

## Chapter 7

*K*endon sat in the small waiting room feeling upbeat that he was at last a step closer to the one-one-five pod, but he wondered about Virginia Woolf. What was the connection between a long-dead British author and the power unit for the beam weapon?

After ten minutes of restless waiting, he got up and stared out of the window at the electric glow of Austin. He was moved by the nighttime beauty, but in his mind the city view was soon overlaid by the image of an asteroid hitting Earth at an incredible speed, sending a blast of vaporized sea in every direction at a thousand miles per second. He could see its searing force tearing through the city followed by a deluge of molten rock.

The image was too painful to sustain. He turned away from the window and walked up and down the corridor to work off the tension the waiting was causing him. As he paced back and forth, he peered into the private rooms. Through one of the doors, he could see a young girl lying on a bed, the covers pulled up to her neck. She was completely bald, and at first he thought he was looking at a large doll. Her eyes were closed, but her lips were pressed tightly together and were moving. Her face was flinching, and he understood she was struggling against pain.

When he saw that no one else was in the corridor, Kendon

stepped into the room and sat quietly in a chair next to the bed. He stared at the girl, at the dark circles under her eyes and at the teddy bear next to her cheek. He guessed she was six or seven years old.

She sensed his presence. Her eyes opened, and she turned her head toward him.

Her voice weak, she said, "Are you a doctor?"

"No, just a friend."

"You smell funny."

Kendon looked down at his clothes and smiled.

"That's from the guano."

"What's that?"

"Bat droppings. I was in a cavern this morning, Carlsbad Caverns."

"Did you see bats?"

"Millions of them."

"My mommy said she'll take me there when I get better."

"Are you in pain?"

"Yes. The nurse gave me my medicine, but it still hurts."

"What's the matter with you?"

"I have a brain tumor."

Kendon felt a wave of sadness. So young and already suffering so much. He forgot about the impending doom and even his reason for being at the hospital. He looked at the palms of his hands, then rubbed them together slowly.

"What's your name?"

"Molly."

"I know how to take the pain away, Molly. Do you want me to?"

"Oh, please, it hurts so much."

He placed his hands over her forehead. "Did they tell you where it is?"

"On the left side, in the middle."

He positioned his hands and kept them there gently. She was

looking up at him. Her eyes were brown, and he thought he detected a gleam of merriment, like they were playing a game.

“I want you to close your eyes and imagine it going away. Imagine it shrinking slowly until it disappears. Can you do that?”

“I think so.”

After a few minutes, Kendon began to see things about the girl, just as he had seen images about the dentist earlier that day at the caverns. A picture formed in his mind of her in a playground holding a large ball and throwing it, then another of her in a yard playing with a dog, tossing a stick and laughing when the dog retrieved it. He could see her in the hospital room with people he understood were her parents. He sensed their sadness and their efforts at cheerfulness when their hearts wanted to break.

The girl’s eyes remained closed, and Kendon wondered if she had drifted into sleep, but ten minutes later she opened them again and said, “I got it to shrink down to the size of a pea.”

Kendon smiled. “That’s great. Make it go away completely. Use the power of your mind to make it go away. You have that power.”

“It doesn’t hurt anymore,” she said.

“Molly, listen to me. I have to go soon. But someone else could do this, you know. Like your parents, or one of the nurses. Tell them what to do.”

He kept his hands on her head for another ten minutes. He felt his hands growing hot and moved them an inch above the girl’s head. He focused all of the resources of his mind on the tumor. His mind became a scalpel, and he imagined cutting the tumor out and then holding it in his the palm of his hand. He imagined throwing it hard like you would throw a stone, far off into the distance where it could do no more harm.

A minute later, he heard a voice at the door.

“Mr. Kendon?”

He looked up. At the door was an attractive woman wearing a white physician’s coat, tall and with brown hair down to her shoul-

ders, looking exactly like the graduate in Meller's photo, but older. He could vaguely see Donald Meller's features in her face, particularly in the shape of her eyes. She was looking at him inquisitively, and he realized he wasn't supposed to be there.

"Molly and I are old friends," he said.

