

When I Get Up in the Morning

By

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Preface

This is a work in process. If you have read some of this before and are returning to find more of the story please be forewarned that some of the material you have already read may have changed. Names, time periods, descriptions and some of the action may have been altered to better connect with the rest of the story. I expect that this type of alteration to the story will continue until I have completed it. It may even happen after it seems to be done. If you have recommendations about the story please feel free to leave comments in the Guest book.

Latest changes as made as of 4/4/2004

Chapter 1

~ Rise and Shine ~

It wasn't a particularly auspicious day as days go, but there was something unusual about it in an unobtrusive way. It was one of those mornings where Kent Holland just felt good about waking up, even though it was still early and there was no reason for him to be so alert. He decided to go ahead and get up even though he should have known that the feeling wouldn't last, and he was right. After getting into the bathroom Kent turned on the radio only to be greeted by a hissing sound instead of the usual morning talk show patter. Assuming he had simply bumped the dial so that it was between stations, he turned the tuning dial up and down the AM broadcast band only to be greeted by a continuing uninterrupted hissing. Of course the radio would pick a morning when he was in a good mood to act up. So, insisting he would not be beaten into submission by a simple cheap radio, Kent switched to FM. What an amazing difference, still just a hissing noise greeted his ears. Again, tuning the dial gave no relief from the monotonous sound. Giving up in defeat, he turned the radio off and continued his morning ritual.

After Kent was cleaned up and dressed he went down to the kitchen and began getting ready to brew some coffee. Absentmindedly he also switched on the small portable TV in the kitchen. More hissing. No stations. Now he really was losing his composure. He could feel his good attitude dwindling rapidly as he changed channels only to find the TV was just as uncooperative as the radio had been just a few minutes before. "Great, now I have to replace a broken

TV as well as that lousy radio,” he said to himself. Not wanting the morning to get the better of him, Kent grabbed his cup of coffee and headed toward the family room and turned on the other TV. Hiss. Click... Click... Click... Click... Click. Now he was finally wondering what was going on. Flipping on the stereo he was again greeted by.... hissssssss. Nothing was working. Now, he was beginning to get a real funny feeling about all of this and began thinking he had somehow entered the Twilight Zone. But he thought to himself, "Come on now. You know that isn't possible. There is some perfectly logical explanation for all of this."

After taking a deep breath and getting his composure back He decided to go outside and pick up the morning paper from the driveway. As he left the front door he got this same funny feeling that something just wasn't quite right, but everything looked fine. Still there was something..... but he just couldn't seem to put his finger on it. “Nuts,” he thought. “The paper hasn't come yet.” No, that wasn't it. He listened. It was too quiet. Not just normal quiet, but too quiet. No birds, no traffic in the distance, no cars pulling out of garages, no dogs barking, no kids on the way to school. Too quiet. Way too quiet. Kent looked all around him and everything looked perfectly normal. Houses, cars, clouds in the sky, but no noise and no newspapers in anyone's driveway. Spooky, but he couldn't believe that what was going on was really the way it seemed. For some reason he felt he must be just jumpy because of having a broken radio and a couple of wacko TV sets.

So, Kent decide to shrug it off and go back into the house and finish getting ready for work. Getting his things together he was finally on his way. He got into the car in

the garage and pushed the button to raise the garage door. "Ahhhh, at least something works right around here!" he exclaimed to the rising door. The door raised, he started the car and backed it out. As he did, he turned on the car radio by force of habit. Somehow though, he was not surprised by the unrelenting hissing and absence of stations. "That's it," he thought. "There has been a power outage that is affecting all of the radio and TV stations in the city. That's all it is. Nothing to get jumpy about. Sure, that's it," he reasoned. Kent then proceeded to turn off the radio and continued backing out into the street. He put the car into drive and headed for work.

After a couple of turns he was approaching the main street near his house. "What in the world is going on here?" He couldn't help from exclaiming out loud. Now he was beginning to get the shakes. There were no cars on the main street. There were always a bunch of cars driving by at this time of day. Not that day though. Hissing radio, hissing TV, no birds, no cars driving by. Images from old Twilight Zone shows flashed through his mind. "That's silly. Why can't I stop shaking?" He sat for a while just staring up and down the street as if just waiting for someone to come by, but no one did. Finally, he decided to drive on toward work. As Kent turned right onto the main street he checked for traffic by force of habit then suddenly felt very silly for having done so.

As he was driving down the street things didn't get better. For block after block there was simply no one around. There were no cars, no kids, no cats, no dogs, no birds..... nothing moving anywhere. Kent found himself stopping at traffic lights and watching for the cross traffic that never appeared. At one intersection he purposely drove through the red stoplight. He thought, "If there is at least one police

officer in this town it is as certain as death and taxes that he will pull me over and give me a ticket and end this nightmare.” No luck, no police. Where are they when you need them? He drove by a donut shop. No, they weren't there either. He couldn't help but chuckle. He sure wished the stereotype worked this time.

