

CHAPTER FIVE

Humans

The Eccentric Human

Life may exist all over the universe, but to the best of our current knowledge, we know of its existence only on our planet. Among all the living things on Earth, human life stands above every other life form. If an alien were to observe our planet closely, it would most likely, within a few minutes, move its focus to the human beings – not only because they seem to be everywhere but because they seem to be the masters of the planet. No matter where they look, humans stand out from the rest of the life forms. They produce and use tools and machinery to make their lives easier. They live and work in small, large, and tall buildings they have built. They work together to produce sophisticated goods and trade them with others to meet their everyday needs. They travel all over the world in airplanes, ships, trains, and automobiles. They govern their lives with law and order to get things done big and small. They communicate instantly and globally with anyone and everyone using the technologies they have developed. They embellish their lives with untold creative works of art and literature. They stand at the top of the food chain with the ability to kill and control every other life form at will. Among the millions of living species on Earth, human beings wield power and sway like

no other. No other species comes even close. The alien would quickly realize that human beings were the undisputed masters of the planet.

How did humans get to take up this mantle? How did only one species get to dominate everyone else with such supreme authority and leave everyone else so far behind? What makes a modern human – a human of the present age like you and me – different from the rest of the animals, particularly the living primates? What are the unique characteristics of a modern human that made it rise to the top of the food chain and become the masters of the planet – lording over even their distant cousins, the primates? While one can enumerate a long list of differences between modern humans and other extant primate species, such as the chimpanzee, a few stand out as uniquely eccentric to humans. Over decades of observation and research, scientists from various disciplines, including paleoanthropology, biology, neuroscience, psychology, and linguistics, have studied traits of different primate species and have narrowed down a list of characteristics unique to modern humans that other species either do not possess or carry only in rudimentary forms.