

Tales of Eternity: a story of the Culture
By Chris Nagele

The GCU *Present or Accounted For* steamed into the stellar system designated H18mX0913, fields busy with a heavy deceleration. The Contact ship angled towards one of the outer planets. Seren flicked through a series of images, generated by *Present or Accounted For* using its suite of sensors and other technological obscurities. The planet appeared golden from far away, but as they approached, Seren saw that the color was simply a reflection of the yellow-orange sun. Gradually, other hues broke through the haze. Greens, blues and whites swirled in a cacophony of complexity as they did on some of the other habitable planets Seren had visited.

As they got closer, Seren strained her eyes and queried if the ship could zoom in any further. Its predictably sarcastic reply indicated that Seren possessed the patience of a small insect.

She sighed and lay back on her bed, staring at the white ceiling. The surface was a few meters above her and gently curved downwards to form a half dome encircling the scattered furniture of her living quarters. *This is it*, she thought. Seren had been an agent of Contact for nearly a decade, but never before had she actually made first contact with a civilization. There just weren't that many unknown civs at this point in galactic history, but as luck would have it, *Present or Accounted For* had been the closest Contact ship to a known, but previously silent Theocracy which had sent out a plea for communication.

It was a textbook case for Contact, a scenario which had been explored in countless holo-dramas, and one that should never happen in real life. Yet here she was. She sat up again and checked the ship's sensors. They had gained only a little ground, but Seren thought she could now make out what she had been looking for. Dark curved lines crisscrossed the surface of the planet, dividing it into a hundred or so uneven sections. The lines appeared slightly longer near the barely visible ice caps.

Her curiosity sated, Seren lay back and passed out almost immediately. They would arrive at the planet in about four hours and she needed to catch up on sleep in the meantime. She had been in almost non stop conferences with other agents and ships since they had received the summons, some eighteen hours previously.

She awoke to a soft but insistent buzzing. With a start, she checked the screen and saw that they had just completed docking. Seren cursed and ripped off her comfortable clothing, frantically asking the ship what she was supposed to wear. The ship produced a black suit of synthetic linen as it informed Seren that she had the sleep habits of a large hibernating mammal. She smiled as she struggled into the unfamiliar garments, the ship's humor snapping her brain to alertness more effectively than any glanding.

Two minutes later, she exited the safety of the Culture ship and emerged onto a large concourse with several stories of open air beneath a gray ceiling. The far side was dominated by storefronts, some of them closed, while docking portals stretched in both directions on the near. She was not sure exactly what to expect, but the reality or her reception was modest. A single man with long arms and short facial hair, dressed in a black suit looking not at all dissimilar to Seren's own, greeted her.

'Seren, is it? I am High Yaril Twente Jannae Aranji. It is a true pleasure to finally meet one of your civilization's fabled ambassadors.'

'The pleasure's all mine Twente Jannae Aranji.'

'Please, Jannae.'

Seren nodded and looked casually around the concourse. There were a few people hustling here or there, but no one had taken any notice of the odd woman being greeted by one of the four heads of the church. She gestured, 'I have to admit some surprise that you've received me alone, High Yaril.'

'Let's walk, shall we?'

The man turned left down the concourse and fell into a low but powerful gait. As Seren moved to match his pace, she noticed that the man's hips were wider than his shoulders, despite his otherwise sleek frame. Possibly a trait of this particular strain of pan-humanity, she mused.

'I'm afraid that this meeting is something of an off book affair.' Seren waited for him to continue, as he did after a few moments, 'if the common people ever found out it was taking place, or for that matter if the clergy ever found out, then catastrophe would ensue at every level of our great society.'

Seren was still slightly behind the High Yaril and looked over at him as they walked. 'I'm afraid that I don't understand. Is it a matter of xenophobia? But surely your civ has had extensive contact with the Pavu and the Unidar, hence our ability to communicate.'

The High Yaril did not slow or turn to regard Seren. 'You are correct that it is not simple xenophobia. Maybe we could refer to it instead as a theological pathos. You see, the civilizations of Pavu and Unidar are mentioned, even described in the Opan.'

They had turned to the left and were now walking down another concourse, though this one was narrower and reminded Seren of a pier at which seafaring craft might dock. 'The Opan is ...?'

'Our holy book.'

'The one referenced in your communication?'

'Yes. As you may have deduced, the Opan is the basis of our faith, and of our very being. It was written by a series of blessed saints several millennia ago, and it has guided our civilization ever since.'

Seren pursed her lips, 'Yes, I think I am familiar with this kind of religious foundational-'

Jannae wheeled to face her and the pair stopped, an eddy in the diffuse flow of the concourse. 'I am sorry for any rudeness, but you are familiar with nothing like the Opan. The Opan has predicted every event in history, every political machination, every technological breakthrough, and even the presence of aliens,' during the last pronouncement, Jannae seemed to falter slightly. 'So please, do not dismiss our Book as you would the ramblings of some jungle hermit whose followers were duped by tales of eternity.'

Seren studied the man before replying. He had the face of a child, she now realized, and it was flushed pink with emotion, his breathing unsteady. 'I apologize, I did not mean any offense.'

Jannae sighed and turned to continue. 'Of course, and I did not mean to react so dramatically. I just wanted to impress upon you that this book has made prediction after prediction, and they have, without fail, come to pass.'

'May I ask a question, High Yaril?'

The man nodded tiredly.

Seren took that as a sign of assent, as it was in Unidar, 'does the Opan say anything of the Culture?'

They approached a viewing platform as Jannae prepared an answer. Seren stared out of the translucent surface in wonder. Below, the planet stretched before them. Mountains, deserts, oceans and all the rest were transcendent when viewed from this high up. Of course Seren had seen these sorts of terrains at distance many times, but from this vantage, she could see the curvature of the planet and the embrace of darkness above. Planet and vacuum were joined by shimmering black arches which appeared slim, but in fact measured many kilometers in diameter. The pair now stood near the top of one of these arches, which Seren had read were used as space elevators as well as residential and industrial areas.