Finally, Kent pulled over to the side of the road, although he kind of wondered at the time why he didn't just stop in the middle of the street under the circumstances. He found himself asking all kinds of questions and all of the answers seem to be, "I don't know." "Am I dead?" He didn't feel dead. "I don't look dead....at least to me." For a dead man he seemed to be driving a car pretty well. So, no he didn't think he was dead. "In that case is everyone else dead? HMMMM." It seemed to him that there would be some evidence of that around somewhere. Visions of bodies lying around all over the place entered his mind and this left him shaking even more. But, no there were no bodies lying around. "Maybe I've snapped. It's happened. I've stressed-out, wiggled-out and am playing with half-a-deck and my elevator is no longer going clear to the top floor. Do crazy people ever ask themselves if they have gone crazy?" This seemed doubtful. "Still, maybe I'm the exception."

There didn't seem to be any other rational explanations. "Crazy, that must be it. I've lost touch with reality. Either there are people here and I can't see them or maybe I'm not really here at all. I'm locked up in a rubber room somewhere and just hallucinating all of this." Kent took a few deep breaths trying to get the sakes under control. "No! I'm not crazy. There is no reason for me to be crazy. Things haven't been going bad; there is just no reason for me to go off the deep end. And this all seems entirely real.

No inconsistencies like you have in a dream. This is the city where I live, this is the car I have driven for the last five years, these are the buildings I drive by every week day on my way to work.” He struggled to get hold of himself. “This is real! I am real! This is happening!”

Then he started to wonder if whatever was happening was just here or was it everywhere? It couldn't be everywhere. He wondered about his family that was scattered all over the country. His father in LA. His mother in Albuquerque. His sister in Dallas. His aunts, uncles and cousins. His friends. “This can't be real, but what if it is?” he thought to himself. He reached for his cell phone, “Damn.” With all the craziness this morning he had forgotten to pull it out of the charger and stick it in his pocket. Then he realized he was trying to make sense out of something that made no sense. He just wanted to hear his alarm ringing and find out this was all just a bad dream. Everything about his whole life was just..... gone.

As Kent sat there trying to keep from going crazy, he began to hear a far off noise. At first he thought it was the car making some new obnoxious noise so he turned it off. The new noise was still there, but from inside the car it was hard to tell where it was coming from. Still scared to death, he stepped out of the car to see if he could tell where the noise was coming from. It seemed to be off to the right and ahead of where he was headed. “Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained,” he mumbled. He got back into the car and started driving in the direction of the noise. He kept hoping the noise meant people.

After driving several blocks in what he thought was the right direction, he stopped and got out of the car again to see if he was still on the right track. Yes, it was still ahead.

A few blocks further and.....yes here it was. He didn't know what was going on but it certainly seemed that he had found the source of the noise. It's was an almost deafening rumble now coming from a small building in the middle of a vacant lot. Funny he didn't remember this area having a vacant lot, but then again he didn't really remember driving around this particular part of town either. "Well, I guess it's time to find out what is going on," he said to no one and commenced to get out of the car and headed toward the building.

As he got closer it occurred to him that calling this, whatever it is, a building was not quite accurate. It was a cube, about fifty feet on each side with no windows and one unusual door on one of the sides facing him. He decided to walk completely around the building once before trying the door and discovered there were no other openings. No other doors or windows. Walking up to the door he found himself at a loss. It was hard enough to think in the deafening thunder coming from the building, but now he found that he was faced with a door that had no doorknob, push-buttons, handles, catches or hinges. Still, Kent was convinced it was a door though he was not sure why. So, he tried to push on it. Nothing. He tried to get his fingers into the crack enough to pull. No luck. Trusty Swiss Army knife. Nothing doing. The constant thunder from the building was really getting on his nerves now. Finally, in some combination of desperation, anger and frustration he kicked the door just as hard as he could. The door didn't budge, but the thundering noise changed. Still it was just as loud as ever but now at a slightly higher pitch.

Convinced that this building had something to do with what was going on and was keeping him from finding out what was happening he got increasingly angry. He kicked it

again even harder. The door still didn't budge, but the thundering sound raised in pitch to a hum. This made him even madder and he kicked it again. Now it was wailing. Kick. Whistling. Kick. Shrieking. Kick. Squealing. Kick. Silence..... "Oh brother," he thought. "Now I've done it." He found himself holding his breath waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. Silence, just silence. "Oh, well... what have I got to lose at this point." He gave it one more kick. The door slid open without a sound. "Great," he thought to himself, "now I've really gone and done it." Not really knowing what "it" might be.

After an eternity of seconds Kent finally pulled himself together enough to creep forward to the now open doorway. All he could see was black. It was a bright sunny day outside but the inside of the building was so dark that he couldn't see anything. It was kind of like walking into a movie theater after the movie had started. After just a couple of steps forward he realized that stepping through the doorway might not be such a great idea. After all, he didn't really kick the door down. The building sort of let him enter in response to his kicking. There was just no way to know if it was going to be as cooperative about letting him back out once he got in. After thinking about this for a moment he decided to go back out to his car and look for something he could use to keep the door jammed open just in case.

After a few moments of looking around in the trunk of the car he decided that his old tool box itself was probably the best answer. Lugging it back to the building he set it in the doorway with one last grunt and shoved it into position. "There," he thought, "that should keep the door from closing on me." Kent reasoned that even if the door did try to close the tool box would keep it jammed open far enough

that he could squeeze by and still get out relatively unscathed. Once again he began entering the building only to find himself rather suddenly disoriented by the darkness. Stopping for a moment to let his eyes adjust and regain his sense of balance, he realized the inside of the building was not totally dark. There was a dim light in the room, but it was not coming from any specific source. It was as if the walls themselves were glowing slightly giving him enough light to begin to see around inside the building.

