

Something's been found... a secret locked away for 4,000 years.

A Novel by

**Robert E. Gelinas**

# THE MUSTARD SEED



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**ArcheBooks Publishing**

# THE MUSTARD SEED

Book One of the Mustard Seed Trilogy

By

Robert E. Gelinas

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OTHER BOOKS BY ROBERT E. GELINAS

Dead of Night

Touch of a Stranger

Dead Man's Run

Anticipation, Paris Hall

Players, Robin Edwards

# DEDICATION

This tale is delightfully dedicated to the truly abstract thinkers of the world, especially those unique souls I've had the privilege to know<sup>1</sup>: the oft scoffed at, ridiculed and disparaged unabashed askers of, "What if...?"

This story is for all those who've eagerly huddled together in coffee shops, taverns, dorm rooms, apartments, dens, basements and the like; plotting and scheming and conspiring and figuring and contemplating and debating and arguing and speculating and puzzling unto the wee hours of the morning, until your puzzler was worn bare; solving all of the world's problems, sober or otherwise, exploring the heights and breadths and depths of the multitude of permutations of possibility, fantasy, imagination, and raw creativity—where all of the most intriguing theories of the universe are found.

Namely, this book is dedicated to anyone who has ever dared give voice to the heresy: "Now, what if...it all didn't really happen exactly the way they told us?"

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<sup>1</sup> You know who you are.

“Gods are born and die, but the atom endures.”

Alexander Chase  
*Perspectives*, 1966



# PROLOGUE

## **Rub Al Khali Desert, The Empty Quarter 257 Statute Miles Southeast of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia**

“We breached the chamber six days ago.” Andrew Duncan adjusted the boom microphone closer to his chapped lips, allowing his thick Australian accent to be heard more clearly over the roar of the helicopter’s rotors. “You won’t believe the size of the complex. We’ve mapped it all out over the last several weeks. Most of it by hand, mind you. Even used composite infrared scans and low-level seismic and radar sensors, so we didn’t miss any hidden rooms or passages. Obviously, GPS and satellite thermal imaging is bloody useless to us that far underground.”

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“So what went wrong?” Helen asked.

“Dunno. That’s why you’re here. We expected possible booby-traps, primitive self-defense apparatus and such...” He clenched his eyes shut. “...but what happened to the first team that went in there. It just isn’t physically possible. Two of them died in minutes. The third isn’t expected to make it through the week.”

Dr. Helen Knight listened carefully, but her eyes remained mesmerized by the pale sterile bareness of the desert floor rushing beneath them a thousand feet below. As they cleared a long ridge of dunes forming the eastern horizon she squinted against the first harsh rays of the dawning sun glaring directly into her eyes, momentarily burning a bright cascade of yellow spots into her vision. She turned back to Duncan rubbing her eyes and yawning, still tired and stiff from the long journey from New York that began fourteen hours ago.

“And there’s no natural explanation for what happened to them?”

“No.” Duncan shook his head. “Helen, I’ve been in the energy exploration business for over forty years. Sunk more than my fair share of wells. The only thing I’m aware of that can put out that much lethal radiation so fast is a few thousand active fuel rods reaching critical mass during a meltdown, or pure weapons-grade plutonium a few nanoseconds before the big boom. Every REM<sup>2</sup> counter we have gets pegged a few seconds after the chamber door is opened. It’s like they walked right

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<sup>2</sup> REM – Roentgen Equivalent Man, a measurement of radiation dose levels.

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into the core of an unshielded nuclear reactor, but with no warning.”

“Good God,” Helen murmured.

“Dr. Cromwell, the only one of the team who’s still alive, and *barely* so, mind you...he managed to uh...tell us how they all, like...began choking and vomiting within a few minutes after entering the chamber. And they also experienced, like this... Oh, how did he describe it?... Incredibly fast and intolerable rise in air temperature as well. Sounded to me like they got thrown into a fucking oven, combo convection and microwave! He said they couldn’t have been inside for more than five minutes before he realized the danger, turned on his heels, and ran for his life. He only made it up as far as level five on his own. By then he couldn’t walk...or see anymore. Helen...” Duncan swallowed hard, “...over ninety percent of the man’s body is completely cooked. Inside and out. We don’t know how he’s still breathing, or why. The bodies of the other two are...presumably still in there somewhere. We couldn’t find them.”

Helen felt a tight twinge in her stomach. “Was that *Brian Cromwell*?”

“You know him?” Duncan asked.

A thick lump swelled in her throat. She nodded with some difficulty, recalling the faint memory of a lovely dinner after a nuclear regulatory conference in London years ago. It was a delightful night filled with laughter, followed by a slow walk hand-in-hand through a quaint little park on a chilly autumn night, highlighted by a brief and exceedingly rare, albeit most welcome, kiss good-night from a very sweet man.

“An old acquaintance. The Egyptologist from Cambridge, right?”