Instead of answering her query about the Culture, Jannae gestured at the massive constructions. 'The Opan predicted that we would reach space on the back of a bowed beast, and so it came to pass.'

'More than one beast, it would seem, High Yaril.'

The man smiled thinly, 'quite. As you may have guessed, Seren, the Opan makes no mention of the Culture, nor any other advanced civilizations beyond our immediate neighbors. Thus when your kind and others have contacted us over the past few centuries, we have as a rule ignored you, and many of us did not fully believe you were real.'

Seren thought about that. 'So the reason that you have contacted us now, does that mean there is some problem with the Opan?'

Jannae turned to her and Seren wrenched her gaze away from the planet with its arches in order to meet that of the High Yaril. 'You catch on quick.' He motioned that they should continue walking parallel to the viewing windows. After they resumed, Jannae elaborated, 'I mentioned before that the Opan has predicted all of our major technological advances. While it does not include engineering diagrams, it does include accurate technical descriptions of anti gravity generators, hyper space drives, CMRD, and a bevy of other technologies. However, the progress of our priests has stalled. For the last two hundred years, we have tried to produce the next batch of wonders described in the Opan, and we have failed.'

The man paused and glanced over at Seren, probing for a reaction. 'I see.'

'This has led to a series of events which has shaken our great civilization to its very core. The once preposterous suggestion that the Opan is not infallible has gained traction.'

'Has this crisis of faith extended to yourself, High Yaril?'

'I am devout, but I am also a pragmatic man who oversees the administration of tens of billions of people across thirteen star systems.' He drew in a breath visibly, 'I would like to ask the Culture to investigate the matter.'

Seren rubbed her arm in thought. 'I need you to be slightly more specific. Would you like us to investigate the validity of the claims made in the Opan or its origins?'

'I care more about the latter, and I would assume the former would fall under the purview of such an investigation anyway.'

They had been walking slowly, but had covered at least thirty meters next to the windows. Seren looked out though she knew the view had not changed. 'What is it you hope to hear, High Yaril?'

'I hope to hear that the skies are blue and the planet green, but such is not the way of life in every circumstance.'

'Indeed, sometimes the sky can be green and the planet blue.'

'Quite.'

'I take your point. I will need to consult with some colleagues of course.'

'Naturally. How long will that take?'

'Not long. I can communicate with them from the ship.'

Jannae turned around abruptly, 'Well why wait?' Seren thought he was struggling to conceal a smile. 'In all seriousness, I thank you for the consideration.'

Back aboard the *Present or Accounted For*, Seren took a brief moment to clear her head. This was incredible. She had never in her wildest dreams imagined such an anomaly would present itself to her. Were there any other possibilities, she wondered, besides interference by an alien civ? She couldn't think of any, but perhaps the Contact Minds could dream up a few more.

'Ship, what do you think?'

The ship answered in its usual low pitched, faintly female voice, 'I've arranged a subspace conference with several interested parties. Would you rather attend or catch up on sleep?'

'You're hilarious ship. Just heaps and heaps of comedy packed into every word.'

'How kind.'

Seren made her way to her sleeping room and motioned for a large screen to appear over the breakfast table. She took a seat in one of the high standing low backed stools and waited for the meeting to begin.

When Contact Minds conversed, they usually did it at great speed, but because in this case Seren was the face of their effort, the Minds would include her in a more normally paced conversation.

The white screen that floated in the air fizzed dramatically and faded. A green and gray room appeared, with a conference table and not much else. Seren's viewpoint was from the head of the table. Seated directly on her right, the avatar of *Present or Accounted For* leaned back in a chair, a smug look adorning a surprisingly plain face.

A few chairs down the table, three other Avatars reclined. They represented the GCU *Falling from the Sky*, the LOU *Sorry Was This Your Chair*, and the GSV *Likely Course* as was indicated by the small brass-inlaid wooden placards resting on the table.

Present was the first to speak, 'excuse the surroundings, Seren, *Sorry* enjoys pretending they're into history.'

Sorry scowled, but made no comment.

Present continued, 'thoughts?'

Falling from the Sky was the first to weigh in. It had a finicky voice, high pitched and indistinct, 'I doubt it's advanced tech alien meddling. It would have to be at least a tier seven civ to pull this off without giving the locals any clue.'

The *Likely Course's* voice was low and rapid, like the noise from a large instrument, 'Are you saying that scenario is less likely than blind luck?'

Seren broke in, curious, 'well I'm sure you've already run the numbers on blind luck, so let's hear them.'

Likely glanced over at their colleagues briefly before shrugging and turning to Seren. 'Well, the galaxy has a hundred billion stars, so that's ten billion habitable planets on which societies could reasonably develop.'

Sorry interjected, 'Systems.'

The two avatars locked rather terse gazes for the briefest of moments before *Likely* continued, 'Yes, as my esteemed colleague points out, that means ten billion systems with planets on which societies could develop, so let's call that twenty billion planets. Happy?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you. Now not all of these planets actually host civilizations capable of developing complex religious traditions, but let's ignore that for now. Each planet might produce up to, let's say a thousand religions over the course of galactic history.'

'Only a thousand?' It was *Present's* turn to interrupt and Seren wondered if the other ships were purposefully trying to irritate the GSV.

'By religion, I mean one that makes predictions precise enough to describe aliens and space travel. Not every bush religion and medium sized pantheon qualifies.' *Likely* looked around pointedly. 'Anything else?'

The other ships responded with barely concealed mirth.

'Not I.'

'You're doing great.'

The avatar sighed, then continued. 'That makes it *twenty* trillion religions in the history of this galaxy which make predictions detailed enough to be comparable to those in the Opan. Now, I have analyzed the text sent over by *Present or Accounted For* and I have broken down the predictions described into a number of yes or no bytes. By my estimate, that number is around one thousand.'

