

A vertical rectangular image showing a forest scene. Sunlight streams through the trees, creating a hazy, golden atmosphere. A black ladder leans against a tree trunk in the center. The ground is covered in green moss and grass. The text 'a novella by Timothy Freriks' is in the upper right, 'Dak' is in the lower left, and 'first contact' is in the lower right.

a novella by
Timothy Freriks

Dak

first
contact

DAK

first contact

A Novella by Timothy Freriks

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Dedication

To my family, who has supported me throughout the years of the development of this book, I give thanks. Special thanks to my wife Kathy: It isn't easy to live with a guy who has multiple personalities, one real, many fictional, but I wouldn't be doing what I love if it weren't for the love and understanding of my family and friends and the support of my readers.

CHAPTER ONE

The dull red glow of the space/time coordinate indicator was the first thing Captain Dak saw as he opened his eyes. The terror and confusion of the last two minutes flooded back to him then lifted as he realized that he was alive, still on the bridge of the ship. The pain in his right leg sharpened his awareness, and he tried to sit up. The weight of his fallen workstation pressed him against the floor. Wiggling painfully, he struggled out from under the metal and pushed it upright until it snapped into place. He scouted four feet down the slightly angled smooth floor to the wall. Gripping his aching leg, he settled into a more comfortable position as he tried to look around through the darkness and thick haze in the cabin.

“Raj?” he asked cautiously. “This is Dak. Are you alive?”

Only a sharp electronic sound broke the silence as the main control panel blinked to life, then, as if convinced of the futility of the effort, blanked out. There was no sound except for the erratic and soft whining of the gravity regulator trying blindly and faithfully to maintain the G-force required by a now-defunct escape procedure.

Dak noticed a faint, but unmistakable, ray of light at the end of the main corridor to his left. He pulled himself along the bottom of the wall, past broken debris, toward it.

“Raj?”

No answer. Was he alone?

His hand touched a soft, moist object and he recoiled, fear now fully replaced anxiety. Peering into the murkiness before him, he made out the faint outline of a shipmate. Raj? He drew his face closer. *Yes, Raj, my friend.* He was quite dead; the side of his head was clearly distorted and wet with blood. Emptiness crept into Dak's stomach as the situation became clearer. Raj had died and, since he heard no signs of life, he had to assume the others had as well. All crew members had been on the bridge during the ill-fated flight and the desperate, courageous attempt to control the final, emergency descent through this planet's thick atmosphere. Never in the history of the space program had the system malfunctioned; it was thought that it couldn't, just as a rock couldn't change from being a rock. But it did. Somewhere in the simple, natural mechanism of elemental physics, something unexpected went terribly awry, causing the gravity-powered engines to reverse their purpose, attracting the craft toward the planet, not repelling it into space and home.

"Raj," he said, shaking his head softly, sadly.

Dak pushed the arm aside and pulled himself up, limping down the base of the communications console to the hallway. About halfway down the short corridor, he saw that the escape hatch had been forced open on impact, exposing the outside atmosphere where a path of cold blue moonlight filtered into the ship. The smoke was being sucked out, and the light carved waves in the air. He looked back into the domed bridge area. The air had cleared enough to see its long curved desks and heavy chairs in the dim light. The flag that had hung proudly over the navigation stations was askew, hanging from a single support now. All the officers were slumped at odd angles in their chairs, motionless, held in only by their seat belts.

There was not a sound except the gravity regulator, which somehow was pulsing weakly again; not a light except for a panel here and there. The feeling of great loss fully engulfed him, and he paused, leaning against the wall. My friends... all

gone. He rubbed his forehead and took a deep breath and tried to concentrate on the facts of his situation.

The scientists had known for many years that this planet had breathable air; at least one basic need for survival was intact. But there were so many more needs. He hobbled to the communication console, straining, his leg burning. His hand touched the main power control to the primary radio, and it blinked on, faded then died.

Dak sat back on the floor. He was alone on a strange planet—he found that conclusion unavoidable. How could a cataclysmic failure of the gravity engine, the ship’s most essential element, possibly have occurred? Or perhaps it was the power source? He had to know.

“Computer,” he said.

“*Ready*” came a mechanical reply.

Dak released a breath of relief. At least, the computer survived.

“Explain malfunction.”

“*The gravity drive was momentarily compromised by a passing wave of radiation from this planet’s sun.*”

“Momentarily?”

“*The drive has resumed partial functionality. More energy is required to restore full functionality.*”

Hope filled Dak’s heart like a balloon. “Then we can leave soon?”

As the moments passed without a response, the balloon deflated.

“*Negative. The hull integrity has been compromised, and the power source has been damaged. Non-sufficient power for departure at this time and storage capacity is decaying.*”

Dak didn’t want to ask the next question, but of course, he had to. “When will sufficient power be restored for departure?”

The answer came quickly, routinely. *“Under current conditions, twenty months. Suggest standby all systems to reverse decay.”*

“If we do, how long before power will be available?”

“At projected rate, two months.”

“Shut down the laboratory and unnecessary scientific functions completely,” Dak ordered.

The computer quietly obeyed. Lights on the console dimmed.

“Status of hull integrity.”

“A hatch seems to be open. No other deviations from nominal.”

“Go to standby.”

Dak could understand the open hatch damage. But that the power source would malfunction was unthinkable, so remote a probability that no standard procedures existed for fixing it, no spare parts, no manual. Dak had no idea how it worked; the developers of the program assumed the crew didn't really need to know the inner workings. Without any knowledge, Dak couldn't repair it and go home. His only hope was slim; perhaps the other ships would come back for him. But they would assume his ship had been lost during the transition from light drive to gravity drive, the only conceivable way to lose one. Since his craft should have collapsed into minute, untraceable bits of cosmic energy, there would be no proof that anything else could have happened. Dak and his shipmates would be mourned as lost in space and no search would follow.

“Computer. Wake.”

“Ready.”

“How many atmosphere protection cubes remain?”

“Seven atmospheric anti-infection cubes remain.”

Dak gasped. He didn't realize it was that low. Seven days.

“Standby.”

Captain Dak's heart started to quicken back to the edge of fear as he looked at the realities. Escaping before he died from the myriad germs and bacteria in this planet's air was a remote possibility. Dak turned his thoughts to survival and the avoidance of discovery. *Two months.* It seemed impossible. With the escape hatch jammed open, contaminated air would soon fill the ship. He would need protection from the atmosphere—somewhere other than here.

“Computer. Wake.”

“*Ready.*”

“Seal all rooms except the bridge and hallway A.”

“*Complete.*”

“Standby.”

The first and primary directive of space travel to a lower level alien planet was to avoid capture of the ship or personnel. In the event capture appeared inevitable, protocols called for the crew to self-destruct by activating the disintegration program. But that option was not available to Dak now since the operation required sufficient power levels, which he didn't have. So, Dak was faced with the unavoidable conundrum: to protect the prime directive, he had to survive until enough power could be regained to destroy the ship and himself, but further survival would require the assistance of the aliens.

“Computer. Wake.”

“*Ready.*”

“Calculate time until regaining power levels sufficient to activate disintegration protocols.”

If it were human, it would have gasped and asked Dak if he were freaking serious. But it was not, so it just hesitated a moment. “*Four weeks.*”

Dak slumped back. He wouldn't make it. “Computer. Is there an automatic disintegration protocol?”

“*Affirmative.*”

“Standby.”

They had studied the alien planet and its inhabitants for many years, using the mind-probing machines to induce cooperation and ensure that each subject’s memory of the experiments was erased. Hundreds of subjects were brought to the laboratory, physically and mentally scanned and examined until very little about the specimen remained unknown. Several of them resisted the final memory eraser and had to be transported home to contain their knowledge of Dak’s existence. Taking the specimens back to his planet was not something that they enjoyed; individual members of this race could be compassionate and caring. Depriving any life-form of its freedom was against his nature and space program regulations.

But the prime directive was clear: no uncontrolled contact with the planet’s Class E life-form. These aliens possessed more than just rudimentary, but promising, intelligence and had managed to create a civilization of sorts, with machines to help make their lives easier and systems to maintain and improve their condition. Most of their technology generally seemed just to create work for the people so they wouldn’t have too much time to contemplate their primitive existence. There was even a crude attempt at space travel, although orbit appeared to be the extent of their abilities.

Dak was mostly concerned about their savagery, however. They tended to strike out at things that were different and favored destruction rather than understanding. The critical question burned brightly: How would they treat *him*, the ultimate oddity. In their world, *he* was the alien. But he also had learned that many of them were understanding, compassionate and would protect him. Many would have a broader base of comprehension about the universe and the brotherhood of life-forms, no matter where they came from. Reaching these individuals would be the challenge.

Dak thought for a moment and pulled himself up onto the operations console chair, tenderly easing the body of Myg to the floor. Poor Myg, such a lovely, happy woman. She had been looking forward to shore leave. The sadness crept back into his thoughts, but he pushed it out again; he knew he first had to stabilize the situation and, at least, find solutions. Mourning his friends and concern about his future would have to wait. He needed information.

Activating the research computer would not use much energy.

“Computer. Wake.”

“*Ready.*”

“Reduce life support to fifty percent and activate manual control.”

“*Complete.*”

“Thank you. Standby.”

The console came alive with a dull green glow. Dak’s long, thin fingers danced over the array of squares before him and after a moment, the humming of the gravity regulator died. The ship shifted as the power released it, sliding a few feet downward and outward, settling in a more level attitude. Dak straightened up on the chair, thankful that it hadn’t plunged down a hillside or came to rest on its edge. His new position was more comfortable.

He touched the research computer button and part of the display panel in front of him lit up.

“*Research. Ready,*” responded the computer in a metallic, strangely feminine voice.

INPUT TARGET PLANET, the panel asked.

EARTH, he typed.

ACCESSING EARTH RECORDS... COMPLETE.

AUDIBLE INTERFACE. ALIEN LANGUAGE, he typed.