He bobbed a curt nod. “Right. The bloke that published all those landmark studies in the eighties on the sister cities of Heliopolis. The well known one in Egypt near Cairo, and the much older Baalbek site in Lebanon. He also did all the groundbreaking work on Tanis in the Nile Delta and Tilmun in the Sinai. Believe me, he’s the best that money can buy. All of them were top leaders in their fields. With a find as massive and unique as this, we had to have the best.” He shook his head in frustration. “Poor bastards.”

Helen did her best to push the image of Brain Cromwell’s kind face out of her mind and concentrate on the urgent task at hand. She could see the massive complex approaching as their pilot slowed the aircraft, banked sharply, then circled in preparation for landing. Below them lay a vast array of oil exploration machinery and industrial drilling equipment, all deployed around a central ten-story drill rig, an imposing iron skeletal obelisk painted fire-engine red. The rig was flanked by neat rows of metal Quonset huts, tilt-up warehouse facilities, a regimented encampment of beige tents, stacks of forty-foot steel cargo containers, and a generator plant that looked like it could support a small city. A small fleet of trucks and jeeps swarmed in all directions leaving clouds of dust in their wake. The bright red Duncan International logo was emblazoned on the side of each and every one. In an open sector near the south side of the complex, apart from all the machinery and other structures, stood a towering pyramid of sand,

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dirt, shale and pulverized rock.

The twenty-five acre site was surrounded by a gleaming ten-foot chain-link fence, topped with coiled razor wire. Elevated guard towers marked each of its four corners. Uniformed guards, who looked to Helen more like heavily armed Special Forces soldiers than mere sentries, patiently patrolled the perimeter. It resembled a prison camp. An oddly formidable sight, she thought, considering that the remote desert location was over a hundred miles from any semblance of civilization. What were they guarding? And from whom? On the other hand, there wasn't anything overtly recognizable about the place that indicated it was no longer an energy exploration operation, but had instead been transformed into the topside base camp of what was surely about to become the most significant archaeological discovery made in over a hundred years—located almost a mile below the earth's surface.

“Andrew, who else have you invited to this party?”

He licked his dry lips and offered a brief glimmer of a smile, the first one she'd seen on his face since he'd met her personally at King Khaled airport in Riyadh just three hours earlier. “Well obviously we've had to keep an extremely tight lid on everything that's happened here over the last several months. Hundred percent top secret, don't-cha-know, tighter than a frog's asshole. I mean, if the Saudis had any *idea* of...” He stopped himself and let out a wary sigh. “Well...let's just say we'd be shut down in a hummingbird's heartbeat. Guaranteed. Only two individuals, other than yourself that is, have been called in for now. One is an old friend of yours, I

believe. Dr. Jason Wise, sharp young fellow out of Pittsburgh. And I've also called in a subject matter specialist."

"Yes, I know Jason," she nodded, but with a puzzled look of recollection. "He's an A-List astrophysicist. Works a lot of NASA contracts. I first met him when I helped him with some of his dissertation research at Carnegie-Mellon. But that was almost ten years ago. I've consulted with him on a few projects since then, but we haven't really kept in touch. What's he doing here? And who's this...*specialist*?"

Andrew Duncan hesitated before answering, either choosing his words carefully, or lying. Helen wasn't sure. "The specialist is Dr. Else Friedrich, from Munich. She bills herself as an anthropological investigator. Also a top linguistics expert. Has her PhD in ancient cultures and languages. Bizarre bitch, I promise you. Gives me the willies, if you must know. But she comes very highly recommended in her field, with top references from everyone from the British Museum to the Vatican. They're both already on site waiting for us."

A pang of realization swept over Helen. The hairs were standing up on the back of her neck. "Andrew, wait a minute. You didn't fly me halfway around the world on a moment's notice *just* to help you contain this radiation phenomenon. You think you've found something else. *Something*—"

"Just stop right there, m'lady, and don't jump to any rash conclusions." He shrugged. "The fact of the matter is, we don't know exactly *what* the hell we've found. It's a complete mystery. That's why I've brought in the best

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minds I could find, in a variety of areas.”

She started to say something in reply.

He didn't let her, explaining, “Look Helen, I've invested over ninety million American dollars in this dig over the last eleven months, and I'm prepared to spend that much again and more, if need be. Yes, we came here for camel crude. But I'll settle for high-concentrate uranium ore, the treasures of King Tut, the Tower of Babel, or even a goddamn flying saucer. Who knows, maybe all of the above. But I *don't* intend to walk away from this dig empty handed, or let some pimple-assed goddamned government bureaucrat steal it out from under me after I've taken all the risks and seen precious lives perish in the process. I'm telling you, I've hit more than my share of dry holes from Perth to Sydney, from Texas to the Ukraine, and all over the Sinai and Persian Gulf. My gut's telling me we've hit a big one here. *Something*. I don't know what it is yet, but *something*. And my gut's rarely ever wrong.”

Helen's gut was alarmingly queasy at the moment.

Andrew Duncan's smile reemerged as he patted her knee with a wink of confident assurance. “As far as the radiation containment work goes, you're the nuclear expert here, my dear Dr. Knight. So that's one-hundred percent your department, no questions asked. Anyone gives you any shit about that, you come straight to me. As I told you, you'll have whatever resources you need to get the job done—bar none. Everything you requested when we spoke two days ago is already here on site, checked out, and ready to go. Even your Iron Maiden and its Chariot from Houston are here.”