"He took the pain away, Dr. Laura. With his hands."

The woman stepped up to the bed and pulled the blanket up to girl's chin. "I'm glad to hear that, Molly. Where are your parents?"

"They went to get something to eat."

"Good. You rest, and I'll check on you later."

She turned to Kendon, who noticed her eyes were reddened, as if she had been crying.

"Please come with me," she said.

He followed her down the corridor and was taken by her confident bearing. They went into a small office that was lined with books and publications. A window gave a view of the landscaped hospital grounds.

"Please, have a seat."

On her desk was a large purse. As soon as she sat down, she pulled the purse onto her lap and eyed him closely. He realized his appearance was suspicious, dressed as he was in rumpled clothes that smelled of guano. He made a gesture toward his clothes and shook his head. "I literally had to crawl through a cave to get here."

"I hope this isn't a joke, Mr. Kendon. I haven't seen my father in ten years, and then out of the blue I get a telephone call from a complete stranger telling me he saw him just yesterday. I suppose you can imagine how I feel."

Kendon grappled with how to proceed. If he told her the truth bluntly, she wouldn't believe a word of it and would likely call hospital security to have him thrown out.

"I know that when you were growing up you were very close to your father. He told me a lot about you. It was very painful for him not to be with you."

“Why didn’t he call me?”

“I don’t have good news for you. Your father died yesterday. I was with him. Before he died, he asked me to find you. He wanted me to tell you how much he loved you. Those were his last words.”

He watched her struggle to control her emotions. “Where was this?”

“In New Mexico, near Alamogordo.”

“Why wasn’t I contacted? I would have gone there to be with him.”

“He wasn’t allowed contact with the outside world.”

“By whom? I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“Your father was involved in highly classified research, initially through Bach-Merling. At some point he came to know too much and was held against his will, along with many other scientists and engineers, in secret facilities in New Mexico. He spent the last ten years of his life hundreds of feet underground in a facility in northern New Mexico. He was a captive. That’s why you didn’t hear from him.”

“This is a free country. How is that possible?”

“It’s not as free as you think. There’s a dark side to it that’s not under the control of your elected officials. The democratic part of your political system doesn’t know anything about it.”

“And you, what was your role in this? Are you a scientist?”

“I was with the security apparatus.”

“You mean like a guard?”

“As an intelligence officer.”

“How did my father die?”

Kendon struggled with how to tell her enough to obtain Laura’s help without having to admit that he himself had killed her father. He realized she would need a lot of preparation to understand.

From the moment he first saw her, he had been getting strong impressions from her. It seemed that all he had to do now to learn

about people was to be in their presence, and he would pick up mentally on things. It had just occurred with Molly, and now images were filling his mind about Laura Meller. He sensed above all tragedy, and not just the tragedy of her father's disappearance. There was another: She had been married and her husband had died. Kendon had the impression he had killed himself because an image of a gun formed in his mind. He was certain her husband had committed suicide with a gun, but the image he was picking up on had more immediacy. He suddenly realized Laura was thinking of a gun—a gun that was in the purse on her lap. He pulled his backpack up from the floor onto his lap and felt the bulge of his semiautomatic pistol.

He continued, "Your father escaped four days ago with other scientists and engineers. I helped them escape. All of them made it out of the facility and dispersed. But within a few days, they were located. The ones who didn't die resisting capture either committed suicide or were tortured to death."

Laura shifted slightly in her chair. Her face had hardened. She shook her head in disbelief. "If what you're saying is true, then why don't you go to the police?"

"They don't have any way to get into such facilities, and it's not something they have the power to deal with."

"None of this sounds plausible," she said. "How did you get out?"

"I escaped this morning. I'm being hunted, and if I'm caught I'm going to be killed, just like the others."

With an air of casualness, Laura opened her purse and reached inside. Kendon whipped out his pistol just as she leveled her gun at him. They aimed at each other across the desk. He felt mildly amused, pleased by her spunk, but he could tell she was frightened because her hand was trembling.

"You've never killed anyone, Laura, but I have. I had to kill several people this morning. That's how I escaped."

