

Chapter 1

Thao

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I awoke suddenly, not knowing how long I had slept. I was completely awake - fresh and alert - but good God, what time could it be? Lina was sleeping beside me, her fists closed, but then Lina always sleeps...

I had no desire at all to go back to sleep and besides, it was possibly already five in the morning. I got up, made my way to the kitchen and checked the clock. Only 12.30am! It was unusual for me to wake up at such an hour.

I took off my pyjamas and dressed in trousers and a shirt, why, I had no idea. Neither can I explain why I went to my desk, took a sheet of paper and a biro and *watched* myself write, as if my hand had a mind of its own.

'My dear, I'll be away for about ten days. Absolutely no need to worry.'

Leaving the note by the telephone, I headed through the door and on to the verandah. I avoided the table on which last night's chess game remained, with the white King still in checkmate, and silently opened the door leading on to the garden.

The night seemed to be suffused with a strange brightness, which had nothing to do with the stars. Instinctively, I tried to recall what phase the moon was currently in, thinking that perhaps it was about to rise. Here, in the north-east of Australia where I live, the nights are generally quite clear.

I descended the outside stairs and headed towards the pandanus. Usually, at this time of night, we would have a veritable concert from the frogs and crickets whose chirring sounds fill the night. Now however, there was a heavy silence and I wondered why.

I had only walked a few steps when, quite suddenly, the colour of the philodendrons changed. The wall of the house too, and the pandanus - all were bathed in a kind of bluish light. The lawn seemed to undulate beneath my feet and the ground beneath the pandanus waved also. The philodendrons distorted and the wall of the house resembled a sheet floating in the wind.

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Beginning to believe that I was not well, I decided to return to the house when, at that precise moment, I felt myself lifted quite gently from the ground. I rose, slowly at first, above the philodendrons, and then quicker, until I saw the house becoming smaller and smaller below me.

'What is happening?' I exclaimed in utter bewilderment.

'All is well now, Michel.'

By then, I believed I was dreaming. Before me, a human being of impressive size, dressed in a one-piece suit and wearing a completely transparent helmet on 'her' head, was looking at me - friendly and smiling.

'No, you are not dreaming,' she said, answering the question in my mind.

'Yes,' I replied, 'but it always happens this way in a dream and in the end you find you've fallen out of bed and have a lump on your forehead!' She smiled. 'Further', I continued, 'you are speaking to me in French, my native tongue, and yet we are in Australia. I do speak English, you know!'

'So do I'.

'It *has* to be a dream - one of those stupid dreams, moreover. If not though, what are you doing on my property?'

'We are not *on* your property, but *above* it.'

'Ah! It *is* a nightmare. You see I was right. I'll pinch myself!' I accompanied the words with the action. Ouch!

She smiled again. 'Now are you satisfied, Michel?'

'But if it's not a dream, why am I here sitting on this rock? Who are those people over there, dressed in the fashion of the last century?'

I was beginning to distinguish, in a milky light, people talking and at a slight distance, others moving around.

'And you, who are you? Why aren't you normal sized?'

'I am a normal size, Michel. On my planet we are all this size. But everything in good time, my

dear friend. I hope you don't mind me calling you that? If we aren't good friends already, I am sure that we will be soon.'

She stood there in front of me, intelligence reflected in her smiling face and goodness emanating from her entire being. It would not be possible to meet anyone with whom I could feel more at ease.

'Of course, you may call me what you wish. And what is your name?'

'My name is Thao, but first, I would like you to know, once and for all, that this is *not* a dream. Indeed, it is something quite different. For certain reasons which will be explained to you later, you have been chosen to undertake a journey which very few Earthlings have made - particularly in recent times.

'We are, you and I, at this moment, in a universe which is parallel to that of Earth. In order to admit you, as well as ourselves, we have made use of an 'airlock'.

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'At this instant, time has stopped for you, and you could remain here twenty or fifty of your Earthly years and then return as if you hadn't left. Your physical body would remain absolutely unchanged.'

