

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Planet of Inverted Pyramids

During the nine-month-long Willamette Valley winter, it was either raining or drizzling – or threatening to – under low gray skies. Yet the short, dim days in Salem looked like a sunny tropical paradise compared to Indegona.

From orbit, charcoal-black clouds shrouded the roasted black ball – not normal clouds of water vapor. Dust, soot and volcanic ash – driven by colossal and often global dust storms – filled the atmosphere, encasing Indegona in a fluffy black shell. Lightning flickered all around the planet, but even those intense flashes barely lit the black haze in flashes of gray. The ship's technology gave Jess a clear view inside the smoky veil, but that only unburied a gloomy landscape more desolate than the night side of Earth's moon. And that was at noon below Jess.

After a few seconds of watching a barren plain roll toward him, he realized that the vast, gray lowland once held an ocean. Now it was a dry sea of sand dunes, salt flats, shells, bones, reefs and charred remains of marine life. The planet held almost no water – only traces of vapor haunted the atmosphere. Although organic material dominated the upper crust, almost nothing lived in it. Much of it formed a thick layer of ash and charcoal from a single, brief geologic period. The cataclysm that had dried the planet's living flesh also had cremated most of it, from the scrub brush that once clung to mountains down to the bottom of the deepest ocean trench. Formerly undersea volcanoes constantly spewed lava and ash into the air, largely accounting for the permanent winter. This would be an ice age – if there were ice.

Losing the water must what killed everyone and everything. Maybe I just need to find out how that happened.

With Jess's orbital scan of Indegona completed, he looked for the pyramid-like structures mentioned in the assignment's summary. He found none. So many thousands of years had passed that no structures stood above the gritty surface. In fact, at least 20,000 Earth years had elapsed while quakes and volcanoes had demolished and buried any buildings, and dry winds had sandblasted the rubble to dust.

Yet the calamity preserved structures below Indegona's surface. Ruins large and small; road networks of stone, brick and primitive

concrete; and concentrations of refined or oxidized metals hid under the soil. Many areas – particularly around underground ruins – held such enormous quantities of these materials that they laid out telltale gridlines of cities.

Another clue drew clear boundaries around buried cities: All the people were still there. Sprawling jumbles of remains spread across the buried former surface, radiating from massive populations in the big cities. Bones lay where each creature took its last step. Some appeared crouching or sitting. A few somehow were buried standing.

“Nexus, how can some of those skeletons be held together like that, sitting and even standing?” Jess asked.

“Mummification of soft-tissue remains held many corpses intact – those that did not burn,” the nexus replied, sending a shiver down Jess’s spine. “Complete and rapid dehydration of the bodies resulted in an unusually high degree of preservation.”

“Great,” Jess muttered. “No pyramids, but millions of mummies. I hope I can solve this mystery from orbit.”

For over an hour, Jess orbited the global graveyard, studying the data he’d gathered.

“But I thought a big explosion from the sun could blow the water off a planet,” Jess told his nexus.

“A stellar phenomenon of that magnitude would have blown away *all* the atmosphere, not just the water,” the nexus pointed out. “Further, this planet’s magnetic field remains intact and robust, deflecting stellar wind effectively.”

“OK. I’ll go down and take a look. I’ll visit the biggest city, which might have been a capital, do some detailed scans, then get out of there. I can study the scans in my hangar.”

The outline of a huge city sprawled near the center of a group of other large cities, connected by the planet’s most extensive road network. Whatever that region was – center of an empire or simply the biggest or most advanced country – it stood out as the largest complex of ruins on the largest former continent.

“Looks like a good place to start,” Jess said.

After starting the ship’s automated landing sequence, Jess took a closer look at the scans of his destination and solved one mystery. Several large buried structures extended deep underground in successively smaller sub-basements – roughly in the shape of upside-down pyramids.

“Hah! Inverted pyramids, like writing in journalism,” Jess joked. “Indegona is the Planet of Inverted Pyramids.”

These pyramids held three-dimensional mazes so vast that Jess would get lost in one without a handheld scanner.

“Anyway, I don’t plan to go inside. But I wonder if there are, like, pharaohs buried with their treasures.”

Jess scanned an entire pyramid and found no treasure, just a few dozen mummies.

“Oh, well, it’s not like I could *keep* any treasure I found.”

Breaking through Indegona’s haze, Jess descended over a vast plain toward the faint outlines of the largest buried city. The underground ruins left a footprint no bigger than Salem. Yet nearly half a million individuals rested there, entombed in the geologic layer that represented the end of their world.

With so many Indegonans in such a small area, Jess speculated that the former inhabitants were smaller than humans. But his nexus confirmed the opposite when Jess requested a virtual rendering, based on scans of the best-preserved bodies. The horror that came to life in 3D animation snarled like a gorilla with a giant bat’s head. A gaping single nostril and a wide, massive mouth dominated the face, making the two pitch-black eyes seem tiny. Although the creature stood upright, its arms were larger, longer and more muscular than its legs. It stood a bit taller than a human, and much wider at the shoulders.

I’m glad I don’t need to deal with such a scary-looking dude on Panforum. At least so far.