“Excellent,” she nodded.

Andrew rested his hand on the back of Helen’s. “Helen, your containment and clean-up work after those unfortunate incidents in Russia, India, and Malaysia over the last twenty years have been more than impressive. They’re the stuff of myths and legends. Bordering on the miraculous. As far as I’m concerned, your creativity and genius in conquering all this kind of hazardous shit is second to none, and that’s exactly what I need right now—a *bona fide* dragon slayer. Lives depend on it. One of whom might be my own. I’m confident that if it can be done, you’re the one to do it.”

Helen suppressed the broad smile that was yearning to bloom in the warm light of Duncan’s flattery. Professional compliments and sincere appreciation were rare in her business. Compliments in general in her personal life were rarer still. She turned her gaze back to the intricate complex below as the helicopter gently descended to alight on the landing pad, creating its own minor sandstorm in the process. Helen’s brain was already its own churning cyclone of conflicting thoughts and possibilities.

*Like walking into the core of an unshielded reactor? A mile below the earth’s surface? Impossible. What the hell could be down there?*

In less than three hours, she would see for herself.

PART I  
INTO THE ABYSS

“Science without religion is lame,  
religion without science is blind.”

**Albert Einstein**

*Out of My Later Years, 1950*

“Science and religion, religion and  
science, put it as I may, they are  
two sides of the same glass,  
through which we see darkly until  
these two, focusing together, reveal  
the truth.”

**Pearl S. Buck**

*A Bridge for Passing, 1962*

“The supernatural is the natural  
not yet understood.”

**Elbert Hubbard**

*The Note Book, 1927*





## CHAPTER I

As the surface winch slowly lowered the two-man, yellow steel cage down through the first seven-hundred meters of pitch black earth, Dr. Helen Knight kept repeating the little mantra her therapist had given her years earlier to help keep her knees from shaking.

“Safe in a cocoon, we’ll be out soon...”

*So far so good.*

Even after so many years, at age fifty-seven, Helen still painfully fought to restrain the percolating screams of panic bottled up tightly inside her. It wasn’t a condition she could just wish away, nor something that even

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the seasonal rains of time itself could erode and wash away. It was her constant demon. She could feel the frightening thorny pressure building up behind her breastbone, moment by moment, foot by foot, as the creaking cage descended deeper and deeper into the heart of the earth. She squeezed her eyes tight.

She shuddered. "Safe in a cocoon, we'll be out soon..."

It was her own little dark secret, but the fact of the matter was, Dr. Helen Knight had been chronically claustrophobic since childhood. She bore the unfortunate emotional scars garnered one late summer afternoon spent with her younger brother, Aubrey. It was a simple tragedy. He was six. She was nine. They were playing too close to an abandoned wishing well. He fell in trying to retrieve the old wooden water pail. She tried to help get him out and fell in too. Just like Jack and Jill. And there she lay on top of his cold, lifeless body, crying in pain and screaming for help for almost a day and a half before being found. His neck was broken, and so was her arm. The arm healed. Her soul never did. And from that day forth, finding herself in any dark enclosed space was potentially sufficient to trigger a most violent and traumatic episode.

"Safe in a cocoon, we'll be out soon..." she repeated quietly, over and over.

"Didn't copy that," crackled the jovial and energetic voice of Dr. Jason Wise in Helen's headset. "Please repeat, Helen?"

"Nothing," Helen replied, muting her chant to a faint mumble.

She was alone, of course.

It only made sense for her to go down by herself for the first radiation risk analysis. Besides, they only had the one EVA suit onsite. The special Extra-Vehicular-Activity (EVA) space exploration suit she wore was comfortable, despite its phenomenal weight. Many elements of the suit were of her own design and specification, developed as part of a classified project she had completed for NASA two years prior. The suit was completely self-contained, was forced-air and liquid nitrogen cooled, electrically heated, and crafted as impervious as modern science could conceive to protect its wearer from extreme temperatures, heat or cold, X-Rays, Alpha and Beta particles, as well as gamma radiation. The simple lead linings of earlier generations of radiation protection apparel had been radically updated with a unique new alloy of depleted Uranium-238, one of the densest of all metals, fused with a multi-layer fabric of lead combined with fibers of twenty-four karat gold, interlaced with pure iridium.

It wasn't physically possible to move about freely in the suit except in zero gravity environments. Thus, it was mounted in a gyroscopic transport unit—a high-tech, battery powered one-man chariot with two triangular-shaped belts of titanium treads, one mounted on each side of the vehicle instead of wheels. The gyro-unit allowed movement in any direction, inclusive of climbing stairs up to a fourteen inch tread rise, merely by the rider leaning slightly in the direction one wished to travel. Actually, the only thing Helen could move freely inside the suit was her hands, which hovered above two special-

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ized control panels and micro-keyboards, also contained within the suit.