'But what are these people doing?'

'They exist as well as can be expected and, as you will learn later, the population density is very low. Death only occurs by suicide or accident. Time is suspended. There are men and women, as well as some animals who are 30 000, 50 000 or even many more Earth years old.'

'But why are they here and how did they come to be here? Where were they born?'

'On Earth. . . they are all here by accident.'

'By accident? What do you mean?'

'It's very simple. You have heard of the Bermuda Triangle?' I nodded. 'Well, quite simply, in this spot and in others less well known, this parallel universe becomes confused with your universe so that there exists between them a natural warp.'

'People, animals or even objects finding themselves in the immediate vicinity of a warp are literally sucked into it. Thus, you can have, for example, an entire fleet of boats disappear in several seconds. Sometimes a person, or persons, can pass back into your universe after several hours, several days or several years. More often, however, they never return.'

'When a man does return and relates his experience, the vast majority of people don't believe him - and if he persists, he is assumed 'crazy'. Most of the time, such a person recounts nothing at all, realising how he will appear in the eyes of his peers. Sometimes too, he returns amnesic, and if he recovers some memory, it is not of what happened in the parallel universe, and therefore sheds no light on the subject.'

'There was,' Thao continued, 'a typical case of this passage into a parallel universe in North America, where a young man literally vanished while going to fetch water from a well which was situated several hundred metres from his house. About an hour later, family and friends set out in search of him and, as there had been a fresh snowfall of about 20 centimetres, it should have been quite simple - they had only to follow the footprints left by the young man. But, right in the middle of the field - the footprints stopped.'

'There were no trees around, no rocks on to which he could have jumped - nothing strange or unusual - the footprints just stopped. Some people believed that he had been taken by a

spacecraft, but that could not have been, as you will see later. This poor man had quite simply been sucked into the parallel universe.'

'I remember', I said, 'I did hear of that particular case, but how do *you* know all about it?'

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'You will find out later how I know,' she replied enigmatically.

We were interrupted by the sudden appearance of a group of people so bizarre that again, I wondered if this was all a dream. About a dozen men, accompanied by what seemed to be a woman, emerged from behind a pile of rocks a hundred metres from where we were. The sight was even stranger, since these human beings appeared to have stepped out of the pages of prehistoric records. With the gait of gorillas, they brandished enormous clubs which modern man would not have been able to lift from the ground. These hideous creatures were coming straight for us, howling like wild beasts. I made a move to retreat, but my companion told me there was nothing to fear and that I should stay still. She put her hand on the buckle of her belt and turned so that she faced them.

I heard a series of small clicks and five of the strongest looking men fell to the ground, motionless. The rest of the group stopped cleanly and began moaning. They prostrated themselves before us.

I looked again at Thao. She stood like a statue, her face set. Her eyes were fixed on those people as though she was trying to hypnotise them. I later learned that she was giving orders by telepathy to the female of the group. Suddenly, this woman got up and began, it seemed to me, to issue orders in a guttural voice to the others. They then helped remove the bodies, carrying them on their backs to the pile of rocks mentioned earlier.

'What are they doing?' I asked.

'They will cover their dead with stones.'

'Did you kill them?'

'I had to.'

'What do you mean? Were we really in danger?'

'Of course we were. These are people who have been here for ten or fifteen thousand years - who knows? We don't have time to establish that and besides, it is of no importance. Nevertheless, it illustrates well what I was explaining to you a few moments ago. These people passed into this universe at a certain time, and they have lived in that time ever since.'

'It's frightful!'

'I agree. However it is part of natural, and therefore universal, law. Furthermore, they are dangerous because they behave more like wild beasts than human beings. Dialogue would not have been possible between them and us, just as it is not possible between them and most of the others living in this parallel universe. For one thing, they are unable to communicate; and for another, they, less than anyone, understand what has happened to them. We were in real danger and, if I do say so, I have done them a favour just now, of liberating them.'

'Liberating?'

'Don't look so shocked, Michel. You know quite well what I mean by that.'

