

Visibly shaken, Zues stood up. He took out his chi seeds and popped a big wad of them into his lip. He regained his focus and looked at Luc. “Are there any people down there?”

“It depends on what one would consider to be *people*, sir,” Luc replied.

Zues motioned for him to continue. “Can you elaborate on that statement, Colonel?”

Both men sat back down at the briefing table. Luc pulled out some more pictographs and continued. “We have been able to identify over eight hundred different hominid species presently on this planet, and we’re finding more every day. All of them seem to be in different evolutionary states. Of these eight hundred, two hundred of them are entirely bipedal. Take this species for example.” Luc pushed one of the pictographs over to Zues for him to study.

Zues’s eyes again widened in awe. “Christ on a cracker, Luc! You’re doing this to me on purpose!”

Luc smiled and started giggling. “I thought you’d like that one, sir. As you can see, this species is on average nine to ten cubits in height. It’s completely covered in hair and has very long arms and massive, massive feet. This hominid is so powerful that it will tear a moderate-size tree completely in half. For some reason that we have yet to be able to discern, it will then take the top half of the tree and begin to bang it against the base of the tree, causing echoes to sound throughout its territory. Could be a warning; might be a mating or communication call. We just don’t know.

“They do not appear to have any type of speech, but they are highly

intelligent. They are solitary creatures, most likely nocturnal, extremely elusive. We have not seen them interact with any species of animal on this planet except for their own. Take a look at this close-up. In it, you can see massive canine teeth that are perfectly suited for a carnivore. However, these creatures choose to eat only berries. They do not hunt. They seem to know which berries they can eat and which ones they can't. All they do is stay in one place, hiding in their habitat and eating berries all day. The only time they move is at night, when they forage for their berries. These things are so elusive that without high-resolution probes we'd never know that they were there at all. I'd estimate that, for a breeding population to exist, there must be between eight and ten thousand of these creatures present on the planet. We have only been able to identify one hundred different animals so far."

"Thank the heavens that they only eat berries," Zues muttered.

Luc laughed some more at Zues. "I know, right? These things would even be able to take down Behemoth or his brother, Leviathan, if they wanted to." Luc then pulled out some more pictographs and gave them to Zues.

"Now in contrast to the massive, big-footed beast, take a look at this hominid species. It is essentially half the size, five to five and one-half cubits in height. It is still completely covered in hair, but its proportions are closer to those of a human. It would still be incredibly strong, much stronger than you or me. It is thick boned, compact, highly muscular, and robust. You can see on the face its prominent browridges and this jaw that juts out, giving it the appearance of having a sunken-in face. It has a moderate-size cranial capacity, which indicates a moderate-size brain; however, its behavior doesn't really correlate to its proposed brain size.

They live in social groups, but they mostly just hunt and gather. There are no permanent settlements, cultivation of crops, or technology of any kind, as there should be with a brain of that size.”

Luc gave Zues another pictograph. “Now I want you to take a look at this specimen. As you can see, it is almost completely hairless. Just a little on the top and a little on the bottom. It is on average taller than the last one and actually has a slightly smaller brain capacity. They also live in social groups; there seems to be a social hierarchy and a leader. Some of them have created permanent settlements, and those ones seem to plant and cultivate crops. Some of them continue to live a nomadic lifestyle, depending on the season. They do have speech and some very rudimentary forms of writing, I would guess. Their teeth seem perfectly suited for them to exist on a vegetarian diet; however, they choose to hunt and kill and eat other animals. They then strip the animals of their fur and place it over their own hairless bodies for warmth. Again, nothing about any of these creatures makes any kind of sense. If you were to call any of these animals on this planet *people*, it would probably be these hairless ones, but that’s a very big *if*, sir.”

Luc handed Zues yet another pictograph. “Now take a look at this specimen. It is slightly taller than the creature with the prominent browridges and slightly shorter than the hairless hominid. Its body is covered in a moderate amount of hair. It is a—”

Zues cut Luc off and finished his sentence for him. “Hybrid.”

“Exactly,” Luc confirmed to Zues.

“These two species have been interbreeding,” Luc continued. “There is absolutely no way, even for me, to be able to tell which species were originally here, which ones were placed here, or which ones have evolved here, if any. There are too many species, too many hybrid species, too many variations of species, and the planet is simply way too large. It’s a hot mess, is what it is. There are so many different and varied species of fish in these seas that you could spend a thousand life cycles trying to sort through them all and you’d never even get close to getting through all of them. I never imagined that such a place could exist. It’s like it’s some kind of a—”

Zues cut Luc off again and finished his thought for him. “Wildlife preserve.”

“You are once again correct, General,” Luc said to his old friend, smiling slightly, proud of his friend for being able to put all the pieces together. “That is exactly what it is. It’s an enormous artificial wildlife preserve specifically created to house every living creature that has probably ever existed in the universe. It’s a giant zoo, and those flying beasts were put into place specifically to keep the animals within their natural habitats. It’s the most incredible feat of engineering that I have ever seen, probably the most incredible thing that has ever been done.

“One thing is for sure, though. It was done deliberately. It’s not natural, it’s not normal, and it’s not right. Some people did this. I don’t know why, but they did. I know that they have to still be here somewhere, and I’m going to find them. I’ll be able to talk to them. They’ll recognize the fact that I am not an animal like the creatures on this planet, that *we* are not animals like the creatures on this planet. Once I make contact and explain to them our situation, they will help us, and I will save our people. *We* will save our people.”

