

## Prologue

### c 04 BCE

Gabriel stood on a hill overlooking Bethlehem, his wings drawn tightly in and concealed beneath a luxurious cloak. High above his left shoulder the brilliant light of a huge star burned strangely in the pale twilight sky. For forty nights the light from the distant dying star had remained dimmed by heavy cloud, but this evening it shone forth in all its powerful radiance. Its revelation in the heavens over Bethlehem at the precise moment of the event in the town below seemed to Gabriel an unlikely coincidence. It certainly deserved investigation.

He turned his head at a loud jingling sound. A caravan was making its way southwards along the narrow path. The leader, an elderly man with a pale olive complexion, was dressed in the richly embroidered robes of a wealthy Persian. He halted his camel and looked around as though surprised to see Gabriel alone. He leaned his turbaned head down and saluted him.

‘We have come from Jerusalem today and will stay here this night. Will you join us, friend?’ he asked.

Gabriel returned the courtesy, shook his head. ‘Thank you, no. There is something I must attend to. Perhaps I will meet you later. Where are you bound?’

‘We follow after the truth, now more than ever.’ The man smiled enigmatically. ‘May the light be with you.’ He hopped his camel into motion and slowly descended the hillside.

Gabriel watched closely as the caravan passed by. Two men of similar appearance followed the first. They smiled and touched their foreheads politely but did not speak. Several servants followed their masters, leading heavily laden camels. An aroma of expensive spices and oils filled the air as they passed.

Nothing in the caravan aroused Gabriel’s suspicions and he continued his close examination of the surrounding hills. Streams of people were still descending the slopes and making for the gates of the town, hurrying to meet the curfew for the census. Even so, many of them stopped every few moments to gaze up in wonder at the brightly burning star. Where small crowds developed, soldiers in their distinctive Roman uniforms urged the visitors towards the town. Hawkers milled around the gates, selling food and accommodation and when they pressed too hard, the soldiers turned their attentions to them.

The town, nestled amongst the upland hills was more brightly lit than usual and crowds surged through the streets. Gabriel surveyed the scene for several minutes and then he raised his eyes to the sky. The evening was calm and clear, but few stars were visible against the great light of the supernova.

He pulled his cloak more tightly around him and made his way down the hill towards the town. When he reached the gates the soldiers glanced at him curiously but he passed them without question and entered onto the wide paved street. Vendors were gathered there, lighting their oil lamps and calling out to passersby. They noted Gabriel and his fashionable attire, but did not offer their wares to him.

He walked through the small colonnade that faced one side of the main street. The arcades were lined with trestles and many people were eating in the open air. The smell of cooking made Gabriel grimace and turn his head away. He glanced into several alleys but they led to dead ends.

The busy streets allowed Gabriel to make his search without attracting attention. Many of the townsfolk had crowded on to their roof gardens to gaze up at the star, now even more brilliant in the darkening sky. Very few of them took any notice of this tall, aloof young man, dressed in the manner of a rich merchant. Those who did, looked twice at his unusually handsome face and then averted their eyes. Gabriel paused in front of one of the few tall buildings, and then mounted the external stairway. From this vantage he could see most of the town and he looked carefully around for many minutes. The Persian caravan had stopped outside an inn near the southern wall.

His survey completed, Gabriel descended from the rooftop and started toward the centre of the town. He increased his pace and his eyes moved purposefully from left to right. After a few minutes he halted abruptly. Five very tall men walking several yards ahead had caught his attention. They wore their dark curly hair uncovered and their complexions were pale and clear. They were clothed in the manner of wealthy Greek gentlemen, but their athletic gait and muscular physiques suggested otherwise. As the five men pushed through the crowd, the people nearby fell back and cleared a path for them, as though their expressions as well as their appearance commanded respect or fear. Gabriel moved forward quickly and laid his hand on the shoulder of the nearest man. The whole group stopped and turned around. Their faces paled further at the sight of Gabriel. He tightened his grip as the man started to speak. 'Not here,' said Gabriel quietly.