“*Voice interface active.*”

Over the millenniums, Dak's people had evolved a telepathic communication system, but he knew the aliens on this planet had not done so yet. To interact with them, he had to learn to speak a passable amount of their language. Actual speaking was, at first, a painful process of reeducating the voice box to function but all but a few of the younger crew members mastered it and often spoke in English. It proved to be an amusing way to pass the boredom of research.

"Language lesson. American," he said.

"Very well."

For the next ten minutes, Dak spoke with the machine and absorbed a full understanding of American English.

"Tell me where the ship is located," he asked.

"Unable to communicate with the navigational computer."

Dak stroked his sharp chin with his long fingers. He didn't know which systems were still functioning. "Compare location with known locations."

"Unable to communicate with sensors."

Dak looked down the hallway. The light was getting brighter, and he calculated that the sun must have started to come up. He eased his short legs off the low seat of the chair and limped to the broken hatch, his eyes smarting more from the brightness the closer he came. The sunlight on Earth was five times more intense than his planet and his people had developed large eyes as opposed to the very small eyes of the aliens. Without goggles, he would be blinded. The door to the goggles cabinet was jammed but surrendered after a rough push. Dak donned the dark lens and climbed the ladder to the hatch which had been forced open about 18 inches.

Blinking against the dawn, he looked around. The ship had landed in an area of low hills, in a valley surrounded by heavily treed peaks. It was much, but not exactly, similar to their Earth Base in what the aliens called New Hampshire. So beautiful; so lush. It may be logical to presume that the reversal of the gravity

engines had drawn them back to the same basic location. He noted a few outstanding features and withdrew into the ship, returning the goggles to the cabinet on his way to the bridge and his station.

“Computer. Wake. There is a tall, metal tower on a hill on a heading of 220 degrees, about five gurnets from our location and what looks like a sizeable river directly to the east about ten gurnets. Can you identify?”

“*Working.*” A minute passed. “*Does the tower have alternating red and white lights?*”

“Yes.”

“*Working... Complete. Central New Hampshire, the tower is on hill E-1675. The river is W-298. Location is 15 gurnets, bearing 52 degrees from Earth Base.*”

“Are there any *Earth* settlements nearby?”

“*Working... Negative. There is a single dwelling, Unit ED-3895 at bearing 97 degrees, two and one-half gurnets. It is occasionally occupied by Specimen ES-1725, Albert Woodbury.*”

“Yes. Good. Are there no other roads or dwellings within visual contact?”

“*Negative.*”

Dak rubbed his expansive, smooth forehead, lost in thought. At least, he hadn’t settled near a town.

“Computer. Power level report.”

“*4 percent power level. System reserve is regenerating at 1894 Parias per unit. Life support is affecting the power level recovery progress.*”

“Recalculate time to disintegration capability at 10 percent life support.”

“*Fourteen Earth days.*”

“Reduce life support to 10 percent. Then standby.”

The dull red glow of the cabin lights and the humming of the circulation system immediately became almost undetectable. He would have to rely on the Earth's atmosphere and the protection cubes to reduce power usage.

But then what?

Dak put his head in his hands as hopelessness consumed him. Two weeks. He had very little food or water and no power for the replicator to create any. He had very few options.

'Albert Woodbury'. The name and code number sounded familiar, and Dak tried to remember details. "Of course," he said out loud. "Woodbury, the writer." His high, thin voice trailed off. Speaking proved to be tiring for him; his tongue and voice box suffered from 200 years of continued disuse. "The writer," he repeated.

Writing was one of those odd alien tasks that interested Dak's people. Entertainment and discussing passions and problems was unique to Earthlings. On his planet, no one needed to talk much about problem-solving: virtually no problems existed. There were no clothing, no investments, no manufacturing for profit, no luxuries, no contests, no rivalries... and no passions.

It was, by Earth standards, very boring according to the specimens that were taken back for further extended study. But, on the other hand, from Dak's perspective, Earth's civilization had shown itself to be only barely controlled chaos. The passions and savagery of the Earth's inhabitants stunned Dak and his fellow explorers at first. But there was also a richness, a vibrancy of their life that fascinated them.

There existed great untamed and barbaric brutality in total, but at the same time, there was a gentleness and sensitivity about most of the individual members. It posed such an incredible paradox that his people decided to gather a full understanding of them. Forty Earth years were spent in various places around the planet studying, probing, trying to figure out

the life-form called Man. The balance of the animal and plant life was simplistic and quickly cataloged and stored, but an understanding of Man turned out to be quite another story.

Dak thought it ironic that after such a period of study, they only felt they had achieved a surface comprehension of the mind of the common Man specimen. And ironic too that as just as the decision was passed down to leave and explore another planet, Dak may now have to enter the world of Man fully, and be at its mercy, or its benevolence. He slid his thin frame off the chair, wincing as he put weight on his leg, and made his way to the nutrient chamber. Without the power required to run the replication machinery, Dak's nutrition would be limited to the remaining nutrient cubes and the only Earth bacteria-negative foodstuff, eggs from chickens boiled for twenty minutes. But *acquiring the eggs would be the problem.*

He opened the chamber. An exploration jacket would carry adequate cubes for about four days. He estimated another two weeks of supply in the storage bin and hoped he would survive long enough to return and get more.

But that wasn't the most critical limitation: There were only seven days of protection from the contaminants in Earth's atmosphere leaking in from the broken hatch. Without an alternative method of protection, the anti-infection cubes would only give him a week of life. The loss of the replication machinery, no more would be available. He picked one up, unwrapped it, and swallowed it. Six days remained.

The sun had risen enough now to flood the bridge, and his eyes smarted from the brightness. He could also feel the warm, damp air blowing in, replacing the cold air of the ship. The temperature on his planet was normally about 20 degrees colder than Earth's average. He knew the heat would be oppressive until the winter completely set in. Without the full protection of the ship's life-support system, he might face the serious

prospect of dying from exposure. If he were lucky, the day outside would be cloudy, and he could, at least, survive until he began his exploration in the relative comfort of nighttime. He closed the nutrient chamber door and headed for the sleeping quarters to rest until the sun went down, and to plan his inevitable rendezvous with the aliens.

CHAPTER TWO

‘The words stuck to the paper like some kind of literary Crazy Glue. He couldn’t concentrate; he couldn’t get the picture of her beautiful, creamy white breast covered with blood out of his mind; it ate at him like...’

“Shit,” Albert Woodbury mumbled under his breath, “‘literary Crazy Glue?’ Seriously, Al?”

The day had been disappointing and busy. The loud noise in the woods that woke him early that morning was forgotten in the futile struggles of creativity or lack of it. The day was almost gone now as were two six-packs of beer and the hope that anything of worth would be created.

He pulled the sheet of paper from his printer and crumpled it up with his fat fingers, tossing it toward the basket across the room, watching as it followed the trajectory of so many other paper balls before it. Like so many others lately, it landed short. *What does that tell you, Woodbury?* he thought, sarcastically. He pushed himself away from the desk and got up, walking to the kitchen for another beer. The day had been cloudy and dim but it was clearing now, and he stopped for a moment to appreciate the sunset through the back window. At least, THAT was consistent, he thought.

Never before had he needed to write so desperately and never before had he been so intellectually dry. The high life for the last five years, his divorce and the stock market crash drained the nest egg he had acquired from three successful books. Now he was Albert ‘didn’t-you-used-to-write?’

Woodbury. He figured he had about nine months of money left then it was starvation, and jail for failure to pay the \$5,000/month alimony. He went out the back door and sat on the porch to watch the sun go down over the hills of his beloved New Hampshire and for a moment, the fear lifted.

He ran his pudgy fingers across his broad, and broadening, forehead and through his thin, and thinning, and sighed. The sunset always cheered him up even if he knew that in a moment it would be gone, and the night would consume him again with its penchant for magnifying anxieties. It seemed like a perfect metaphor for his career: burn bright and darken. At least, he knew for certain that morning would come. He didn't have the same level of confidence in his career.

He felt like a character he had created in "*By the Station*", a desperate, tired old man who just wanted to give up and kill himself but who couldn't face the fear that he would be even more disgusted with himself at the actual moment of death. So he had gone on, failing and trying, trying and failing.

But Woodbury wasn't a failure, yet, and he wasn't an old man, yet. At 52, his dark hair was just about gone, and his stomach had waged and won a battle with his belt. The once proud, beaming face that had somehow overcome its basic unattractiveness with youthful enthusiasm was now just a wrinkled, tired, basically unattractive facade with sad, fluid eyes and a perpetual frown beneath the trademark immense black mustache.

At least, his intellect had survived, maybe... maybe not. The rich well of ideas and characters that had always sustained him had dried up and for weeks nothing worked; he had no motivation, except desperation, and no burning enthusiasm. Perhaps a good idea will happen, he thought. Perhaps. The sun was gone now, and he pulled on a sweater, made a fire in the stone fireplace and went back to his monitor, hoping that somehow, miraculously, something had been written there. It

hadn't. It was empty, as was his thoughts, and he sighed. All the ideas he had lately were tacky, about as tacky as the green and brown striped double knit pants he insisted on wearing most of the time at the cabin. Millie hated them, which was probably why he insisted on wearing them. But that was alright; he hadn't been too fond of Millie, anyhow.

She had left after the money started to run out and his hair started to thin out, and his tummy started to bulge out. Had it been only two years? He looked at a picture on the wall of himself and J. J., smiling at a dinner thrown to celebrate the future ill-fated sale of his newest book to Hollywood. Albert Woodbury of two years ago was a lot different. He couldn't blame Millie for running off with a younger man, another writer that was just starting out. She liked the first battle to the top, but she couldn't face the prospect of a second battle to the top with a worn-out, middle-aged man so thoroughly deflated by the Hollywood machine. So she left and ran to somebody that burned with the fire that he once had. Anyhow, Albert wasn't the literary Harvard snob that she really wanted. He was a good old boy, a down home guy that had a knack for writing stories people wanted to read; or used to.

"Piss on her," he said as he drained the beer and stared at the paper.