"You are known as Arkasha," Laura said coldly.

Kendon was stunned. “How do you know that?”

“They had your picture on television. They gave your name and your alias. They said you murdered two men at Carlsbad Caverns this morning, two federal agents.”

Kendon nodded. It made sense. The Breeders had to know by now he was no longer implanted and that they and the Directorate had been fooled. It made sense to use upper-world resources to capture him. The Directorate had channels it could use to pass on the location of the bodies and provide the information about Kendon needed for a manhunt. Once he was in police hands, it would be easy for the Directorate to grab him.

But only two dead? He wondered about the numbers that were reported. Did it mean that Bogdan had survived, or one of the gooneys?

He said, “Why did you come here to meet me? Why didn’t you go the police?”

“I wanted to know why you called me. I wanted to know what you know about my father.”

Kendon thought about it for a moment. He was sure she hadn’t alerted anyone, so he wasn’t in immediate danger of capture. He had to earn her trust.

“How about if I give myself up to you?”

“That would be the right thing to do.”

“I want something in return. I want you to listen to me. If you don’t believe what I have to say to you, then call the police. All I ask is that you listen.”

Laura didn’t respond. Kendon lowered his gun, gripped it by the barrel, and handed it to her.

“Take it. I surrender.”

She shoved it into her purse, but kept her pistol pointed at him.

“Talk,” she said.

“Your father said to ask you about Virginia Woolf. He said her books meant a lot to you when you were young.”

Kendon studied Laura's reaction. He knew he had touched something deep in her because he could see mental images the name evoked—a room with a roll-up oak desk and a black and white portrait of a woman with an anguished face on the wall above it. He saw a man who was thin, handsome, and intense. Kendon had the impression the man was her husband and that he was a poet. He was certain he had hit a psychic motherlode.

"Go on," she said.

"That should convince you that I knew your father. How many people in your life know about your interest in Virginia Woolf?"

She shrugged. "Dozens."

He recited two short poems of hers, one light-hearted and witty that she had called *Butterfly Moon*, and another that was dark and brooding: *Hero for the Damned*.

"How do you know those poems?" she demanded. "They were never published."

"Your father used to recite your poems from memory. He was very proud of you. There is no such a thing as literature in the underground. I found them very beautiful, so I memorized them."

He had not intended to flatter her, only to speak the truth, but he realized she was pleased by the fact that he knew the poems by heart.

He closed his eyes. He began to see more about her. The relevant experiences coalesced around poetry, including the tragic experiences. Soon, he saw the image of Breeder eyes, large, dark, and chilling.

So, the Breeders were part of her tragedy!

With his eyes still closed, he said, "You were married to a poet. It was blissful at first, but it turned tragic. You were experiencing abductions, a series of them. Your body was being used to create a hybrid creature, half-human, half-alien. Your husband realized this was happening, but he could do nothing to protect you. What they were doing to you annihilated him as a man. He fell into a depression, then one day he killed himself."

Tears formed in Laura's eyes. "How do you know any of this? Not even my father knew. It started after he disappeared."

"It's coming from you, Laura. You are telling me."

"I haven't told you anything."

"Not consciously."

She stood up. "I don't want to hear any more of this. Please leave. Just take your gun and leave."

"It's because of what they did to you that I'm here. There's a way to stop them. Your father found a way, but he died before he could carry out his plan. No one else is left to fight them. It's up to you and me now."

"Everything you're saying is nonsense."

"Really? When they brought you to a brightly-lit room and had you hold an infant, you knew it wasn't totally human, but you knew it was yours. Was that nonsense? Why don't you tell me about that, Laura? Tell me what you thought about and what you felt when you were holding that half-human creature that you knew was yours."

"Maybe I should shoot you just to make you shut up."

"If you do, you're going to die in two days."

"You're insane."

"There are millions of those half-human creatures now. Enough, in fact, to replace the human race. And that was always the intention behind the abductions. It's going to happen on Sunday. They've diverted an asteroid so it will hit Earth and bring an end to the human race. Unless we stop them, Laura, you and I. Your father created a weapon to deal with it. Part of it is in your possession, only you don't know you have it. Virginia Woolf is the key to finding it. That's what your father told me before he died."

