

REQUIEM OF THE HUMAN SOUL

EXCERPT: FIRST CHAPTER

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1 Harry Shields

***Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?
And where have you been my darling young one?***

I'm making my way down a corridor in the United Nations building in Manhattan. My heart pounding out of control. My temples beating so hard against my brain I can hear nothing else but their thud-thud. I'm carrying in my pocket a little metal object which will bring utter destruction to everybody around me in just a few moments. I am the bringer of doom. I am the savior of my human race. I am a confused, desperate man who knows what he needs to do. I find the right door. I enter. I am about to unleash a destruction on a greater scale than the world has ever seen. I am about to save my race. How did I get here? How did I get here?

“Now, Eusebio, do you happen to have an idea of how many tigers were freely roaming the wilds of Asia during the late nineteenth century, just three hundred years ago?”

I'm sitting in a comfortable, conference room, with leather chairs and oak paneling, thick carpet and soft lights. I'm with two d-humans. At least, that's what we call them. They just think of themselves as humans. To them, we're the ones who don't fit. To them, we're Primals. Made from primal human DNA. Completely unenhanced.

One of the d-humans, a beautiful woman, looks like she's in her thirties. Then again, all d-human women look beautiful, so this doesn't distinguish her. Her name is Naomi Aramovich. She has strawberry blonde, slightly wavy hair, warm brown eyes overflowing with kindness. The other d-human is tall and muscular, with a strong face sporting a thick mustache. D-humans are all much taller than us but this one's real big - close to seven feet. His eyes blue. His face cold and steely. His name Harry Shields. He's the one asking the questions.

"No. No idea," I reply. How would I know the answer to a question like that? Sure, I'm a history teacher. But not that kind of history. I teach my tenth-graders about the American Indians, the Aboriginals. The people who roamed free on this earth before men like Harry Shields came and devastated them.

"Well, best estimates are there were over a hundred thousand of these magnificent creatures in the jungles of India and Southeast Asia."

"Uh huh." I had no idea where he was going with this.

"And do you know how many tigers existed in the wild a hundred years later, at the beginning of the third millennium?"

"No."

"Well, believe it or not, there were less than five thousand of these great creatures left in the wild by that time. Of course, by then, there were conservation projects under way to save the tiger from extinction. Sadly, they didn't work. Do you know the last time a tiger was seen in the wild?"

"No, I don't."

"The mid-twenty thirties, about a hundred and fifty years ago. Thankfully, the genetic code had been collected by then, so we've been able to reconstruct them in our d-reservations.

"Now, Eusebio, let me ask you this. Why did the tiger become extinct?"

"I don't know exactly," I responded. "I guess hunting... and no more jungle."

"Not bad. Now, who do you think was responsible for the hunting?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I guess probably the English colonialists... and then the local people."

"And who do you think was responsible for the loss of the jungle?"

"Probably a lot of people. The local developers, I guess, who cleared the jungles for farming... and the villagers."

"And what, Eusebio, is in common between all those people you just described?"

"I don't know what you mean," I answered.

"Think about the only thing that all these people have in common."

"I can't think of anything. They were all human beings," I replied.

"Wrong, Eusebio, not human beings. They were all Primals. It was the Primal race, your race, who colluded in the extinction of the tigers, wasn't it, Eusebio?"

There was nothing I could say. I nodded.

"Please speak up, Eusebio." Harry Shields' tone was more haranguing, more prosecutorial. "Was the Primal race responsible, single-handedly, for the extinction of the tigers in the wild?"

"Yes. I guess it was." I have to tell the truth. I have no choice. I'm sitting in a neurographic chair. A special arm chair, with another set of "arms" extending around the back and both sides of my head. These "arms" are a few inches away from my head. I can hear a slight hum around me, and I know that millions of scans each second are piercing through the neurons of my brain, creating neurographic images of my thoughts. It immediately detects if I lie

and sets off an alarm. They call that a “neurographic event”. I’ve already had one of those, and I don’t want another.

