

# **The Council of the Saleem**

by James Roulston



**Thanks to David Burton  
(my mothers cousin-in-law and an English teacher)  
for teaching me, without really realising,  
to write what you feel and always keep writing, no matter what.**



**D**ave Vladistock looked up in awe. The metal gates loomed above him. Dave let out a gasp; they must be hundreds of feet high. They were made from a strong, silver metal which shone brightly in the sun's light and showed Dave's reflection. Even the hinges, which were far too high for Dave to reach, were as big as a grown man. Elaborate engravings ran all over the surface, almost every inch was covered in writing. He ran his hand over them. It was certainly some sort of writing but it was no language he had ever seen. It was nothing even similar to his own language of Zlastivak or to the languages of his surrounding tribes. In fact it was like no other writing he had ever seen on any of his travels. The lines curled and crossed creating beautiful symbols, which were more like pictures than writing. Together, the words seemed to form a magnificent picture which covered the huge gates.

There were two, even taller, towers on either side which seemed to almost be among the clouds. They were made from white marble stone and had no sign of dirt or weathering from the harsh winds of the desert. There were no windows in the towers and at the top of each tower, there was no battlements or parapets, but a giant dome, which curved away to a point. A enormous wall ran from each tower curving away out of sight, enclosing the entire city. There was no windows in this either, the wall just seemed to close the entire city in and there was no obvious way of seeing out. It looked strong and grand, towering over Dave like a huge, long cliff. It was all made from exactly the same white marble as the towers by the gate. Dave had never seen anything like it; he had never seen any kind of structure so big.

After some minutes, spent admiring the wall and towers, Dave returned his attention to the gate. He held up a fist and knocked upon the gate. No sound was made; the metal was much too thick to be affected by his knocking; compared to the size of the gates, his fist was insignificant. After a few more attempts at knocking Dave tried to push the gate open, but to no avail.

He looked at the gaps between the two gates and at the edges, but they were barely a few inches thick, far too thin for Dave to be able to squeeze through. Beginning to get frustrated, he searched for some way to get inside. He was starting to think that he would never be able to gain entry to the Sacred City. Maybe it was blocked off from the outside world and even those clever enough to find it, like Dave, were forbidden from entering.

Dave cast his mind back over the journey here. After his mother's death he had strived to find some way of bringing her back. She was all Dave had left and now she was nothing but a memory. His father had left him before he was born and he had no other family, meaning that he and his mother had become very close. He grew up with her, never leaving her for more than a few hours and they had been inseparable. She meant more to him than anything could mean to anyone, she was everything in his life and Dave loved her dearly. She died suddenly, killed by an unknown disease that no medicine man or herd woman could cure her of. The one thing Dave could not forgive himself for was the fact that he had not been with her at the end. He had allowed someone to convince him into getting some sleep and while he rested, his beloved mother passed away. Although it was the disease that killed her, Dave knew that his mother had died because he was not there for her when she needed him most. Dave knew that he had to find away of bringing her back and reversing death itself. He had sought answers from wise men and people who travelled the world but had found no answer. Then, once he had almost given up hope of ever seeing his mother alive again, of hugging her tightly in his arms, of talking to her again, he found a way. He had managed to find his way to this fabled city. But now his dreams were crushed, there was no way in.

Then at last, as he walked back, his eyes came across a hollow in the wall, a short walk to the right of the gate. He walked over to it and, inside it he saw a large golden bell and a metal bar. He swung the bar down into the side of the bell as hard as he could and it rang. The sound the bell made was extremely loud and Dave covered his ears. The note released was a pure, unfaltering one, which hung in the air for a few minutes.

Once the ringing stopped, Dave turned to the gates but they still remained closed. Then, after a few moments of silence, the gates began to open. They swung back, seemingly effortlessly, without making a sound. Dave stood back and watched as this happened and, once they were fully open, he stepped into the city. As he walked past the open gates he looked around for signs of life but he couldn't see anything. He turned as the gates closed behind him and Dave saw that there was no-one shutting them and no obvious mechanism doing it. Dave looked away from the gates and gazed at the city, which the gates concealed.

The sight of the city took his breath away. The entire city, every tower, building and dome, was built from gleaming white marble just like the wall which surrounded it. This reflected the sun's light everywhere so that city was filled with a magnificent bright white light. The city was draped in sunshine; there were golden rays bouncing off the marble stone and draping the entire city in light. The buildings almost seemed to wear the sun's rays like a cloak. The sunlight served to add to the grandness of the city, enhancing its beauty.

After taking in the city and all its great beauty he began to walk down the wide, central street, which passed straight through the middle of all the buildings to the centre of the city. Grand buildings stood on either side and it was paved with white marble.