Laura's breathing had become rapid and shallow. Still holding the gun, she squeezed her hands against her ears. The phone suddenly rang. She grabbed it as if it were a lifeline to the sane world. She listened without comment and nodded, then slowly put the receiver down. She looked for a moment at her gun, then at Kendon.

“What did you do to Molly?”

“You mean the girl in the ward?”

“Yes.”

“I felt sorry for her. All my life I’ve been able to heal with my hands, so while I was waiting for you, I tried to help her.”

“She has an inoperable brain tumor. This morning she could barely stand up. At the most, she has a month to live. That was a call from the nurse. She said Molly is jumping up and down on the bed and acting like a naughty child. She says she won’t stop until she sees you again.”

Laura put the pistol back into her purse and pointed to the door. “Walk in front of me. I haven’t made up my mind about you yet.”

As they walked down the corridor, Kendon noticed a group of people at the far end of the ward in the waiting area. They were standing at the windows looking up at the sky. Some were pointing. One was a nurse who turned and motioned repeatedly to Laura to join them, but Laura pointed at Molly’s room to show where she was going.

The girl was jumping up and down on the bed and was holding her teddy bear as if dancing with it. A man and a woman were there, who Kendon guessed were Molly’s parents.

“That’s him, that’s the man who took the pain away,” Molly said when she saw Kendon.

Kendon winked at her. The dark circles were gone from under her eyes, which now sparkled with vitality. She threw her arms out for Kendon to hug her. The woman was dabbing tears from her eyes and the man was grinning.

“I don’t know what you did to her, mister,” the man said with a drawl, “but I sure want to thank you.”

Laura got Molly to sit on the edge of the bed. With a thumb, she raised her eyelids and examined her eyes. She took her pulse and with a stethoscope listened to her heart.

She said to the parents, “Her energy level is perfectly normal. We’ll do some testing to find out exactly what’s going on here.”

Turning to Kendon, Laura said, "Maybe I *should* take you seriously."

Kendon nodded and pointed to the door. When they were out in the corridor, he said, "What does Virginia Woolf mean to you?"

She was quiet for a moment, then said, "When I was growing up, we lived in the countryside. I was fond of her books. One of them is called *A Room of One's Own*. I liked to write poetry and stories, so my father fixed up my room with an antique writing desk. It was near the window and had a view of the hills. That's where I wrote, in a room of my own."

"We need to go there. Do you still own the property?"

"It's part of a trust, but essentially I own it. I often spend the weekend there. It's not terribly far, only an hour's drive from here."

They were interrupted by the nurse who had been staring out of the waiting-room window.

"Dr. Meller! Dr. Meller! Come here. You've got to see this."

Kendon and Laura went up to the window and peered up where the nurse was pointing. High in the night sky were bright disk-shaped lights that were hovering at an altitude of about three thousand feet. Kendon counted twelve in all.

"What are they?" Laura asked weakly.

"What do you think?"

"I don't want to think."

Kendon pulled her away from the window. He touched the bridge of her nose.

"You're implanted. When you were first abducted, they embedded a device that works like a transmitter so they know where to find you when they need you again."

She became panicky. "Don't let them take me. I don't want to go through that again."

"They've linked us together. They're after what I'm after."

"I can't run. No matter where I go they'll know. You need to get out of here. I'll draw you a map."

“No,” Kendon said, with enough vehemence for the people at the window to turn and look at them. He lowered his voice. “Block it from your mind. The implant also helps them penetrate your mind if they want to. Don’t let any images form in your mind. Think white, think bright. Keep repeating that to yourself. Imagine a ball of white light.”

She closed her eyes. “Okay, I see a ball of white. Now what?”

“We have to get you X-rayed. If you have an implant, it has to be removed. We don’t have much time.

“Then let’s go down to radiology,” she said.

Kendon sensed panic in her voice and took her hands. “I promise I won’t let anything happen to you.”

They rode an elevator one floor down. As it descended, Laura gave Kendon his pistol back, which he shoved into the backpack. They followed a yellow line down a corridor to the radiology room.