CHAPTER THREE

Dak didn't sleep well, but he slept. The heat in the ship was starting to be oppressive, and he kept worrying that the ship's skin cloaking equipment wouldn't have enough power to hold the holographic image of trees through the day. If it failed, the smooth metal surface of the ship would be immediately seen from the alien's air transportation vehicles or the ground if any aliens were hiking in the area. Without the camouflage, it was an 180 foot round mirror during the day. Fortunately, the system had remained engaged when the ship lost control, and no visual or radar contact had alerted the local population.

He turned the waking alarm off before it sounded and rose, rubbing his aching leg. He put his weight on it and determined that it was not damaged too badly and that it was restoring itself. He was relieved; growing an entirely new one, if he had to remove the old one, would take at least five weeks. He stepped gingerly to a small hole in the wall and deposited the waste pellet he removed from his pouch. How crude the aliens are, he thought, with their vulgar digestive system with its juices and odors and totally undisciplined processes. He hoped his destiny, whatever it proved to be, was something he could live with.

Dak left his rest area and entered the hallway A. The sunlight through the open hatch was almost gone, and he could feel the cooler air sweeping in. He went to the systems console and checked the readouts. The power source had held the cloaking equipment all day and seemed to have increased its storage level by a small amount. He was encouraged but knew that unless the rate of improvement quickened dramatically, his

plan must remain the same. It took about 15 percent power to activate the disintegration program and about 25 percent power to get a radio message through and fully 80 percent power to achieve enough gravity power to even enter orbit. The gauge indicated 5 percent power, 1 percent higher than the night before, true, but still inadequate to avoid the inevitable.

“Research computer. Wake,” he said softly.

“*Xetryiur.*”

“We will speak in the alien’s language.”

“*Very well.*”

“Disengage the cloaking equipment until morning. Access historical database.”

“*Ready.*”

“Recall records of ES-1725.”

“*On screen.*”

Dak scanned the information before him. Woodbury was 52 Earth years old, 210 pounds, 5’-10”. His intelligence levels were generally higher than the average, especially in creativity, willingness to examine and accept new ideas, sensitivity to the individual’s needs and rights and thoughts. He had been very cooperative and even showed a certain fondness toward Ridgit, the chief alien investigator. Dak remembered him now: A heavy but interesting man. He had felt strong empathy for him.

“Good,” Dak said. “Computer. Is Mr. Woodbury presently in his dwelling unit?”

“*Unable to communicate with sensors.*”

Dak had forgotten. “Thank you. Standby.”

The screen flashed off, and Dak was alone with the faint hum of the fans. He looked around him at the lifeless bodies of his comrades. The sadness returned; his stomach tightened with the weight of the loss fear for his personal future. But he shook it off, slid to the floor and walked to a storage cabinet which contained the burial apparatus, a hand-held, self-powered

disintegration machine to be used for a service in the event a crew member died on a mission. He pulled it out along with the manual that had the ritual words and closed the door.

He knelt by Raj first and put it to his friend's forehead. Raj was the largest of the crew: 4'-11" by Earth measurement. Like the rest of his people, fully 20 percent of his height was head and neck. His smooth facial skin began at his pointed chin and expanded upward, enclosing his skull, which, as an alien once mentioned, resembled a flattened egg. His eyes were in the middle of his face, right between his chin and the top of his hairless head. They were deep black oval eyes of about 6" in height. His breathing ports were small holes covered with flaps of his light gray skin, and his mouth was small, only about 2" in width. Raj was the most handsome of the crew, Dak thought, having caught un-mated female members looking at him wistfully on occasion. But Raj's head, like the others, had indications of the trauma of impact that caused their fragile bodies to terminate. Dak briefly contemplated the strange feeling in his gut that he, too, should have died.

"I'm sorry, my friend," he said quietly as he pressed the activation button.

"Esut Mesi ahsyd, siud lie Raj. Ryt guie verout Mesi le Raj."

Raj was gone within seconds, collapsed to a minute particle of energy. Dak repeated the ritual for each of the eight crew members, replaced the burial machine in its closet and returned to his station and activated the historical computer.

"Computer. Wake."

"Xetryiur. I'm sorry. Ready."

"Let the record state that the crew died on this 167th day of Ruidyl on an alien planet in the pursuit of knowledge for our people. All died with honor and bravery and were buried by the Law of Mesi. Record and transmit."

"Recorded. I'm sorry. Insufficient power to transmit."

“Thank you. Standby.”

Dak had forgotten. “We will all die alone,” he said sadly to himself. “No one will ever know.”

He leaned back in the chair, blowing a sigh through his rounded mouth. So many good friends had died. He glanced at the relative clock. In a few hours, he calculated, his comrades would be landing on Meti and facing a rewarding reception and eventually would honor those brave Metians who died in the pursuit of knowledge. He imagined the ceremony being planned and longed for the dim sunset of the twin suns and the warm greetings of his fellow Cue dwellers as they welcomed him with the proud stroking of foreheads. And later, the visit by Renja, his mate. Beautiful Renja, how he had missed her these last seven years, her gentleness, the glow in her eyes as she listened to the stories of strange, far-away planets and beings. He would never see any of them again, of course, unless they returned, which he doubted. Who would say the Mesi Den for him, he thought. He was so....

The computer interrupted his thoughts.

“Protocol A-17. I have a momentary contact with a sensor that indicates heat source radiation from the dwelling unit of ES-1725.”

“Good. Standby.”

Dak rose and walked down the hall and climbed the ladder to the hatch. The sunlight was completely gone, and the stars were blinking brightly. He briefly picked out his sun in the constellations, then pushed his thoughts of home away and returned slid back down the ladder. He moved to a large cabinet and pulled out his exploration jacket and boots. His night vision would be perfect, of course, but as a precaution against daylight, he also took a set of goggles and hung it on his jacket. Next, he opened the Survival chamber and put one nutrient cube and four atmosphere-protection cubes in a pocket.

He climbed back up through the hatch. The dwelling unit was clearly in sight, and he saw smoke curling up from the roof. ES-1725, Albert Woodbury, was indeed in residence. He pondered his next move and examined a plan. He would have to trust an alien; that much was totally clear. Was Albert the best choice? The right decision would have to be made; the wrong decision would cause grave consequences. If the aliens succeeded in studying and understanding his technology, they might learn to travel through space, spreading their savagery throughout the universe.

One other thing was clear: Dak had to survive until he could activate the automatic disintegration protocols. And that was the critical irony. In order to survive and contain the aliens, he would have to *rely* on the aliens. The cloaking equipment would shield the ship from detection during the day unless someone actually walked into it, a remote possibility in this semi-wilderness and one that Dak had to chance. Staying alive long enough to protect and ultimately destroy the Metian secrets was his mission.

Dak returned to the bridge.

“Computer. If I do not return within five days and report to you, engage the automatic disintegration protocols and execute when power is sufficient.”

“Affirmative.”

“Extend the Disembark Ladder then standby.”

He pulled himself up onto the hatch and breathed in the thick, cool outside air. How rich this planet was compared to all the others and how incredible it is that the aliens took it for granted. They were so much like his ancestors who lived hundreds of thousands of years ago and who used up almost all of Meti’s natural resources, leaving it close to a desperate, barren wasteland. Modern Metians worshiped the resourcefulness of the early settlers of the Highland and the engineers of the Cue society. How much a paradise Earth

seemed to Dak and his comrades and how grateful they would be to live in its richness. They couldn't fathom why the inhabitants of this planet did not respect such a gift.

Dak forced himself through the opening of the hatch, and he slid a foot at a time down the invisible hull of the ship until he reached the Disembark Ladder, which had now been extended to the ground. Only twice in the seven years he had been on this mission had he left the ship and touched the planet itself. It was on one of these missions that he met ES-1725. Dak hoped that the warmth and compassion he felt at that time was real. In fact, he counted on it. He could feel the coolness of the soil on his feet as he pushed away from the hull toward the dwelling of Mr. Albert Woodbury.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘The sun burned his red face as he swung his heavy load onto the burro’s dusty back. San Antonio was hot and flat, and he longed for his beloved mountains. Do not be afraid. I am communicating with you through your thoughts. We are friends.’

Albert’s eyes flew open, and his heart suddenly seemed to have trouble beating as he stared at the monitor. He didn’t write those last words; his fingers typed them, but he didn’t write them. He looked at his fingers as if they might have changed. They hadn’t, but he felt a strange tenseness as he put them back on the keys.

They took control immediately. ‘Please do not be afraid. I am using your hands. I am a visitor. In your unconscious mind, you remember us. I come in peace.’

“What the...?” Woodbury said. “What fresh hell is this?”

The tenseness lifted. ‘Who are you?’ he typed.

‘My name is Dak. I am from the planet Meti. My ship has been destroyed, and I need assistance.’

“Oh, my dear mother of fuck,” Woodbury mumbled as he shook his head, trying to remove the contents of the last minute... or understand it. Then he typed. ‘OK. I’ll play. Where are you?’

‘Near your home.’

Woodbury took his fingers off the keys again and locked them together as if that would control this bizarre event. He quickly glanced around the room, half expecting a swarm of Martians to be at the window. But, then, his analytical mind

kicked in. Several explanations presented themselves: first, insanity—which he fully expected would happen someday—or his pent-up imagination was suddenly unleashed beyond his capacity to control, or... He didn't have another option. Fear began to worm its way past curiosity.

‘Do you intend to do me harm?’ he typed.

‘No. I come in peace, and I need your help. I remember you. My name is Dak. Are you prepared to help?’

Somewhere in his dark, deepest memories, the name ‘Dak’ lit a small spark. A quick flash of a bright room scampered across his eyes. ‘*I am Dak. Do not be afraid.*’ He remembered that and associated it with a certain sense of comfort, a certain absence of fear. Another part of his conscious intellect exerted itself: This is ludicrous; *be afraid*, it told him.

‘Do you remember me, Albert?’ his fingers typed for him.

After a moment, during which several parts of his mind fought with each other for dominance, he responded. ‘Yes.’

‘Excellent. I am real. We must meet.’

If this was really happening, an alien was asking to present himself to him and initiate the first significant contact between their life-forms. Strangely, he felt at ease. *At ease? How could that freaking be possible?*

Something written on the monitor grabbed his attention. ‘What do you mean by “I remember you”?’ he typed.

