

# THE INNER ELEMENT

## \*CHAPTER ONE\*

"Preposterous!" boomed the Lord of all Life. "No one commands that much power. If this council meditated for a thousand centuries it could never approach the type of cataclysmic force you describe." The red aura flared as the supreme councilor threw out his hands in disgust. "I refuse to believe it. Your findings must be flawed."

"The precision of the mathematics cannot be disputed," answered a calm and reserved Mr. Hikkins. "The sequence I am illustrating for the council is occurring even now. I cannot speak as to the source of this phenomenal power, but I assure you my figures are correct. Not only is the entire system in jeopardy, but also I believe Conor's world may be in the most immediate danger. If my calculations prove reliable, earth will be wiped away from the Crossworlds system in approximately twenty-two days."

"This is madness!" shouted the first councilor while rising from his floating seat and slamming an open palm against the table. "Entire worlds disappearing without a trace, do you realize what you are suggesting?"

"I am *not* suggesting," replied Mr. Hikkins while clenching his teeth.

Arriving two days prior to his session, the soft-spoken but determined seeker had demanded an immediate audience with the Council of Seven. Merely stating a request in so bold a fashion would keep most visitors in the gardens for weeks, but Mr. Hikkins had always been something of an enigma to the creators. His intellectual capabilities had never been questioned, but his decisions left some on the council suspicious of his motives. Indeed, the crafty seeker had solved many of the most perplexing dilemmas during his service, including the final calculations for the protection packet used by

Conor in his first battle with Seefra. But his judgment often troubled some of the council members. His decision to travel constantly instead of dedicating himself to the realm had not sat well with the Lord of all Life. The council debated whether to restrict his movements many times, but in the end they understood the overall value of his contribution. Mr. Higgins, on the other hand, had never allowed his relations with the council to hamper his precious responsibilities for a moment. He preferred close contact with the beings under his guidance. He enjoyed traveling through the corridors acting as mentor to the Crossworlds' most valuable inhabitants.

He discovered the anomaly in the system almost by accident. Staring up at the stars one evening, he noticed a tiny discoloration appear and then disappear in deep space. He thought nothing of it, until a few days later he spied an identical shift in the pattern of the night sky. His disciplined mind would not accept a random occurrence repeating itself in such a short period of time. He began investigating the phenomenon immediately. He contacted most of the preeminent mathematicians and astronomers in the Crossworlds system. He ran simulations in his mind constantly while jotting down bizarre sets of equations. Most he threw away, but the few that remained began to form a most interesting model indeed. The result, when he had finally dismissed all other possibilities, astounded him. He didn't feel fear or dread, instead he appreciated the purity of the strategy. The Circle of Evil couldn't possibly annihilate every planet in the Crossworlds system. That would take too long and they wanted immediate revenge. Instead, they had devised a formula that depended on random selection based on calculated odds, slating worlds for destruction while shaving the probability of error to

less than five percent. It was brilliant and deadly, and unless the creators could decipher the source of their power, Conor would have to be notified at once.

"There is no mistake, first councilor," repeated Mr. Higgins. "I haven't determined the physics of the weapon, but I have deciphered the pattern of their attack." The seeker waited a few moments to allow the reality of what he reported to settle in with the council. When he felt he had their collective attention, he dropped the one statement he knew would ignite controversy. "The situation leaves us no choice. We must notify Conor immediately and inform him of the circumstances."

"No." said a delicate, soft voice. It came from the rear of the chamber. The Lady of the Light stepped forward, announcing her presence to the members of the council. Up to this point she had listened quietly while Mr. Higgins delivered his account. Preferring not to become directly involved unless absolutely necessary, she had held her voice as long as possible. This, however, must not be allowed.

"We cannot turn to him again so quickly," she continued. "He has established a life for himself back on earth. He and his companion have worked tirelessly to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives and move forward again. They have selected a path for their futures, and we must not intervene and disrupt their progress."

"We appreciate the zeal with which you defend your Champion," interjected the first councilor. "Let me remind you, however, that your presence here is only tolerated so long as you observe and remain silent. You may not interrupt the proceedings no matter how strongly you feel about the subject matter."

