around his small apartment, a bedsitter with a bathroom. He'd left the place untidy and unkempt for many days, which matched his scruffy, unshaven appearance. His gaze moved to the leather briefcase on the side table. On top of the briefcase, neatly arranged, were his cell phone, keys, wallet, Omega wristwatch and a travel folder from Thompson's International with a one-way ticket to London Heathrow. The briefcase looked ordinary enough – rectangular in black, softened leather with gunmetal combination locks – the type carried by many a businessman every day. Only the coils of

wire and the assortment of electronic switches scattered beside it betrayed its sinister purpose.

Mo was the name that had stuck with him from a young age when his family immigrated to America. His real name was Mohammed, but no one had called him that since his parents passed away – until he returned to his native land.

Mo had spent the last week in his New York East Side apartment fasting and meditating. During this period of abstinence and introspection, his only companion had been the Holy Book; his only indulgence, drinking from the stockpile of Le Bleu bottled water he had stashed for the occasion, and his only preoccupation the black briefcase on the side table.

He got out of bed briskly. Stepping over cartons, boxes, electric gadgets and manuals, he walked over to the window. Passing by the side table, he glanced at his watch.

The time was 06:12.

He unhooked the window latch, opened the glass panes, took a deep breath and felt the fresh air fill his lungs. He looked out over East River Park at the Williamsburg Bridge, wondering if he would ever see this sight again. Then he closed his eyes, lifted his head to the sky and thanked Allah for the good fortune of meeting Sheik Ali. Yes! It was the Holy Man, Sheik Ali, who had revealed the way to him, the road to salvation, resulting in this clarity, this harmony that now suffused his brain.

Today was a glorious day. Mo decided to forgo the morning exercises that had become a ritual in his daily life, and ambled to the bathroom, lean muscles flexing as he moved, accentuating his athletic physique. He looked at his face in the full-length mirror on the bathroom door. This was the first time he'd taken note of himself for days. Mo was a handsome man, with sharp distinctive facial lines. His lightly browned complexion gave the impression of a permanent tan. Although athletic, his demeanor and attire had been badly neglected, mirroring the disturbing thoughts that had occupied his mind of late. A blue-black stubble covered his unshaven face, making him look much older than his 26 years.

His dark eyes and slightly protruding pointy chin gave him a stubborn and determined look. His springy black curls remained un-rumpled, in marked contrast with the rest of his appearance. He did not like what he saw.

For most of his life, Mo had disliked what he represented – a desert drifter in an oasis of plenty with no clear purpose. For a fleeting moment, doubt crossed his mind, but he willed it away. There was no longer any reason for negative thinking. As he concentrated on the task ahead, clarity returned.

It has been a long haul since his early childhood in the Middle East; through his adolescent years at Steinway High School in Astoria, New York; his studies at college; then back to the turmoil of his native country. There, the hatred and frustration he had buried deep in his psyche and concealed during his student years could be bared without indignity. It was hatred towards the oppressor, the warmonger, and as Sheik Ali later taught him, it was born of a God-inspired love for the faithful.

He had a cold, invigorating, shower, shaved and dressed in a pale-blue shirt, dark-blue tie and a grey pinstriped suit. He pocketed the items on top of the briefcase, and slipped on his wristwatch.

The time was 06:59.

He picked up the briefcase, almost in slow motion, then checked himself in the mirror. He looked like a young business executive on his way to the office. Gleaming brown eyes looked back at him with a sense of purpose. He smiled in satisfaction. Yes, now he liked the man looking back at him. No, he actually loved this man.

Mohammed Bin Yussef al Attar was going to make his mark on history.

He left the apartment, locking the door behind him, and took the stairs down to the foyer. He glanced at the night watchman preparing to leave, who looked like he had had a pretty good rest during the night. Walking towards the street, Mo hoped all the guards he encountered would be as lackadaisical as this one.

He walked westwards on Grand Street at a leisurely pace until he reached the Doughnut Plant coffee shop. Mo had been there a number of times on his practice runs, but had deliberately avoided getting into any form of conversation. He nodded at the owner, who simply nodded back, knowing that this polite young man preferred to be left alone.