“I don’t know if anyone’s on duty this late,” she said.

A short, stocky man in a white lab coat was seated at a workstation. He stood up when they entered.

“I’m glad you’re here, Morgan,” Laura said. “I need an X-ray of the bridge of my nose. It’s urgent.”

“I don’t think I’m authorized to do that, Doctor.”

“I’m authorizing you.”

Kendon smiled politely but firmly at him and nodded. “It can’t wait.”

“What’s the problem?”

Kendon said, “I suspect she has something right here at the bridge of the nose, embedded in the cartilage. Probably T-shaped. Of unknown material, possibly metallic. We need to know for sure if it’s there. We need at least two images—one from the top, one from the side.”

The technician shrugged. He pointed to the table. Laura lay on her back. He swung the arm of the machine over her and made some adjustments, then slid a large, thin cassette underneath the table. Kendon joined him in the adjacent room, behind a leaded

glass window. After clicking the X-ray machine, the technician returned to the room to turn her on her side for a second X-ray.

Kendon, meanwhile, found an office with a window and scanned the sky. He could see three of the disks. He was sure the others were still up there, but the building blocked his view.

He felt them probing, trying to enter his mind. but he was able from years of effort to create a mental shield. He was shrouded in white, living in the center of a blizzard. He felt secure mentally, but he also felt the beginnings of panic: He was certain they or their surrogates were going to make a move of some kind. Time was running out.

He rushed back to the radiology room just as the technician finished processing the X-rays. The X-rays were digitalized and were displayed on a large monitor.

The technician pointed to an object. "Is that what you mean?"

Laura's face whitened. "It's been there all this time, and I didn't know."

Kendon said, "It has to be removed immediately. Who's here who can do surgery?"

The technician said, "I ran into Dr. Urquidi ten minutes ago in the corridor. He said he was visiting a patient."

Laura picked up the desk phone. "Which ward?"

"Orthopedics."

She punched four buttons and waited. It took a minute to connect with the other doctor. "Dr. Urquidi? This is Dr. Laura Meller. We have an emergency. Can you meet me in surgery immediately?"

She was gripping the receiver so tightly her knuckles whitened. Her ear pressed to the receiver, she bobbed her head up and down as she listened and said finally in a frustrated voice, "I don't have time to explain over the phone. Just be there. I repeat, this is an emergency."

As they rushed out the door, Kendon grabbed the technician by the arm. "I need your help. Come with me."

The surgery ward was on the same floor as the cancer ward. They were in the operating room in two minutes.

Kendon said to Laura, "White out your mind. Think white, think bright. Don't let anything in your mind betray what we're doing."

A half a minute later, Dr. Urquidi, a thin-faced man with an arrogant expression and cold eyes, entered. He stared at Kendon, Laura, and the technician.

"And what is the nature of the emergency, doctor?" he said.

She called up the X-rays on the surgery room monitor and pointed to the implant.

Kendon said, "You've got ten minutes to take it out."

"What are you talking about?" the doctor huffed. "This doesn't look like an emergency, and I don't have time for this right now. It needs to be scheduled."

Kendon grabbed him by the arm and walked him to a nearby office with a window. He pointed to the sky. "You see those lights? They're alien spaceships. They're after Dr. Meller, and they're after me. That T-shaped object in her nose is an implant, a tracking device. They put it there. It has to come out."

The doctor struggled to break free of Kendon's grip. "This is ridiculous," he said.

Kendon whipped the gun out of the backpack. He put the barrel to the doctor's head. "And what about this? Is this ridiculous?"

"Just who the hell are you?"

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me."

Still gripping his arm, Kendon marched the doctor back into the operating room. Laura had already positioned surgical instruments, a suturing kit, a vial of local anesthetic, and a syringe on a stainless steel tray next to an operating table. She had taken her doctor's smock off and strapped a green garment over her clothes.

She looked with surprise at Kendon's gun. The technician was staring at it, too, his mouth wide open. He glanced nervously at Laura.

“Are you doing this under duress?” Urquidi asked her.