He glanced around and then urged the group into a narrow, deserted alley. He looked at each of the men in turn. Two of them avoided his gaze, but the others stared back resentfully. The tallest was a huge imposing man, older than the others and obviously their leader. He met Gabriel's eyes steadfastly, his face quickly becoming red with anger. Gabriel held his gaze and for a few moments there was a dreadful silence.

Finally Gabriel spoke. His voice was calm and even. 'Why are you here?'

None of the men replied. The tallest of the men folded his arms and stared insolently at Gabriel. His face had lost some of its awful flush.

Gabriel appeared unmoved by their attitude. 'You should not have come,' he continued. 'We made an agreement.'

The leader clenched his fists and thrust out his chin. 'Yet you are here. Explain that!' He spoke angrily but quietly as though unwilling to attract attention.

Gabriel's voice became colder. 'I do not need to explain myself to you. That you are here is sufficient reason for my presence.' He paused and looked briefly to the side. 'I ask you again. Why have you broken the contract? Why are you here?'

'I changed my mind,' the man replied furiously. 'And what of it? We will stay as long as I please.'

'You will not stay.' Gabriel's voice was calm again.

'I will not answer to you!' The man leaned forward aggressively but stepped back in alarm as Gabriel pushed his cloak back over his shoulders. The cloak rose slowly in the air and a steel blue glowing light spread upwards in a fan shape over Gabriel's head. A soft rustling noise grew louder, like a thousand knives sliding gently over fine china.

The leader stepped back even further and the rest of the group huddled behind him.

'You would not do that, surely?' he asked in a shaken voice. His face was white with fear.

'Enough is enough,' said Gabriel in a cold, hard voice. 'Give me your hands.'

The rush of wind prompted a woman nearby to look around the corner. The alley was deserted except for some feathery leaves fluttering slowly to the ground.

## 1

### **More than 2000 years later**

The alien, yet strangely familiar figures with their stocky bodies and heavily browed faces disappeared as the mist crept up the hill. Sally wondered if they were still standing there behind the white veil, or whether they were returning to their caves, taking with them the gifts she had brought. The Neanderthals had shown very little curiosity at her sudden arrival; no fear or aggression as she watched them go about their daily routines. When she had signaled that she had to leave, they made their elaborate gestures of farewell.

She felt regretful but calm as she waited; but she jumped in alarm when something touched her shoulder. She fumbled with her eye mask and stared up at the blonde flight attendant leaning over her. 'We've landed, Doctor Burns,' the young woman said pleasantly, and turned away to assist another passenger.

Sally rubbed her face and yawned. She raised her left wrist and squinted at the small screen on her watcher. Four pm Sydney time. For a moment she did not know where she was. Then her stomach gave a nervous lurch. 'Geneva time,' she muttered, but the screen did not change and she recalled that the watcher was still on standby mode. It must be about eight am local time. She hated arriving early in the morning – a whole day fighting jet lag loomed ahead.

She stood up, ruffled her short dark hair, pulled her cabin bag down from the overhead locker. She checked the flap on the back of the seat in front of her and pulled out the document her boss had handed her in Sydney. Her stomach jumped again as she remembered his farewell.

Steven Andrews had looked at her closely. 'I know you're tired but we need you to go. You don't realize yet how important this discovery is. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity for you as well as for Lifescape.' When Sally did not reply, he had continued. 'There's no need to be nervous. Security will be very tight and anyway, you're not likely to make it to the final team. Australia's not important enough to be guaranteed a place. But think what it will do for Lifescape, just having you at the conference.'

Sally suddenly recalled her dream. She had always been fascinated with the distant past when mankind shared the planet with other human species. After completing her controversial PhD on why Neanderthals had not developed spoken language she had been offered a job with a film company. Her latest documentary 'Why We Are Alone' was the best work she had ever done. She had just signed off on the postproduction, and would probably be nominated for an Oscar.