He picked up a newspaper from the entrance stand and seated himself at a corner table, his back to the shop window and the cash point on the service counter. He placed the briefcase on the floor between his feet. This would be his first meal after the fast, so he opted for something light. – A health breakfast with fruit and yogurt and a large glass of milk. Waiting for his order, he casually glanced at the headlines. He wondered what the headlines would read tomorrow morning.

He finished his meal. Noting that he had time to spare, he buried his head in the newspaper. He could not concentrate on any news articles and his mind drifted into reverie, mulling about the circumstances that had brought him to his present situation.

The time was 07:45.

Mohammed was born in that little pretense of a country carved out of the Sinai desert, known as the Gaza Strip. He was fortunate enough that his family stemmed from comparatively better-off merchants, so had been spared the squalor and desperation that plagued the majority of the population. As a Palestinian living in Rafah, the southernmost town in the Gaza strip, on the border with Egypt, life was difficult at best, desperate at worst, but never calm or relaxed. On one hand, people had to contend with the near-lawlessness of the radical Islamic militia who roamed the streets, and their almost routine provocation of Israel by indiscriminately firing rockets into that country. On the other hand, they had to endure Israel's retaliatory bombing raids, which destroyed homes and maimed or killed civilians.

BOOK III

THE MENTOR

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

The Bible - John 3:16

CHAPTER 1

COOPERATION

The only thing that will redeem mankind is cooperation.

Bertrand Russell

The Assembly Dome dominated the landscape, dwarfing all other domes in the vicinity. It stood majestic amidst the many smaller domes used privately or communally by the Valdors. The enclosed space was sufficiently large to accommodate several hundred delegates at meetings, as well as thousands of members during general assemblies. This day, however, it was empty except for Bal, Valianx and the other 14 consuls assembled on the central podium. Their sole purpose at the gathering was to initiate transposition from one universe to the other. The procedure necessitated concentration of their energies to create an inter-dimensional portal through which Bal would be transported to Sol III.

Huddled together on the central podium, they looked insignificant in the cavernous space. Yet the event was of such magnitude that an onlooker would cower at the surge of sheer power that was about to be generated.

A circular aperture at the apex of the dome gave access to Alpha radiation from the firmament that enveloped Valdor. Alpha beams entering the dome were focused directly onto the podium. Those present were saturated in pervading energy.

The 15 consuls clustered around Bal, their combined energy fields encircling him, swirling around him, capturing his essence in concentric spirals of pulsating power. The ever-increasing spin

of the force field was amplified by modulating in cyclical parallel interface with Alpha vibrations. The combined mental force of the consuls were absorbing power directly from the immeasurable energy reservoir that is Alpha. As the mental vibrations of the Valdor consuls fused and amplified, the firmament above the dome pulsed, spreading undulating peaks in a multiplicity of colors, which intensified and faded at regular intervals, indicating that a harmonious interaction was at work.

Symphonic melodies accompanied by variations in tincture, intermingled in a diffused spectrum. In a short time, dynamic resonance caused the entire interplay of sound and color to settle into a harmonic whole. The intense spiraling mind force of the Valdor consuls, through interaction with the energy field from Alpha, created a symmetry break in the fabric of space. Quantum decoherence split a gap in the plasma wall, separating the two parallel universes, and the energy that is Balthazar was directed to predetermined coordinates – an area of dense population.

Bal relaxed his hold on awareness, yielding control. The unified mind force of the Valdor consuls gradually subdued his mental energy, reducing its oscillations to lower frequencies, drawing him closer to the center of rotation. With his mind force abating, the gyrating thought surge swept Bal out of the Valdor ethereal energy level, propelling him through the eye of the vortex into the physical domain of Sol III.

* * * * *

Like an ever-shrinking whirlwind, Bal's mind was converging on one spot. The surge was so formidable that the surrounding debris and leaves were spun into the center of gyration. It was as if the dust of the Earth was creating a solid form to house the powerful mental energy.

Without a physical connection, Bal's essence was sustained by the sheer willpower of the Valdor consuls. He knew that he had to connect quickly with a sentient entity. Mental energy projected to Sol III from Valdor could not endure too long before it weakened. This meant the procedure would be postponed until a more suitable time and place could be processed.

Valdors functioned at very high frequencies, so could not manifest in the universe of Sol III as free entities. On Valdor, they existed in ethereal form interacting with their surrounds. On Sol III, however, their ethereal form could only be stabilized and sustained for very brief periods. The only way a Valdor could endure on Sol III was through synergy with a host body either by sharing or dominating the host brain.