As Dave walked along the street he looked out for any signs of life, after all it was the people of the city that he was looking for not just the city. He looked into the buildings through doorways and windows and kept his eye out for any life in the city or any movement. He didn't find any people or creatures or see any sure signs of life but every now and again, he was certain he could hear voices or see figures move in the shadows in the buildings around him. However every time he spun around to see the figures or the people behind the voices, there was no-one there. He would look around, peering into the dark rooms inside the buildings for another glimpse of the figures. Although he was sure that he had seen people inside the buildings, he could never catch a proper look at one of them and still wasn't actually certain there had been anyone there. He became paranoid that he was being followed but since he never actually saw anyone, he assumed that it was just his mind or possibly it was the light. He continued to see and hear things but guessed that he was imagining them because there was still no obvious proof of life in the city and the whole place seemed deserted. He carried on walking along the central street in the hope of finding people for certain. The centre of the city seemed, in Dave's mind,

Dave headed for the central building with the biggest dome, which was directly in front of him, down the main street. As he neared this building and became closer to the centre of the city, he realised that the buildings around him were becoming taller and grander. To begin with they had been basic house-like structures but as he walked further he passed tall towers and elaborately decorated buildings that looked like churches or palaces. There were statues and engravings all around him but there was still no sign of life. At one point, Dave could have sworn that he saw a figure stood in a doorway. Dave stopped in his tracks, knowing that as soon as he turned around the figure would disappear. He tried to see the figure by turning very slowly but couldn't control himself for long enough and turned quickly at

the last second. The figure had vanished but Dave had definitely seen the edge of some sort of cloak. There was definitely life here.

Dave thought about looking around one of these other buildings; he had seen all the glimpses of life in these outer buildings and many of them didn't even have doors. He stood in the doorway of a large building with two tall towers at the top. Dave looked around inside. He was in a big empty hall which had absolutely nothing in it. He took a step forward and the sound of his foot hitting the marble floor, echoed around the room. Dave began to hear whispers, voices that seemed to come from nowhere. He couldn't make out what they were saying but he became quite scared. The voices became louder and Dave was sure that they had started to sound angry. They echoed around the room becoming louder and louder. Dave was still unable to understand what these voices were saying; they must be in a different language. The words seemed to flow into each other, in a way that no other language did, and the voices sounded almost like snakes. Dave was terrified by the voices and really wanted to leave but found himself glued to the spot, in hope that the creatures behind the voices would show themselves. A couple of minutes passed and Dave didn't see anything. The voices however had begun to shout and Dave found his body urging him to go, skin crawling and every muscle in his body straining to turn him and leave but his mind was fixed on the prospect of finally meeting the creatures of the city. He had heard so much about them and what they might be like but he was now closer to finding them than anyone else had ever been. He couldn't leave this building now, not if it meant meeting the people of this city. Then finally his mind gave up, realising that he wasn't going to find the people here. His brain relaxed, allowing his body to turn and take Dave out of the building and into the street. As soon as he stepped out of the doorway, the voices ceased, disappearing as though they had never been. Dave continued to walk along the street, deciding that the central building must be his best chance of finding the people for whom he searched.

When he reached this central building, he noticed that it was not built from marble, like the other buildings, but from some sort of white crystal. The effect of this was to make this building stand out against the rest but, at the same time, being similar. Dave approached the entrance and laid one hand on the door. At this point, however, he stopped. He thought about what this meant. If the legends and stories were true, and so far they were, then this was where he would find the way to reverse his mother's death. He was finally here, at the place which he had searched for, for over a year. This could be the place where Dave could right all the wrongs in his life. If these people really did have the power that Dave had been told, then they could control life and death itself. They could do anything that Dave wished, and he had finally found them.

Awaking from these thoughts, Dave pushed the door open and entered. The light inside was even brighter than outside. It was a pure, brilliant light and it filled the chamber. Dave looked around, but it was also void of signs of life. He walked to the centre of the chamber and looked around. He looked up at the huge dome above him. It was like nothing he had ever seen before. It was colossal compared to the dome roofs on the little huts in his village. Then, Dave heard voices coming from the other side of the chamber. They were just like the ones which he had heard before in the empty building. These must be the people of the city. They were really here!

The stories told of an ancient race, which dwelt within the hidden city, which had incredible powers, including the ability to undo death. He had first heard about the city and its people from an old traveller, called Boris Kriskov. He had found Boris wandering in the foothills of the Tryan Mountains. Boris had lost his mind in his old age but from what Dave could find out about him, he was a great explorer in his youth and had travelled around the world. Dave became good friends with Kriskov, intrigued by his tales of adventure and discovery. He would talk with Kriskov for hours on end, listening to his stories about foreign tribes and strange cultures. Kriskov would drink a lot, which was a big factor in the disintegration of his mind. One night, while in a drunken state, Kriskov mentioned a sacred city in the Eastern Desert and his information eventually lead Dave here. He was so close to the people of this city, he could clearly hear their voices.

Then, as the voices grew louder, Dave realised where the voices were coming from. There was a small marble staircase on the far side of the chamber.