The Lady of the Light gently lowered her chin in submission, but did not retreat to her former position. Her silver aura flared briefly, highlighting her apprehension with the contents of the discussion.

"My Lady, if I may," began Mr. Hikkins. "You must know how deeply I care for Conor, as well as for Janine, his companion. After all, I spent a good deal of time with both of them during Conor's first year of high school. I do not wish to disturb their happiness, nor do I find the prospect of throwing the young man into another journey appealing. However, you must understand the complexity of the situation and grasp the mortal danger we all face."

Mr. Hikkins turned to face the Council of Seven directly. "The ability to wipe away the existence of an entire planet has never confronted us before. Due to your design and the collective power of the system, the Crossworlds have successfully existed for untold millennia. What I tell you now I say with the support of empirical evidence. Earth will not be the final target for the Circle of Evil. I believe they will continue their offensive after destroying the birthplace of our latest Champion. After obliterating that target, they will turn the focus of their mighty weapon against the glade of Champions and the realm of the creators. I do believe, first councilor, they intend to destroy every world that holds positive dominion over the system itself."

The council chamber exploded with comments and argument. Mr. Hikkins accepted a barrage of challenges to his suppositions. He stood silently while accepting the flood of criticism. He knew better than to try and debate the council, especially after delivering a message as shocking as this. Even under intense scrutiny, however, he felt comfortable with his conclusions. After all, he held the conviction of his science and a

consummate belief in what he put before them. In his opinion, they could only come to one conclusion. To be certain of the outcome, though, he allowed the council to exhaust themselves before delivering the final blow.

"May I remind the council," he stated quietly, waiting for the last points to be aired before continuing, "that we haven't touched upon the most important aspect of their strategy."

"And that is?" demanded a clearly exasperated supreme councilor.

"The corridors, my Lord," answered Mr. Hikkins without hesitation. "Imagine if you will, the network of portals connected to the combined energies of just one world."

The chamber went completely still. The council members froze in place, none of them uttering another sound. They stared at Mr. Hikkins for what seemed like the first time, even though he had been standing among them for over an hour. Their expressions softened towards him, as if their opinion of his intelligence climbed a notch or two. As one group, they changed their posture, looking directly at him with open minds.

"Yes," continued the brilliant mathematician. "Not only are the complex organic connections throughout the system in jeopardy, but consider this, esteemed council members. If we do not act, and act promptly, we may not be able to recruit Conor and his companion at all. We may be cut off from them permanently. What's more, if the portals that bond the glade of Champions to the realm of the creators are severed by the elimination of a symbiotic world, then you will be without the services of your most powerful protectors."

The Council of Seven sat in stunned silence. The Lady of the Light placed her head in her hands, sighing deeply. All present in the chamber now began to grasp what

Mr. Hikkins already knew as fact. The Circle of Evil, whatever remained of them after the great battle with the Champions, had devised one last deadly strategy to destroy the Crossworlds forever. The desperation of the tactic confirmed their depleted state, Mr. Hikkins had said as much when he referred to the random aspect of their attack. They were gambling that the worlds they wanted to eliminate would fall within their projected line without touching their own provinces. The first councilor had spoken truth, for the plan *was* madness. The Circle of Evil had decided to gamble with a weapon strong enough to erase an entire galaxy from existence. There appeared to be only one logical course of action, as distasteful as some in the chamber found it.

"How soon can Conor be contacted?" asked the Lady of the Light.

"Preliminary calculations have already been arranged," replied Mr. Hikkins.

"Proceed then," commanded the supreme councilor. "My Lady, I assume you wish to travel to the glade?"

"I will leave immediately," she answered with a slight bow of her head.

"Then let it be so," stated the Lord of all Life. "Let this be the final battle between the Creators and the Circle of Evil. I will hear no more about them after this journey."

"I assure you, my Lord," said Mr. Hikkins. "One way or another, this will be our final confrontation."