Even Helen's face and head were completely protected. That is, there was no face mask or porthole from which to peer out. She could only see by wearing a pair of heads-up display goggles beneath the shielded helmet that was sealed to the torso of the unit at the neck, like a deep sea diver. An array of exterior cameras and sensors fed her real-time images of what it looked like outside the suit. She had a variety of viewing choices from Hi-Definition full-color video images to Infrared Thermal Imaging, or the pale greenish and ghostly white images of Night-Vision. Any combination of the two could be divided or overlaid between her left and right eye, as desired. The binocular camera array gave the illusion of unfettered three-dimensional sight, which helped assuage any perception of being locked inside a lead sarcophagus or an Iron Maiden, hence the suit's nickname. Everything she saw, heard, said or did was relayed to the surface and recorded. Presently, there was nothing to see or hear but the blur of earth and stone rising around her as she descended down the long, dark shaft.

Temperature readings read forty-seven degrees Fahrenheit. She was just over halfway down.

"How you doing?" came Jason's cheerful voice again. "How about a quick system check for me?"

Helen interrupted her mantra for a moment. "All systems five-by-five. Rate of descent still smooth at five feet per second. Temperature rising slightly. Now at fifty-one degrees."

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“Any radiation?”

Helen punched a button on the control panel. A green meter appeared in her vision. “Nominal.”

“Good to hear,” Jason noted. “Keep an eye on that one.”

“Roger that.” She closed her eyes and her lips began their quiet ritual once again. “*Safe in a cocoon, we’ll be out soon...*”



The abrupt echoing impact of the yellow steel cage reaching the stone floor at the bottom of the mile long, forty-eight inch wide shaft popped Helen’s eyes open with a start and a quick gasp. The monotony of her chant had helped her doze off. It had taken twenty minutes to complete the journey from the surface.

She checked her readings and yawned, her neck popping as she cocked her head to the side. “OK, base, I’m down. Temperature is...*wow*, a balmy seventy-six degrees. Radiation levels...still normal.”

“Copy that,” Jason replied. “Good God, look at that.”

“Look at what?” Helen was still looking at a smooth stone surface.

“Queue up your aft cameras,” Jason replied. “Or turn around.”

Helen leaned to her right and backward. The gyro-unit’s servos hummed as the left and right treads moved in opposite directions, rotating her one hundred and eighty degrees. Her breath stilled yet again, eyes wide.

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Before her lay a great cavernous hall.

It was oval in shape, roughly the size of a large aircraft hanger. Evidently, the drilling shaft had penetrated the hall at one extreme end, along a wall. The thought occurred to her that if Andrew's crews had dug a few feet further to the north, they might have missed it entirely. To her immediate left was a portable electric generator and a rack of digital radio relay equipment, all bearing the bright red Duncan International logo. Helen could hear the gentle hum of the generator. Tethered to it, via long black power cables, were a series of industrial halogen light banks. The work-lights were positioned along both sides of the hall at about ten meter intervals, brightly illuminating the entire expanse. The smooth stone interior was obviously no natural phenomenon. No, this was no cave, no volcanic bubble nor fissure. These walls were crafted of uniformly hewn and dressed rectangular stones, tightly fitted and seamed without mortar, clearly the product of skilled masons and stone cutters.

Every square inch of it was covered with pictographs and glyphs.

Andrew Duncan's voice broke in, "Helen, all the maps of the complex are loaded into your NAV system. If you punch up series one, it will indicate your current location in real-time with a red dot. But for now, just exit the main hall on the far end, and go straight ahead. Through the arch at the other end you'll find a central junction point of five corridors. Take the second one on your left until it ends. There you'll find a utility lift we've hung in what appears to be some kind of vertical

air shaft. That will take you directly down to level seven. That's where you want to make your way."

"Roger that." Helen activated the gyro-unit's mechanical arm to lift the yellow cage's safety gate. When the arm was fully retracted she leaned forward. The gyro-unit rolled ahead, padding its way across the great hall on its miniature tank treads.

It took another fifteen minutes for Helen to navigate down the tall stone corridor as instructed, find the utility lift, and then ride it down to the lowest subterranean level. Visibility was extremely limited. After leaving the great hall above there were no more portable work-lights deployed. However, Helen's Night-Vision imaging showed her that she was still completely surrounded by smooth stone walls. The corridor itself was approximately ten feet wide, but twice as high.

She glanced at her instrument readings again. "Temperature is constant at seventy-six degrees. Radiation still normal."

"It will be," Duncan added, "until you reach the chamber door."

"Is it sealed?" Helen asked.

"Not any more," Duncan replied. "Just closed. It took two days worth of cutting torches to get through it initially."

"Why did you open it in the first place?" she asked.

"Self-explanatory. You'll...uh...see for yourself," came Duncan's hesitant reply. "Just keep following the main corridor directly in front of you a bit more. You're doing great. When you reach the end, you're going to enter a large antechamber. More of a foyer, I suppose

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you'd say. A bit garish and ostentatious for my tastes. But that's where you'll find the chamber door. Can't miss it."