The voices grew louder and he heard footsteps, climbing the stairs. Dave hid behind a nearby pillar, so as not to reveal himself despite the fact he was desperate to meet them finally. He still did not know whether he was welcome among this hidden race. The footsteps reached the top of the stairs and Dave heard them echoing in the empty chamber. The voices continued in a language, unlike any he had ever heard. He slowly peered round the pillar to get a look and the people behind the voices. He could only see the back of their heads because he was on the far side of the chamber, but the sight of them made him retch. He stared in horror at the figure's head, unable to tear his eyes away from the sight before him. His eyes followed them around the hall, fixed on the back of their heads. They seemed to have almost no skin. All Dave could see was their red raw flesh. What little skin they had was in black shrivelled patches and seemed to have been burnt away. He had never seen any other creatures or people who looked anything like this. It was just as though someone had torn away their skin to reveal the flesh underneath. The sight was repulsing to Dave and he felt sick as he watched the figures walk across the chamber. They had almost no hair on

their heads and what little they had was thin and grey. Their few hairs were spread thinly across their scalps and seemed to put emphasis on their lack of skin. They wore thick, black robes which reached the ground, covering all of their bodies, down to their feet. The cloaks also had hoods put neither figure was wearing their hoods at this time. Apart from their lack of skin and hair however, they seemed just like humans. They had two arms and legs, and were roughly the same height as an adult male human but possibly slightly taller. It crossed Dave's mind that possibly these figures were human. Dave could not explain the lack of skin, but apart from that they seemed very like humans. Perhaps they had cut off their skin as part of some sort of cult.

As the two figures reached the door, they stopped for a moment and lifted their black hoods over their heads and lowered them over their faces. Upon doing this, one figure pushed the door fro and they exited the chamber, walking away into the city. The door slammed shut and the sound echoed around the chamber. Dave stayed still for a while, still queasy from the sight of the figures' flesh. He stayed still for a while, trying to calm himself. He was buzzing with excitement, he had seen the people of the city! He was so close to achieving his goal. For so long he had sought to find these people and now he was here.

After Kriskov had first mentioned the city and its people with power over life and death, Dave had pressed him for more information. However, progress was slow as Kriskov seemed to be quite secretive about the whole thing. After a few drinks, Kriskov would become careless and Dave was able to find out more about the city. Then, one night, Dave came across a book. It was full of maps and diary entries from Kriskov's travels. Dave had flicked through the pages, hurrying because Kriskov was in the next room and Dave knew that he would not want Dave to read the book. Eventually Dave found the pages about the Sacred City in the desert. He could hear Kriskov calling for him but Dave had what he needed. He had sneaked out of the house, with the book and set out to find the city. The book had all the information he needed to get to the city but it was very vague about the city itself and hardly mentioned the inhabitants. It did go as far to mention that they were able to control death and this was the assurance Dave needed and the thought of having his mother back, gave him the resolve he needed to get to the city.

Awaking from these thoughts, Dave stepped out from his hiding place and walked towards the staircase. Looking around for any more figures, he stepped through the arch and down the steps.

The staircase winded down for a very long time and when he reached the bottom, Dave was sure that he was far underground. He could also sense the change in conditions. It was more humid down here and after the long climb

down, Dave found it hard to breath for a few minutes. He leaned against a wall with his hands on his knees, panting and trying to get used to these new conditions.

Once he had regained his breath, Dave began to take in his surroundings. He was another, smaller chamber. It was also filled with bright white light, but this light was somehow different. It didn't seem as pure as the light in the first chamber. It wasn't as natural, it seemed like fire light compared to that of the sun. This didn't keep Dave from continuing for long though; he began to explore the corridors and tunnels that lead away from the chamber. They all seemed to lead to small empty rooms and Dave noticed the same strange light was everywhere down there. He couldn't find anywhere interesting, almost everywhere was empty except for the occasional books, which were written in the same incomprehensible language that was written on the gates. He couldn't find any sign of the people who lived here. The figures he had seen earlier had definitely come from around here somewhere. Dave was beginning to get very frustrated; he was so close to his goal, to the people of the city but he couldn't quite find them. He was lost in a maze of white crystal where every room, every tunnel looked exactly the same. The whole place was infuriating; he could go mad in this place.

It started to remind him of his journey here. He had to come through the Eastern Desert. It was a huge empty place, dry and barren. The landscape was bleak and there were no people or landmarks to make sure you were going in the right direction. Kriskov's maps were sketchy and vague and not of much help. They pointing Dave in the general direction but inaccuracies meant that after that it was up to Dave to find his way. It was a horrible experience and was an extremely wearisome process of marking where he'd been and searching the desert for the city. Despite the city's size, it couldn't be seen, except by those who had found it, making the task of finding it a dull process of trial and error as Dave scoured the desert.

Then, as he started to become desperate he saw an entrance to yet another chamber to his right. He hadn't been into this chamber yet. How could he have missed this entrance before? He could swear it hadn't been here last time he had passed.

He likened the feeling of relief and discovery to the time when he finally found the city. He had been searching the desert for most of Winter, all of Spring and the best part of the Summer. It had been almost a year since he had found the book in old Kriskov's house and set out on his journey to find the city. He finally found it when he entered a small underground tunnel. The walls were covered with picture and writing carved into the stone but they had become too worn to make out. It had emerged back on the surface, in the Desert, barely fifty feet from where it had started but when Dave

came out the other side, he could see the city. It was right in front of him, barely two hundred feet away, towering above him and shining out as the sun was reflected off its white stone walls. Dave couldn't understand why he couldn't see the city before but approached the gates undeterred. He had overcome the frustrating desert to find the city and now he had conquered the maze of corridors and tunnels to find this chamber, which was surely where the people, of the city, were.