Unfortunately, even with the cooperative lighting of the building he found that there wasn't much to see. Nothing actually. The walls of the building were large, smooth, and completely devoid of attachments, protrusions, decorations, or anything at all. Because it was so hard to see anything on the hard featureless surface, he began feeling all along the wall as he walked around the inside of the building. After all, there wasn't much else to do. The inside of the building was completely empty except for him. After he completed one circuit from the door all of the way around the building and back to the doorway he felt pretty discouraged. There wasn't so much as a rough spot on the wall. Well out of his reach and stretching almost 50 feet above were all of the rest of the 4 walls and the ceiling hanging over his head.

Kent was sure this building had something to do with what had been happening. Yet, it also was defying all of his attempts at getting to its secrets. Whatever made the noise must have been hidden in the walls, yet he could find no sign of it. He was certain the building must have a purpose, but there were no clues to what that purpose might be. The building reacted to his kicking and allowed him inside but now was totally ignoring his presence. After deciding that he might have pushed his luck too far Kent start heading for

the doorway. After all, it occurred to him, the building might just stop ignoring him at any time and he was not sure what the reaction might be. Visions of being inside a gigantic trash compactor flash through his mind. He reached the opening and stepped over the tool box just as the door began to close. The tool box became jammed between the door and the edge of the doorway and the door itself simply stopped moving. It didn't crush the tools or rebound. It simply stopped, as if it had done its best and didn't really care that it was incapable of closing completely.

Once again Kent was faced with the reality that he appeared to be totally alone. After leaving the building he was struck even more strongly with this realization. Here he was trying to out think a building and forgetting that everyone was gone. But, he didn't really forget and now it was brought home even more. So, he decided to retrieve his tool box and go see what else unusual might be happening around the city. The door didn't resist his effort to dislodge the tool box, but as soon as he had removed it the door finished closing. He was tempted to begin kicking it again, but he decided not to do so. He really didn't want to know whether it might not ignore him next time.

After throwing his tool box back into the trunk of the car, he got back in and started the engine. It occurred to him that this is about the point in the old horror movies where the car fails to start, but in fact it roared to life and was ready to go wherever he commanded. He finally decided to drive on into the center of town. It just seemed logical that whatever had affected the city might just be right in the middle of it. Of course he realized that he was not hearing radio stations from anywhere period, but still he hoped whatever was going on was just local.

As he drove toward the center of town he was abruptly startled by something moving besides him. A shadow flashed over the car. "It must be a plane passing overhead," he thought. "A plane!" Kent slammed on the brakes, jumped out of the car, and started spinning around looking up into the morning sky. Finally he saw a small speck in the sky now quite far away and receding with astonishing speed. It was already too far away to see what kind of plane it might have been. By the way it got out of sight so quickly though he feeling quite sure it was not a passenger plane, but more likely a small private jet or military fighter. Still, there was the nagging feeling that even as far away as it was it should have looked more familiar. He chalked this passing feeling up to being jittery, and rightfully so, and got back into the car.

Well, at least now he knew there was something else moving around the city besides just him. So, he started paying a little more attention at intersections as he continued his drive through town. The thought crossed his mind that there used to be a joke about the last two people on the face of the earth getting into a car wreck. It seemed that they ran into each other at an intersection in the middle of nowhere, but he couldn't remember the whole joke. Now the punch line seemed like it would be kind of meaningless. As he turned a corner near the center of town a familiar unusual sight greeted him. There it stood; an empty square block with a lone 50 foot featureless cubical building sitting in the middle of it. "Well, at least this one isn't roaring at me," he thought. However, he wondered if it was also making noise earlier and whether it might have stopped at the same time the other building did.

Kent pulled the car over to the side of the road and parked it. He still hadn't gotten used to the idea that it would be perfectly safe to stop right in the middle of the street. He sat there a few moments thinking about what he should do next. Should he go over and see if this building also has a door? He couldn't see one, but that doesn't mean there isn't one on the other side. If he found a door, should he kick it like he did the other one? Should he just leave it alone? Should he just go somewhere else and forget about this second building? He decided he had to at least go over and have a look at the building just to see if it also had a door. If he found one he had decided to go ahead and kick it if it didn't respond to more subtle methods of persuasion.

As he reached the building and began walking around it he saw that in fact this building also had one doorway that was still closed. He stood in front of it for a while then tried pushing on it. Nothing. He knocked on it. Nothing. He pounded on it with his fists. Nothing. Finally, he went ahead and started kicking. Sure enough, the door started to open. One last kick and it slid silently out of the way to reveal the interior of the building.

There were no surprises there. It was another totally empty interior. It had the same subtle lighting, and same featureless smooth walls. This time he didn't even bother to get his tool box door stop. He wasn't even interested in going inside. Whatever the secrets of these buildings he was convinced that they are going to stay well hidden from him at least for the time being. Suddenly he started feeling overwhelmed with everything that had been happening. He certainly didn't feel like the hero in some novel who charges off into the unknown taking on every adversary without a moment's hesitation. That just wouldn't be him; he was a normal everyday person who was now faced with

the most abnormal situation he could possibly imagine. This wasn't something he was trained for, and he certainly was not ready to take on this challenge like the Terminator, or even Buzz Lightyear for that matter.