“Now answer me this, Eusebio. Was there ever a commission held to identify the responsible parties? Was there ever an ‘extinction crimes’ tribunal? Did the Primal race even call it a crime?”

“Not that I know of,” I was forced to reply.

“Now, Counsel Aramovich and the Primal Rights group have been arguing for years in this PEPS session that it’s a crime, *prima facie*, to carry out the extinction of the Primal species. Please answer me this, Eusebio. Why should we view it as a crime to implement the extinction of the Primals when the Primals themselves were prepared to drive countless other species to extinction without anyone being held accountable?”

I was stunned. How dare this d-human, who looked liked he wouldn’t give a damn if every animal in the world disappeared... how dare he use this argument to extinguish the future of my race!

The PEPS session. That’s what I was participating in. The Proposed Extinction of the Primal Species. A set of hearings at the United Nations, going on for years, about whether our race should be eliminated from this earth. There are seven billion d-humans in the world and just three billion of us. But that’s three billion too many, from their point of view. And I’m the Primal witness, on the stand for my race. That’s why I was abducted from my little community of Tuckers Corner. Because Naomi Aramovich and her fellow Primal Rights activists chose me to defend my race.

And I seemed to be doing a lousy job of it so far.

I tried to think quickly and logically.

“You can’t use an argument like this, Harry, and get away with it,” I responded angrily. “Whatever crimes were committed in the past, whatever wrongs were done, they were done by the

ancestors of all of us – d-humans and Primals alike. You can't accuse Primals alone for what was done in the past."

"Eusebio," he responded, "by the time the tigers were completely extinct in the wild, there were no d-humans, as you call them, of voting age anywhere in the world. The earliest 'PNO's', as they used to be called, pre-natally optimized humans, were born in the late 2020's and would just have been learning to read and write when the last tiger died in the wild. How could you possibly accuse my race of involvement in a crime that your race alone committed? You know as well as I do, Eusebio, the first time a d-human was elected President of the United States was the end of the twenty-first century. Anything done to the world in that century was done by Primals, not d-humans. So, of course I can – and should - accuse the Primals of making the tigers extinct. Has anything changed in the nature of the Primal, that whatever led them to destroy the tigers is no longer true of you and the rest of your race? If so, please tell me about it."

I was so struck by this heartless prosecutor accusing me and my race of mercilessly destroying the tigers, that I couldn't think clearly for a few moments. I've always cared deeply for the animals around me. I thought of my cat, Jigger, how I would pull the ticks off her when she returned from her forays in the fields behind my house. Suddenly, I worried what would be happening to Jigger, now that I was gone from Tuckers Corner. Then, I thought of the Barlows, my neighbors, a warm and friendly elderly couple. They would look after her.

And then my mind was back to the present, to the PEPS session conference room, and Harry Shields' accusations.

"How can you condemn a whole race," I argued, "for the actions of just a few? It wasn't the whole Primal race that killed the tigers. Most people in the world had nothing to do with it." I felt I had him cornered.

“By the first half of the twenty-first century, this simply wasn’t true,” came Harry’s response. “If you look at the record of the time, there was massive global awareness of the plight of the tiger. International treaties to prevent trade in tiger skins, global organizations telling the world how close the tiger was to extinction. Any literate person knew the tiger was disappearing. But all anyone accomplished was to delay it by a decade or two.”

Harry continued his barrage. “Eusebio, you’re a history teacher. You know that by the twenty-first century, when the world seriously wanted to accomplish something, they could do so. UN peacekeepers were sent to trouble spots. Were any peacekeepers sent to India to control poachers? Did the wealthy countries fund programs to persuade the villagers not to raze to the ground the last of the jungles where the tigers lived?” Harry paused for a moment. “No, Eusebio, none of these things were done. The whole global community of Primals was responsible for the tiger’s extinction. They all colluded in their acceptance of the inevitable, and assuaged their collective conscience by making noble, empty speeches, signing international treaties that did nothing.”

“Tell me, Eusebio,” Harry spoke to me now in a quieter voice. “Use your own knowledge of that time. If preventing the tiger’s extinction had been a priority for the Primals, wouldn’t they have achieved it?”