As he approached the chamber beyond the entrance, which was even bigger than the one on the surface with the domed roof, he began to hear voices. He approached the entrance quietly and peered in. In the centre of the chamber was a large marble table and around it stood seven robed figures, like the ones he had seen earlier, but they had white robes. They spoke in the same unrecognisable language and seemed to be arguing among each other. They were waving their arms about wildly and pointing angrily at each other. Their voices were raised and sounded enraged. They were fixed on their argument and hadn't yet noticed Dave as he entered. He crept in quietly and ducked behind a smaller table, which was near the entrance and also made from solid marble. He tried to catch a glimpse of their faces but they had their backs to him. The figures all had the same burnt skin and Dave couldn't bear to look at it. He crawled around the table, trying to see their faces. He slowly crept around the side of the chamber to a pillar which he stopped behind. He leant out from behind the pillar, not daring to leave its cover completely. He looked around further and could nearly see the face of the furthest figure. He couldn't quite see it yet though and stretched even further out, still on his hands and knees. He strained his neck, nearly able to see the face past the bodies of the other figures. He leaned out a tiny bit further, still not daring to move away from the pillar in case they saw him. Then his hands slipped on the cold, hard, stone floor and he fell to the ground, flat on his chest. The sound of him falling echoed around the chamber and the robed figures spun around to look at him. Dave got his first look at their faces and nearly screamed. Their faces were also void of proper skin and were simply bare flesh just like the back of their heads. They did have small patches of skin but they were black and shrivelled and hardly covered any of the flesh at all. They had no noses, just three slits between their eyes. The slits just looked as though someone had simply cut them into each face because they were just small thin holes which didn't seem to have any purpose and didn't do anything that Dave could see. Dave wasn't even sure if they were noses at all, they looked more like wounds. However, it was their eyes which stood out most, more than the lack of skin, the noses or the thin grey hair. They were shaped like those of a snake or lizard, like ovals with pointed ends. Unlike reptile eyes however, or any eyes Dave had ever seen before, they contained huge white

thin pupils. These filled most of the eye and looked startling and electrifying but at the same time looked blank and empty. Dave couldn't really understand how they made him feel but it seemed to be a strange mixture of terror and entrancement. The rest of the eye was black and charred. It almost seemed as though it had been burnt, like the skin, and looked dead. As Dave lay on the ground, staring up at the figures' faces, the tallest figure stepped forward and opened its mouth to speak. As it did this, Dave got to see its jagged teeth, which were yellow and set into dark red gums. He could also see the figure's long tongue which was jet black and thinned out to a sharp point at the end.

"Who's there?" it asked.

"You are intruding in our Sacred City," said another figure.

Dave was thinking how to answer when something struck him and he said "You...you speak Zlastivak?" surprised.

The tallest figure laughed, "Of course we do!" he boomed "We basically created it!"

"What? What do you mean?" Dave replied.

"I assume you came from the outside world," said another figure.

"Er...yes. I guess so."

"And you are human?" said a third figure.

"Yes," Dave answered "Can't you tell?"

"How could we?" came the reply "We are almost blind after all."

"You're...you're blind?" said Dave, stepping towards the exit. By now he was regretting ever coming here.

"Stay where you are!" shouted another figure, apparently hearing his footsteps.

"Who are you?" asked the first figure.

"Dave," he said "Dave Vladistock."

"Welcome to our city Dave Vladistock," the figure proclaimed "And well done in finding it."

"Who are you then?"

"I am the Serakhi," said the tallest figure "Or head-creator in your language,"

"The rest of us form the Karakha," said another figure "And together we form the Zisbal dar Saleem."

"The Council of the Saleem in your tongue," said the Serakhi

"What are the Saleem?" asked Dave

"The Saleem is our race," came the answer.

"And the others, the ones up there," he said pointing up "Are they Saleem too? I saw some, but they were in black cloaks, not white like yours."

"Yes they are Saleem, but they do not have any kind of power like we do. They are far less important than we are," answered one of the Karakha

“They are merely here to supply us with food and materials. They help to build houses and grow food, they are not really needed.”

“And what do you do?” asked Dave “What are your powers? Why are you here?”

“It is a long story,” said the Serakhi

“I want to hear it,” said Dave, building in confidence.

“Very well!” boomed one councillor “Follow me to the archives!”

\* \* \*

When they reached the archives, Dave was sat in front of a blank wall. He was in a huge square room but it was completely empty. Dave understood an archive to be like a library but there were no books here or anything. There were no shelves or tables just a few stone benches in front of a blank wall. Dave just sat and stared at the wall, wondering what was happening. The Saleem just stood in the doorway.

“Computer,” said the councillor “Play ‘History of the Saleem’ and ‘Summary of Life on Earth’,”

A series of beeps answered this and by some amazing technology, which was far beyond anything in Dave’s country or indeed beyond anything on Earth outside the city, pictures appeared on the blank patch of wall. Dave was completely baffled by this and spun around to see what was doing this. Some sort of box seemed to be shining the images onto the wall. This was amazing. Dave found this incredible and decided that this race really were something special. Then the Saleem left, telling Dave that this would answer all his questions and that he would return shortly. Dave was still confused, what would answer his questions? The box that was shining picture onto the wall?