So, for the moment he just sat on the ground leaning up against this improbable building and stared at the other buildings around him. Then the realization hit him that he had better make sure that some practical things are taken care of before the sun went down. He needed to make sure that everyday necessities were still available and plentiful for the time being, however long that may be. At this point he was beginning to wonder if this situation was going to be resolved somehow in hours, days, months or years. "Naw, can't be that long," he thought. What a thought.

Kent said out loud, "OK, it's time to get up off my rear and start taking care of business." He got back to his car and realized much to his chagrin that it looked like the first order of business would be to find a gas station. He had forgotten he had intended to get gas on his way into work that morning. Now, it was getting emptier than empty and he had better find some gas in the next four or five miles. It occurred to him that he didn't remember the gas tank being quite that low just yesterday but he chalked it up to being a little rattled under the circumstances.

As he pull into a gas station he realized this might not be as easy as he first thought. He usually used his bank debit card to get gas, but he was wondering if this was going to work today. Well, maybe..... After all, the traffic lights had been working. But, luck was not with him in this instance. The display on the pump showed, "ERROR" and there was no response to pushing any of the buttons. So, not being ready to give up just yet he went inside to see if there is

some kind of switch which would override the computerized stuff and get the pump running. Never having worked in a convenience store before he was not familiar with how this might be done, but it sure seemed possible. After spending 15 minutes looking around and pushing buttons he finally conceded defeat at the hands of the computer gods, but at least he had an idea.

Across the street was an auto parts store and they should have just what he needed. After breaking the window in the front door, and feeling terribly guilty about it, he went inside and found just what he was looking for; a gasoline siphon. Again feeling guilty for walking out without trying to pay, but wondering why he should be feeling that way, he went to his car which was parked near another car in the parking lot. He briefly wondered who the owner of this car might have been, then he flipped open the gas filler door. Using the siphon he drained 5 gallons of gas into a gas can he brought with him from the store. Then he transferred the contents to his tank and went back for more. He only got another 4 gallons before his source of supply was exhausted, but 9 gallons would do fine for the time being and there were plenty of other cars around to choose from. After all, 9 gallons should give him a couple of hundred miles to work with he thought.

Putting all his gas pumping equipment into the trunk of his car he set out for the nearest grocery store. The first store he saw had a large banner hanging on the front proclaiming, "Open 24 Hours". Well, it occurred to him; at least he shouldn't have to deal with any locked doors this time. As he swung into a parking place he realized just how much of a creature of habit he was. Without anyone around he still insisted on parking in a regular parking place having even passed by the handicapped spaces. It would actually have

been rather comforting right about now to get a ticket for illegally parking in a handicapped zone. So, he decided he would try it the next time he parked the car.

As he walked up to the front doors of the store he began wondering if the automatic door opener would be working, and much to his relief it did. A quick look around the store confirmed that this would not be one of those days where you have to wait long in line. In fact, it looked like everything would be on sale for 100% discount today, and maybe for a lot of days to come. The thought of just how many days that might be gave him the shakes and he put it out of his mind rather quickly. Since Kent knew he didn't really need anything right away and since the store was obviously well stocked he decided to leave without taking advantage of the tremendous sale prices.

On his way out of the store he glanced down at the newspaper racks to see if there were any papers. Sure enough there were some. He figured they were probably from yesterday, but what the heck. He dropped in a coin and opened the hood and grabbed one of the papers. Opening it to the headlines he was left even more confused. The headline just seemed to make no sense. "President Williams Surveys Flood Damage in Virginia." President Williams..... President Williams..... Who the heck is President Williams? The president was Sam Colton. What was this nonsense about a President Williams? There was even a picture. It was the typical not-so-high-quality newspaper picture of someone totally unfamiliar. Feeling a little unsteady he walked over to a nearby bench and sat down and again stared at the newspaper. He was really beginning to feel like he was losing his mind. Then, he happened to glance at the date at the top of the page just to see if this was actually yesterday's paper or today's paper.

Since he was looking to see if it said Wednesday or Thursday, he was first a little dismayed to see that it said Friday. Then almost immediately he noticed the month and year. This paper was dated almost 10 years in the future.

Chapter 2

~ World Ends, news at 11 ~

After a little bit of mental calculation he concluded that the paper was dated about 9 years and 10 months in the future. Or another possibility was that he had somehow lost not only everyone in the world but also the last 9 years and 10 months of his life as well. Neither possibility seemed particularly appealing. Then he realized that he was still just sitting and staring at the newspaper as if staring would somehow make it right or make it go away. It also occurred to him that this might not be yesterday or today's paper and even more time might have elapsed between his yesterday and this today than the 9 years and 10 months confronting him in the newspaper. How could he find out? His watch! Sure, it had a month, day and year display.

That's it, just hit the right button. Great, his watch thinks it's Thursday, just like he did. It was also 9 years and 10 months out of wack with the newspaper. Well there were other watches in this world. He walked back into the store and went over to the Camera and Photo department where, sure enough, they had some watches. Still feeling a little guilty he broke into the display case and grabbed one of the watches. After punching a few buttons he eventually was greeted by the information he was searching for. It looked like that wasn't yesterday's paper after all. According to the watch, he was 10 years and one month out of synch with the world. The newspaper was three months old. "Guess that explains why it looks so yellow," he thought.