‘We have met. You have been to our ship.’

A flash of bright lights and black eyes passed across his thoughts again and disappeared. Recognition? Possibly. Confirmation? Maybe.

His heart rate was softening. ‘What do you want?’

‘Your help. Are you afraid?’

Woodbury thought a moment, searching his feelings, surprised by what he found. ‘No.’

‘Good. There is no danger. Please turn the lights in your house very low. I cannot see in brightness. I will be at your front door.’

Woodbury stared at the monitor with its incredible stream of words and reread it. Was he going crazy? His hands suddenly were free; the tenseness left them, but his stomach tightened. Was he about to have contact with an alien? *Come on, Albert, he thought, get serious.*

Another flash of memory crossed his mind, this one longer and more distinct. He was in a room with people, no, not people, animals, no, not animals. Flashes came quicker, but he couldn’t grab hold of them, just images that disappeared before he could focus. But one thing was clear, if he wasn’t suddenly insane, something very real and unusual—even exciting—was definitely happening. Two choices. He had to prove one or the other.

Albert went into the living room and turned the lights off, then walked to the kitchen and switched on the small light in the corner. It would provide a low level in the living room. *Thank you,* a voice said in his mind. There was a place in him that wasn’t afraid, but there was also a place that was growing and it kept saying ‘call the police.’

Do not call the police. the voice said again.

“Jesus. Are you in my head? Is this how you communicate?” He paused as an odd thought struck him. “Do you have a mouth?”

Yes. I am at your front door. This is a significant moment for both of us. I am ready.

What about ME being ready? Woodbury thought as he went to the door, his heart pounding again and his stomach quivering as the moment of truth approached.

Dak stood about ten feet from the door. Emotions were not unknown to most Metians. Compassion and love, and to a small

degree, fear, were normal. But anxiety due to uncertainty was new to Dak. Except for the explorers, no Metian had reason to be nervous. Everything was predictable and programmed; nothing was unexpected, and nothing was unusual. But this moment was not usual, and Dak was definitely feeling anxiety as he watched the door, waiting for Woodbury to pull it open. It would be the first time he would meet an alien in foreign, uncontrolled surroundings; Dak was truly a visitor in a strange world.

Dak fidgeted as he waited. Earth people were at first repulsive to him, and his comrades; the physical power of their long bodies and tiny heads were a matter of some concern. But after closer study of the first specimen, it was determined that they were basically Metian in structure, having roughly a similar body type regarding arms, legs, head, brain.

There were so many differences, however. Their structural system was of hard, brittle material, not flexible and fragile. And Earthlings had numerous complicated internal organs, unlike the Metians who had only two, one for processing and distributing oxygen and one that distributed nutrients to the substance of his body and disposed of waste after the nutrients were consumed. The skin held everything together. A very intelligent Earth doctor they met had equated the Metian physiology to that of an apple. The complexity of oxygen delivery in Earthlings—through what they called veins and arteries—was almost beyond comprehension.

The human skin was filthy, discolored and covered with thin fibers that were coated with bacteria and organisms in abundance. How they had survived with such inadequate controls was the main object of study for the first few years. The Metian was, in some ways, too much the other way, not able to combat infection at all. His planet had no bacteria or viruses or microscopic life-forms, so considerable research led to the

necessary development of the cubes that Dak had taken before leaving the ship. For 24 Earth hours his skin and breathing membranes would be safe from infection, but then he had to take another cube. He had six days left in a non-sterile environment.

The creaking of the door snapped him back to the moment. It was opening, and he saw the bulky and shadowy figure of Albert Woodbury, the alien, the writer, slowly appear behind it. A shiver of apprehension shot through his body as their eyes met. It was indeed an incredible moment.

Woodbury's eyes flew open in amazement. "My dear God," he mumbled. Standing perfectly still before him in the dark, but clearly visible, was a short, gray, humanoid with an immense head and thin, willowy arms and legs. He was wearing what appeared to be a long hunting jacket and low boots—but no pants that Albert could see, just smooth gray skin. His neck was very thin, rising from narrow sloped shoulders into a massive head that started at a pointed chin and went up like Spandex to enclose a large skull. But it was the eyes that Albert ended up staring at: huge black eyes, deep and black as coal with the barest of wrinkled skin around them. They were familiar to him.

The alien cocked his head slightly to one side, and Albert jumped back. It moved: *This is not a statue. This is not Claymation. This is not a joke. My God—this is an alien.* But he seemed familiar as if from a dream that he couldn't remember. Albert was not as afraid as he thought he should be.

Dak studied the alien's body and wondered how his people had been able to adapt to having such a monstrously ugly container. It was a testimony to their ancestral ability to adjust to and overcome all obstacles to survive and prosper. But it was Dak who must now learn to adjust. He had to remember: he might be just as ugly to them as they were to him. This

specimen, at least, had less hair and a larger forehead than most they had studied. He was... he searched for the right word... stout.

“My name is Dak,” he said in his high, thin voice. “I have learned your language. We can communicate audibly.”

Woodbury just stood there, his tiny eyes gaping, his mouth moving without forming words. Dak was in no hurry; he knew the alien’s limited intelligence needed time to comprehend the unexpected. There was an awkward silence as several moments passed.

Woodbury finally regained some semblance of his mental bearing and closed his mouth. “Uhh... would you like to come in?”

How stupid, Woodbury thought. Jesus! He sounded like he was inviting a stranger to use the phone to call a tow truck, or greeting friends for dinner.

“Yes,” Dak said as he started toward the door. Woodbury recoiled slightly.

“Do not be afraid; I mean you no harm.”

Woodbury knew subliminally that the alien was telling the truth, and he backed away as Dak moved toward the door, then into the living room. They stood for another few moments, staring at each other, Woodbury trying to accept the reality of the moment and Dak trying to give him time to do so.

What do I say to an alien? Albert asked himself.

Dak looked around at the coarse and primitive room, noting the details. The cages that had been built for the specimens who needed to be taken to Meti were very similar to this real human house.

What do I say to an alien? Dak asked himself.

“Lovely house,” Dak said first, his memory having searched for a proper comment.

“Uh. Thanks,” grunted Albert, glad the awkward moment was broken.

Dak thought a full disclosure would be the best approach. “I know you must be confused by my presence, and appearance, I would imagine, but we should establish some basis. First, I am real. As I said, my name is Dak, and I come from a planet we call Meti. It is several hundred of your light-years away. My sun, twin suns actually, is part of what you would call the Big Dipper. We have been studying your planet for about forty of your years, and I have been here for the last seven.”

Albert found himself almost entranced by the lilting cadence of Dak’s almost child-like voice.

“We were just leaving for a new assignment when my ship had a malfunction and crashed back to Earth, near your cabin. All my comrades are dead, and my ship disintegrated. It is normally against our laws to appear to an alien, I mean, to your people. However, these circumstances are such that I must.”

Albert was still stuck on the first thing Dak said. “You are real then?”

“As real as you are, Albert.”

Albert’s mind was still adjusting, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that deep in his brain again: this humanoid seemed familiar.

Dak read his thoughts. “Yes, I am familiar to you, Albert. But let me explain something. My people communicate through telepathy. Consequently, it is natural for me to read your thoughts. I don’t mean to pry, and I have learned that your people are offended by it, but it is my way, I do not mean to be...” he searched for the right word, “nosy. We first met about three years ago when we settled in the valley about 15 miles west of here. You were our third specimen. You were not harmed. Do you remember?”

That is when the dreams started, Albert thought, the dreams about little people with big eyes. *I remember.*

“Good, Albert,” Dak continued, “your unconscious mind remembers us and the times we took you to our ship to study you. I met you only once more, however.”

“I remember dreaming about you. I can’t get a clear picture, though.”

“One thing nice about our ability to read minds: we can also read our own minds, unlike you. Your people have a peculiar facility for forgetting events and separating thoughts. You keep secrets from yourselves, very strange, and destructive, we have seen a few specimens go quite insane because they can’t remember things that have happened, or can’t identify what bothers them.”

“Are you saying that some of your specimens—those are my people, by the way—were driven insane by your experiments?”

“Not experiments, Albert, we aren’t primitive. We call it investigations. And yes, to be honest with you, there have been some whose minds have been too weak to accept our presence. We have learned from our investigations.”

“What gave you the right to ‘investigate’ my people?”

That took Dak by surprise. “What right do you have to experiment on animals?”

Albert pondered the question and decided to leave it for another conversation; it was too complicated. “What happened to these weak-minded people?” he asked cautiously.

“We are caring for them on Meti.”

Albert’s stomach started to twist anew with apprehension. “Are you saying that these people couldn’t forget that you took them and worked on them? And you stole them? And what about me? Are you going to take me?”

“No, Albert. I have no ship. I told you that.”

“Right.” He was only slightly relieved.

They stood there a few more moments, and Albert calmed down. In the dreams, the little people were always friendly and

polite, and Dak seemed the same. About ten minutes had passed since he first saw the alien and the shock was already wearing off.

“Would you like to sit down?” he said.

“Thank you,” Dak replied and moved to the couch.

“Dak, there is a green spot on your leg.” The skin on Dak’s legs was like a smooth gray seamless body stocking. He was, as far as Albert could tell, totally monochromatic except for the green spot.

“It is an injury from the crash. The pain has gone away, and I think it will fully regenerate.”

Albert stepped to the easy chair and sank into it, his eyes never leaving the incredible sight before him. He didn’t blink, frightened that this would go away, and he would be left with the empty pages of the literary wasteland he was living with in the study.

Something Dak said earlier popped into Albert’s brain. “Your crew is dead?”

“Yes.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“Thank you.”

Albert relaxed a bit. “You said you need my help. What can I do?”

Dak lowered himself into the couch; his legs dangled over the edge like a child. Dak took a deep breath. The thick atmosphere was hard to inhale. It had a lower oxygen content than his planet. He would have to remember to breathe deeply from time to time. “Albert. This unfortunate accident has forced me into the position of having to make contact with your people. We never intended to do so.”