Seren glanced at *Present* who was listening politely, before asking, 'sorry I'm lost. Could you explain?'

As *Likely Course* started his explanation again, Seren heard more voices. Slightly grainy versions of the voices of *Falling* and *Sorry*.

'Humans.'

'What are they even good for?'

'Organic procreation?'

'True. Why do they ever do anything else?'

'It requires interaction with other humans. They're horribly antisocial creatures.'

'Ahh, that's it then.'

Seren looked at the two avatars down the table, though they were not speaking visibly. For the briefest of moments, *Sorry Was This Your Chair*, turned ever so slightly towards Seren and winked.

She giggled and turned her attention back to *Likely's* explanation, but realized she was lost again. 'Umm, sorry but could you start again? I was distracted by your colleagues.'

Likely Course held its hands up in exasperation. 'Will you fucking grow up?'

If there was some sort of silent exchange between the ships, it was over too quickly for Seren to notice. Instead, *Likely* launched once again into his explanation of probability. 'As a rough sort of estimate of the randomness associated with this holy book, the Opan, we can

determine the randomness associated with each prediction and then add them all up. For instance, consider the prediction, country X will invade country Y.'

Likely cleared its throat a bit dramatically before continuing. 'First off, the book needs to know that country X and country Y will both exist, though it can make this easier by using vague language. Then it needs to know that there will be a war, and that one side will win the war. So, very basically there are three bytes: does country X exist? Does country Y exist? Does country X beat country Y in the war?'

'Shouldn't there be four bytes? Do they go to war?'

'We're talking level 3 civs here, Seren. They always go to war. Anyway, the last of these three bytes is conditional on the first two bytes both being true, so in reality this is closer to four bytes. Do you get the basic idea?'

'Sure.'

'The Opan is quite short when it comes to religious tomes, so all told it includes only a thousand bytes. Now, what is the probability of this occurring randomly? Well, let's assume each byte has a fifty percent chance of being yes or no. Then, the probability of getting the Opan is one over two to the one thousand, which is one quadrillion quadrillion.'

'So is that big or small?' This was from *Sorry*.

Likely Course scowled once more at the LOU and then looked back to Seren, 'I'm saying it is incredibly unlikely. Even if we include all the galaxies in the observable universe, we still can't get enough religions to make this one probable.'

'But wait, only a thousand bytes?' Seren shook her head. 'How is it describing space travel in only a thousand bytes?'

Likely's calm facade never faltered. 'It only includes the crucial revelation for a specific technology, so less than ten bytes for each one.'

'So then it's definitely gotta be an alien plant?'

'Not necessarily.' *Falling From the Sky* leaned forward to place its elbows on the table and rest its chin very lightly there. 'With all due respect to our big brained colleague over here, this analysis does not take into account the possibility that the clergy shaped the path of history on this planet so that it would follow the possibly random predictions of the Opan.'

Present leaned forward to match the other GCU's pose, 'and there's also the sociological angle. If the Opan predicts that country X will invade country Y, and everyone believes in the Opan, then that event has a much higher likelihood of occurring than the one half assumed by our lucky GSV.'

'Sorry, but why?' Seren was once again getting lost in the weeds.

'Because public opinion matters. Think about the Culture. We are not a democracy per se, yet things are decided democratically, according to how Culture citizens feel about a certain topic. If they like a civilization, or if they dislike it, that affects how we at Contact deal with that civilization.'

'But it's circular logic because Contact is the one who provides Culture citizens with information about the other civ.'

'Well that gets at *Falling's* point about the clergy shaping the belief of their constituents, but also do you really think Contact alters information to shape public sentiment within the Culture?'

Seren nodded, 'of course, SC does it all the time.' At this, one or two of the other ships glanced at *Falling From the Sky*.

Likely forced some direction back into the conversation, 'Anyway, my point is that just analyzing the barebones numbers, it seems unlikely that the Opan is just some random fluctuation, though I invite my esteemed colleagues to pursue a more detailed analysis at their leisure.' The last bit veritably dripped sarcasm.

Seren looked around, 'so what are we saying here, divine gift, alien gift, a clever fake, or something more exotic?'

Present answered its crewmember's question, 'we need more info. Let's send Seren down to do some more digging and you three can continue your analysis of the Opan, agreed?'

Arsen-fin Urve was a round woman. The priest of the Opan was dressed in a set of enormous black robes which rippled down from where flesh and fabric parted. As Seren looked on from across the room, Arsen guided a sequence of miniature pastries artfully into her mouth.

Seren turned slightly to her left and looked at Jannae who said, 'Yes yes. Believe it or not, that woman is one of the preeminent scholars on the history of the Opan.'

Seren suspected that the woman was preeminent in several areas, though she kept the thought to herself. She wondered if obesity here was a choice, as it was in most civs, or if this society lacked the requisite cohesion or technology to prevent the rare disease.

Aloud she said, 'shall you introduce me?'

Jannae looked startled, but nodded and started to weave his way across the crowded day room. He had explained that this building was a place where priests of different orders and disciplines convened informally to discuss theology and theocracy. More than a few questioning glances had been thrown Seren's way, but the High Yartil had insisted upon haste above all else, and he preferred not to wait for a more secluded opportunity.

'Seren, may I introduce the right honorable Arsen-fin Urve. Scholar senator, this is Seren, and if you are not otherwise occupied, I would be very pleased if you could answer some of her questions.'

The large woman turned to Seren and studied her briefly though with some intent. She leaned forward. Her voice was surprisingly dextrous compared to her frame. 'Of course High Yartil, I would be honored. I take it by her lack of honorifics and the strange looks we are receiving that Seren is... not from around here?'

Jannae answered, 'indeed, perhaps we could retire to a more private location?'

As Arsen rose to her feet, Seren realized she hadn't yet said anything to the large woman. 'Pleased to meet you.'

Arsen laughed good naturedly though Seren didn't get the joke.