Then he thought that he was probably looking a little yellow about now too.

“OK, I need some answers, and so far I am not getting many,” he said to the watch. “Where can I find out what has been going on?” As he was turning to leave the store he saw a small portable TV in the store. Of course, why didn’t he think of this before? He ran over to the telephone booth outside the front entrance and opened the directory to look up the address of one of the local TV stations. There it was. Committing it to memory, he dropped the book and began running to his car.

After a quick drive to the station he approached the entrance. Trying the front door he was rather surprised, but also thankful, to find it was not locked. As he entered the station lobby he thought how impressed he had always been when the hero of a story always seems to know exactly where he is going and what to do when he gets there. Let’s see.... door number 1.... Door number 2.... Or door number 3? No hurry and he really didn't have to be right the first time so door number 1 it is. Broom closet. Oh well, it’s not like anyone saw him do it. So, door number 2 then.

This door was much more rewarding. After going down a hallway past several offices he finally saw some signs that he was approaching a studio area. Newsroom. Yes! That’s the sign he was hoping for. Good, he thought, there was video equipment in here and tapes lying around. Some stored up on shelves had labels. Looking over the labels he was relieved to see just what he was looking for. These were tapes of daily news broadcasts covering the last couple of months. Pulling down the last tape on the shelf he took it over to the video recorder and inserted it, turned on the monitor and punched Playback. Thankfully, the tape

had already been rewound and an evening news broadcast began to fill the screen.

The opening segment finally finished and a local news commentator appeared on the screen. Strangely Kent didn't recognize the face, but at this point he was not sure whether he would recognize his own mother. The announcer looked visibly shaken. "Good evening," he began, "As we all know now, it was almost 10 years ago that the alien probe entered our system. At the time there was much excitement and enthusiasm over the plans to recover the probe even though we did not know what it was at the time. Now, however, it seems that recovering the probe was one of the worst mistakes of mankind. The disruptions that at first were not even noticed have now reached epidemic proportions. As a result this station will leave the air in just a few minutes. We take this step with deep regret, yet all of us have been severely affected as have all of you out there. Many of us have lost family members, friends, and co-workers to the phenomena. Now it comes to this. As we shut down our broadcast facilities we will attempt to leave them in an operational condition in the hope that the situation will somehow improve. So, I would encourage you to tune your TV sets to this channel from time to time in the hope of seeing us back on the air. With that we want to wish those of you who are left the very best and our hopes and prayers are with you as we are sure yours are with us. May God protect us." At this point the TV station logo replaced the announcer for a couple of minutes then the tape ended leaving Kent viewing the snowy screen he had gotten so familiar with just this morning.

Well that was certainly a little maddening. Now Kent knew something, but he wasn't really sure exactly what. Clearly this was going to take more research to determine what

happened ten years ago, how some alien spacecraft was involved and what this phenomena was that the announcer was talking about. However, the most maddening thing was trying to reconcile a 10 year old problem with his life that was perfectly normal just yesterday. He certainly didn't know anything about a spacecraft appearing 10 years ago, and nothing about any disturbances that were getting worse and worse.

For a few moments Kent just sat there, not knowing what he should do next. Should he start plodding through the shelves of tapes attempting to put together what had been happening? Should he go somewhere else? Should he just go try to do something normal and get his mind off of all the craziness? Yes, that sounded good. He was quite sure that whatever was going on would probably wait for him to get something to eat. Carefully he removed the tape from the video recorder and placed it back into its holder and returned it to the shelf where he had found it. No need to make a mess of the place he reasoned. Then he headed out of the building and back to his car.

Food was next on Kent's agenda, but where should he head he wondered. Fast food places were certainly out even though he was tempted to go to the nearest one just to be sure. It seemed like the best idea was a grocery store, so starting the car he drove to the nearest one he could remember.

Kent was only just beginning to get the hang of not stopping at intersections, or even slowing down, but just a block before reaching the Value-Mart a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye caused him to slide to a stop in the middle of a major cross street. What he had seen he wasn't completely sure, but no sooner had the car

come to a stop than he flung the door open and jumped out and began searching the skyline. He was sure he had seen something. Perhaps it was the same thing that he had glimpsed earlier. Looking between buildings he finally caught sight of the aircraft, or whatever it was. It didn't quite look like a plane, but Kent was struggling to determine just exactly what he should call it when it abruptly changed directions and disappeared as his view was blocked by a nearby building. "Damn!" He just wished that whatever it was had been closer. The brief sight had just magnified the loneliness that was beginning to sink in now.

As he stood there in the middle of the intersection he began to appreciate just how alone he felt. Now he knew whatever happened had probably happened a long time ago even though to him it seemed like just yesterday everything was perfectly normal. This was something he had trouble reconciling, but he was beginning to accept it as an inescapable fact. So, not only were people gone, but they had probably been gone a long time and he was terribly unlikely to find anyone. The aloneness was becoming overwhelming and he began sinking to his knees right there in the middle of the street. Praying yet not knowing what to pray he continued to look at the sky. Then he saw the aircraft reappear and realized this was no ordinary plane.