“Why?”

The question took Dak somewhat by surprise. Didn’t Albert understand that Dak’s technology was so far superior to Earth’s that it would be dangerous if exposed to them? At least, in his

unconscious mind, he must know that the Metians were a vastly superior race.

A new twinge of apprehension came over Dak as a thought occurred: what would happen if Albert decided not to help him survive long enough to destroy his ship? What if Albert overpowered him and forced him to reveal the existence and the location of the ship? Earth people were far superior in brute strength.

Albert swore he saw something in Dak's gray, smooth face that betrayed fear, or, at least, concern. He didn't want him upset; that was clear. He had to assume that Dak had very dangerous powers.

"I'm sorry," Albert said finally, "I guess that was a stupid question. You're probably afraid we couldn't handle the technology you have."

Dak's level of anxiety eased a bit, but not entirely. This alien was perceptive, and that was good, but one of the first things they discovered about Earth people, however, was that they can, and do, tell untruths to each other, and to themselves. This phenomenon had only been found on this planet. Other life-forms of rudimentary intelligence or better throughout the universe have many things in common, and many things different, but only in the most intelligent life-forms on this particular planet does there exist the peculiar characteristic of lying. They seemed to do it primarily to better their position in a more complex version of what humans called 'survival of the fittest.' It was a name that wrongly applied the justice of natural selection to the rigorous and intricate application of their selfishness and greed. Greed for power, luxury and the pursuit of only enjoyable things was generally at the bottom of most of Man's treatment of each other. Lying to gain the cooperation of others was the primary tool of this eccentricity. Dak knew he had to be careful.

“Not that you cannot handle it,” he said, fully aware that he, himself, was lying. “We didn’t want to disturb the natural progression of things. Our developments are a product of our history and evolution. It would be hard to expect that you could fully apply our technology to your existence. Just as we couldn’t apply your technology to ours.” Dak knew again that he was lying. They didn’t need man’s primitive technology, but the knowledge that Albert could not read his thoughts gave him a certain comfort. Interesting. In a society where telepathy was rare, lying was probably an accepted tool, easily used. Curious conclusion, Dak thought, filing it away for further examination.

“You’re right,” Albert said. “In the wrong hands, it could be an instrument of evil. But again, what do you want with me?”

“Your help. My research and my recollection show you to be understanding and compassionate. I have decided to approach you because of these qualities. If I am to exist in this world and interact with your people, I require assistance. First, my food supply is very limited.”

“What do you eat?” Albert asked. “By the way, are you hungry?” It seemed oddly appropriate to ask.

“No, thank you. There is only one food that we have identified as being a non-contaminant. We did not expect to need to survive without our processing station. But to answer your question: Basically, we eat a processed form of our waste.”

“You eat shit?”

“I’m not familiar with the word ‘shit’ although I have heard it from some of your people. But if it means waste products, yes, in a way. Waste is essentially a nutrient-free substance, so we take fresh nutrients and put them back in to create food. It is very efficient.”

“But disgusting.”

The fact that a life-form filthy with infection-carrying microscopic organisms was making a derogatory value judgment about the cleanliness of Dak’s biological functions

was irritating. “That is debatable, Albert. My body produces waste cubes that I place in the processing station and store for future use. Your process is much more...” he searched for a word that wouldn’t offend Albert, “... involved.”

“True enough, I guess. All animals and insects, I think, do it the same way. I suppose I’m just used to it.”

Albert had, for the last few minutes, let himself forget that he was talking to an alien. But he was stuck and fought for something else to say.

“So, Dak, tell me, are there girl Metians?” Just as he said it, he wondered why he assumed Dak was a male. “You are a male, aren’t you?”

“Male and female are basic universal concepts. Strangely enough, on all the planets we have studied the males are more aggressive and are the hunter-gatherers. The female bears the young, cares for them, and maintains the living quarters. This seems to be true of all intelligent life-forms until they achieve middle evolution status. At that point, the differences between the sexes become almost non-existent as the intelligence levels increase. It also corresponds to the trend away from the body itself bearing the children. In most civilizations above Class C, which yours is not yet, the young are created mechanically using the sperm and egg of the individuals.”

“Boring.”

“Aside from that, there still remains essential maleness and essential femaleness. It is that quality that you unconsciously perceived.”

“Oh. Then you’re male?”

“Fine. Yes.”

“OK. By the way, what level of evolution are we?”

“Class E.”

“Oh.” Albert didn’t know if that was good or not, but he decided it was best not to find out. “You said you could eat one food. What is it?”

“Boiled eggs, from chickens. Most of your world are contaminated with a multitude of bacteria and diseases. It is unusual in the universe to have so much variety and complexity on one planet. On Meti, there are no organisms and our bodies have little immunity to infection. I can control exposure to your atmosphere with anti-infection cubes, but I have nothing to protect against exposure to bacteria that I ingest. Again, we didn’t think we would need such things.”

“Why not?”

“We never thought our ship could malfunction.”

“Nobody is perfect.”

Dak shrugged, as best he could. “I guess you are right. I have little food left, and I would imagine I would have a problem walking into a Piggly Wiggly and asking for a dozen eggs.” His mouth curled imperceptibly at its edges.

Dak’s humor caught Albert totally off-guard, and he had to suppress a laugh. “Piggly Wiggly?”

“Yes, Albert. I am familiar with your culture, and with humor.”

This time, he did laugh. “You read my mind again, didn’t you? I can’t believe you made a joke.”

“Why not? Humor is another universal concept.”

“No shit?”

Dak was perplexed at the use of the word ‘shit’ again. It was a word that had so many meanings.

Albert saw his bewilderment as Dak cocked his head to one side and knew immediately what caused it. “This time, I’ll read your mind. You wonder what shit has to do with humor, right?”

“Yes. I see no connection between bodily wastes and being funny.”

“It’s just an expression. You’ll get the hang of it. In any event, I can’t believe humor is a universal concept.”

“In almost all Class D and below intelligence levels, we have found humor. It is odd also that it seems to reduce as the evolutionary levels increase. On my planet, it is becoming quite rare.”

“I’m glad you have some. How many planets have intelligent life?”

“We don’t know. We have only studied less than one thousand. But we presume most stars above Class 178 that have planets over Class Q size and are within certain temperature distances from their suns have some sort of life. There are roughly eighteen million such planets in the Retina quadrant of the universe.”

“Wow. We thought we were alone.”

“I know. Most interesting life-forms at or below Class E do.”

“You find us interesting?”

“Very. We never spent anywhere near the time on any other planet that we have here. Your people are very complex and curious. We find you fascinating.”

“Why?”

“You’re so unpredictable for one, and arrogant. You think you’re the only life-forms in the universe but then create all sorts of bizarre ideas of other life-forms. We find your creations amusing.”

It was Albert’s turn to cock his head in bewilderment. “How do you know what we create?”

“We watch re-runs of ‘Star Trek’”

Albert’s eyes widened in shock and amusement. “Star Trek?”

“Yes. We learned much about your world from your form of communication.”

“Dak, for Christ’s sake, TV is not communication, it is entertainment.”

“We know that. But all my crew members became very serious fans of the show, especially Spock. It passes the time.”

Albert laughed and flapped his hands against his heavy leg. “Jesus Christ. Alien Trekkies.” He leaned back in the chair and stroked his mustache. “I am going crazy. At first, I discounted it, but now... Why didn’t I think of it before? Of course. What a jerk, I should have seen it coming before. It’s so simple: I’m going crazy. Ha Ha.” He rolled his eyes.

“Albert. You are not going crazy. This is real. Settle down.”

Albert stared silently at this aberration before him and caught himself once again forgetting that he was talking to an alien. Unfortunately, maybe he WASN’T going crazy, he thought. That would have made it, at least, easier to accept. What an incredible feeling, he thought, sitting here talking to an alien life-form as if it was a guy from a country he had never visited, a guy he was beginning to like. Suddenly a sense of seriousness blanketed him.

“You’re concerned for me,” Dak said quietly.

“Will you stop reading my mind? There isn’t enough room in there for ME, let alone a funny looking guy from the Big Dipper.”

“Sorry.”

“Look, Dak. I have, for some strange reason, come to grips with the fact that this is really happening and that you are really an alien. I want to know a lot more about your planet and the universe, but right now I think we should plan some strategy. What exactly do you want?”

“I need to continue my existence, and I need your assistance.”

“I figured that out, Dak. What I mean is: I can’t just hide you under the bed the rest of your life. This isn’t E.T.”

“Another good movie.”

“Dear God,” Albert whimpered. “Okay. What is your plan?”

Dak was glad Albert could not read his mind. The fact was that Dak didn’t know exactly what to do. These aliens had proved to have such a random set of bizarre and unpredictable behavior patterns that Dak could not anticipate their actions. Every time the examination staff created a computer model of typical human behavior, another specimen violated it.

“I need considerable input from you, Albert, on that question.”

Albert sat back into the chair and reviewed his life. His failing career and his money running out were apparently not enough. The mischievous god of errant destiny was working overtime. Now he was to babysit a lost life-form from another planet. He looked down at his stomach and wondered exactly when beer had become more important than looks. But, he digressed.

“I don’t know what you want,” he said. “Go on television and be exposed to the world?”

“No. That would not be advisable. Albert, let’s set some rules. First, I want to avoid being locked away in some hospital somewhere and...”, a shudder went through him, “...dissected like a new species of frog. In any event, I would like to avoid any publicity for at least several months.”

“Why only several months?”

Dak hadn’t prepared a definitive answer to that question yet; he didn’t know what knowledge he should let the man have. The wisdom of letting Albert know that his ship was intact was clearly questionable. If Albert had the greed of the rest of his species, Dak’s life was secondary to the treasure of technology they would find. Before he could bring Albert totally into his confidence, he would have to determine much about his character that the examiners couldn’t test with conventional

equipment. Dak could read thoughts, but not examine feelings and motivations. He had to mislead Albert.

One new factor of life on this planet had to be filed away: Lying was complicated... very complicated.