Then Jess felt sorry that these ugly creatures had been wiped out. They couldn’t help what they looked like, and they might not have been responsible for their extinction.

His ship landed, and he shut off the projection of the alien. But its ghastly image lingered in his mind. He unbuckled his safety belts and looked around the barren, windswept landscape. Mid-afternoon here looked more like dusk in a cemetery. Jess aimed one of the ship’s lights into the dark outside, reflecting flecks of ash and dust gusting through the beam.

“Looks safe,” Jess told himself, wishing he believed it.

From a compartment beneath his seat, he pulled a tool belt loaded with gear for an interplanetary archaeologist. In addition to a hand scanner and light, the belt carried a medical kit, a backup power supply for his biovox, tools and expandable containers for samples, clues, evidence or whatever else of interest he might find. Jess took a deep breath.

“OK, open the hatch.”

The dull cry of a lonely, ceaseless wind broke the cockpit’s enclosed

silence, and a dark gateway to swirling dust greeted the boy. He pulled the light from his tool belt, turned it on and peered outside. Although the device was capable of shining a spotlight, it wasn't typically used that way. Instead, its "ambient" setting lit surroundings without itself shining like a light bulb or casting the shadow of the person holding it.

"I wonder how it does that," Jess said to himself. "Nexus, don't answer that question! I know, it's either a secret or it's some techno-babble I won't understand."

Jess stepped out of the hatch and crunched on the gritty ground. He felt like a noisy intruder in an ancient burial ground, or a gopher emerging as the solitary survivor in a scorched wasteland. He longed to be lost in a slew of aliens crowding the bright avenues of Panforum, or even at high school.

There's nothing to be afraid of. There's nobody here but me. Nobody alive, that is. Just take a few scans and go home.

Jess turned on his handheld scanner and looked for the ruins of the nearest major building. A rectangular depression in the ground to the southwest stood out in the 3D map projected in front of him. That spot entombed a huge structure. It must have been an important building, so Jess walked toward it. Each step puffed a cloud of dust and broadcast a dull *scrunch*, which he feared might awaken some resentful spirit from its endless nightmare of millions of lives unjustly cut short. He slowed to soften his footsteps as he meandered through the uneven terrain. Once he reached the large structure's grave, he scanned it to make sure it was a safe place to set foot. The scanner confirmed that the bulk of the original foundation and pillars supporting a single surviving level were unlikely to collapse for a long time.

The boy stepped into the soft, sandy depression toward squared shapes jutting upward. Once near enough, the outline of bricks sandwiched between layers of crumbling mortar lay exposed to the winds. Jess scanned the site, looking for metals and plastics to see if there was plumbing, electricity, tables, chairs, pens or pencils, or maybe machinery – any of the trappings of cities as Jess knew them. His scans found oxidized iron, copper, tin, bronze, lead and bits of gold and silver. But he detected no plastics, no traces of electric wire, no aluminum or brass, or other alloys common after an industrial revolution.

"Nexus," Jess said. "Can you tell me about what year it would be on Earth with this level of technology?"

"No precise comparison is possible because of Earth's erratic progress," the nexus said.

"Give me a rough guess."

“This culture’s technology was comparable to Earth’s late Roman Empire. But that’s a rough comparison.”

“The Romans? Then these people couldn’t have invented something that made all their water disappear.”

He knelt by the exposed ancient, crumbling wall fragment and examined it. He dug by hand to uncover more of the surface, revealing geometric shapes gouged into the brick.

“Writing!” Jess shouted, pulling out his scanner. “Nexus, is this writing?”

“Yes.”

“What’s it say?”

“Unknown. I need a large set of samples to attempt a translation. Even then, a full translation may not be possible.”

“Can you use the ship’s scanners to record all the walls buried in this city and see if there’s enough writing?” Jess asked.

“Yes.”

“OK, then do it. How long will it take?”

“About seven point six minutes. Scanning is underway.”

Jess set his hand scanner on the ground and climbed atop the outcropping of ancient wall to get a better view of the gloomy surroundings. Although he couldn’t tell the sun’s location through the dense sky, the black clouds hung darker in one direction. Night must be approaching from that way. Lightning flickered on the horizon, briefly illuminating a backdrop of jagged, bare gray mountains. The peaks probably supported snowcaps when Indegona held water, Jess imagined.

Lightning roared overhead across the smoky sky, flashing the rugged landscape and casting a jumble of dancing shadows that made the rocky terrain quiver for an instant. And something else moved at the far edge of the building’s rectangular outline. Terror jolted through Jess. He switched his light to a spotlight setting and aimed it at the suspicious area, but his jumpiness kept him from holding it steadily. Its bright beam wavered on distant rubble, causing their long shadows to wiggle.

“It’s just a shadow,” he told himself, jumping down from his dusty perch. “Nexus, scan the city for anyone, or anything alive.”

“Scanning,” the nexus said. “Scan complete. Besides you and the microorganisms you carry, there are no life forms but traces of dormant bacteria.”

“What about a spaceship or robot, something artificial that can move, follow me, watch me – anything I didn’t bring here?”