It was moving through the air, but not exactly flying. It was moving something like a helicopter, but clearly was not that either. Part of the time its motion was slow and smooth, yet at time the motions were rather abrupt as if the craft didn't find it necessary to bank or make arcing turns. Instead it made some right angle turns without ever noticeably slowing. It almost seemed to be tracing a pattern in the sky rather than just going someplace. It reminded

Kent of the times he had seen police helicopters orbiting the area of a crime while they were searching for someone.

Rather abruptly it occurred to Kent that possibly they were actually looking for him. Maybe they had noticed his car moving down the street just about the same time he noticed them. “Them?” He laughed out loud. That word conjured up visions of an old science fiction movie about giant ants. Yet he did feel that someone was in that aircraft and they certainly appeared to be looking for something, but now he wasn’t exactly sure he wanted to be found. Kent recalled the somewhat cryptic video tape account and knew he didn’t really know enough to be real sure he actually wanted to be found by whoever was up there looking things over.

Kent knew that something in motion was a lot easier to spot from the air than something stationary. He remembered this from the airline trips he had taken for work. Cars and people moving were always more noticeable. Yet he wanted to get out of the middle of the street so he began slowly making his way to the nearest building that he felt would offer him some semblance of protection against being observed.

At this point he cursed himself for the one time he had chosen to stop his car right in the middle of the street, but there was nothing he could do about that now. He just hoped that his car wouldn’t attract too much attention from above. As he moved out of easy line of sight of the craft, he also wanted to continue observing it as it came closer to his position. He was hoping there would be some markings or identification of some kind that would give him a clue whether he should want to attract their attention or continue avoiding them.

Kent was now pretty well concealed in the entryway of a building where he could still continue to observe the craft that came steadily closer. The craft continued its pattern until finally it was directly over his car. “Damn!” Kent cursed again out loud. Of all the stupid times to stop where he did, he thought, but there was nothing to be done about that now but watch and wait.

The craft simply hovered over the car and slowly descended. Kent guessed that it was probably couple of thousand feet in the air while it had been searching. Finally it stopped its decent at maybe two hundred feet. This was giving Kent a real good look at it and something else as well. For the first time he heard the sound. It was that same low rumbling he had heard earlier coming from the first white cube building he had encountered just this morning. It wasn’t terribly loud but it was unmistakable.

The craft just hung there for what seemed like an eternity. Kent tried hard to really understand what he was looking at. It wasn’t easy. This didn’t look like anything he had ever seen before. The craft was very dark and was triangular in shape. It reminded Kent of a B2 bomber he had seen flying over the Pasadena Tournament of Roses Parade. Lord, how long ago was that? Of course, this thing just hanging there in the sky conflicted with him being able to think of it as a B2. This thing clearly was not “flying.” Whatever was keeping it in the air obviously had nothing to do with aerodynamic wings, jet engines, or helicopter rotors.

Then Kent noticed the craft was slowly rotating as if surveying the surroundings very slowly. He was pretty certain his vantage point was well concealed, but he noticed that he was beginning to get the shakes. This was getting to

him. He wanted to get inside the building to hide, but was sure if he moved he would likely be spotted. So he waited and watched as the craft continued to rotate.

As he watched, he concluded that the sharpest point of the triangle might likely be the “front” of the craft if there was any such thing as a front to it. Slowly the front was coming around in his direction. Closer. Closer. Closer. Then it felt to Kent like his heart just stopped. With the front of the craft pointing directly at him, it stopped rotating. Kent wanted to run, hide, dig a hole, break through a wall, something, anything. He desperately wanted to be anywhere but where he was. At the same time he was just frozen in place except for shaking like crazy at this point.

The craft just hung there for years. Actually it was just seconds, but it seemed like years to Kent. As Kent watched in horror, the nose of the craft began dipping down until it was pointed directly at him. Again it stopped moving and just hung there doing nothing. Kent pictured himself being blown into oblivion at any instant by some unimaginable weapon from the strange craft. Seconds ticked by for what seemed like hours. Then it happened. The nose of the craft slowly began to rise back to its original position. When it was again level, the nose rotated away from Kent and the craft began slowly moving away.

Kent was simultaneously relieved and disappointed. Maybe he should have run out in plain sight and waved at them? What would they have done? One thing is for sure, however, they knew he was there, exactly where, and he was certain they could have removed him from the face of the earth in an instant, but they didn't. The only explanation seemed to be that they were trying to show him

that they meant him no harm, but wanted him to know they knew he was there.

Kent could still see the craft between intervening buildings as it continued to move toward the edge of town. It began slowing and eventually came to a stop. Then it started descending. At this point Kent was betting they knew he could see them and whatever they were doing was somehow for his benefit. After standing there for a couple of minutes he finally exclaimed, "What the heck!" He then walked from his hiding place, as little good as it was, and went back to his car.

Making a mental note of approximately where he thought the craft had descended, he started the car and began making his way toward the edge of town. Surely this was crazy, but what else could he do? Keep hiding? What was the point? Whatever was going on around here, someone in that craft might know what it was and he wasn't going to find out by hiding in the doorways of empty buildings. Kent concluded that whoever was in that thing apparently didn't mean him any immediate harm, and just might be of some help.

Chapter 3

~ Close Encounter of the Strange Kind ~

Kent wasn't sure what to think any longer. Nothing was making sense and he felt more and more like he was stuck in the middle of some bizarre nightmare. As he drove toward the edge of town he couldn't help but think of normal things he had originally intended to do today.