“Yes, but not from him.” She pointed to the sky. “From them.”

She lay down on the operating table. “I’m ready, Dr. Urquidi. Please proceed.”

Kendon released his grip on the doctor and said, “Skip all the pre-operation stuff. There’s no time. Just start with the local anesthetic.”

“I want to know what this is all about and why you need to point a gun at me,” the surgeon said.

“I’ll tell you all about it while you work.” Kendon shoved the gun into his belt and turned to the X-ray technician. “I want you to extract blood from her. Enough to fill a vial.”

The surgeon quickly prepared the anesthetic and then made injections on both sides of the bridge of Laura’s nose. As he became engrossed in the work, the arrogance was replaced by a look of cool professionalism.

Kendon stood behind Laura, his hands smoothing back her long hair. He cupped her face between his hands and leaned close. He whispered, “Your father was a great man, Laura. You have his greatness in you.”

She closed her eyes. Kendon said softly, “Think white, think bright. Think of a ball of whiteness growing and filling the room. It has warmth and nothing can hurt you when you’re wrapped in its warmth.”

He repeated it in a soothing voice until he could see she had slipped into a state of deep relaxation.

“The anesthetic hasn’t had time to work,” Urquidi protested.

“She won’t feel anything,” Kendon said. “Go ahead.”

After a glance at the X-rays, the surgeon made two small incisions and quickly exposed the cartilage. After he rinsed and scraped, Kendon could see a thin metallic line.

“That’s an alien implant,” Kendon said. “It was manufactured forty light years from here.”

As the surgeon cut into the cartilage around the sides of the

object, Kendon gave a brief account of the alien presence and their ultimate objective, a narrative in short, declarative sentences, each with the impact of a hammer blow. He told them of the approaching asteroid and that it had been deliberately diverted to strike the world.

As he spoke, he watched the surgeon's face. Urquidi said nothing, but he began blinking more rapidly and his breathing quickened. The X-ray technician, who was standing nearby extracting blood from Laura's arm, turned pale.

Soon, with the help of a thin, curved forceps, the surgeon extracted the implant. Kendon took the vial, now full of Laura's blood, and handed it to him.

"Drop it in here. It needs the body fluids of the host to work."

After the surgeon dropped it inside, Kendon screwed the cap on and handed it to the technician. "Not of word of this to anybody. We have a way of defeating the asteroid. If we fail because you've told somebody about what's happened here, I guarantee you that in two days you and six billion other people are going to be dead."

The technician's lower lip was trembling. "What do you want me to do with this?"

"Get to your car and drive to the nearest truck stop. Plant it on the back of a large transport truck. The aliens are smart, but they're not that smart. They will follow the truck."

The surgeon quickly sewed up the incisions and cleaned the blood from Laura's face. A minute later, she sat up, a small bandage over her nose. She seemed dazed. Kendon took the green gown off her and led her by the arm.

The surgeon stepped back to let them pass. He didn't look either of them in the eyes.

"Good luck," he said almost inaudibly.

They rushed down the hallway to the elevators, but after pressing the button, Kendon said, "Forget the elevator. Which way to the back entrance?"

They went down a staircase, then followed a wide corridor that led to another hallway. Soon they were outside the building, walking toward the parking lot. As they got near, Kendon spotted the X-ray technician. He was struggling to get away from three tall men in long black coats who were wearing sunglasses even though it was nighttime. Next to them was a long, sleek limousine-like vehicle that wasn't quite touching the ground.

"Who are they? Are those the agents you were telling me about?" Laura said in a frightened voice. "What are they doing to Morgan?"

Kendon pulled her by the arm across the street. They rushed down a side street to his Jeep. He opened the passenger door and pushed Laura in, then jumped in on the driver's side and started the motor.

As he sped away from the hospital, Kendon said, "Those aren't Directorate agents. They're hybrids. They're taking Morgan away and very soon they'll know everything."

"Are they going to hurt him?"

"Yes."

"Oh, my God," she said, shaking her head. "Can't we do anything to help him?"

"No," Kendon said. "Now, which way do we go?"