“To build up immunity to your diseases,” he answered finally, knowing full well that his body would never adjust, and that he was lying again. He needed anti-infection cubes, and he only had six left. After that... “I would die quickly if I were exposed to large numbers of your people without proper protection.”

“I understand.”

Dak was becoming oddly comfortable with the concept of being untruthful, giving more strength to the idea that this curious trait accounted for the sharp eccentricity of the human race.

“The government would know what to do.”

“Which government?”

“The US. America. What other?”

Dak shook his head. “It’s amazing. You carve up the planet’s surface into little portions, and each occupant of each portion has an incredible compulsion to feel that their set of irrelevant and highly contrived attributes are vastly superior to the occupants of the other portions. And your people have so often battled amongst each other to protect such beliefs. The savagery of ‘nationalism’ is one of the more interesting, and repulsive, qualities of Man.”

“Sorry,” Albert said, feeling scolded.

Dak’s nerves were stretched too thin; that outburst was unnecessary. “No. I’m sorry,” Dak said as he raised his hand. He didn’t want to offend Woodbury; he needed him. He let the moment clear itself. “Why the government?” he asked finally.

“I don’t know. Seemed like the right thing to say.”

“Governments could lock me away and dissect me. I saw *Independence Day*, too.”

“But everybody else would try to make money off of you.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

It hadn’t occurred to him, but he briefly contemplated how he could, not that he would, actually use this poor space traveler’s misfortune to his advantage.

“Oprah? Really, Albert? You are capable of better ideas than that.”

“Will you stop reading my mind? I don’t like it.”

“I have to keep you honest.”

“Oh, really. Well, who’s going to keep YOU honest?” It was time for Albert to voice an outburst. “How do I know that there aren’t a million guys like you out there waiting to attack my planet and suck everybody’s brains out—or whatever. What assurances do I have that you’re not using me for some evil plot?”

It was a good question, but unexpected. One reason telepathy was virtually non-existent on this planet was probably the fact that Man’s mind came up with such bizarre switches of logic that the reading of the common human’s thoughts couldn’t possibly be counted on to be accurate anyhow.

“Trust?”

Albert contemplated the word, and he was already regretting his own brief anger. Whatever the alien was planning, Albert was irrevocably a part of it. If there was evil intent in Dak, Albert honestly didn’t see it. But if Dak had incredible powers, as he surely must, then his comrades, if there were any, must have incredible powers, too. If he misread Dak’s objectives or pissed him off, the Earth might be in for a big problem. If he helped Dak, he would wind up on the winning side. In the end, it was the best chance for personal survival that determined his decision.

“OK. I trust you. But why don’t you like the government idea?”

“Think about it. Your government officials are not respected for their intelligence levels.”

“Is your government different?”

“We have very little government, actually no formal government like you do. Our world is run by computer except for a four Metian council that judges unusual events that might need more depth of reasoning than we want to trust to a computer. Every twenty years the council is changed, and the candidates visit each Cue and are probed by the people there, and then we vote.”

“You have the same problem we have. How do you know which is the best candidate?”

“We read their minds, remember? We only vote as a way to reflect attitudes that may change among the people over time.”

“That sounds good. Very democratic. Just like ours.”

“No. Not like yours. Our candidates cannot lie to the people for their own gain. We do not know about greed.”

“Right. But, no greed? How boring. Don’t you have rich people and poor people and robber barons and con men or... novelists?”

“Greed is a characteristic that is not uniquely yours, but nowhere else in the universe does greed and ambition exist as a major property of life.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“It’s true. There are no evil empires like the one Darth Vader works for. At least not yet.”

“Darth Vader?” Albert laughed aloud. “Jesus, you saw *Star Wars*”? What, do you have NetFlix?”

“Showtime.”

Albert laughed so hard his stomach started to jiggle but didn’t overlook the obvious slam to the character of Man on his planet. “You’re a stitch, Dak.” Under his laugh was concern. It was obvious that Dak was afraid for the future of the universe if Earth became capable of space travel. *But, how are we supposed*

to protect ourselves from Dak's people? He kept laughing, trying to hide that thought from Dak.

When Albert settled down, he asked: "You don't have any crime, either, right?"

"Crime is a partly a function of your greed: trying to get the easy life with no effort. But mostly it is powered by the same problem that causes most of the irrationality and brutality."

"What's that?"

"Low self-esteem."

"Jesus, an alien Dr. Phil. How do you know that?"

"It's true. Few people we have studied are truly secure and satisfied. They take their frustrations out in savagery. People who were raised to be secure with themselves are no problem to others."

Albert had to take some exception to the idea. "Those frustrations are also the passion that drives the geniuses to paint, and write, and think, and create. A part of the struggle to find one's self-esteem can endow the brilliant and gifted with the fire that produces us our greatest achievements."

"Yes, a contradiction we have often discussed."

"Alright. Enough of this." Albert waved his hand. "Let's figure out what to do. I cannot offer you a prolonged solution. You can't stay here forever. Eventually, you'll catch something and die."

"I understand that. And I understand if I am not rescued in the next seven days, I have no more anti-infection cubes. If I am to live out my life on your planet, I must have a sterile environment."

"Then we need to prepare some strategy in case you are not rescued. We have to develop a plan and be ready to put it into action in short order."

Dak was getting into this charade very deeply. His lies were starting to lead him in unpredictable directions. His true

intention was to wait for the ship to regain sufficient power to either return to Metia—highly unlikely as that might be—or let the computer activate the disintegration mechanism. But there was a scenario in which he could survive long enough to cancel the disintegration protocol and give the ship a little more time to regenerate fully so he could return home. If that happened, he would be faced with a very short period in which to make a decision. If he didn't have a plan for that scenario, there might not be enough time to put one together. Uncertainty was almost unknown in his world, and the confusion scrambling around in his mind right now was not pleasant.

CHAPTER FIVE

“You are still thinking government?” Dak asked.

“Some people in the government are okay; I’m sure of that. The problem is how to get to the guys that will treat you with respect and not exploit you. We need a buffer, someone who can direct us in the best direction.”

“You have an idea?”

“I do. I have a friend at Harvard. He teaches Psychology and Parapsychology. He’s a big believer in extra-terrestrial life like you and has experienced the same kind of dreams that I have. I imagine he was one of your specimens too.”

“Perhaps not on my ship. But there were several other ships. What is his name?”

“Dr. William Bradley. Good guy. Knows a lot of government types that will be able to treat you with respect. Should I call him?”

“Remember that it is essential that I stay here in your house for at least seven days. The only thing I could save before the ship disintegrated was the rescue beacon. If they search for me, they may come back. I have to be close to the beacon in case they do. You understand?”

“Of course. I can bring Billy here in a couple of days. Meanwhile, you should stay in the bedroom, and I’ll get some eggs.”

“No rush. I have enough nutrient cubes for four days before I need to try eggs.” He stood and reached into a jacket pocket and took out a cube and showed it to Albert.

“Cool,” Albert said. “And I like your jacket. But it’s pretty light.”

“Our bodies are comfortable in the cold.”

Albert had a fleeting image of freezing cross his mind, but he shook it off.

“You don’t have pants?”

“We usually only wear clothes to carry things. We don’t need them. Our bodies have adjusted to the stable atmosphere of our Cues, and our skin is very durable. We require no protection.”

“How do you, you know, cover up your, you know... your private parts?”

“What?”

“Your sex organ. Or do you have another pocket for those?”

“I understand. In a manner of speaking, we have another pocket—formed from flesh. Females have pockets, too, different types, of course.”

Albert was cautious. “Of course. I don’t mean to be personal, but... how do you, you know... do it.”

“Do what?”

“Have sex.”

“We open each other’s pockets.”

“Kinky.”

“Twice every year Renja and I would open our pockets, combine our cells and contribute them to the Generation Module. It’s a wonderful experience.”

Albert was surprised by that. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even think to ask about you. You know so much about me. Is Renja your wife? Do you have kids?”

Dak had let himself get caught up in the conversation with Albert and forgot his sadness. His loss and loneliness came back to him as he thought of his lovely Renja. He lowered his eyes and wove his thin fingers together. “My mate and companion,” he said in a quiet voice. “We have no family as you do. Our

children are created from random cells and grow up in the Generation Modules, then replace the Metians that die.”

“I’m sorry,” Albert said, giving Dak a few moments of introspection. He hadn’t thought that Dak could have feelings; he didn’t know why, but he seemed like... almost a regular guy.

“Do you and Renja have a house?”

“One hundred and fifty of us live together in a Cue. Each Cue has a job, and collectively it supports our civilization. No one has money, and no one has possessions. There is no poverty and no wealth and no ambition. And no laziness.”

“Sounds boring.”

“So we have been told by your people.”

“Is ‘Dak’ your first name, or last?”

“First. We are named after our Cues.”

“Which is?”

“*Thrieufisyidlee.*”

Albert opened his mouth then paused. “I’ll stick with Dak.”

“Good idea.”

Albert got back to business. “I’ll call Billy. Should I call him now?”

“Yes. But, Albert. Let’s be clear. We are only discussing strategies. Preparation. There are many things I won’t agree to. Not now. Please, don’t tell him much. Just have him visit.”

Albert got up from the easy chair and went to the kitchen where the cell phone was charging. He was partially covered from view by the cabinet and dialed the number. As Billy Bradley answered, Albert saw Dak step to the end of the kitchen to monitor the conversation. “Billy, hey, buddy. It’s Al Woodbury, how are you? Yeah, me too. But it’s coming along. Say, listen. I know you’re damn busy at the old school house but I’ve got something going up at the cabin that you really need to be involved in.”

He put his phone over the mouthpiece and looked at Dak, who was trying to shield his eyes from the lamp in the corner. “This might not be easy. What if I need to tell him you’re here?”

Dak shook his head. “Don’t.”

“What? I hear you, Bill, but somebody else can handle the mid-terms. I know, but this is very important. Look, I’m telling you it’s important. I can’t tell you what it is.”

Pause. “I can’t.” He lowered his voice, turned his head away from Dak and tried to think of baseball. “Billy, erethay’s a lienay erehay. A Lienay, you dumb shit. ET, Bill. Artianmay. Get the uckfay up erehay.”

