# Prologue

Every culture, every nationality has a spirit. To truly understand that spirit, one must walk down that nation’s streets, examine its buildings, and experience firsthand a civilization’s contours. Years can be spent in this endeavor, but even then, all that will be understood is the body. To see the face, one must peer into the numerous physical countenances of a culture’s people. Some are folded and creased, others smooth and unobtrusive. Eyes that dart and dream, mouths that crease and swallow their laughter, hiding their emotion from the streets that give them passage. But the clues remain nonetheless, like crimson strokes brushed on pale cheeks by the wind, there to be glimpsed by the careful observer. And there, in the collective image formed by those reflections, one might at long last glimpse the spirit of that era.

Space, too, has a spirit. It has a history, to be found among the ebb and flow of galaxies, the formation of stars, the explosion of supernova, and in the place between all those things: the windless dark, the void. Nothing.

If dark matter had a face, Harlow imagined this is what it would look like. He watched the heat-syringe bore into the frozen water with bemused fascination. The surrounding ice had been carefully carved and chiseled to within centimeters of the body beneath. Harlow knew he should have been paying more attention to the creature within. After all, that’s what he was being paid to do. And as Dr. Noguchi’s assistant, he was probably only one of a handful who would ever get this close to *It*. But whenever he looked at the entombed alien, his eyes just wouldn’t stay focused. Even though it was dead, the creature’s physical architecture was so odd it seemed to defy the normal cognitive abilities of the human brain.

Prior to his coming on board the project, the KBSF research team had been studying the various objects within the Kuiper Belt. They examined the stretch of celestial bodies at the far end of the solar system in hopes of learning valuable information about the formation and evolution of the sun and planets. What they found on one small rock floating through the edge of humankind’s reach into space was more than anyone had bargained for. Needless to say, their funding issues quickly dissipated when the benefactors on earth realized that a frozen alien life form had been discovered there.

Perhaps the other reason Harlow couldn’t bring himself to look at the creature was his overwhelming sense of guilt. For all that he had accomplished during his lifetime, he still felt like he didn’t belong here. While the disease he carried within his body shouldn’t interfere with his job, anyone with it would not normally have been allowed to become a member of the JSCF. And of course, all members of the Kuiper Belt Special Forces team had been handpicked from the JSCF, since they were the group who had discovered the alien. Except Harlow. To face this *being* that so few would be privy to behold with their own eyes was to face his own feelings of inadequacy. Never mind that Akihiko had requested him specifically because he was the world’s leading archaeologist. He was still the only American on the team. And the only Landholder.

His lips frowned behind the polished azure faceplate as he recalled receiving his blood test results aboard the ISS3. Akihiko Noguchi had not mentioned his disease once during that conversation; but it was there, written on his face, lurking in the corners of his piercing gaze. Doubt*. We need you, but we’re afraid you’ll become a liability,* the creases around his eyes seemed to say. In the end, it didn’t matter. Whether his ticket was through friendship or credentials, or a little of both, the flaw in his genes was overlooked, and his papers for the mission approved.

He briefly examined the specimen. What he saw was an amalgam of a pterodactyl and dragonfly, unbent and stretched to almost four meters tall. Two long, thin, leg-like appendages stretched down from the abdomen. However, from the skeletal structure observable through the permafrost, they would be incapable of supporting the creature’s weight in gravity even a fraction of earth’s. The creature had two more sets of limbs protruding out from its upper body. What looked like a pair of fragile membranous wings extended from its back. The lower edge of the one on the left appeared jagged, but he couldn’t tell if the ice was distorting his view or if it had been torn at some point.

Harlow’s gaze flicked away. He stared at the icy rocks drifting all around them. They created a vast ring around the solar system, and he pondered how they had taken that formation. But of more immediate concern, he wondered if he had made the right choice. After all, he could have refused, couldn’t he? Just before the celebration dinner aboard ISS3, he had briefly contemplated throwing the invitation away, tearing up his passport, and returning to the mundanely comforting routine of his life on earth. But of course he didn’t. He wasn’t brave enough to resist the opportunity of a lifetime.

So here he was, standing on a chunk of rock and metal not more than five kilometers long, assisting Dr. Noguchi in extracting a small sample of alien DNA, which they would then take back to the makeshift lab they had assembled on a nearby asteroid. There wasn’t much for him to do while Akihiko drilled into the ice, so he forced himself to study the strange form within. That was why he was here, after all. But his job wasn’t merely to observe the alien carcass and categorize its structure. He had been brought into the KBSF because his expertise spread across a variety of fields. They hoped he would be able to peer deeply into the alien’s physical morphology and determine what type of culture would arise out of that genetic make-up. To see if there was any threat to humanity within its substance.

To thaw or not to thaw.

Dr. Noguchi’s hands quivered within the pressurized suit as the oversized syringe bore deeper. Not much further. After another minute the heated metal passed through the ice and pierced the alien carapace, the event marked by a sound not unlike a cork popping out of a champagne bottle. Akihiko reversed the drill. Once it was free, he removed the needle from the collet and placed it in the case Harlow was holding. The scientist turned from the specimen without a second look.

“Come on,” Dr. Noguchi said calmly over their direct channel. “Let’s get this to the base for testing. We’ll come back out tomorrow for those photographs you’ve been wanting,” he added with a wan smile.

Harlow nodded, lifting a hand to close the case.

Like an underwater scream the object slammed into the asteroid, the concussion felt more than heard in the void of space. NewLife1 hadn’t seen it coming. Neither had Dr. Noguchi. Or maybe they had, but like Harlow, were too frozen in shock to warn the others. The sphere, easily ten cubic kilometers in diameter, appeared suddenly, just overhead and to his right, as if it had materialized into space. At first its coloration appeared to be a mottled black and white. But as it neared, he realized the object was entirely white, and that the black portions were shadows caused by peaks and valleys on its surface. The mountains resembled gigantic worms that had been dipped in glue and thrown haphazardly onto a round balloon. The endpoints of the ridges were stationary, but the bodies wavered and throbbed as the object hurtled towards them.

Harlow’s mouth dropped open, but sound refused to grace the shape his lips made. The last thing he noticed before being hit was that beneath the many rippled tubes protruding from its surface, the object was perfectly spherical. Then the humongous conglomerate collided with the asteroid, shattering it to pieces. As he was thrown from his feet, a large chunk of rock knocked the case out of his hands, sending the syringe spinning end over end. He reached out but the needle eluded his grasp, the long metal sliver twirling quickly away from his gloved fingers. Then the stars spun him round, blurring their light, and his mind went white as well.