She followed the two priests out through the day room and down several corridors. Eventually, they came to a nondescript wooden door. Arsen tried the handle but it was locked and so she motioned to Jannae, who sighed and stepped forwards, laying his hand on a pad above the door. Shortly, the door clicked and edged towards them. Inside was a small office with no windows. The room was a mess, with stacks of papers and leather bound books all over the floor. Antique (or so Seren thought) wooden furniture was also scattered about the small space,

with a desk and three chairs just about visible among the clutter. On the desk was a holo-display of some children playing on what looked to be the shore of a mountain lake.

'Whose office is this?' Seren asked.

Arsen answered, 'the government's chief of intelligence. Don't worry though, she's on vacation with her extended family. Plus the old bat has more than a few tricks and I suspect this room is very secure.'

Seren pinged the ship silently, 'how secure? Can you still hear us?'

'Loud and clear,' *Present or Accounted For* responded.

There was a good deal of small talk and pleasantries, with Arsen wanting to know where Seren was from and how she got here among other things. Seren answered dutifully and waited for Jannae to take over. The man was sweating and he seemed to lack the composure he had shown up on the arch, and Seren wondered at the change. Finally, he interjected, 'Scholar Senator, now that you are somewhat more caught up with the situation, perhaps we can proceed?'

'Of course.' The rotund woman turned to Seren, 'what do you want to know?'

She took a breath, 'first off, do you find it strange interacting with someone from a civilization not described in the Opan?'

Arsen didn't bat an eyelid, 'strange in its novelty perhaps, but nothing beyond that.'

'So you don't believe that the Opan is one hundred percent accurate?'

'Not at all. We have interpreted it that way for millenia because we have had the ability and the need to do so, but other interpretations are possible, ones which are not as kind.'

'Are you devout, Arsen?'

The woman donned surprise, 'why of course, Seren. But please understand I am a scholar before a theologian. In a way, understanding just how close the Opan has come to unraveling at several points in history makes me believe in its potential all the more.'

'Yet you seem surprised at talking to someone whose existence is unacknowledged by the Book.'

'It's true, the Opan predicted some characteristics of our neighboring civilizations, but we— or I suppose I should say, some of us— are not so unworldly as to not realize that other civilizations, many of them far more advanced than our own, exist.'

Seren thought hard about how to proceed. The woman seemed to be saying two opposing things with complete confidence at the same time. She decided to change tactics, 'why do you think the Opan is so accurate?'

Arsen smiled knowingly, 'ahh, you want to know if we have entertained the possibility of fabrication? It was discussed in academic circles several hundred years ago, but ultimately, it was decided that no satisfactory answer could be found, so the subject was dropped.'

'But isn't the existence of aliens such as myself evidence for fabrication?'

'Only if you are assuming the aliens are not very knowledgeable. Do you think it's possible for our holy book to have been faked by a civilization which knew of only two others? That seems unlikely to me.'

Seren was struggling with the conversation. It seemed that Arsen had a reasonable but ultimately uninformative answer for just about everything. She decided it was time to use her only truly powerful move, 'so why did you contact us?'

Arsen opened her mouth, but Jannae beat her to it, 'yes, well I should say that Arsen's opinions, while certainly unassailable from a scholastic point of view, do not represent the opinion of the clergy writ large.'

Arsen waited till she was sure Jannae had finished before continuing. She held up a hand in acknowledgement, 'indeed. I can only speculate that the answer to that question lies within the fact that many of our colleagues, both in government and academia, have been disturbed by recent events which they interpret as falling outside the predictions of the holy book.'

'Such as?'

'War when there should be peace, new technologies which do not function as they should. We have of course experienced these phenomena before, but this time they have gotten more attention because they are all occurring at once. In fact it was announced earlier today that a new faster than light communications method predicted by the Opan, has been delayed by another decade at least. Some now question its feasibility.' She glanced at Jannae, 'anything to add, high Yaril?'

'Just to reinforce that most of us, besides a small group of academics in which Arsen may be counted, do fear that the Opan is becoming unreliable. This, in essence, is why we have contacted the Culture.' He nodded almost fearfully at Seren.

She queried the ship briefly, to see if it had any questions. It told her she was doing great. 'Ok, I think I understand the situation more fully now. The one point which I am still not sure about is this. Did you reach out to us because you have completely lost faith in the Opan or because you seek an external assessment of its --- well I guess of its validity?'

Arsen looked at the High Yaril, but the man was lost for her words. 'Of course I can't speak for the government itself, but I suspect the answer is in between.'

'Thank you. And your *opinion*, Scholar Senator?'

The woman picked up a screen sitting on the desk and started flipping through pages of text. 'The Opan,' she explained after a moment. When she had found the appropriate passage, she started reading aloud, 'And a guest shall emerge slash appear among the stars-'

Jannae's face turned waxen, 'it can't be,' he whispered, 'that passage referred to-.'

Arsen cut him off, 'And a guest shall appear from among the stars. And there shall be a great march under the night sky. And forms slash organizations shall fall, yet others will grow.'

Seren's mind conjured an image of massive arches. She did not comment.

Arsen put down the screen and addressed the high Yaril, 'there is precedent. A single passage can describe multiple events, as, I believe, your grandmother argued as a student, High Yaril. The guest among the stars could be the supernova of 6142 or it could be this woman sitting in front of us now, or it could be both. There is no reason to doubt such an interpretation.'

'God, what have I done?' The man surveyed the room, the doubt that had sheltered in his soul violently ripped out into the open.

Eventually Arsen spoke, 'there's nothing you could have done. Either it was meant to be or none of it was and we will make it so. Either way-' she shrugged.

Several minutes later, they exited the secure office. Jannae steered them down the hallway towards a sparsely populated cafeteria. The man remained preoccupied, his gaze rarely leaving the floor in front of him. Arsen assumed the mantle of conversation.

‘Have you had a chance to see any of the old cities?’