Helen followed the main corridor for another hundred yards, ignoring the unending series of elevated doorways, grand arches, recessed alcoves, niches, colonnades, connecting passages and side corridors passing by her on either side. At the end of the long corridor, as promised, stood a majestic stone archway, soaring up almost three stories. Its large stones were chalky white. Limestone, perhaps, she figured, each weighing maybe two tons or more. The room beyond the arch was equipped with another one of Duncan's small portable generators along with two additional banks of halogen work-lights. They were automatically activated by motion detectors, which illuminated as soon as she rolled into the room.

Helen's entire field of vision went white.

She squinted as she switched from Night-Vision back to Hi-Def-Video mode, blinking several times until her eyes adjusted. On the other side of the archway she stopped abruptly, again staggered by what she saw.

*Holy shit! Now there's something you don't see every day...*

The walls before her were no longer dull, cold, gray stone. They were unmistakably covered with gold. The antechamber itself resembled more of an extravagantly overdone baroque cathedral or shrine—or perhaps a king's treasure chamber. A series of wide tables or altars flanked either side of the room, covered with every manner of container and serving pieces. The artwork

adorning everything in the room, including the walls themselves, was stunning: high relief branches and leaves, vines and grapes, date palms and olive trees, birds of prey and fishes, cattle and livestock, exotic sea creatures and...*oh, my God...* what appeared to be some type of winged humanoids bowing in supplication. Helen took a closer look at one such human-shaped figure. It certainly wasn't the cherubic fat Gerber-baby angels of the Renaissance. No, these renderings were larger than life-sized, perhaps seven or eight feet tall she surmised, had they been standing.

"Are you getting all of this?" she whispered.

"Roger that," Jason's voice confirmed. "Unbelievable."

"Can we get back to the task at hand?" Duncan's voice interjected.

Helen faced ahead and rolled forward. Twenty yards further, on the opposite side of the antechamber, stood "The Door." The massive portal was at least ten feet in height and almost that again in breadth, smooth and glimmering in brilliantly polished gold with no visible seams. A constellation of twelve large gemstones adorned its center, arranged in three even rows of four. The door itself was hinged to Helen's left by three gold exterior hinges, each almost a yard in height. On the right side of the door, she noticed the irregularly cut and discolored metal edge from Andrew's acetylene torches, as well as a broad pool of melted and re-hardened gold spread out on the floor.

"OK, what's the trick to get in?" she asked.

"Just pull," came Duncan's reply. "It's completely

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inset into its jam. The goddamn thing's almost a foot thick. Can't begin to imagine how many tons it weighs. But you'll find it's balanced on its hinges so precisely and smoothly you can move it with almost no effort. Picking up any radiation yet?"

Helen glanced to the display meter. "No, nothing. All readings normal."

"OK. Are you ready?" Jason asked.

Helen took a preparatory breath. "As ready as I'll ever be. Let's see what nasty things we can find."

She activated a control panel beneath her fingertips and with a hydraulic hiss the gyro-unit's mechanical arm reached forward. With the soft buzz of its servos, the motorized pincer stabbed into the crevice cut by the torches. She used a trackball under her right forefinger to manipulate the arm, prying it with as much leverage as she could muster from the angle she was positioned.

The door swung free with a deep whoosh of air.

As it came open, Helen felt a protracted series of dull, throbbing, low-frequency waves begin to pass through her—pulsing and pulsing, slowly rising and falling in intensity. It made her teeth and sinuses hurt. All sensor readings remained stable. She rolled forward slowly, cautiously crossing the wide threshold and entering the chamber. She stopped inside to look around, bracing herself mentally for the possible sight of two irradiated and decimated corpses. Only darkness and silence lay before her, save the low throbbing pulse, rising and falling.

She rolled forward.

"*Danger. Danger. Excessive Radiation,*" blared the ro-

botic warning voice inside Helen's earpiece. She halted her advance and glanced at the REM Counter. The digital graph had gone from near zero to a reading pegged in the red zone. Temperature readings shot up to almost two-hundred degrees. She entered a quick command, resetting the sensitivity on the REM Counter down an order of magnitude. The levels stayed maxed out. She set the calibration down once more and the readings dropped to about three quarters of the scale.

"Oh shit," she sighed as she initiated an emission analysis program.

"How bad is it?" came Jason's urgent voice, crackling and somewhat distorted amid a hissing wave of static.

"It's bad," Helen answered. "I've never seen readings like these. No living thing could endure this. They'd absorb a lethal dose of gamma radiation in seconds. At these levels, even my EVA-suit won't give me any more than twenty minutes of safe exposure in here. And then I won't be able to come back for another twenty-four hours. Gotta move quick. Starting countdown now." Her fingers quickly punched in the stopwatch settings and hit the START button. The digital timer in her upper right peripheral vision began decrementing.

"Let's hope that's enough time to find out where it's coming from," Duncan added. "And how to stop it."

"Roger that." Helen looked around, surprised to see that the chamber was perfectly circular, roughly sixty yards in diameter. She angled her cameras upward, observing that it was a perfect hemisphere above a smooth, level floor, illuminated by a pale green light emanating

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from the walls and domed ceiling above, a light that grew brighter by the second. The chamber appeared to be empty, with the sole exception of a small dome in the very center of the room. It was another perfect hemisphere, approximately fifteen feet in height. She approached it. The throbbing low frequency wave intensified as she drew closer.