“Besides what you brought, there is no functioning product of any level of technology in or near this city.”

“OK, how much longer do you need to scan for writing?”

“Two minutes, forty-five seconds.”

“Good. I’m going back to the ship in a minute.”

Still atop the crumbling wall, Jess shined the spotlight again toward the area where he thought he’d seen movement. Nothing but shadows waved from the distance. He slowly turned the light 360 degrees, looking all around.

“All right,” Jess said, jumping down and grabbing the scanner. “Show me the quickest route back to my ship.”

He held his light high over his head in ambient mode and jogged toward his landing site, following a glowing blue line the nexus provided through his biovox. The line led Jess over the dusty, uneven ground and into blackness.

“Scan complete, attempting to reconstruct language,” the nexus said.

“That’s nice.” Jess replied mentally. *“I feel like I’m being watched. Scan the planet. Am I really the only one here besides a few dried-up germs?”*

“There are no living multi-cellular life forms anywhere on this planet except for you,” the nexus answered.

Jess skidded to a halt when he saw the light from his ship’s open hatch and the shadowy figure standing in front of the glow.

“Nexus! There’s someone here, walking toward me. How do you explain that?”

“There are two possibilities: You’re hallucinating, or an individual is using an illegal camouflage device.”

“Hello, Jess,” a feminine voice said.

“Did you hear that?” She just said ‘Hello, Jess’ to me.”

“I did not ‘hear’ anything. If you heard a voice, then there are two possibilities...”

“Oh, shut up!”

“Remember my e-mail?” the figure said. “I promised to contact you later. It’s later now.”

“Who are you?” Jess asked. “What are you doing here?”

“I was once a recruit like you, and I’m here to offer you a deal infinitely more rewarding than what the Institute has.”

“No, thank you,” Jess said, recalling Dr. Paragon’s warning about offers that sounded too good to be true.

“Why don’t you think about it?” she replied. “I can get you a better ship, total freedom to travel the galaxy wherever and whenever you want, total freedom on Earth. If you want, you could become the wealthiest and most powerful man on Earth.”

“Sorry. That sounds too good to be true, like there’s a catch.”

“The ‘catch,’ as you call it, is simply choosing who your friends will be,” she said, stepping toward Jess and dropping her cloak. She was a Veyan girl, as beautiful as Saralestra and Ning but a little shorter than Jess. “And it’s worth it.”

“You’re a Veyan? But there are already Veyan recruits.”

“They aren’t the first,” she said, stopping a few paces away from Jess. “The Institute would deny I exist. But here I am.”

Wearing an electric-blue tank top and a black skirt, she walked slowly in a circle and threw her huge mane of long, thick blond hair to one side. Jess couldn’t keep his eyes off her – because of both terror and attraction.

“I was a Platinum Maiden until I was in an accident on Exuus,” she said, pointing to her cheek. “You see this scar? Human eyes can barely see it, but on Exuus it sent me crashing down to Gold Maiden. It grieved me so much that the Institute was about to drop me from the Alien Integration Program.”

“They were going to kick you out because you got a little scratch on your face?” Jess gasped.

“No, because of how *devastated* I was after my demotion to Gold Maiden. But I was justifiably angry and disappointed.”

Even with that little mark, she’d be famous on Earth.

“Fortunately, I had a better option. You have that choice too.”

Jess stepped to the right, preparing to circle around the girl and run for his ship.

“I think this is a pretty good deal as it is,” he told her.

“Really?” she said. “Well, I can get you a starship that would give you the freedom of the galaxy without any control by the Galactic Union or anyone else. They would never be able to even find you. Your scans here show no trace of me, do they?”

Jess looked around and took a couple more steps.

“So that’s why my nexus says you aren’t even here?” he asked, realizing that she could be anyone or anything and simply using a biovox to appear as a beautiful Veyan.

“Yes, that is one of many, many powers I can give you.”

“And the catch? What would you want from me?”

“Your friendship, and a little favor now and then. It’s worth it. Imagine the freedom to do whatever you want on Earth. Those bullies at your school wouldn’t just stop bothering you; they’d worship you. You could *rule* Earth, if you wanted. Or just travel the galaxy, without boundaries. Or you could take over an uninhabited planet and remake it however you wish.”

“I don’t know,” Jess said, folding his arms and taking a step.

“Well, just think about it,” she said. “And think about one other thing – I know that humans find us Veyans *very* alluring, even though I am not as beautiful as I once was. I have no boyfriend. You have no girlfriend. Think about it.”

Jess pretended to think and took another step toward his ship, eager to fly straight to Panforum to report this encounter.

“Oh,” she said, “you don’t need to *run*. You can leave any time. I won’t stop you. But before you go, I’ll give you another bit of advice: Pick a different planet to study. This is the most difficult one you could have chosen.

“And think about my offer. I’ll contact you again later.”

A long, sleek bluish starship materialized overhead. It was about the size of the shuttle Kellen piloted to Tenna Omosh. The girl vanished, and so did her vessel. Jess ran to his tiny ship.

Well, she – or he or whoever – is right about one thing: I’d rather study a different planet.