Once joined to a host, a Valdor could interact with, share, or dominate a number of minds in close proximity. If no host was available, a Valdor mind would automatically begin to oscillate at levels unsustainable in the physical universe. The high-energy fulcrum thus created would produce localized quantum decoherence that would eject it back to Valdor within minutes.

Bal oriented himself with his surroundings. He struggled to contain his thought patterns, searching for a target. He could not locate any. Unless a Valdor had previous symbiosis with a host, he could not attune his vibrations to connect instantly on transfer. He had to contend with searching blindly for a target in order to establish a connection. This problem was inherent in the transfer process. Marginal discrepancies in computation could shift the focus toward areas of sparse population, resulting in failure to interface.

Because he had not visited Sol III for a long time, Bal had no focal point to target. He was obliged to search at random for a connection, any connection. He could later pick and choose, but for now, priority was to find a host before the energy field dissipated, catapulting him back to Valdor.

Bal eased his concentration. Experience gave him the confidence to weaken his mental powers and allow him to drift,

sustained only by the force field from Valdor. The elements subsided as the mental forces dispersed and the area of interaction broadened. This increased the probability of connecting to a host, which was, after all, the reason for selecting a densely populated location.

Suddenly, he felt the vibrations of a nearby mind. He immediately tuned his to the same frequency, following the sensation until it brought him closer. He felt no resistance. Not that he expected any. Human mental development was far too weak to withstand a Valdor incursion – so weak that it would not even register an interaction unless intended by the intruding mind. He reduced his oscillation levels to lessen resonance, lest the sudden connection cause damage to the host brain. He blended with the host mind.

As Bal identified the host and attached to him, the consuls dissociated in unison. The force field projected from Valdor ebbed and eventually ceased. Calm was restored in the atmosphere, as if a gathering storm had suddenly abated.

Having secured a physical attachment, Bal was able to stabilize. He decided to take complete control of his host for the time being, keeping him unaware of the intrusion until he familiarized himself with his surroundings and was able to evaluate his situation undisturbed. He surveyed the brain he was in. There was so much unused space; he could stay there forever undetected.

As he tuned into the physical sensations of the host, he found he was running at a moderate pace along a promenade. Looking around, he saw that he was in a city park on the banks of a river. He deduced it must be the city known as New York. It had been the city designated for connection. After a few more minutes, he felt a sensation of being tired. He made the host body stop, walk over to a wooden bench and sit down. The transfer process caused tremendous exhaustion to a Valdor mind. Several days of meditation were required to stabilize it and return it to its full functioning capacity. In this instance, however, Bal assessed that

the fatigue belonged to the physical entity and was not due to his mental exertion. He decided to analyze the physical condition of the body before retreating into meditation.

He entered the thalamus sector of the brain and blended his thought patterns into the nervous system of his host. It was like turning a switch off and on. In a flash, he took control of all the command centers, subduing the host mind and containing it in the pineal gland; isolating it from all interaction with the brain and the body. He quickly adjusted the autonomic nervous system to respond to his control. For all practical purposes, his host was in a coma. The brain of the host body now housed the mind of Bal.

He took full control of the host's bodily and mental processes. He did not however, enter the hippocampus area where long-term memories are stored. He was uninvited, and considered it etiquette not to unnecessarily encroach on another entity's privacy. There would be plenty of time to interact if he decided to make this host permanent.

Instead, he followed the Papez circuitry of the limbic system and obtained a superficial understanding of the brain. He touched the body all over, to assimilate the physical sensation. This entity was a man in advanced middle age, from whom the years had taken their toll. Loss of fiber, weakening of muscle and leatherness of skin were evident. He was not impressed. If he had to function in a borrowed body, he could find a better one.

He felt the heart pounding, really struggling to work. He could feel it was about to falter, sooner rather than later. He didn't worry about that. He would repair it before he left. This could be viewed as some sort of rental payment for temporary accommodation. Besides using this shell as a transitory vehicle, he had no other use for it. He decided he would allow this man his privacy and not interfere in his thought processes. He would share this brain to stabilize, then transfer to a more suitable host. Apart from a little fuzziness in the head, this host would be none the wiser.