There was a pause on the other end of the phone and Albert changed strategy. “Bill, remember those dreams we have in common? Right, the little people. I need to talk to you about them.” He turned to Dak, who nodded approval to his latest approach. Albert noted that Dak didn’t seem to read his thoughts while his eyes were out of his view. Perhaps he couldn’t. Maybe?

“Bill. Believe me, buddy.” Pause. “I know you’re still angry, but... ownay. Omecay ownay.”

Pause. Albert’s eyes brightened; finally, Bill had understood the message.

“Tomorrow evening, good. Sure, I’ll be here. Say, listen, could you bring up about four dozen eggs? Save me a trip to town.” Pause. “Sure will. Look forward to the visit.”

Albert hung up.

“Piece of cake,” he said to Dak, who had just fully entered the kitchen.

“No, thank you. I can’t eat cake.”

Albert laughed. “You’re a funny guy.” He thought he saw the corners of Dak’s mouth bend upward again. He was beginning to be comfortable with Dak now, unbelievable as the idea might be sound to most rational men. But he felt a degree of honesty in him, and Albert was always a sucker for honesty;

most of his characters won the girl or the game or whatever because they were basically good. He felt a little twinge of disappointment in that he had just violated a trust with Dak, but Bill wasn't getting the point. It was justifiable.

"Let's sit down again. I'm going to have a beer. Do you want an egg?"

Dak grunted with what Albert accepted as at least a snicker. They were making progress.

When they were settled, Albert shifted his weight and formulated a question he had meant to ask. "You talked about universal constants, male and female, humor. What about God?"

Dak thought for a moment. "Most lower forms of evolutionary intelligence in the universe have a curious characteristic; they name things they don't understand. As soon as it has a name, they invent statues or stories to make it real. It is an ironic twist, but God is your creation, not the other way around."

"How about good and evil? Universal constants?"

"It is hard to maintain a robust level of evil without lying and deception. Remember that telepathy is normal in most of the universe. I'm afraid that one's your creation too."

The two aliens sat for the rest of the night and talked. They discussed evolution and life-forms and why humans were different from other life-forms. Albert defended them saying it was inherent in the passion of man to be unpredictable and savage.

As the time passed, Dak started to understand some of the nebulous, mysterious quality of this strange being, this erratic and fiery life-form. They talked about wars and heroes, villains and saviors, Jesus and Hitler, love and cruelty. That the complexity of this creature was beyond the capacity of the ship's computer was evident. His history and beliefs and attitudes were truly fascinating and compelling. Never before

had Dak been so transfixed and intellectually stimulated. They talked long into the night.

As dawn started to emerge, and while Dak was pondering yet another revelation as to the enigmatic mind of man, Albert fell asleep.

Dak went through the house and found the darkest room he could and settled down to sleep through the brightness of the day, hoping that Albert would remember the message he had put in Albert's mind. He felt certain Albert would respect his sensitivity to light and leave him alone. It had been an interesting evening.

There is much to be repulsed by in this strange world, he thought, but much to be admired as well. The fire of passion, the lust for excitement and sheer intellectual stimulation of the complex life-form called Man was, above all, fascinating. The contradictions, the emotions, the burning ambitions were mind-boggling. They were brutal, to be sure, but they could be gentle, and compassionate, too. His thoughts whirred with the new information he had acquired over the last few hours. He curled up on the floor of the big closet and finally fell asleep himself.

CHAPTER SIX

“Dak? Dak?” Albert softly knocked on the door of the closet in the study.

Dak’s eye shield withdrew, and he awoke and sat up. “Yes, Albert?”

“Good. I finally figured out that you had planted a message in my brain last night. It was driving me crazy wondering if you were real or the product of too many hops.”

“Hops?” The word was unfamiliar.

“Never mind. Listen, Bradley should be here soon. The sun went down, and I think it’s dark enough for you now.”

Dak opened the door a crack a peered out. He pushed it open to reveal Albert staring at him.

“You’re just like I remember. Jesus, I had hoped I had made it up.” Albert snapped his fingers. “Damn, this is E.T., the alien in the closet.”

“Great movie, but I am very real, my friend.” Dak reached into his waste pocket and removed a cube, then walked to the desk and placed it down next to the keyboard. It looked like a cube of beef bullion.

“What’s that,” Albert asked.

“My waste pellet.” He removed a nutrient cube from a jacket pocket then put it in his mouth.

“Let me guess. A nutrient cube, right?”

“Yes, it was processed before the ship was destroyed.”

“They look the same to me.”

“Very similar, yes.”

“Not a good idea to get them mixed up, is it,” Albert snickered.

“No. That would be very unhealthy. I’m surprised your people do it.”

Albert raised an eyebrow. “We don’t eat our waste.”

“One of our specimens suggested that we try it. He told us to eat ‘shit’.”

Albert laughed out loud. Smart as these little buggers are, they couldn’t get a grip on good old American defiance.

“Let’s go into the living room; I want to show you something. There is some sunset left.”

They walked to the deck, stood against the railing and watched the light fade beyond the hills. It was a spectacular display and the brilliant colors burned on the bottom of the stratified cloud layers. They stood and absorbed the sight in silence.

“It is beautiful, Albert. Your planet has so much natural beauty. Meti is very flat and ever since our ancestors robbed all plant and animal life from it, it has been barren.”

Albert looked at Dak. “I’m sorry. What happened?”

“Thousands of years ago we had many resources of beauty, animals and plants and lakes. But my people did not expect that it might be used up one day and did not prepare for the end of the riches our planet had provided for millennium. But eventually the planet’s ecological system just couldn’t manage the drain of raw materials, and it went terribly awry.”

“How could they not see it coming?”

Dak started to reply then turned and pointed out the window to a series of bright lights, growing longer in the distance. “What is that?”

Albert squinted. “Shit! It looks like headlights. Bradley must have brought the whole damn campus with him.”

“Or the army,” Dak said. The fear that had been eased by his growing comfort with Albert returned. His knees felt weak, and his forehead felt hot and cold at the same time.

Albert stamped his feet. “That bastard! What do we do?”

“I can’t be here. They may want to take me away, and that is not acceptable. I must hide in my ship.”

Albert looked at Dak, startled. “You said your ship was disintegrated.”

Dak looked up at him. “It is disabled. I lied.”

“You learn fast.” Albert looked back to the road. By the length of the line of cars, he figured about twenty or so. *Damn them!*

“Were you lying about the danger of infection? Or that there is only one of you?”

“No, no. I couldn’t let you know about the ship until I got to know you better. I couldn’t chance you killing me and selling technology that your people couldn’t handle.”

He was right, of course. Many people would have done just that. “Where is your ship? They’ll be here in five minutes.”

Dak looked straight into Albert’s eyes. “Were you serious about helping me?”

“Yes. Yes. I will.”

“Then you need to come with me, Albert. I need eggs. You must know where the ship is to bring me food.”

It was logical and inescapable. Now that Bradley had blown it, Albert had to babysit the alien until he could live in the atmosphere and other among other people. Unless that was a lie, too.

“What will you do?” Albert asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s go,” Albert said, grabbing his sweater and heading for steps down into the backyard and the woods beyond.

They jogged through the underbrush in the direction that Dak pointed out. To Dak, the path was clearly visible. To Albert, it was virtual darkness in the thick forest. Even though it was dusk, he had to trust Dak's night vision to avoid obstacles. After a few minutes, he looked back and saw the cars were just arriving at the cabin, men jumping out and going into the house.

"They'll find nobody there and come after us. They're going to see the ship and know where we went."

"No. Keep going. There will not be able to see the ship; it is camouflaged."

A few more minutes passed.

"Are you OK?" Albert asked through painful gasps for oxygen.

Dak stopped and leaned against a tree. He was fighting for air, too, and his legs were rubber, his lungs were burning. "No. I am not accustomed to physical exertion. I'm afraid my body is not as strong as yours."

"It ain't too strong right now, pal," he replied.

After a few minutes of rest, they walked quickly for about ten more minutes, looking back and listening occasionally. The men were in the woods, no doubt searching for a path.

Dak was starting to move erratically. Suddenly Dak's foot caught on a branch, and he fell, his chest heaving.

"Dak. How far is the ship? You're not doing too good."

"No... I can't get enough oxygen... I need to rest."

"They don't know which way we went, but they will figure it out. Maybe we have a few minutes."

"I need some time to adjust... and another nutrient cube. I am using energy too quickly."

Albert sat down next to him, also welcoming the rest. "Just breathe deep, relax." They sat quietly for a moment. "I'm sorry about this, Dak. I don't know how Bill figured it out. Or why he brought..."

“You told him, Albert,” Dak said cautiously.

Albert recoiled slightly, feeling suddenly guilty. “How... you knew? Why didn’t you say something?”

“I was testing you, and your friend.”

“And?”

“He failed.” Dak was quiet for another moment. “But I think you truly didn’t know he would bring people with him. I believe you are as disappointed as I am.”

“Yes, I am.”

Albert heard the sound of barking dogs. “Jesus! They brought dogs! They’re following my scent directly here.” They both heard voices behind them, closer than they expected. Albert stood up and reached out for Dak’s hand, pulling him up. They grasped hands for a moment.

“I wish it could be different.”

“As do I, Albert.”

“We better get going.”

They started out again on a trot, Albert following his new friend through the brush until they entered a clearing.

“Albert. Stop. The ship is right here.”

Albert slid to a stop, panting hard, his stomach bouncing, and turned forward expecting to see a flying saucer covered with branches. But he saw only woods with streaks of remaining daylight slashing through the clearing.

“Is this a joke?”

“No,” said Dak as he pointed to an invisible spot in front of him. “Put your hand right there.”

Albert took a step forward, his hand in front. It struck something hard.

“It has three-dimension cloaking equipment similar to your holograph technology. It reproduces the surrounding environment perfectly.”

Albert was amazed. No one would ever know it existed. No wonder the alien ships were never seen all these years. It was the ultimate stealth technology. “Damn.”