“Hey lady, how’s your levels?” came Jason’s garbled voice. The hissing static storm in her ear grew worse as she moved further inside the chamber.

“Radiation is holding steady,” Helen noted. “Temperature is now over four-hundred and still rising. But I’m good up to eighteen-hundred degrees, before it all starts to melt and I burst into flames. There’s no visible or apparent source of the radiation that I can see. I’m going to check out this convex structure in the center.”

“Copy that,” Jason replied. The static in Helen’s earpiece made his words a buzzing garble of distortion.

Helen rolled forward. As she neared the small center dome, she could see its surface was smooth, softly reflecting the green hue of the walls. She made one full lap around it. It was opaque, with no other distinguishable features. A movement in her peripheral vision caught her attention.

“What the hell?” She looked at her instruments. The REM Counter was holding steady at its hyper-lethal levels, but the temperature was over eight-hundred degrees.

“What is it, Helen?” Duncan’s voice cut through the hiss.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “Hang on a second.”

She angled her cameras down, not exactly believing

what she was seeing. All around the perimeter of the small dome were rising ribbons of steam. She moved closer, zooming in her camera's resolution on the dome's surface. Beaded drops and tiny rivulets of what appeared to be water were cohesively collecting and running off of the little dome, vaporizing the instant they touched the superheated stone floor.

"It's melting," Helen said out loud.

"What's melting?" Duncan again.

"The dome in the center," she replied. "It looks like this thing is either made of, or covered with, a thick layer of ice. The heat is melting it."

Helen moved closer still, extending the mechanical arm of the gyro-unit once more. She used the sharp pincer to peck and chip away a small section of the dome's surface, confirming her suspicion. It was indeed ice, several inches thick, but liquefying rapidly. Temperature readings were now approaching a thousand degrees. Large pieces of ice began breaking away and sliding off the convex surface, crashing loudly onto the frying-pan-hot floor—fizzling, dancing, seething, boiling, shattering, shrinking and popping until they were completely vaporized.

"How we doing on time?" Jason queried.

"I've been in here for..." Helen answered, glancing at her timer, "...eight minutes. Ten more and I'll need to head for the exits."

"Make it seven," Jason advised, his voice now almost gone.

Helen circled around to a section of the small dome that was now completely cleared of ice. "The inner

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dome appears to be made of a solid material. It's reflective in nature to light, but I don't think it's stone or metal. Actually, it looks a lot like..."

"Like what?" asked Duncan.

"Like glass," she replied.

As larger and larger pieces of ice continued to break off and tumble away, Helen saw the soft green glow of the room permeating the smaller dome. It indeed had a certain degree of transparency, like a giant glass bowl turned upside down.

A loud rumble and a distinct thump to Helen's left brought her attention back to the golden chamber door. It had slammed shut of its own accord. The floor beneath her trembled.

*Oh no.*

A flash of panic gripped her heart. She immediately started to roll back toward the door. The gyro-unit had a top speed of fifteen miles per hour. However, before she could reach the door, the dull low frequency pulsing sensation ceased.

"Are you guys seeing this?"

There was no reply.

The static in her earpiece was gone.

"Hey, Jason? Andrew? Anyone? Can you hear me?"

Silence.

Helen's eyes went to her sensor readouts again. Surprisingly, the temperature in the chamber was dropping fast. Radiation levels were falling as well. The Max-Temp indicator showed that the ambient air temperature had reached just over twelve-hundred degrees Fahrenheit, and yet it was now down to six-hundred degrees

and still falling.

None of this made any sense to her.

Her initial sense of panic and deep desire to flee gave way to a disturbing wave of confusion mixed with no small measure of bewildered curiosity. She stopped, spun around, and looked at the small dome again.

*How interesting.*

The glassy exterior had begun to cloud over. Soon the green glow passing through it from the walls could no longer be seen. She knew what was happening. The evaporated water molecules in the air were condensing on the cold surface again and crystallizing. Soon its shroud of ice would be securely back in place.

“Hello, upstairs,” she called out once more. “Can anybody hear me?”

No reply.

“Wonderful. OK. So let’s just finish up our little look-see, and then get the hell out of here,” she mumbled to herself as she punched up the Infrared Thermal Imaging camera. The room went bright red. The ambient temperature readings were still above two hundred degrees, but continuing to plunge.

“How cold is this thing?”

In her heads-up display the small dome appeared as a horizontal half moon of rich violet around its edges and inky black throughout the center, quite distinct from the bright red heat signature of the walls and floor—with one exception.

*How curious.*

From the very center of the dome shone a small speck of white light. Helen moved closer. It couldn’t

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have been any larger than a pinpoint, like a distant star in the night sky, shimmering slightly, fading, pulsing, twinkling.

Helen's headset suddenly crackled in her ear, then squalled and shrieked with feedback.

"Oww!" She grimaced and shook her head in pain.