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'They are liberated from their physical bodies and are now able to continue their cycle, like every living being, according to the normal process.'

'So if I understand correctly, this parallel universe is a curse - a kind of hell or purgatory?'

'I didn't realise you were religious!'

'I just make this comparison to show you that I am trying to understand,' I replied, wondering how she could know whether or not I was religious.

'I know, Michel, I was only teasing. You were right in explaining it as a kind of purgatory but, of course, this is quite accidental. In fact, this is one of several accidents of nature. An *albino* is an accident, and a four-leafed clover can also be considered as an accident. Your appendix is just as much an accident. Your doctors still wonder what use it could possibly have in your body. The answer - no use whatsoever. Now usually, in nature, everything has a precise reason for existing - that's why I list the appendix among the natural 'accidents'.

'People living in this universe suffer neither physically nor morally. For example, if I hit you, you would feel no pain, but if the blows were strong enough, although without pain, you could still die from them. This might be difficult to comprehend, but it is so. Those existing here know nothing of what I have just explained to you, and it is fortunate because they would be tempted to commit suicide - which, even here, is not a solution.'

'What do they eat?'

'They don't eat, nor do they drink, because they don't feel the need to. Here, remember, time has stopped - those dead won't even rot.'

'But that's terrible! In all, the greatest service that one can render these people would be to kill them!'

'You raise an important point there. Effectively it would be one of two solutions.'

'What is the other?'

'To send them back where they came from - but that would pose great problems. Because we are able to make use of the warp, we could return many of them to your universe, and thus liberate [1] them, but I'm sure you are aware of the enormous problems that would create for the majority of these people. Here, as I have already said, you have people, who have been here for thousands of years. What would happen if they found themselves back in the universe they left so long ago?'

'They might go insane. In all, there is nothing to do.' She smiled gently at my affirmation.

'You are certainly the man of action we require, Michel, but beware of jumping to conclusions - you have much more to see.'

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She put her hand on my shoulder, having to incline forward slightly to do so. Although I didn't know it at the time, Thao measured 290 centimetres, exceptionally tall for a human being.

'I see with my own eyes that we made the right choice in selecting you - you have an astute mind, but I cannot explain everything to you now, for two reasons.'

'Namely?'

'First, it is still too soon for such an explanation. By this, I mean that you must be instructed further on certain points before proceeding beyond.'

'I understand - and second?'

'The second reason is that they are waiting for us. We must leave.'

With a light touch, she turned me around. I followed her gaze and stared wide-eyed with surprise. About 100 metres from us was an enormous sphere, from which emanated a bluish Aura. I later learned that it measured 70 metres in diameter. The light was not steady, but shimmered, resembling a heat haze when one looks from a distance at sand heated by the summer sun.

This enormous sphere 'shimmered' about ten metres from the ground. With no windows, no openings, no ladder, it appeared as smooth as the shell of an egg.

Thao signalled for me to follow her and we set out towards the machine. I remember that moment very well. During the short time we took in approaching the sphere, I was so excited that I lost control of my thoughts. A constant stream of images flashed through my mind, resembling a film in the 'fast-forward' mode. I saw myself relating this adventure to my family, and I saw again newspaper articles I had read on the subject of UFOs.

I remember a feeling of sadness sweep over me when I thought of my family whom I loved so much; I saw myself caught, as though in a trap, and it occurred to me that I might never see them again...

'You have absolutely nothing to fear, Michel,' said Thao. 'Trust me. You will be reunited with your family very soon, and in good health.'

I believe my mouth fell open in surprise, triggering in Thao a melodious laugh, such as is rarely heard among us Earthlings. That was the second time she had read my thoughts; the first time I thought might have been a coincidence, but this time there could be no doubt.

When we arrived in close proximity to the sphere, Thao placed me in a position opposite her and about a metre's distance away.

'Do not touch me under any pretext, Michel, whatever happens. *Under any pretext* - do you understand?'

I was quite taken aback by this formal order, but I nodded.