I knew I couldn’t lie. “Yes,” I whispered back. But I still couldn’t accept how he was using the tiger’s extinction to justify wiping out our race. I came up with another approach.

“There’s a huge difference,” I said, “between what happened to the tigers and your PEPS proposal. The people of the time never planned to eliminate the tigers. They never proposed a campaign to wipe them out. They just had other priorities.”

Harry seemed to have been expecting this line of argument. He smiled, and without a moment's hesitation, answered me back.

"Eusebio, under international law, if you have the power to stop a crime, but do nothing about it, you're guilty of conspiracy." Harry turned to Naomi. "Counsel Aramovich, can you confirm this is true?"

"Yes, it is, Counsel Shields," Naomi responded. "I would point out that frequently, judges will give a more lenient sentence to someone who was not the key protagonist."

Thanks, Naomi, that was a big help, I thought to myself. You're supposed to be on my side.

Harry turned back to me with a satisfied smirk. "Now, Eusebio, I put it to you that the PEPS proposal is far more humane, far more legitimate and fair, than what your Primal race did to the tigers. Most of the tigers died from starvation, shot for their skins, or caught in traps, dying in agony from their wounds. Our PEPS proposal won't harm a single Primal. No Primal children will be watching their mother get shot in front of them and then starve to death because their mother's milk is gone."

Harry Shields looked up to the ceiling and let out his breath with a slow, whooshing sound, a phony expression of sorrow on his face. Then, he turned back to me, accusingly.

"That's how most tiger cubs died, Eusebio," he continued. "No Primal will be hurt and certainly no Primal will be killed as a result of our proposal. We're merely looking at a gradual reduction in the Primal race over generations, permitting all Primals to live out their lives to their natural conclusion. And our PEPS proposal is honest and legitimate. We're going through due process. We're not acting like the Primals of the twenty-first century, saying one thing in the UN while permitting the exact opposite to happen in the real world."

I was clearly getting nowhere. It was true what he said. They weren't going to kill any of us with their PEPS proposal. D-human society is too civilized for that. No ugly killings, no massacres, none of the horrific atrocities our Primal race has blotted all through its sordid history. It's a clean, humane extinction plan. A radioactive compound called Isotope 909. Once released, it will partially sterilize the ovaries of all Primal women around the world, but have no effect whatsoever on d-human women. Partially sterilize. Because any Primal woman who hasn't yet had a child will still be able to give birth once. Just once.

So the Primal species will just gradually fade away. It's a bland euthanasia, painless and victimless, that creates a final solution to what they call the "Primal Question". Once we're down to about twenty-five thousand, roughly twelve generations from now, they won't let us disappear entirely. They'll use cloning techniques to keep our population stable. And they'll keep the remaining Primals safely enclosed in reservations.

Yeah, a lot more civilized than what we did to the tigers. But I couldn't let him get away with this. It simply made no sense to me that the loss of a hundred thousand tigers could justify the extinction of three billion humans. That was utterly ridiculous. I realized this was the argument I'd missed – and I told him so.

"That's just absurd!" I added angrily. I did the math quickly in my head. "You're talking about an extinction thirty thousand times greater than the tigers."

Harry Shields sneered back at me. "Oh, so it's a numbers game," he replied sardonically. "The crime of extinction is a function of how many there were to begin with? Well, under that approach, I guess the worst crime of all would be the extinction of cockroaches and flies, because there are so many more of them. And so, the rarer a particular species is, the more acceptable it is to wipe it out. Is that what you're telling me, Eusebio?"

Harry's arguments were driving me to distraction. I just knew his logic was flawed, but I couldn't make any headway. Everything I tried made me look more ridiculous, but I knew it was *his* position which was absurd. I tried to calm myself and think carefully.

Why was I so angry? I realized we humans believe there's something special about us, something that makes us more important than other species. Was this really true or was it simply that we'd always been the ones in charge, so we could get away with believing it? If so, my race was in trouble, because the d-humans were now the ones in charge. If there really was something truly special about us – then I knew I'd better figure it out right now.