## \*CHAPTER TWO\*

Gribba walked among the trees of his simple estate. Holding hands with his mate, he inhaled the fragrant smells from the budding fruit walls climbing up from the ground all around them. Each scent reached his nostrils in its own time, dancing around his powerful senses before making room for the next distinct aroma. The giant ezuvox Guardian strolled along at a gentle, relaxed pace. He took his time enjoying what life offered, and he would not rush through this uncomplicated moment. Having lived for over a century, Gribba knew how important it was to savor the morsels of simplicity life so rarely afforded him.

It had been almost two years to the day since the battalion of ezuvox warriors had returned to their planet from the hideous world of the Circle of Evil. They had annihilated the shadow warriors, losing few of their number to death or serious injury. They had returned home to a hero's welcome. Nearly every inhabitant of their considerable world turned out to greet them after they emerged, row by row, from the corridor drawn forth by the Lady of the Light. The celebration had lasted nearly a month, with dancing, story telling and forecasting challenges between younger and older generations. Gribba had smiled and laughed along with his extended family of ezuvox, happy to encourage their frivolity. For him, though, the proceedings masked a more somber mood. He had returned to his home, and happily, but he brought with him a disdain for all things unpleasant and bitter.

He had relished the destruction of the shadow warriors; even he could not dispute that. They were another race of beings, however, and no matter how repulsive, they represented life. All life, mused the ezuvox leader, deserved a chance to thrive and live as

they desired. He could never arbitrarily judge another race of beings no matter how different or peculiar they might be. He had fought to save his friends and his people, to avenge the slaughter of his kind by the Circle of Evil. If called upon he would do so again. He would not, however, take personal delight in the destruction of life. Keeping his beliefs to himself, he wandered through the crowds of revelers, grasping hands and exchanging smiles. He would not dampen their joy, but some day, his beliefs would be displayed openly for future generations.

“May I intrude upon your thoughts?” asked Shim, Gribba’s mate of almost half a century.

The huge bear creature shook himself mentally, bringing his mind back to the present. He inhaled again, smiling as the dreamy scents in his garden drifted into his nostrils. He turned his head, looking at the greatest joy in his life. Shim had given him twenty offspring, strong sons and daughters who had prospered from their combined guidance. Strong-willed and attractive, their offspring had excelled in every aspect of life. Mostly grown now and spread far and wide around the planet of Wilzerd, Gribba and Shim rarely saw the entire group of them together. The battle with the shadow warriors had at least brought a half dozen of them together under the banner of Gribba’s forces. Four sons and two daughters had come home from the war to stay with their parents for a short while. Joined by a handful of their brothers and sisters during the celebration, the group brought many days of happiness to their parents. Now and then, Gribba looked over at his mate and saw the contented smile she wore. If there was anything greater than that sight, he could not fathom it.

“You may always ask, Shim,” answered the towering ezuvox without turning to meet her eyes. He walked a few more steps before answering. “The battle with the shadow warriors, it crowds my mind, unfortunately.”

Shim grabbed her mate’s arm with both hands, resting her head against his huge shoulder. She had been sheltered as a youth, kept far away on the margins of life. She couldn’t comprehend war. It held no logical outcome for her way of thinking. She wouldn’t allow her soul to be corrupted by it. If her family was threatened and war offered the only recourse, then so be it, but she would never approve of it. She said nothing in response to Gribba’s remark, instead she simply crushed her body against his, hoping the touch of her love would soothe his tortured soul. He reciprocated, putting a giant, furry hand against her cheek.

“Do not worry, Shim,” said the Guardian, softly. “Everything passes with the soothing flux of time. Before long the memories of the battle will be a distant disturbance, and the two of us will be harvesting baskets of fresh fruit to enjoy before our early morning walks.”

She held her mate tightly, believing what he said. He had never failed her, not once in the fifty or so years they had paired their affections. For some reason, though, on this day the touch of his furry shoulder troubled her. She had never sensed this feeling in her mate in all the years she had known him. Through every trial they had suffered together, Gribba always maintained a strong exterior, even when inside he felt fear or indecision. This afternoon, however, he seemed altogether different. The fear she had sensed from time to time deep within his soul had pressed its energy outward to the very hair along his skin. She could feel it, sizzling like a piece of meat on hot rocks. He did his

best to hide it from her, but she knew her mate well enough to know something was terribly wrong. She could feel the onset of some horrible event, but she could not pinpoint it or describe it.