Seren knew that the Senator was referring to cities not clustered around the base of the arches. ‘Alas, only from above.’

The woman grinned. Her mood was infectious. ‘Well, we’ll have to remedy that, won’t we?’

‘I would be honored.’

‘Unfortunately, I have unassailable commitments for the rest of the day, but I’m sure our leader can conjure a suitable guide.’

Jannae had paused and he now looked up towards the two women. ‘What? Oh, yes of course.’ He removed a small electronic device and spoke into it, requesting that one of his attaches be sent for. The group paused in the entrance to a cafeteria while Jannae consulted his device. After a minute and a half, he led them back in the direction they had come from. They took an unfamiliar set of stairs up two floors before emerging into another, wider, hallway lit by natural light streaming in huge windows on their right. At the end of the hallway waited a younger man sporting a thick mustache and shoulder length wavy chestnut locks.

Jannae gestured towards the young man. ‘Gellan will take care of you, now I fear I must depart with haste. I hope you have found some utility in these conversations.’

Arsin turned to follow, ‘until next time, alien.’

Seren smirked and raised an eyebrow, then looked over at Gellan. She suspected he would be quite attractive without the facial hair.

As she approached, he bowed to the waist. ‘This way please, madame.’

‘No formality is required, I assure you.’

‘And yet it persists.’

Fair enough.

The man led Seren through a tangle of passageways until they emerged onto a short parking area crowded with what she presumed to be air cars. They approached a compact silver vehicle with a driver leaning against the metallic exterior.

She wondered if it was her imagination or if Gellan’s gait stiffened at the sight of the woman. The woman pushed herself off of her perch and approached, nodding at each.

‘Seren, let me introduce attache Hestra.’

She looked up sharply. ‘I’m sorry, I thought you were the attache.’

There was a moment of awkward silence before Hestra spoke. ‘Gellan is many things.’

The man nodded stiffly and departed.

‘Shall we?’

Seren frowned at the woman, Hestra. She was short, yet her aura of confidence did not feel out of place. A cascade of raven hair was just a shade darker than her ebony skin.

‘I suppose so. Where are we going?’

Seren inspected the sequence of increasingly grand buildings with interest, though her mind was preoccupied. The first, dating back twenty seven hundred years, was a squat cement

structure with a dome of gold painted wood. Hestra spoke in a light but confident voice, informing Seren that this was the site of the second planetwide theological parliament. The dome was not the original, though this particular one had been in place for over seven hundred years. Before that, historians had lost count of how many times the dome had been replaced, though the consensus was that the structure had been capped with a dome of some sort.

In the grounds of the surrounding park, four other parliament buildings could be found (they were relocated after they had been retired). Hestra guided Seren among them in chronological order. The third and fourth parliament buildings were significantly more advanced than the second, with arches and porticos framing the sides of each structure. The fourth also had an elegant overhanging section containing glass floored courtyards through which the gray sky could be seen.

The fifth parliament marked a return to simplicity. It was a black rectangular building, and it would have been unremarkable if not for the clever horticultural arrangements, bringing occasional bursts of color to bear. The sixth and final parliament (in this location, Hestra informed her that the seventh and eight were on the other side of the planet) included some of the arches so prominent in the early buildings, but they were stylized to such a degree that Seren wasn't sure whether the architects were paying homage to their predecessors or making fun of them.

In the very front of the building, a single arch stood. As they approached, Seren thought that it was attached to a walled courtyard behind it, but she then realized that this was an intentional illusion. As they walked under the now obviously free standing arch, Seren turned to Hestra. Before she could ask, the woman chuckled.

'Quite the obsession my people have with these. I'm sure to someone as well traveled as yourself, it must seem quaint.'

Seren paused, directly underneath the sloped stone, not knowing how to respond. To give herself time, she turned around and tried to make out the outline of one of the enormous arches which reached to the heavens. She was barely able to make out the base of one in the growing twilight. She pointed, 'is that the one that I came down from?'

Hestra crossed her arms, 'sure is, good old number 137.' After a moment, she added in a somewhat sly tone, 'very stable, I'm told.'

Seren turned to face the woman, 'I may be well traveled, but I admit to some confusion over the exact role of an attache.'

The reply was much more forthright than she could have expected. 'Look Seren, your arrival has caused more than a stir. And the High Yaril only made things worse by trying to hide it and doing an overwhelmingly poor job at it.' The woman looked into Seren's eyes, not intently, but with perseverance. 'The truth is we are going to need your help to fix this mess.'

'We being?'

'Surely you've guessed.'

Suddenly Seren knew where this was going, but she remained silent.

'You were using my office earlier for your not-so-secret meeting.'

Seren nodded and extended a hand with two fingers outstretched, mimicking the physical greetings she had seen some of the others use earlier that day. As Hestra extended her own hand and intertwined their fingers, Seren said in what she hoped was a cool and professional voice, 'what are you hoping to hear, Hestra?'

The woman motioned that they should continue towards the sixth parliament building. 'I'm an intelligent woman. I understand that your society might not take an entirely positive view of the way we run ours.'

Again, Seren let the woman speak, curious and concerned.

'Our methods of maintaining social order are very different from those of our neighbors, and I personally believe this is not an anomaly.' The woman paused, pursing her lips. Black hair rippled gently across her slender neck. 'What I am trying to say is that while you might disagree with our morals, that should not necessarily stop you from helping us now, and make no mistake Seren, we need your help.'

'Exactly what is happening at the moment, and how much of it is due to my arrival here?'

The attache guided her to the right, so that they were walking along a promenade of a springy synthetic bordered by short red shrubbery. 'Well, for that second question, you would have to ask someone smarter than me, but I can tell you that people are not happy. We have been having a crisis of belief for the past decade or so, and unlike past crises, this one has only gained momentum. I suspect it was in large part this questioning of the Opan that prompted our leaders to summon you here.'

'Summon?'

A wry smile, 'you know what I mean.'

'I do.'