I leveled back my gaze to Harry Shields. "OK, Harry, it's not about numbers. There's something special about human beings – about Primals. Something that would make the PEPS proposal a far greater crime than the extinction of other species."

"So what's that, Eusebio?"

"Well, to begin with, there's language." Finally, I'd hit on something.

"So it's language, the ability to conceptualize thoughts and feelings and communicate it on all these different levels, which makes the Primal special? And that's why we can't compare the extinction of other species to the PEPS proposal?" Harry said.

"Yes," I replied firmly. I felt I'd finally scored a major point.

Harry was silent for a few moments. He appeared blocked in his line of arguments. He seemed to be thinking. Then, very calmly, he spoke up again.

"Now, Eusebio, I'm going to play some sounds for you. Listen carefully and see if you can guess what they are."

Harry pushed a button on the console. I began to hear deep rumbling sounds. They seemed to tear through me. They started

softly, wavered, became more intense. They seemed to have a melody, but this was no music I'd ever heard. What struck me was the range of feelings and at the same time an almost infinite complexity. I had no idea what I was hearing. But I knew this was something special. I was moved by the sounds, by their emotion, even though I didn't know what I was feeling. After a while, I realized I could sense a sadness, an anger, but there was a depth way beyond those feelings.

Harry hit the "stop" button. The sounds ended.

"Any idea, Eusebio?"

"None. No idea at all."

"Could you feel anything?"

"Yes, sadness. Anger. But something else... I don't know..."

"Would you say the sounds were simple or complex?"

"Very, very complex."

Harry betrayed a look of smug victory as he started speaking again.

"Those sounds, Eusebio, are recordings of elephants performing a ritual over the bones of one of their family. They are infra-sound – sound that travels at such low frequency that we can't hear it. At the end of the twentieth century, Eusebio, some of your Primal ancestors discovered the existence of elephants' infra-sound. That recording was speeded up about fifty times into a frequency we can hear. In case you're interested, Eusebio, what you heard was a family of elephants performing a ritual of ancestor worship, slowly passing to each other, with their trunks, the bones of a great bull elephant shot by an ivory poacher a few months earlier. The elephants spent two hours reminiscing in turn about their lost friend."

Harry turned to me with a conspiratorial expression. "You know, Eusebio, it took decades of research before they cracked the

code of the elephants' language. It's lucky they took a lot of recordings during that time. Any idea why?"

I shook my head.

"I'll tell you why. Because by the time your Primal ancestors had finally cracked the code, there were no elephants left in the wild. All the herds had disappeared along with their habitat. No wild elephants in Africa. No wild elephants in Asia. Only 'slave elephants' –born into captivity. And, you know what, Eusebio?"

I was feeling sick in the pit of my stomach. I shook my head silently.

"The 'slave elephants' stopped speaking except for very basic communications. By the time your Primal ancestors had finally discovered the complexities and subtleties of the elephant language, there were no elephants left for them to talk to."

Suddenly, he changed his demeanor and raised his hand, pointing his finger at me. "Now, Eusebio, tell me again what you were saying about language, because it didn't seem to have saved the elephants."

I was dumbfounded. I looked across at Naomi Aramovich for help, but she seemed strangely distracted with a glazed expression on her face. She seemed to be doodling idly on her PDA. I was silent. I'd already been defeated by the PEPS session. And this was just the first day. Then, I realized I had one last, desperate argument I could make.

"OK, Harry, but there *is* a reason why you can't compare the extinctions of other species to your PEPS proposal. No matter what you say about the difference between Primals and d-humans, we're really the same species."

I was remembering, too late, how Naomi had told me yesterday they had already used this argument – and lost. I kept going anyway.

“Even if we accepted that you d-humans are better in some way, because you’re genetically optimized – and I don’t accept that – but even if it were true, you’d be committing a terrible crime with your PEPS proposal, because you’d be destroying your own species.”

“How can you say we’re the same species?” Harry responded. “What do you base that on?”