She knew better than to pressure Gribba into revealing what troubled him. He would inform her when the time was right. As a mother, though, she feared for the safety of her children. If some tragic event loomed ahead, she wanted desperately to know so she could warn them. They may not be able to escape it, but at least she would try to give them the chance. A tear emerged from her left eye. She blinked once, causing it to drip onto her cheek. She pressed her face against Gribba's strong arm, mashing the tear into his fur. She squeezed his hand again, pulling herself into his body and matching his stride.

She knows, thought Gribba. He hadn't mentioned a word to anyone and yet she knows. This is the beauty of a long companionship, that one person should know the other's thoughts without question. Gribba loved his mate, and he did not wish to worry her if his feelings proved wrong. After all, that is all they were, just feelings, judgments about strange phenomena he saw occurring in the night sky from time to time. Even he could not discern the meaning of the shifting pattern of the stars, but he believed nothing good would come of it. Something told him the disappearing lights in the sky represented a devastating development for whoever lived so far out into space. As long as it remained distant he at least held out hope that the bizarre occurrence might pass them by on its way to another galaxy.

The previous night, however, had smashed those hopes forever. A circle of light as big as the fingernail of a female ezuvox flared momentarily in the sky before vanishing

completely. In a matter of minutes, the night sky looked the same as it had only moments before, minus the planet that had previously occupied that region of space. He had nearly told his wife immediately after the incident, but instead decided against it. The creators would understand the phenomenon. They would know what to do. He would seek their counsel in a day or two, and then call the leaders of Wilzerd together if need be. Until then, he would house his fears within his own mind. After Shim had fallen asleep, he would come outside and watch the sky again.

### \*CHAPTER THREE\*

In the deep, frigid regions of space, where no sound occurred at all, a tiny, glittering rectangle of light traveled a linear course toward a preset destination. Although organic in composition, the pulsating object held its course without a conscious thought or feeling. It had been given life and purpose, and now it would fulfill its assignment without pausing to ponder the moral question of whether its function was healthy or destructive. It lived, and its designers had issued their orders. It would carry them out efficiently and without pause. When it completed its mission, it would dissolve into the energy from whence it came, hoping only to be drawn forth again at another time for another objective.

The object traveled through the Gulserian galaxy, passing stars and planets by the thousands. Its trajectory carried it along a straight line, except when that course would intercept one of the many planetary bodies blocking its path. Only then did it deviate from its direct track, hopping around the distraction and then returning to its original path. The object blinked at a constant rate every one point five seconds, counting off the light years between its launch point and target.

The counter placed in its organic sensory organ registered the halfway point in its journey. One more galaxy to overtake and then the next would contain its objective. It would not fail its assignment. Its designers had placed within it infinite pride in the completion of the mission. Its existence depended on its ability to finish what it had been sent to accomplish. The small rectangle sailed along through the infinite reaches of space, blinking methodically while preparing to execute its orders.

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Gribba stood outside of his estate, inhaling the cold air from the winter winds. He loved the night, for its quiet as much as for its mystery. Only the bravest of creatures ventured out at night. Gribba saw or sensed very few on this particularly cold evening. After scanning his fields and ascertaining his safety, the great ezuvox leader lifted his eyes to the heavens. He didn't expect to understand what he might see, but he looked nonetheless. He stared straight ahead for ten or fifteen minutes before moving his eyes first to the left and then slowly in the opposite direction. He inspected every inch of the night sky, and after he finished a complete sweep he reversed course and examined it again. He stayed out under the stars for roughly three hours, a solitary creature scanning the sky for an answer to a riddle he couldn't even understand. He felt so insignificant and unworthy, because whatever was happening seemed beyond his control. He couldn't reverse its course by any method known to him. If the phenomenon moved toward Wilzerd, he would only be able to stand by impotently and watch it occur. Squeezing his eyes shut, he cursed himself for his inability to conquer the strange enemy. He uttered a silent message to the Lady of the Light, asking for her guidance in case the worst of his fears came to pass. The council would come to their aid. They had to; it was written in the ancient code. Besides, Gribba's people had destroyed the shadow warriors; surely they would do everything in their power in light of their recent victory for the Crossworlds.