He had a list of things sitting on his desk at work that he was going to get right on this morning, or, rather, this morning about 10 years ago. This left him wondering if he was really older and just missing 10 years of his life, like having amnesia. This caused him to reach up and swing the rear view mirror so he could see himself in it. It wasn't like he had to watch for traffic. He took a good look while still paying enough attention to keep from swerving all over the road. He was particularly studying his hair. He figured if he really was ten years older there ought to be a significant change in the graying that had just started happening to him. One good look confirmed what he felt already. He not only didn't feel ten years older, but he didn't look ten years older either.

The whole day had been so weird that only now was he beginning to comprehend some really basic truths, or at least things he was assuming to be true now. Everyone he knew was gone. Family. Friends. Co-workers. All gone. The loneliness hit him right in the stomach giving him an intense sinking feeling. It made him think for a moment about all those heroes in the movies who are cut off from

everyone around them but just keep carrying on as if everything was alright.

Kent found himself slowing down and pulling over to the side of the road. He pulled to a stop, turned off the engine and got out of the car. He walked over to the curb and sat down and began to cry. He had lost them all. Were they all dead? Had they all just gone somewhere? He even wondered if he himself were dead. How could he tell? He just cried.

It's hard to know how long he would have sat there if he had been left alone, but being left alone was just not in the cards that day. As he sat there and cried he heard the rumble that he had heard for the first time just this morning. "Damn you! Just leave me alone!" Kent screamed to the sky. Then he whimpered, "Please just leave me alone....." The rumble didn't obey or oblige and just continued to the point where he felt like it was probing him and prodding him to get moving. "Alright! Alright! Have it your way." Kent picked himself up, feeling like he weighed a thousand pounds, and got back into the car while wiping the tears from his eyes with his shirtsleeve.

The car started flawlessly and once again Kent began making progress in the direction of the strange craft he had seen earlier. As he drove he had to consciously avoid thinking of people. He was afraid he would lose what little control he had if he let his mind wander in that direction. Instead he let himself ponder more mundane things. If he was 10 years out of step with the world, who had paid the rent on his apartment? Why had there still been the quarter tank of gas in his car? Why was the battery in his car not dead? Why did everything in his apartment look just as it had the night before?

Kent realized that he must be getting pretty close to the place where he saw the craft descend. This gave him the shakes momentarily. He was excited, anxious, and fearful all at the same time. Part of him wanted to know what the craft was all about, and another part just wanted to hear his alarm go off and realize this was all just some crazy nightmare and he just needed to get ready for work like any other weekday morning.

Yes, he thought to himself, the craft ought to be very near now, and it was. As he rounded the corner he saw it sitting on the ground in a large empty area just off the road. It was bigger than he had expected. Kent figured it must be about a hundred feet on a side and the top was at least thirty feet in the air. It was sitting on legs. There was a leg at each corner and large round pads at the base of each. It reminded Kent of the feet on the Lunar module that had gone to the moon during the Apollo days. Yes, “One small step for man,” he mumbled.

With that, he proceeded along the road right next to the craft and at the closest point he pulled the car over and stopped. Then he wondered if he should turn the car off, or sit there with the engine running just in case he needed to make a quick getaway. “Yeah, right. Like I would be able to out run them.” He turned off the car and stepped out still wondering if this was really a wise idea.

As he stood there beside the car watching the craft he noticed an opening appearing on the underside. A ramp way was dropping from the lower half of the craft and finally rested on the ground. Then he saw it in the doorway. It was hard to make out exactly what he saw, but clearly this wasn't an ordinary person. Whatever it was

began making its way down the ramp and was obviously looking directly at him. As Kent tried to make sense of what he was seeing the best he could do was think of a praying mantis. It had a triangular head that was broad at the top and narrow at the chin with a pair of overly large eyes near the top corners of its head. The body was spindly but moved with a strong but deliberate motion.

Then Kent noticed that it had some kind of equipment that was attached near its mid section and it was using one hand to make some adjustments as it approached him. Kent was surprised that he was standing his ground and not running as it finally stopped a mere twenty feet in front of him. Finally it made a sound and totally astonished Kent.

“Hola. Como estas?”

“What?” Kent was in momentary shock as visions of the Taco Bell dog flashed in his mind.

The creature immediately made some adjustment to the equipment again. Its hand was making some movements along the side of the box.

“I’m sorry. A mistake. Hello. How are you?”

“Ummm, OK? Hello. Who are you?” Kent felt overwhelmingly inarticulate.

“Oh good, I have gotten it right.” The creature made an interesting tilt of its head that increased the illusion of being a praying mantis. “Even with all the practice I was worried this might not work. I am Gerard. Please do not be afraid. I mean you no harm. I am hoping we can be of assistance to each other.”

“OK. I guess I was kind of hoping the same thing. Can you understand me alright?”

“Oh yes, thank you. My hearing is adequate for your voice range and I have been studying your languages for a long time. However, I do need this,” indicating the box, “because our ability to vocalize is not consistent with being able to produce the sounds of your language.” Gerard’s hands were flying fast and furiously along the side of the box.

“I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but your name is Gerard? I mean, you’re an alien. Since when would an alien be named Gerard?”

“Good point. Actually my name is not Gerard, but there would be no adequate way for you to pronounce my real name so I was forced to pick something appropriate to your language and vocal capability. I can pick something else if you would prefer.”