Now I’m not a technical person, but I thought this would be an easy one.

“On our DNA of course. We have essentially the same DNA, with the exception of the genes optimized for d-humans.”

“In a recent study comparing a d-human,” Harry responded, “such as Counsel Aramovich or me, with a Primal such as you, it turns out that nearly 1% of our functional DNA is different. I think the amount of identical functional DNA is approximately 99.3%”

Yes! I’d finally scored a point.

“So, you see, we’re almost identical,” I exclaimed with relief.

Harry ignored my comment, and continued talking. “Now, the Primals who first developed DNA sequencing, in the early twenty-first century, did the same type of analysis comparing the Primals’ functional DNA with that of the chimpanzee. Do you know what percent was identical?”

As usual, I shook my head with a sinking feeling.

“99.4%. That’s right, Eusebio, your DNA is closer to the chimpanzee than to us. Unfortunately, that didn’t stop your Primal ancestors from killing off the chimpanzees in the wild, too. They survived longer than their close cousins, the other great apes. The mountain gorillas, the bonobos and orangutans all died out in the first half of the twenty-first century. The chimpanzees survived another few decades. And, to the credit of some of the Primals, they used to use the same arguments that you just used, that it would be a crime for the Primals to kill off their closest living

relative. Sadly, not enough people listened to this argument. Or at least, if they listened, they didn't care."

"So, Eusebio, if your own Primal race couldn't be bothered to save its closest cousin, why should we listen to that argument now? It's the ultimate in hypocrisy."

I can't bear to describe the rest of the morning. Harry Shields went through the litany of extinct species, seemingly without end. The loyal African hunting dog. The gentle and peaceful sloth once hanging down from the trees of the jungle that no longer existed. The shy okapi with its big ears, hidden deep in the African rainforest until there was no more rainforest to hide in.

It was torture to be blamed, one by one, for the crimes of my ancestors. Naomi Aramovich didn't raise a single finger to help me. By the end of the morning, I was hungry and tired and I just wanted the haranguing to end. I kept looking at the cold, hard eyes of Harry Shields, thinking to myself, if he'd lived two hundred years earlier, he would have been one of the very people he was now condemning – a cold, heartless bureaucrat making decisions to fund some development project that wiped out another ten thousand square miles of primeval rainforest. And if I'd lived two hundred years ago, I'd have been a schoolteacher, watching nature shows on TV and donating more than I could afford to the World Wildlife Fund.

And here was I, on the dock for my fellow human beings, being accused by this hypocritical prosecutor for these crimes, when he was the one trying to carry out the greatest extinction program in history.

Then, finally, as the morning drew to a close, I remembered the conversation I'd had with Naomi the day before, when she'd been describing the struggle of her Primal Rights group against the PEPS proposal. *"We lost the arguments about the ethics. We lost the*

argument on enlightened self-interest. We've retreated to one final argument... The Primal soul."

After receiving yet another battering from Harry Shields about how 80% of the globe's biodiversity had been destroyed by the brutal devastation conducted by our Primal race, I summoned up the last energy I had left, took a deep breath and blurted out:

"The human soul."

Harry Shields stopped in his tracks.

"The what?"

"The human soul. If you carry out your PEPS proposal you'll be committing a crime greater than all the devastation we caused. You'll be destroying the human soul."

Naomi's face suddenly lit up for the first time in hours. Harry looked like he'd received a body blow. In a second, he regained his composure, but something had changed. His prosecutorial tone had momentarily disappeared. He looked over at Naomi and said, in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice:

"Counsel Aramovich, the Primal witness has raised the question of the human soul. I'd like to propose that we adjourn now for lunch, and when we return, we take up this question."

I felt, for the first time since the beginning of the session, that I'd done something right.

Naomi smiled. "Sure, Counsel Shields, I think that makes sense." She looked over at me. "Eusebio, let's go for a moment to the Privileged Room next door."

With that, the morning session was over, and I got out of my neurographic chair, battered and exhausted. But I'd finally made a stand for humanity.

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