The ezuvox Guardian raised his chin, looking up to the stars again. Where before, a benign, passive sky existed, this time he saw something that caused his entire body to shake with alarm. The breath of life left his lungs as his heart leapt into his throat. He tried to call out to Shim but found he couldn't. He felt as though he were having a

nightmare of the most horrible sort, the kind where your mouth opens but no sound emerges. He tried to scream, to call for his mate, but nothing escaped his lungs. He clutched at his neck, trying to free up his vocal chords. He stared at the stars and scratched out the only words he could whisper. It would be the last statement ever uttered from an inhabitant of the planet Wilzerd.

“Mind of the Creators!” he wheezed, before running toward his estate.

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Three short blinks in rapid succession informed the glowing rectangle that its journey had come to an end. The target lay directly before it. The rectangle hummed, beeping softly while scanning the gigantic world for its exact dimensions, density, and molecular composition. The information was rapidly filed and collated: 197,648 kilometers diameter,  $2.229 \times 10^{26}$  kilograms mass, and 3.164 grams/centimeter<sup>3</sup> density. Planetary composition: 28.6% Iron, 39.5% Oxygen, 9.2% Silicon, 9.7% Magnesium, 5.5% Nickel, 1.9% Sulfur, and 5.1% Titanium. Indigenous life forms; air, ground, and water, population approximately twenty million Homo erectus, plus or minus one hundred thousand. Another three quick blinks informed the rectangle that data collection was complete and successful. The device could now commence operations.

With a flash of dark auburn light racing around the perimeter of the rectangle, the corridor sent by the Circle of Evil began expanding. At a distance of less than 400,000 kilometers from the planet Wilzerd, the small rectangle grew rapidly, spreading from all four corners simultaneously. As its size increased, the speed with which it grew accelerated as well. On its way to full capacity, the mushrooming corridor encountered all manner of stars and space debris. Because it had altered its structure before resizing

itself, it consumed everything it touched with little or no effort. Where once it had been a silent traveler, and completely benign, its new matrix gave it the capabilities of one of the Circle of Evil's most devastating creations. Nothing could stand before it, even at a marginal size. When the corridor had reached its full dimensions not even a world the size of Wilzerd would be safe.

The portal measurements soared past 150,000 kilometers length and 125,000 kilometers width. The membrane suddenly flashed, illuminating a blood red, milky substance that quickly solidified, attaching itself firmly to each side and corner of the corridor. Stars and smaller satellites began flowing toward the immense portal, ripped away from their gravitational fields by the all-consuming strength of the membrane. The indistinct and much smaller corridors, those attached to the world facing the giant portal, flew away from Wilzerd and were swallowed into the endless morass. In an instant, any possible escape for Gribba and his race had been withdrawn. Every corridor connected to the planet now resided within the massive membrane of the ever-expanding blood red portal. No flash, fire or explosion occurred when they encountered the organic passage; they simply disappeared into the red pool without a trace. It seemed to work like a black hole, except anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of orbital physics would know otherwise. This entity was a killing machine, and although organic at birth, it would obey its programming to the letter.

The expansion ceased. The gigantic corridor now measured 250,000 kilometers length and 215,000 kilometers width. As if checking every component before initiating final instructions, the boundaries of the portal flexed and stretched themselves. In doing so, they checked the tautness of the membrane against the perimeter of the corridor. The

milky passageway also ran a series of checks on itself. Allowing a number of electric charges to pass from one side to the other and from top to bottom, the membrane established a measure of consistency along the massive face of the corridor. Satisfied that everything was in order, the immense portal sparked once, illuminating the membrane with a fiery blast of titanic energy. The entire corridor burned with a controlled fury, and as the intensity accelerated, the portal began moving forward toward Wilzerd. Its pace remained slow and determined. As it progressed to the target world, it calibrated its advance ever so slightly. It wanted to please its masters, and it would by consuming its largest objective to date. It would do so flawlessly, living up to the reputation its kind had enjoyed since the inception of the Crossworlds.