“It’s the emergency entrance.” Dak stepped onto what Albert could only think of as an air ladder and climbed, his legs bending slightly with fatigue. Albert went to the same spot and felt around, finally touching the invisible step and putting his foot on it.

“I’m impressed. I’m really impressed,” he said as he put his weight on it. “But... a ladder? You can’t beam inside?”

“This is reality, Al,” Dak grunted.

Albert followed Dak upward. At the top, there was nothing, or what appeared to be nothing. Trusting that he could safely follow Dak, he slid his hands forward, found a handhold and pulled himself up then crawled until he reached the open hatch. He was climbing on air in the middle of the woods. Dak was waiting.

Albert felt the invisible door. “You’re freaking kidding me. I can’t get through this.”

“You must.”

The structure of the hull and the inside of the ship beneath was visible and glowing with a dull light. Albert could see the hinge where the hatch met the hull. “Hold on, Dak.” Albert reached in and felt a bent rod. “I think I see your problem, pal.”

Albert scouted around so he could get both hands on the rod then forced it straight. The hatch door immediately extended to a full-open position.

Dak was amazed as he saw what happened. “How did you do that?”

“I’m pretty handy, for a dumb alien.” He peaked inside the ship and saw the ladder leading down. “All clear.” He backed off and motioned to Dak. “After you, sir.”

As Dak lowered himself into the hatch, his body seemed to disappear into the woods. Albert moved back to the opening, imitated Dak's maneuver and dropped to a floor.

Suddenly, he was in a long but narrow room, a hallway of sorts with smooth gray walls and a low ceiling that was glowing faintly. "Jesus Christ," he said softly.

Dak touched a dark plate on the wall, and the hatch fully closed and sealed shut. "Piece of cake," he said. "Follow me to the bridge."

Albert moved after him and soon they came to a larger domed room where he could stand straight. Dak had already sat down at what looked like a control console, trying to catch his breath.

"Computer," he said.

"Xetryiur."

"In the alien language, please," Dak reminded the computer.

"Very well," it replied. *"Ready."*

"Disengage disintegration protocol."

"Done."

"Power levels."

"13 percent."

Dak turned his eyes excitedly to Albert. "Higher than I thought. Much higher. This means by morning the ship may have enough power to activate the disintegration program."

Albert drew back. "Why? Can't you just fix it and get out of here?"

"No. Those men Bradley brought may eventually bump into it long before I have enough power for escape. The universe must be spared your people having access to my technology."

"Set it on automatic and wait for them to give up the search. Then we'll get back to the cabin and..."

"No. They will find it. I must disintegrate with the ship. I had hoped that your people could accept the knowledge of

intelligent life-forms from elsewhere in the universe. We have seen that this would be a problem, haven't we? You are not ready for contact with other life-forms; it is best you keep such knowledge as mere speculation. Man could not handle proof at this point in their evolution."

Albert knew in his heart that Dak was right. The exploitation of his friend that would surely occur would be truly savage. It sickened him, and he tried to justify alternatives, but every path led to the same conclusion: This gentle and wise creature was far superior to man in many more ways than just technology. He deserved to live, but Albert had to respect his friend's position and wishes.

"You're right, of course, I wish..."

"You don't have until morning, partner. They'll be here in five minutes. They'll run into it for sure."

Dak slammed his hand into his fist. He had experienced many new feelings in the last day, and the addition of acute frustration seemed strangely appropriate. "You must stay with me. You can't be seen leaving the ship. If you do, you will give away the location of the hatch. They may bump into it, but they can't get in."

"Computer. Wake."

"*Ready.*"

"Retract Disembark Ladder. Standby."

A slight humming sound was heard. Then silence returned.

A thought occurred to Albert as he looked around him. "Dak, the ship doesn't look too badly damaged. Why can't you fix the power-source and get out of here?"

"Only the power source is damaged. There is very little instruction on fixing anything. Malfunctioning equipment is a complete rarity."

It was a crazy thought. "Let me look at the engine; I used to be quite a mechanic when I was younger. Hey, I fixed the hatch."

Dak grunted a laugh. How impudent. How typically arrogant. “You cannot think you could figure out our technology, do you?”

“Hey, who knows? I took apart a Studebaker once. Maybe you have advanced so far that it became so simple that even lower forms of life like me can understand it.”

It was a curious and valid observation. Simplicity was an inherent quality of higher levels of technology—and lower. Albert’s idea was strangely compelling.

“Computer. Wake,” Dak said, turning to the screen. “Unseal and raise the light levels in Hallway B and the power chamber.” He turned to Albert. “Follow me.”

Albert stooped and trailed after his friend down a narrow hall about twenty feet where Dak touched a dark spot on the wall. The door before them slid open, revealing a round room twelve feet in diameter with a high ceiling. In the center, on a pedestal, was a strange glowing device consisting of two large plates standing on edge, separated by about twelve inches.

“We cannot look at it,” Dak said as he shielded his eyes.

“I can. Use your sunglasses.”

Dak removed his goggles from his jacket and put them on. It was still very bright, but he could manage. Albert walked to the mechanism and examined it. Between the two large plates was a holder that seemed to have once suspended another plate. Obviously, something had cracked the middle plate, and only brilliantly-glowing sliver remained. He looked around the floor and saw the rest of it, darkened to a gray color where it had fallen.

“Dak, old pal, this might be your problem.”

He went to the plate, picked it up and looked it over. There was no doubt that it fit into the holder: the cracked splinter that remained perfectly matched the missing part.

“Looks like it broke off when you crashed.” He went to the assembly, held the gray plate gingerly above the central holder and lowered it slowly into place. As it clicked down, it seemed to fuse to the base and immediately started to glow. Albert quickly withdrew and looked at Dak whose mouth had fallen open with disbelief. The intensity soon matched that of the other slabs then all three brightened together.

Albert wiped his hands off on his shirt and smiled. “Piece of cake.”

“You are a genius!” Dak almost shouted, shielding his eyes but smiling as broadly as he could. “I would not have thought of attempting to fix it. I have never even looked directly at the engine.” All exhaustion was forgotten, replaced by the exhilaration of hope. The humming of the gravity engine grew in intensity, and soon the lights became brighter.

“We must return to the bridge.”

They left the chamber and walked quickly to the main control room.

“Computer. Wake. Power levels.”

“25 percent and rising. Estimate 90 percent in three cretels... five minutes.”

Dak turned his astonished face to Albert, who was beaming back. “I can go home!” he cried. “I can go home!”

The corners of Dak’s mouth bent upward as relief flooded over him. Albert thought he saw moisture around his friend’s wide eyes.

“And open Renja’s pocket a few times, I bet.”

Dak laughed out loud. “Yes. And once for you, my friend.”

Albert frowned. “That’s just sick,” he said then laughed. “But Damn, Dak! This is excellent!” Albert looked at his unlikely friend as he excitedly scanned the instruments coming to life on the display panel. “I’m glad for you, buddy. It is strange, but I think I might miss you.”

“And I will miss you, Albert.” Dak had learned many new things about these fascinating creatures that would augment their physical studies. He knew that man was unique among other life-forms; they have a wildness about them that is frightening and yet, bewitching. He looked at his new friend, feeling a kinship. “Can you go with me?” Dak asked, somewhat to his surprise.

Albert thought a few moments then shook his head. “Too boring on your planet. Anyhow, I think I may have another book to write.”

“I understand. You should leave before the hunters arrive. It will take another six minutes to prepare to return to Meti.”

“Okay.”

“Computer. Lower the Disembark Ladder and prepare for departure. Set course for Meti.”

“*Yes, sir.*”

Albert thought he heard a certain excitement and relief in the metallic voice. But that was impossible.

The two aliens hurried down the hallway and Dak pressed the dark button. When the hatch opened, they clasped hands for a long moment.

Albert rubbed his hand on Dak’s long forehead. “Good luck, my friend.”

He started to climb but turned back for a moment. The new friends nodded as their eyes met; words weren’t needed. Albert pulled himself up onto to the top of the ship and pushed the hatch down behind him until it clicked into position and disappeared. He slid along the invisible surface of the ship, feeling for the ladder down—he couldn’t find it.

Suddenly, the skin of the spacecraft became visible. Dak had turned off the cloaking equipment so Albert could find the ladder and reach the ground safely. Albert knew it was the last

act of friendship and knocked on the surface of the ship in response.

As he jumped the last few feet, two men burst into the clearing.

“Jesus Christ,” they said in unison as they looked up at the edge of the ship whose deep humming was becoming louder. Several more had joined them and stood transfixed, staring in disbelief. As quickly as it appeared, it was gone; the cloaking equipment had been reactivated.

“You better run for it,” Albert said to the now-larger group of gaping-mouthed men. “He’s going to take off any second.”

Albert turned and ran away into the woods.

“Let’s get out of here,” the first man to regain his bearings yelled and followed Albert through the underbrush.

They were halfway up the hill toward the house when they heard a loud whirring noise behind them. Turning, they saw the ship materialize again and right itself then float to about thirty feet above the tree tops. It rocked back and forth a number of times as if to wave a final good-bye then disappeared with a whooshing sound into the sky.

Albert raised his hand. “Bye, Dak.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

After the two-day briefing, the men from the Air Force finally left. Bill Bradley had departed early the first morning, his ego a little smaller from the chewing out he had received from Albert.

It had only taken two days for the news to break and one more for Albert to regain equilibrium and decide to turn off the phone. Finally, it was quiet. He sat down at his laptop and pushed away the several emails from Fox News and CNN, and, yes, even Oprah. To one side lay the waste cube Dak had left behind. It was a welcome reminder that the whole episode was, indeed, real. *I'll have it encased in plastic*, he thought as he opened a new file.

He drew his hand across his tired, puffy eyes, stroked his fat mustache and put his fingers on the keyboard. He would have no problem now; he knew he had, at least, one more story left in him. And this one was a hum-dinger.

'The dull red glow of the space/time coordinate indicator was the first thing Captain Dak saw as he opened his eyes. The terror and confusion of the last two minutes flooded back to him then lifted as he realized that he was alive, still on the bridge of the ship...'

THE END