For two years she had worked on nothing else. No wonder she had strange dreams; she was mentally exhausted. She felt irritation rising in her. What was she doing in Geneva? She should be home in Sydney, enjoying a long overdue holiday.

Most of the passengers had disembarked and it took her only a few minutes to reach the immigration checkpoint. She stared into the iris identity scanner, the machine beeped and the door in front of her swung open. She was surprised to see another checkpoint ahead. An official scanned her international identity card, looked briefly at her face and nodded for her to proceed. She wondered why the ID check had been set up again. She gave the man her most charming smile, but his grumpy expression did not change.

'I'm staying. You can go back home if you want to!' Ahead in the queue, two men glared at each other. As she moved closer the older man replied, arguing that they should fly back to India immediately. The younger one, a very handsome man in his early thirties shook his head. He noticed Sally watching them and his face lit up. He smiled as if he knew her. The older man nudged him and he frowned again.

'I respect your feelings, father, but I'm not leaving,' he repeated in Konkani.

‘Now that the news is out, they might speed up the selection process. I want to be here when it happens.’

‘What about your family? Don’t you care how we feel?’

‘It was you who persuaded me to put my name up in the first place. I’m not going to throw it all away now. Anyway, this is Switzerland. The security here is excellent. Nothing’s going to happen.’

The older man’s voice was urgent. ‘You know how it is. Every lunatic group will see this as yet another Western conspiracy.’ He looked around suspiciously.

The conversation made Sally uneasy. She wanted to ask them what they were talking about, but someone in the queue behind her gave a small nudge towards one of the customs desks. As she lifted her flight bag on to the counter, she glanced around. There was the usual mix of people – nothing out of the ordinary except for an air of preoccupation, almost of anxiety. She thought there were more airport marshals standing around than usual. Perhaps there had been a bomb scare.

‘What?’ The customs official was asking her whether she had anything to declare. ‘No nothing.’ The man unzipped her bag anyway and expertly rummaged around inside. He scanned her card and handed it back to her.

‘Thanks,’ she replied in German. ‘Have a nice day.’ The man grunted and did not return her smile.

She remembered to switch her watcher on as she passed into the arrival lounge. A message from Steven Andrews blinked, but she ignored it. She paused for a moment and looked around. The secretary at Lifescape had assured her she would be met. She hoped so. The airport was very crowded.

As Sally hesitated, a group of people surged through the doors behind her carrying her forwards. She heard a loud crashing noise, the sound of shattering glass and several shouts. She was suddenly surrounded, buffeted from all sides. A marshal pushed past her, she stumbled, lost her balance, and felt a sudden stab of alarm. Someone grabbed her arm and she turned to see a WorldSecure guard, a gun held above his head. She instinctively pulled away but the guard yelled at her and tightened his grip. As he thrust her forward, she caught sight of the two Indian men ahead. There were several more shouts and the younger man glanced back as if to see where she was. To her surprise, he smiled slightly and shrugged, then disappeared behind several guards who were also pushing towards the exit. Something slammed against her shoulder and she was almost knocked down. The guard tightened his grip again and to her amazement fired a shot above his head. The people around her pushed away frantically.

Sally could hear a loud voice over the PA system as she was thrust towards the exit, but she couldn’t make out what it said over the increasing noise. One of the tall glass doors was cracked and broken glass crunched under her feet

as they exited onto the concourse. Ahead, a uniformed man was helping the two Indian men into a black limousine. Sally glanced back and saw another WorldSecure guard pushing two more men forward - a very tall blonde man in a grey suit and a shorter Chinese man in a white tracksuit. Behind them, more guards blocked the exit. Frightened faces stared at her through the glass doors.

The Chinese man waved and gave a rueful grin. The blonde man stepped towards her and put out his hand. 'Sally Burns! I'm Thomas Beecham. Sorry about the mess.'