Hestra appeared to gather herself a moment before continuing, 'unchecked, the current sentiment could destroy us. Our entire civilization plunged back into an age before fusion or climate control. Wouldn't preventing that outcome be worth helping us, even if, as I suspect, our civilizations may be morally opposed?'

'I will of course bring it up with my colleagues, but know that morally opposed doesn't even begin to cover it. It cannot be a question of morals, when our technology is inescapably ahead of your own.'

They followed the path as it turned to the left, Seren lengthening her stride a touch to keep pace with the shorter woman. 'But technology isn't everything. We speak today as colleagues do we not? That implies some level of similarity.'

'I don't know if I agree with that, I'm not an intelligence operative and-'

'But that is what you're doing here, right? And besides, are you trying to tell me that your civilization has no intelligence service?'

'Ours looks outwards rather than in, but I take your point.' Seren lit upon an idea, 'and besides, there is another fundamental difference. Even if I agreed to help you, I could not compel my colleagues to do the same.'

'What a strange thing to say.' Hestra spoke in her marked low and sarcastic voice.

'It might be.'

A car approached as if from nowhere and Hestra stopped and faced Seren, once more finding the Culture woman's eyes. 'Please consult with your colleagues. We will accept any form of help, with any conditions attached. My personal preference would be your assistance with a declaration of martial law, but, well...'

Seren studied the dark haired woman. 'Surely you don't have the authority to say that.'

Hestra shrugged and raised her voice over the drone of the landing car, 'it was nice to meet you Seren. I hope to do so again, some time.'

'Things are getting tasty.'

'Spicy even.'

The avatar of the GSV *Likely Course* stared scathingly at the two sitting opposite them, but made no comment. Instead, he turned to Seren and continued updating her. 'There have been a few scattered protests, but mostly people are just gathering. They are confused more than upset, but if their confusion is not answered sometime soon, who knows what could happen.'

'What are the protestors saying?'

'Lot's of things. Some want church reforms, some want government reforms, some are complaining that summer in the northern hemisphere was too short this year.'

Seren pursed her lips. It was hard to discuss things with Minds, because one tended to want to try and think fast, to somehow match the intellects of the ship AIs. But of course, that rarely led to anything productive and Contact agents were trained to think at a normal pace in these situations. 'So no one is saying "The Opan is wrong, let's revolt!" yet?'

The avatar of *Sorry was this your chair* smirked at something. *Likely* responded, 'not yet, but it could still go that way.'

'I assume you all heard my conversation with Hestra the attache-intelligence chief?'

Falling from the sky piped up, 'A brave woman, if you're into that sort of thing.'

Present concurred, 'one wonders if she has any shred of belief in the Opan.'

Seren frowned, 'regardless, the question is what do we do now?'

'Do? Why would we possibly do anything?' This came from *Sorry* who was still grinning at *Likely Course*. 'Don't tell me that the little brave woman took you in, Seren. This civ is a mess and it's not even a particularly well organized mess.'

'Yes, but there are thirty billion beings peopling this civ. If their society is about to implode, you could consider their plight for at least a millisecond or two.'

'I have, Seren.' They gestured across the table, 'Let's say we divert *Likely* over to your location, and we say, "ok, things aren't looking great down here so anyone who wants to get on board the big giant spaceship, have at it." Then what happens? No one goes. Maybe a few million of the educated or the curious, but everyone else would be way too scared because they cannot possibly conceive of a civ like ours. The idea of freedom of choice is so alien to them that they wouldn't get on that big fat GSV even if the alternative was imminent destruction.'

Likely finally bit, 'don't worry *Sorry*, size isn't everything.'

Seren sighed. 'Well isn't there anything else, any other options?'

Present turned towards its crewmember as *Likely* and *Sorry* traded ever more acrimonious barbs. 'Like what?'

Seren threw up her hands, 'I don't know, a clever manipulation of public opinion, a brief show of force, maybe even posing as an outside threat to encourage unity. There must be something we can *do*. By the way, did you guys ever make any progress towards the origin of the Opan?'

Present frowned, 'not really. Based on your conversation with whatshername-'

'Who?'

'The scholar.'

'Arsen?' Seren looked at the avatar and grinned, 'did you really not know?'

'Believe it or not, I do not keep track of you every second of every day, small human. Well, either that, or I do and I was just being nice.'

'You were saying...'

'Yes, based on your conversation with Arsen, we now think it is plausible that the book wasn't an alien plant. Basically, the reasoning is that the humans are quite liberal in their interpretations of the Opan. Contributing to this conclusion, *Sorry* did some analysis suggesting that an Opan planted by aliens would probably have had to come from an equiv tech civ, which makes it less likely because we know all of them and this doesn't feel like their style. Overall, though, I think the alien plant theory is still slightly more likely than random chance.'

Seren frowned. The Minds' analysis made sense, but she couldn't immediately see how they could use their findings in any practical manner. As she was trying to come up with some brilliant idea, drowsiness seeped into her thoughts.

In the real world, she stood and stretched her arms. It had been twenty two hours since they had docked at arch number 137. 'I need some sleep. Wake me if there is a thing.'

When she awoke, the situation was deteriorating. Seren watched the video displays provided by the ship, which showed ever more tense scenes of assembly across the planet. During her slumber, factions had emerged with a biological inevitability.

There were three main camps. In order of apparent support, there was a group which wanted the government to admit that although the Opan was absolute fact, there were events and forces not covered in its finite pages, a group which maintained that Seren's arrival had in fact been predicted by the Opan, basically arriving at the same conclusion that the scholar Arsen had, and finally a much smaller group who leaned more strongly into blasphemy. As Seren consumed a light, post sleep meal, she wondered if it was more surprising that this last group was as large as it was, or that it was not larger. She had trouble making up her mind.

As she finished the meal, the ship informed her that she had several requests for audiences or statements from the humans of Atise. She ignored them for the moment.

'By now news will have gotten across the galaxy. Are there any other Contact minds who decided to weigh in?'