“Wait!” he called after the Saleem “What do I do?”

“Just watch the screen, primitive human,” came the reply so Dave turned around and watched the pictures being shone onto the wall by the box. Except the pictures were moving and now there was sound, it was just like watching real life except it was on a wall. Dave was truly enchanted by this. The first thing Dave watched was the History of how the Saleem came to where they were now. Dave learnt how these people, the Saleem, once lived on a planet like Earth and looked, with the exception of a few features, very much like humans. Their native planet became polluted and affected by climate change. There was widespread war and chaos. Crime, fighting and disease ran amok. To escape all this, one small contingent managed to leave the planet, crash-landing on another planet in a nearby solar system. This place was uninhabited but very similar to their own planet. However one major difference was the sun. The sun in this solar system was much

younger than that they were used to. As soon as they left the cover of their crashed transport, the Saleem were blinded and their skin was burnt terribly. The Saleem were left with dead black eyes and huge white pupils. Their skin shrivelled up into small black patches, exposing their raw flesh and their hair fell out in big chunks, leaving no more than a few grey hairs. These first Saleem blamed the sun for all this, it was younger and brighter than the sun that they were used to, the one on their home planet. The Saleem assumed the brightness blinded them and the heat burnt their skin. It seemed to be the most logical explanation so they found refuge and shelter from the sun in a large network of caves. Some Saleem saw it as a curse from their God for abandoning their home planet but the matter of fact was that the Saleem were stranded there without the technology or the know-how to get back. What was there to go home to anyway? Just a planet half destroyed by war and pollution. There was nothing for them at home, they would stay on this new planet and make a new civilisation, come what may.

Eventually they grew in number and, despite their blindness, managed to build a city around the cave. For some inexplicable reason the Saleem's children inherited their parents' blindness but it wasn't quite as bad. Their offspring had very poor vision, they could barely make out individual objects and just saw everything as a blur, but were not completely blind. They also inherited their parents' burnt skin, and the Saleem realised that they were all cursed to look like the original Saleem settlers. There must be something in the air that was causing this; it couldn't just be the sun as first thought but the Saleem still couldn't explain what caused it. However, the sun seemed to have a detrimental effect on their condition and any Saleem who looked into the sun would become completely blind immediately. They built the city to shelter them from the sun's rays and much of it was underground. When they were outside, they wore hooded robes to shield their bodies from further damage.

The Saleem were always obsessed by the idea of creating life and starting new civilisations. They were always experimenting with life and testing the few small creatures that lived on their new planet. Then, after many generations of Saleem, one small group cracked it. They discovered a way to create new life. This small group formed the Council of the Saleem. They created life and populated the Earth with it, spreading new and different species across the planet, in the air, in the sea and on land. They watched how it evolved and how it adapted to change. The Saleem studied the different species which were created from one original life form and how some species thrived and some died away. They would test the life with diseases and weather. The council were trying to find perfect life, forever ashamed of how their own race had ended up destroying themselves. The secrets of creation were passed down from councillor to son so that the

majority of the Saleem never knew the secrets. It was decided that only seven Saleem would know the secrets at any one time. This meant that only the council's life would populate the Earth. The council would watch as life expanded and different species developed. The species would adapt and dominant life forms would develop and evolve. Once one dominant species became extinct, the council would start again with more life and the cycle continued. According to the film, the current Earth, which Dave was a part of, was number twenty-three.

Then the second film began and Dave was shown a brief summary of every Earth up until his own.

"Number one," the voice droned on "Simple vertebrate life forms. Simple intelligence. Never fully evolved. Wiped out by disease and large scale flooding."

"Number two: Large eight-legged arachnids developed and populated entire planet. Very strong hunters but unintelligent. Natural extinction because of competition for dwindling food."

"Number three: Unusually, amphibious creatures became dominant. Still unintelligent. Disease saw their end."

"Number four," the voice continued. It became apparent that humanoid species often became the dominant species. So far, nine planets had become populated by human-like creatures. It was obvious that it was these intelligent species which thrived best. Dave's own Earth was the tenth human, dominant planet. Out of the other human planets, two had been destroyed by disease, three by global warming and climate change, two had been overtaken by a new dominant species and the Saleem had put an end to one Earth because progress had been pathetically slow and the humans had barely evolved past cavemen. The final Earth, before Dave's own, was mentioned later on. One factor that became apparent in the end of human Earth's was war, the majority of human earths were torn apart by huge wars before they were destroyed by disease or climate change. The human Earth's didn't seem to have been much of a success.