The shrill tone stopped as abruptly as it came. Her ears were ringing. Her teeth hurt. The painful pressure in her sinuses was building again, its sharp talons running down the back of her neck.

And that's when she heard it.

It wasn't an audible sound in her earpiece. No, it wasn't a sensation that touched her ears at all. But heard it she did, ever so clearly and distinctly. Yes, somewhere in the back of her mind, it came through vividly, like a triggered memory, leaping forth with a sudden rush of urgent recognition.

It was a plaintive voice.

*Help me.*

## CHAPTER 2

“*What* just happened?” Andrew Duncan ran a nervous hand over his neatly trimmed gray whiskers.

Jason’s long, nimble fingers flew across his keyboard. Alternate images from remote cameras in the underground complex flashed up on a separate bank of television monitors. There was no sign of Helen on any of them.

Dr. Jason Wise was an athletic African-American man in his mid-thirties with chiseled features, closely cropped hair and deep penetrating eyes—bedroom eyes, his last girlfriend had called them, if he could remember back that far. He continued to stare at the blank video

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monitor before him, visibly just as surprised and dumbfounded as Andrew Duncan. As usual, Jason wore his favorite black and gold Pittsburgh Steelers bowling shirt, faded blue jeans, and well-worn high-top tennis shoes. He pulled a half-gone grape Tootsie-Pop out of his mouth, nervously tapped his lower teeth with it for a moment, then put it back in his mouth, rolling the soggy white paper stick back and forth from one corner of his mouth to the other, narrowly missing the clear plastic boom microphone of his headset.

Jason's brow furrowed with annoyed concentration as his fingers continued to enter combinations of key-strokes. "I don't *know* what just happened. All transmission was interrupted. Maybe an equipment fuck up, or a software glitch on this end. Hang on. Give it a second. Helen, come in. If you copy, please acknowledge. We lost you on this end. If you can hear me, acknowledge."

Duncan turned to Arnold McNulty, his operations manager. "Don't wait. I want you to get four of your men in our best RAD suits and get them down in that hole immediately. Alert Dr. Markham in the infirmary. I want her out of there! And I mean fucking *now!*"

"Right away, sir." McNulty, a heavy-set man in his forties with a clean shaven head, ruddy cheeks, and scrub-brush moustache, clad in neatly starched khakis, grabbed a radio off his belt and bolted from the command trailer, issuing terse commands to unseen minions.

Jason turned to Duncan. "Andrew, that won't help. The lift is sitting at the bottom of the shaft. If something

really *is* wrong, it'll take forty minutes for the first two men just to bring it up and ride back down. And then another fifteen or twenty to reach the chamber. Helen doesn't have that much time."

"Why did she have to go down there all alone?" came a calm feminine voice, spiced with a prominent German accent. All of her words which contained a hard "th" came out sounding more like "z's." "This and that" became "zis un zat." The voice belonged to the only other person present.

Duncan and Jason turned to Dr. Else Friedrich. She stood leaning back against a tall rack of computer equipment, with her long lean arms folded tightly across her chest, watching them both intently. Dr. Friedrich was in her early forties, tall and gaunt, with short cropped black hair. She wore no make-up to speak of, and dressed predominantly in black—black pants, black hiking boots, black tee-shirt. A pair of round, gold wire-rimmed glasses sat perched on a thin pointed nose. The whole Goth ensemble would have been made complete if her complexion were ghostly white, but the stereotypical image was somewhat distorted by her darkly tanned skin, taut and leathered, evidently garnered from her many years of outdoor field work.

Duncan answered her, sounding at first almost apologetic, but with a clear note of his own frustration festering as he rambled, "No choice, really. Couldn't risk anyone else down there without proper protection. Bear in mind, that special environmental suit she has on should be more than enough to protect her. She'll be all right. You'll see."

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“But you have other protection.” It was more a statement than a question.

“No, not really.” Duncan shook his head. “At the radiation levels we’ve measured down there, our standard RAD suits hit lethal exposure in less than two minutes. Barely enough time to get in and out.”

Jason looked down at his watch. “Yeah, but that doesn’t matter. Even inside the Iron Maiden she only has five more minutes in the safe range.”

The intricate watch on Jason’s wrist befit the young prodigy scientist from western Pennsylvania, who held four separate PhD’s and seven technology patents in four advanced sciences: Quantum Mathematics, Computer Science, Physics, and Astrophysics. The gold and platinum encased timepiece boasted a Hi-Res digital display which normally showed a 3-D image of three analog dials for two separate time zones plus Greenwich Mean Time, all digitally synchronized within fifty milliseconds via a satellite transponder to the atomic clock at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). With the flick of a MODE switch the intricate chronometer also functioned as a wireless PDA, scientific calculator, stopwatch, compass, altimeter, underwater dive computer, and GPS receiver. Another former girlfriend called it his Geekonometer. But that was several years ago.

“So—then you are saying, if this is anything other than a communications failure, your men go down for recovery, not rescue. Yes?” Else was coldly matter-of-fact, taking a second to glance down at her carefully manicured fingernails painted a deep metallic purple.