'Not yet.'

'And nothing from SC?'

'Still our show.'

'Excellent.'

'At least try to sound pleased.'

She took a breath. 'Who do you think I should speak with first?'

'That depends on what you decided to do.'

'Well what do you think I should do?'

The ship paused, giving the impression that it was actually thinking. 'Stick to the book. Explain what the Culture is, and what we stand for and don't say anything about the Opan.'

'What happens if I say the Opan was possibly a practical joke of an advanced alien civilization?'

'Don't say that.'

'But someone is going to ask me about it.'

'It's a tough question to answer.'

'Thanks ship. Big help. As ever.'

Sitting across a uniquely sloping table, High Yaril Twente Jannae Aranji was sweating. 'Would you be willing to tell us in advance what you would say at such a press conference?'

Seren leaned forwards, admiring the glass-like material of the conference table. 'So. Just so I understand fully, you want me to give a press conference with your whole world watching and you want to nudge me towards the right thing to say.'

The man ran a hand through his hair, 'Well that's not exactly it, you see. We just want to know what you will say so that we can prepare an... appropriate response to... whichever response we think your words will elicit.'

'If you want me to say something specific, just ask me plainly, and I can tell you yes or no.'

The High Yaril looked around. To either side of him sat two of the other three High Yaril's, the final one being off planet. The room was additionally filled almost to bursting with close to a hundred staffers and ministers, though Seren had not yet caught sight of the *attache*. None of the seated men and women would meet Seren's gaze as Jannae continued, 'We would find it most generous of you if you were to endorse the Opan.'

'Endorse?'

'Emphasize its uniqueness in the galaxy.' He paused, 'It is unique, is it not?'

Jannae seemed to gain some confidence with this last bit. Seren thought she could see the logic of it. The government wanted to side with the largest camp, as governments often did, and say that the Opan was great and all, *look we are the only ones that have one*, but also it doesn't describe absolutely everything and at some point we are going to have to start to move past it.

Seren decided she needed to understand better exactly what these people believed. In as unassuming a voice as she could manage, she delivered the line that she had been mulling over since her meeting with Arsen.

'Does God publish errata?'

A droning started on the other side of the table. Staffers began murmuring, and then whispering, while scholars frantically retrieved theological theses. Jannae seemed unaware of the commotion, and answered even as it steadily built.

'Can you be more specific?'

'Well, your god is omniscient and omnipotent, as is recorded in the Opan, so they provided you with a handbook, a guide to life on this planet and this guide included some history, some predictions, and most importantly some guiding technological principles. But now, you have made use of all these wondrous gifts, yet your civilization is in some way no better off.'

'No better off?'

'Well you have developed some quaint technologies,' at this she saw several expressions of confusion and anger, 'you even have residents in multiple star systems, but you know very little of the true powers of this galaxy, and what's more, you know nothing of their technology.' Jannae tried to interrupt, but Seren surged ahead. 'To provide a concrete example,

the ship I came here on is just a lowly transport, but it could destroy your entire military capability before you noticed the first sign of hostility.'

Present pinged her, 'lowly transport?'

She pinged back, 'lowly might be an exaggeration....'

The other two High Yarils' faces had darkened in hostility and the buzz in the room increased tenfold. Jannae maintained eye contact. 'So what you're asking is, why haven't we received a second handbook in order to guide us on this second stage of our journey?'

'Exactly.'

'I need to consult with my colleagues, could you give us a minute?'

'Of course.'

Seren stood and stretched her arms, turning to look out the windows of the conference room. They were near the top of another of the arches, and in the pre-dawn glow, Seren could just make out the landscape below. She stood and walked the few steps to the glass, trying to see what lay directly below them. It turned out to not be land at all, but ocean, likely surging with power from a nearby storm system. Just to the north of the ocean, desert bled into mountains, faint traces of civilization adorning both. She could see nothing of the angst rippling out below. Was that good or bad? Did it matter?

When she returned to take her seat, a knot of about fifteen people--- she noted scholar senator Arsen among them-- was just breaking up. Jannae motioned that they were ready to resume.

'It is a difficult theological question, of that there is no doubt. Our current position is that it is perfectly possible that God may grace us with another holy book at some point in the future, but if they do not, it is because they have already provided us with sufficient advantages in the Opan in order to take our intended place in the galaxy.' He raised a hand, and gestured in a small circle, 'after all, God is omniscient.'

Seren nodded. 'I need some time to confer with my colleagues.'

'Will you need to go back aboard your spaceship?'

'No, I can do it from here. If you would?'

As Jannae herded the others out of the conference room, Seren stood and started back towards the windows. The other minds would hold a discussion and *Present* would ping a copy of the discussion to her, though she would not comment on it in real time.

Sorry wasted no time, 'They're practically begging us to give them a new Opan.'

This time it was *Falling from the sky* that pushed back against the belligerent LOU. 'You'd like that, wouldn't you? Playing a little god?'

'Compared to these people we practically are gods. Their ships can barely break lightspeed.'

'And that makes it okay to toy with their religion?'

'You all were listening to the same conversation I was, weren't you? That's exactly what the leaders of their religion want! Think of all the good we could do if we wrote their new holy book. We could *literally* shape the course of their societal evolution.'

Likely Course weighed in. 'Don't you see the problem? How could we possibly instill the value of freedoms of thought and action using a religious text that by its very existence demands obedience? You would write, "think for yourself! But not too much that you stop believing these words!"'

The other ships besides *Sorry* voiced their agreement, to Seren's relief. That kind of deception was way too large scale for her tastes.

'I'm not saying it would be easy, but we could at least start them on the right path, right?'

Likely spoke in its best grown-up-explains-to-child voice. 'Any gains would be offset by reinforcing the existing bad habits. Frankly, I don't know why you're still pushing for this.'

Seren could almost hear the ensuing sulk. She added, 'an even more direct argument applies to declaring martial law.'