However, one human Earth, number twenty-two, had been a huge success. They had expanded and filled the entire planet. They had created advanced technologies, landed on the moon (the voice even gave the name of the first of the Saleem's life forms to land on the moon, Neil Armstrong), created separate countries and alliances and even established charities to help those other humans in need. The Saleem had seen nothing like this on any other Earth. They could build huge cities, predict weather before it happened using various machines, understand very complex science about the universe and even explore space via robots, machines and by sending people into space. The voice noted that they had even discovered fossils, remaining from Earth twenty one, and studied and categorised them. They named these

last dominant species, Dinosaurs and some were fascinated by them. They had even reached the level of the Saleem in some respects; they studied evolution and the changes of life, calling it 'Survival of the Fittest'. They also studied other species just as the Saleem did, the Council found this incredible. The voice spoke for much longer on this Earth than it had done before. It seemed that the Saleem were proud of this species because it became very similar to the Saleem themselves. Of particular interest was the development of separate religions which had never happened on any other Earth. For thousands of years, humans of Earth twenty-two, worshipped gods and developed rituals and beliefs. The Saleem also had different gods and beliefs and were amazed by this species. The development of religion seemed to indicate the imagination and strength of mind of these humans. Some Saleem even saw their religion in a different light after this Earth. Some saw it as proof of God; if two species on one planet believed in the existence of God, then surely he did exist. The religions spanned across different areas and cultures, fights and wars could be started over religious differences. The Saleem had great respect for these humans and the different religions served as to add to this.

Then the voice, which had been speaking so proudly, changed to a tone of displeasure:

"Then this hugely promising race became very disappointing. They had expanded and learned so much, but they never desisted from burning fossil fuels and were always fighting and killing in large wars. Global warming and climate change became a huge problem and eventually nuclear war broke out and the race was destroyed. It was so disappointing to see our greatest, most advanced and intelligent race, be destroyed by the same simple things that other barbaric and unintelligent life forms also fell to. We had such hopes for them and...they failed us," the voice came to an end and the screen went blank. Dave hadn't understood some of the film, like nuclear war or Global Warming but he understood the ideas and he understood the way in which the last Earth had underachieved and how it could have done so much better.

"So now you know all about us," said the councillor, returning.

"Yes," said Dave quietly, overwhelmed by how small the film had made him feel.

"Come," said the councillor "We must return to the council for your challenge."

"Challenge?"

"Yes. A great test of your character, heart and endurance. Every life form that learns the truth of our race is given a challenge," he said "It is an almighty challenge for you and will test you to the bone. If you succeed in

your challenge and hence prove that you are worthy of reward, you will be given a choice.”

“A choice?”

“Yes,” the Saleem nodded “You can choose to save someone, a loved one, a friend, yourself. We can heal any wound they may have, or cure any illness. We could even reverse death to bring them back. Or, alternatively, you can choose to end disease among your race. If you can prove that your species is worthy of our recognition then we can stop disease from killing them,”

Thoughts rushed through Dave’s mind. He could save mankind, end starvation and suffering. But he couldn’t forget his mother; he had come here to save her. This was a horrible decision to have to make. How could he let down the people of the world to save one woman? But then, other people needn’t know about his choice, he could save his mother and no-one would be none the wiser. After all, he had travelled all the way here to save his mother, he couldn’t abandon that goal now. He would save his mother, he had wanted her back so badly for so long and he couldn’t lose her now.

“Can I not do both?” Dave asked timidly

The Saleem burst into laughter. “Of course not!” he laughed “That would defy the whole point of the choice, wouldn’t it?”

“But I can’t possibly choose between...,” he began

“You must!” shouted the councillor, no longer laughing “You must choose or die!” They continued walking. Dave had been silenced by the Saleem’s outburst and lagged along behind him. The Saleem was now quite angry and they didn’t speak for the rest of the walk back to the Council.

When they reached the council, the test had been decided. Dave was to use his intellectual and physical ability to defeat a Karah-Sakir.

“What’s that?” Dave asked

“It is one of our strongest, most powerful creations,” said one of the Karakha “It was the dominant species in Earth Eleven and we kept some alive for this very purpose.”

“So I have to kill it?”

“Yes. If you succeed, you will make the choice,” said the Serakhi

“Do I get some kind of weapon?”

“No,” replied one of the Karakha “You are from an intelligent species. You must use your intelligence to defeat it. It is a physical being and you must use your mind to defeat it.”

The Serakhi explained how he would be the tenth being to attempt to kill a Karah-Sakir under their orders. Only three had succeeded, two of which were human. The Serakhi explained how Boris Kriskov had found them about fifty years ago and had killed the beast. However the Doctor was severely wounded and chose to save himself and not his race. Dave was enraged by this, after all it was this decision that ultimately led to his

mothers death. His mother had been killed by a disease which Kriskov could have stopped. He had been friends with the old man but now he felt a surge of anger, Kriskov had basically killed his mother. He was no better than a murderer, not to mention all the other thousands of people killed by disease because of him. He hated Kriskov with all his heart. He had taken his mother from him, indirectly but it was still his fault. Dave promised himself that if he ever saw Kriskov again, he would kill him.

“How can you stop diseases?” Dave questioned

“Easily,” answered one of the Saleem “We simply stop exposing creatures to them,”

“You spread diseases?”

“We create them,” said the Serakhi, calmly “They are used to test you all.”