Andrew's chin fell to his chest. "I'd prefer not to think of it like that just now, if you don't mind."

Else added, "You must realize that there can be no further exploration, salvage, or recovery of artifacts until the radiation threat is fully contained. If your Dr. Knight should be lost, who else can you find for this task?"

Duncan just stared at her, speechless, somewhat in disbelief. His jaw clenched tighter and tighter, his nostrils flaring with every breath.

Jason jumped in, doing his best to sound convincing, while masking his own sinking sense of dread. "All right, guys, look, come on. You know, it really *could* just be a communications failure. The heat and radiation we were measuring down there could have easily melted some of the radio circuitry, fried a PCB<sup>3</sup>, or maybe knocked out one of the relay repeaters just outside the door. Her equipment may be suitable for walking on the sun, but our traditional shit just wasn't intended for that kind of abuse. She may still be fine. Let's give her the goddamned five minutes before we start writing any more obituaries. All right?"

Duncan broke his icy gaze with Else and turned back to the blank monitor. "Yes. That's exactly right, Jason. I appreciate your clear thinking. We'll wait five more minutes and see what happens. Helen knows what she's doing. If she can't contact us, she'll know she has to get out of there, and fast."

*If she can*, they all thought in unison, though no one said a word.

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<sup>3</sup> Printed Circuit Board

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Helen glanced at her decrementing stopwatch timer. It said she had just under five minutes remaining. However, the radiation levels had fallen almost to zero. The ambient room temperature was leveling off in the mid-nineties. *Beach weather!* She was about to leave the chamber, but was still strangely intrigued and momentarily mesmerized by the small ice covered dome. Through her Infrared-Thermal Imaging cameras, the walls and floor had dimmed from their bright red glare, through muted shades of orange, softening to a cooler greenish hue. The lonely little ice dome was completely black, as inky black as deep space itself. The tiny twinkling star was gone, obscured completely by the thick encrustation of ice.

Helen wondered if she had actually heard what she thought she heard. Did something really say, *Help me?* Her rational mind told her it was nothing more than her own potent and excitable imagination, or at worst, her own internal voice sounding an urgent note of panic, a simple cry for help, echoing a sense of initial alarm from the moment the door closed—potentially trapping her inside.

*AM I trapped in here?*

For some inexplicable reason, at that moment, Helen didn't feel especially alarmed, nor feel the need to suddenly turn and dash to the door to find out if escape was still possible. No, something kept her undivided attention firmly fixed on the small, cold, silent ice dome. She

leaned forward, and with a hum of her electric motor, rolled towards it once more. The mechanical servos driving the titanium treads clapped against the stone floor with a crisp metallic patter.

A new sound arrested her progress.

It came through her earpiece, but it wasn't a radio signal. Rather, the sound came from the external microphones on the EVA suit itself. At first, it was merely the whispering hush of a light breeze, rising and falling, like the sound of a conch shell held up to your ear at the beach. But soon it accelerated in intensity swelling into a mighty, rushing wind. In only a matter of seconds, Helen could feel the external pressure of waves of warm air in the room buffeting against her left side, threatening to topple her over. The gyroscope stabilizers could withstand over a hundred miles an hour of hurricane level force without yielding, and she was strapped in securely, but the pressure of the gale could be physically felt roughly buffeting against the suit nonetheless. She was taking a pounding. A dark thought struck her: if she did fall over, there was no getting up, and no calling for help.

*Oh, shit.* She grit her teeth and hung on for dear life.

The swirling storm swept around the circumference of the circular room, growing stronger and roaring louder, a veritable indoor typhoon. Ice crystals from the central dome flew off its surface and were quickly caught up in the grip of the air currents creating a glittering conical cyclone, dancing and twisting high above the center of the small convex shell. The floor trembled once again for almost ten full seconds.

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And then, as quickly as it had begun, the earthquake abruptly abated, as did the fierce fury of the wind. The gusting air currents diminished with a familiar decelerating whine, akin to a jet turbine being powered down.

All grew silent and still.

Helen swallowed once and waited, not quite sure what it was she was waiting for, but feeling overwhelmed with a palpable sense of anticipation that whatever was going on, wasn't over. Her entire body was soaking with sweat. She instinctively checked her instruments one by one. The familiar routine was calming. The room temperature was now down to eighty-seven degrees. No significant radiation detected. A strange, but welcome, wave of relief washed over her. Maybe it was over.

She half-laughed to herself, "OK. What now? Rain, thunder and lightning? Hail, frogs and locusts?"

Her earpiece crackled and popped with static once more.

And then it happened again.

*Help me.*

"Jason?" Helen startled. "Is that you. Can you hear me? If that's you, this isn't funny, you little son of a bitch. I'm going to beat your ass as soon as I get back topside. You scared the shit out of me."

Silence.

*Free me, and I shall give you the desires of your heart.*

Helen froze.

"Who *is* this?" She spun the gyro-unit in a full circle looking everywhere, searching, scanning. The room was still completely empty. "*Where* are you?"

**ROBERT E. GELINAS**

*Here, in this abode. Awaiting one to awaken me and set me free.*