As he took her hand Sally felt a strange jolt and for some reason she leaned towards him. He looked intently into her face, her knees gave way and she toppled forward. There was a deafening cracking noise and the Chinese man fell against her. Someone grabbed her from behind and the track suited figure slumped to the ground. Thomas Beecham kneeled down and turned the man over. As he felt for a pulse he looked up at Sally, a peculiar expression on his face. 'He's dead!'

Someone screamed and a man nearby retched violently. Sally stared down at the red stain spreading across the white tracksuit and instinctively touched her own chest. She raised her hand. It was covered in blood. The world went dark.

A strange smell filled the air, strong and bitter. She struggled against it and opened her eyes. She was in the limousine and Thomas Beecham was leaning over her. His face was so close she could see the fine lines around his eyes. He offered her the refresher towel he had been using to wipe her face but she jerked back, suddenly repulsed. She heard him say. 'It's all right. She's ok.' His voice sounded strange; a clipped English accent devoid of emotion.

The two Indians were seated opposite her. The older man slumped in the seat, as the limousine accelerated. His eyes were closed, his face pale and sweating. She heard someone curse and the younger man twisted around and stared out the window. Sally leaned forward to follow his gaze but she could not understand what she saw. As the limousine slowed to enter a roundabout, a group of people holding placards ran out onto the road. She fell back in her seat as the car swerved to avoid them.

'I told you how it would be. We'll be lucky to get out of here alive.' The older man straightened up and looked angrily at his son.

'What do you mean?' Sally automatically spoke in Konkani and the two men looked at her in surprise. 'Why did...?'

'God! I don't know ...' The younger man's face contorted. 'His name is, was, David Liu - one of the psychologists.' He paused and continued in Konkani 'I'm Mohun Patel - zoology, and so on. This is my father.' The older man nodded and turned away. 'I assume you are Sally Burns? The linguist? I thought I recognized you.'

Sally nodded. 'What the hell's going on?' She looked down at the blood on her shirt and tasted bile in her throat.

Mohun glanced at Thomas Beecham and continued in English. 'Haven't you heard? A German journalist got the story. It's all over the news.'

Sally shook her head. 'I've been traveling for almost twenty four hours. We got held up in Singapore. We weren't allowed to leave the plane and the vidscreens weren't working; some technical problem, they told us.' She clenched her hands to stop them shaking.

'Someone's leaked the whole thing; when and how it was discovered and of course, about the meeting here.' Mohun glanced at his father. 'We saw the newscast when we changed flights at Frankfurt. Apparently someone hacked into the project and sold the story to the highest bidder.' He scowled. 'It was stupid to keep it secret for so long.'

Thomas Beecham interrupted. 'The sponsors wanted to choose the right time to announce it.' His voice and face were still unnaturally calm and Sally felt again a faint sensation of revulsion.

Mohun grimaced. 'Well, they chose wrong.' He continued bitterly. 'Why did David get shot? Just bad luck I think.'

His father interrupted, his eyes still closed. 'Some people will do anything to stop the project.'

'Why? I don't understand.' Sally shook her head again. 'I didn't know anything about it until my boss put me on the plane in Sydney. Why would people get so upset? Dozens of new planets have been discovered.'

'This is not some remote rock out past Pluto. The newscast called it "Earth 2"; same size, same orbit as earth, out of sight behind the sun.' Mohun frowned. 'Just think about the implications; a new planet, the solution to all our problems, global warming, overpopulation. Why would they keep it secret? How long have they known about it? Some people are bound to think it's a conspiracy.'

His father interrupted. 'That's not all. What if you find intelligent life there? What if they already have and they're just not telling us.'

'That's not likely, is it?' Sally stared at the two men.

Mohun shrugged. 'Not at all, but a lot of people would like to believe it.'

As the car slowed, Mohun pointed out the window. Across the top of a building, a huge news sign flashed; - "WE ARE NOT ALONE."