“You killed my mother!” Dave screamed. The Serakhi shrugged his shoulders. Dave was furious with the Saleem. Blood rushed to his head and he began to fume. His hatred of Kriskov was driven from his mind and replaced by an intense loathing of the Saleem. He wanted them dead, he would kill them, just as they killed his mother. What sort of sick people would kill thousands just to test them? Dave was repulsed. He detested the Saleem.

The Serakhi seemed to notice this and quickly clapped his hands, calling for the challenge to begin. The area of floor, upon which the Saleem were standing, rose up to form a central pillar with the council sat on top, watching. The Serakhi clapped his hands again and a section of wall lifted up to reveal a dark cave. There was grunting and stamping coming from the shadows and then out stepped the Karah-Sakir. It looked like a rhinoceros, except it was covered in silver-blue scales. It had a long hooked horn at the end of its head and a large blue fin down its back. Unlike a rhino, it had a long powerful tail which was ridged with spikes and at the end was four spikes the size of swords. Its huge clawed feet stamped the ground and it reared up to stand on its hind legs. It let out a tremendous roar which shook the chamber. Then it fell back to earth with a huge thud.

“Its scales are impervious to almost any substance and its tail can be swung with terrific power,” called down one of the Saleem “Its horn can cut through any substance on this planet. Its eyes detect movement, they can even see in pitch black,” Dave noticed the two piercing red eyes on either side of its head. It roared again and Dave saw a row of razor sharp teeth and its black tongue.

“How do I kill it?”

“You must find its weaknesses,” called a Saleem

“As if it has any,” Dave muttered

“This is a particularly vicious specimen,” called the Serakhi “He has killed two others of its kind,” He pointed to the cave and Dave could make out the shapes of two skeletons with the same hooked horn in the skull.

“Begin!” the Serakhi shouted and the Karah-Sakir snorted and instantly charged at Dave. He had barely enough time to dive out of the way. The beast swung its head, and its long horn, at him as it passed him but only succeeded in catching its jaw on Dave’s foot. Dave hit the ground and turned in time to see the Karah-Sakir skidding to a halt and turning for another charge. Dave got to his feet and flung himself to one side, just avoiding it again.

The minutes went by and Dave was starting to tire. The relentless charges meant he had to keep diving and dodging and when he did, he hit the ground hard and it was taking its toll on him. This was no use. He had to find a weakness, but its whole body was coated with scaly armour except for the eyes. Of course! The eyes! The Serakhi had said they detected movement. That meant that if he stayed still, the Karah-Sakir would not be able to see him. He ran to the other side of the central pillar and stood, with his back pressed against the wall, perfectly still. He tried his hardest not to move, taking quick breaths when the beast’s back was turned.

“Well done!” came a shout from above “You have found one weakness, but this will not defeat it and you must kill it to succeed.”

Dave needed to find a weapon, quickly. The beast seemed to be sniffing him out and was getting closer. How could he pierce the beast’s scales? Nothing would cut through it, except its horn of course but Dave couldn’t get that. Or could he? He turned to look at the cave. There were two horns in the skulls of the dead Karah-Sakir. If he could get to them, then he could kill the beast using its own weapon.

“Oh, the irony,” he thought. He needed to run to the cave before the Karah-Sakir saw him. Where was the beast? He turned to try and see where it was and found it. It was stood barely ten metres away, staring straight at him. It had seen him move and knew exactly where he was. Before Dave knew what was happening, the beast was almost upon him. Dave spun to his left. The Karah-Sakir swung its long horn at him and it caught Dave right in the stomach. Because of the angle of impact, it didn’t go straight through him but it cut right across his side. Dave staggered backwards and fell to the ground. He grasped his side; blood was running from the wound at an astonishing pace. Dave turned to the Karah-Sakir. It was stuck. After it had got Dave it had turned and hit the wall head on. Its horn and cut right into the marble and the beast could not pull it out. It was stuck fast with its horn in the wall. Dave turned to the cave and staggered across, leaving a large trail of blood behind him. He reached the cave and with his right arm (his left was holding the wound) he pulled the horn out from the skull. He turned

and began to walk back to the beast, which was still struggling to free itself. Dave walked over. He was beginning to feel dizzy for he had lost a lot of blood, and the pain in his right side was immense. Dave felt like giving up and just letting the pain take a hold of him.

“No!” he thought “I must kill the beast.” He reached the beast, which seemed to have realised it was in danger and was struggling much harder. With his free arm, Dave swung the horn over his shoulder and brought it down into the beast’s side. It worked! The hooked end dug in to the body, piercing the scales. Dave pulled the blade down causing a large gash in the beast’s side. The Karah-Sakir let out an almighty roar of pain. Dave swung the horn down again, this time into the beast’s head. The Karah-Sakir let out another roar of pain, but this one was smaller. It was dying and had lost much of its energy. One more blow, Dave decided. He brought the blade down one last time into the rear end of the Karah-Sakir’s body. It swung its tail in agony and Dave was caught with the blunt underside and thrown backwards. He hit his head on the stone floor and was knocked out.

\* \* \*

When Dave woke, it was to find the Saleem leaning over him.

“Well done young human,” said one “You have killed the Karah-Sakir.” He pointed to the dead beast’s body.