Likely Course steered the conversation back to the present. 'Essentially, they want us to legitimize their government--- which is teetering right now because of a religious crisis--- by opening diplomatic relations, but they are not willing to walk back the religion beyond admitting that we exist and are very advanced. If we accept, we will legitimize the current government and likely be forced into saying something along the lines of, "we really like your holy book, and it is very definitely real," whereas if we decline to do so, then we will have indirectly started a war, which will result in a relative anarchy. Is that a fair summary?'

Falling spoke in its high pitched voice, 'why not support the anti-religious faction?'

'There's so few of them that if we did do that, it would seem like it was just us looking for an excuse to invade the planet.'

Seren pinged, 'since there's no clear path forward, I am going to go with the not having billions of people's blood on my hands option. Anyone disagree?'

None did.

The room was well lit, with plenty of white surfaces, and more than a few reflective ones coaxing sunlight about the space. The setup was one that Seren had seen a few times before, with a podium facing one hundred or so chairs, each one filled with a respectable looking journalist. Seren was curious as to what extent freedom of the press existed in this place.

There were no visible recording devices, though Seren had been told that images were being sent to every functional screen on the planet. The polite attention of the reporters was currently focused on one of the High Yarils from earlier, who was speaking in his native tongue. *Present* translated a few highlights via ping, but it was mostly what you would expect of a panicked priest trying his best not to act the part of clinging to legitimacy.

Instead Seren watched the man. His head bobbed up and down in a regular pattern. Two bobs up, then a dip and a further bob up before a sharp downwards motion. She found the gesture reassuring and wondered if the man had been born with it or had developed it for the purpose of public speaking.

Soon it would be her turn to speak to the people of this planet, to somehow explain that she supported their government, but not what it ultimately stood for. Again the speaker's head plunged sharply as he enunciated a zipping sound. He stared down at the nearest reporters, evidently seeking to drive home his argument with posture rather than language. Then, almost unexpectedly, he turned towards her.

Seren approached the podium with what felt like slower than normal steps. She was sure that the rhythm of her walk was the same, but it seemed that each individual step required more than the normal amount of weight. Seren had never been a good public speaker, but neither had she ever experienced this level of trepidation before.

She reached the podium and turned to face her immediate audience. The faces showed professional curiosity overlaying what was likely deep anxiety. 'Relax,' pinged the ship. 'Just say what you need to say.'

'My name is Seren, and I am an ambassador from a civilization the name of which may be translated into this language as *The Culture*. Many of you will have heard stories or rumors about me, and I imagine that more than a few of you are terrified of me. I am well aware of the cornerstone of your faith, the book known as the Opan, and I am also aware that the Culture is absent from the Opan. Thus I stand before you here today both present and absent, both real and imaginary.'

'It is difficult, to be both real and imaginary, and for you who are completely real, it must be even more difficult to imagine what it's like to be speaking to you here today. I do not make this distinction to poke fun at or trivialize your faith, rather I mean to demonstrate how people with completely disparate perspectives can exist. I come from a place completely unimaginable to you, yet here I am, standing and speaking before you.'

'My society has several core values, and foremost among them is the freedom of choice. I have heard it said that my coming will issue a new era of history, one not determined solely by the Opan, and I have also heard that my coming heralds great destruction, the beginning of a war which will devastate this planet.'

Seren chose her next words carefully, but before she could deliver them, she got a ping.

'Assasination attempt, neutralized.'

She pinged back, hoping that she had managed to keep her expression calm, 'neutralized to what degree?'

'Unconscious.'

'Who were they?'

'Anti-theocrats.'

Seren took a long breath. 'Just as it is hard for you to imagine this scene from my perspective, I also find it hard to measure it from yours. I have seen the horrors of war, yet I have also seen the devastation of shattered belief. If I had to choose between war and altering my conception of reality, the half real person who stands before you now would choose change, but what about the real version of me? I do not know her, and so I shall not presume.'

'The most important question, which I can see written on your faces, which I can hear vibrating through these walls, is why am I not in the Opan? Perhaps God dislikes the Culture. Perhaps God wanted you to see a semi-real being. Perhaps God is not real, and the Opan was placed here malignly, or perhaps benignly, or even gifted from the arms of chance herself.'

'I know many things. I know details of technology and culture, I have seen blueprints for structures encircling a sun, and I have conversed with lost societies. I know all this, and yet I do not know the reason for my partial reality in your eyes.'

'There are many aspects of this planet that I do not like, yet I find myself marginalizing those feelings because this place has provided me with something I haven't felt in a long time, and that is uncertainty. I do not understand everything about the Opan, and I would like to try and understand its opportunities and its limitations, its scope and its specificity.'

She paused to make eye contact with a few different reporters. She was gaining confidence, like a wave forcing itself ever higher as it approached the shore. 'I cannot speak for

my true self, but the ethereal woman standing before you now would choose the path of freedom and discovery over the path of stubbornness and war.'

'But in the end, the choice is not mine. Thank you for your time.'

Present or Accounted For started the debrief even before she had left the podium, and she had to concentrate to hear its ping over the cacophony of questions flying her way.

'Well done.'

'Thanks.'

'You could have played on the assassination attempt to draw out sympathy.'

'I considered it, but I had committed to a different approach by that point.' She was now smiling and nodding at various dignitaries amid being ushered into a conference room where she would have a final word with Jannaë before returning to the ship.

'Understandable. You did an excellent job of making these people feel special while at the same time showing a good deal of contempt.'

'That was the idea.'

'You know that that whole real and imaginary thing is going to go over ninety nine percent of people, right?'

'Have you told the authorities about the assassination attempt?'

'Not yet, want me to time it so that the news drops just as you are talking to our friend the high Yaril.'

'That would be very kind of you, ship.'

'Perk up Seren. You did good today.'

With an almost physical start, she realized her own exhaustion.

Rather than glancing, she considered the ship's parting words.

She had lied to a planet, and she had done it well.