“Now you must make the choice,” said the Serakhi. Dave sat up, he felt dizzy and his head felt very light. He was again aware of the splitting pain in his side. He grabbed it and felt the blood, which was still oozing out of the cut.

“You may save your race from disease, hunger and extreme weather...” said one of the Karakha “Or you may save yourself from death and end the pain you are suffering from,”

“What?!” exclaimed Dave. He felt he had to save humans from suffering but the pain in his side was so immense and he just wanted it to end. “Make it stop,” he muttered “Just end the pain,”

“Are you sure?” asked the Serakhi.

“Please,” Dave pleaded “Just make the pain go away.”

“If it is your choice,” shrugged the Serakhi and he ran his hand over the wound. The pain began to disappear. Dave was aware of the wound sealing up and the blood flow ceasing.

After a while he was able to get to his feet. He checked the wound, it was gone. There was no mark, no scar, nothing. It was then, once he realised he was fine, that he understood the true horror of the choice he had made. It

struck him hard as he understood what he had done. He had chosen to save himself and not the entire planet. How could he have been so incredibly selfish? He was disgusted by himself; he was as bad as Kriskov. What terrible piece of thinking had brought him to make this choice? He was repulsed by his own pathetic nature, sacrificing countless lives to extend his own. He was scum. He had come to save his mother and now he had probably cost the lives of thousands of more mothers.

“Undo it!” he cried “Let me die, save the planet.”

“Too late,” said a Saleem “You’ve made your choice.”

“But you can do both! You can let me live and stop diseases!” Dave screamed at them but their faces remained blank and they simply stared back at him. Dave was furious. Blood rushed to his head. All he wanted to do was hurt the council, even kill them. It was their fault, forget Kriskov, forget him, it was the Saleem who spread diseases. They killed all those people. He hated them all. His anger overtook his senses and he swung the horn, which he was still holding, around and cut the Serakhi’s head from his body. His limp body collapsed and his head bounced on the floor and rolled to Dave’s feet. The Saleem stared at Dave for a second then began to run. Dave charged amongst them and swung the horn wildly. He slashed and stabbed until all but one was dead.

“Please don’t hurt me,” the Saleem pleaded.

“Now I have control over life and death,” Dave said.

“Please. It wasn’t me. It was the Serakhi. He controlled us.”

“I don’t believe you,” Dave said, in a strangely calm voice.

“Without the council, disease and weather will run amok across the planet,” he whimpered, whilst trying to edge away “If you kill me, you’ll seal the fate of your race. Please let me live.”

“Reverse my choice!” demanded Dave “Save the planet! End all the disease and bring back my dead mother!”

“I can’t do that,” sobbed the Saleem “I don’t have the power. Please you must spare my life. You’re endangering the entire planet!”

“Liar!” and with one swift movement he cut off the Saleem’s head and left the body in a pool of its own blood. He turned away in disgust at the body and threw the horn aside. With all of the council dead Dave left the chamber and began to climb the stairs. His head was filled with angry thoughts, cursing the Saleem. It was all their fault he assured himself but in the back of his mind, there was a little voice, one that told him that it was all his fault. He could have saved the Earth, his life in return for those of all the people of the Earth. The Saleem had offered Dave a chance. They had been merciful, they had given him a choice. They would have stopped diseases, if only Dave had made the right choice. This little voice grew louder in his

mind and no matter how much he tried to drown it out, he couldn't stop blaming himself.

As Dave walked down the road in the city, other Saleem emerged from the marble buildings. All cloaked to protect themselves from the sun, they watched Dave as he walked towards the gates. Their voices filled the still air, whispers between them all. None of them made a move for Dave, they just let him pass. All their heads were bowed and their voices raised and began to sing a solemn song. This carried throughout the city and Saleem started to walk out of every building, standing still by the side of the road. As Dave reached the gates, one Saleem stepped out in front of him.

The Saleem put its hand on Dave's shoulder and said, so that Dave could understand "You have killed the Council. You must stay in the city. You are needed greatly."

Dave shook his head and removed the Saleem's hand from his shoulder. The gates opened and he left the city and, with thoughts still buzzing around his head, he began to return home for the first time in over a year, leaving the city behind forever.

\* \* \*

It only took a few days for Dave to realise what he had done. Disease was everywhere, spreading from tribe to tribe, village to village. Floods, droughts, hurricanes and storms were everywhere, even Dave's village was burned down in a thunderstorm, and it was all Dave's fault. Dave stood by his mother's grave and looked out across the barren landscape. Was it human nature to be so selfish? Why had he done it? Why had he chosen himself above every living creature of the Earth? All he knew was that if he could have anything in the Universe, he would have a second chance at making the choice and he would not be so selfish again. He would sacrifice his life and put others first because life is the most important thing there is and he was but one life and he had cost countless more their own lives. He could never forgive himself for that.

**The End**

**This book was written  
for the people of the Earth,  
in the hope that everyone  
will respect this planet more,  
because this is the only planet  
that we will ever have.  
And I also hope that readers  
will learn to appreciate life  
far more than they do now,  
because we only get one chance at life  
and so many people don't understand  
the true value of life  
and we must be thankful for it  
and recognise its full value.  
Use Your Life to the Full**

**James Roulston**