“Oh, no. That’s OK. It just struck me as funny talking to an alien named Gerard.”

“In picking the name I tried to find something that would be related to my duties as a translator. In searching the history of your planet I found that there was a famous translator named Gerard of Cremona, who had traveled from Italy to Toledo specially to find a copy of Ptolemy’s famous book of astronomy, the Almagest. Gerard then stayed on in Toledo to translate Archimedes, Hippocrates, Galen and Euclid - the classics of Greek science. The name appealed to me and I appropriated it for my own.”

“Oh, OK. I get it.” Kent paused wondering how to ask then finally blurted out, “Do you know why there is no one around?”

“Well, yes and no. In fact I was hoping you knew more than I do. We are a little at a loss to understand what has happened here as well. We know some, but were rather hoping you might be able to explain some things.”

“We?”

“Oh, yes. Please excuse my rudeness. There are 12 of us aboard the Bright Star.” Gerard pointed toward the craft. “I am the only one that is able to converse adequately in your language but the crew is most anxious to meet you soon if you don’t mind?”

“Well, yeah.... OK... I guess that would be fine.” Kent was feeling a little inadequate as the sole representative of earth to these people? “I’m guessing Bright Star is not the real name of your ship?”

“That’s quite right, but Bright Star is a reasonable translation of its name.”

“OK, I get the idea.” Kent was at a loss what else to say.

“Excellent. We need not rush. Perhaps it would be best if I explain to you what we know of the situation?”

“I really would appreciate it.” Kent was feeling relieved at not having to go first.

“Well, before I begin I just want to let you know that we are not responsible for the odd situation at the moment. We are trying to piece together what is going on as you also seem to be doing. By the way we were extremely overjoyed to have encountered you.

“Now, for us this situation has been unfolding for about the equivalent of what I believe you refer to as fifty thousand years.”

“Wait a minute. You are telling me you are fifty thousand years old?”

“Well, yes and no. This did happen fifty thousand years ago, and we were there, but I assure you we are not that old. Please bear with me and I will try to explain that a little later.”

“OK.”

“As I was saying, at that time we were in transit between the Gamma and Beta sectors searching for ore deposits that might be worth mining. I hope you understand that Gamma and Beta are not their names in our language.

“Anyway, while we were doing standard scans we stumbled upon something that was obviously a craft or probe of some sort that was crossing our course. The Captain decided we should investigate. Occurrences of this sort are extremely rare and one never knows how important a find something like this just might be.

“We pulled near the probe a few days later and did some short range detailed scans of it. It was clearly not just a derelict of some sort. It was still operational, but

apparently not exactly fully functional. The best we could determine was that the power source of the probe was very near the end of its operational life, but given the decay rate it was still likely to be functional for a few thousand years.

“Our science officer found this extremely interesting. None of our species has ever encountered an unknown probe in free space that was still operational. Very rarely derelicts are found, but never something still functioning.

“Not wanting to prevent the probe from doing whatever it was designed to do we simply followed it for several days and examined it. We carefully measured its course and projected possible destinations with our charts. It was then that we determined that in about fifty thousand years the probe would enter this planetary system.

“We didn’t know if this was its destination but it seemed possible so the Captain had us make sure our work would bring us back to your system at the predicted arrival time of the probe. That gets me to how this happened fifty thousand years ago even though our lifespan is a mere five hundred years.”

“Mere five hundred?”

“Well, yes. I realize many species live much longer, but we are pretty proud of what we accomplish ever with our short lifespan.”

“You think five hundred years is short? Do you know what our lifespan is?”

“Well, actually I guess I don’t. I never really thought to study that I suppose.”

“Well if we’re lucky we might live eighty or ninety years but a lot don’t live longer than seventy.”

“Oh, I had no idea. And yet you built this?” Gerard pointed toward the city.

“Well, yeah.”

“You are an amazing species.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“I hope I have not offended you?”

“No, Gerard. It’s alright really. Please go on.”

“Well, the reason we encountered the probe but are here today talking about it is that we were busy doing our job. We locate ore deposits in various places and set up mining operations. However, much of our business includes travel between planetary systems at very near the speed of light.

“While we were there fifty thousand years ago it is only the equivalent of about three years for us because we have spent so much time near light speed recently. The time dilation effect.....

“I’m sorry. The what?”

“As a person travels at a speed closer and closer to the speed of light, time gets slower and slower. If we had been traveling at exactly light speed time would have come to a standstill for us. As it is we never actually reach the speed of light, but we travel pretty close to it for extended

periods. The effect is that time for the universe goes by pretty fast, but for us time is extended.

“So, we just made sure we crossed paths with the probe when it arrived here. Three years for us and fifty thousand years, for you, later.”

“Sorry this kind of hurts my head.”

“I understand. Perhaps you will just have to trust me on this one.”

“Guess so.”

“At any rate, as we departed from the probe to go about our business we discovered that some of the equipment aboard the Bright Star was malfunctioning.”

“What kind of malfunction?”

“Well at first it seemed like a number of small unrelated things. It would be hard to explain exactly what they were, but we soon discovered the malfunctions were all related. Each malfunction was a result of some part of the ship’s systems losing synchronization with another part of the ship.

“From what I have learned about your world, it would be like having the spark plugs in your car firing out of step with the rest of the engine. It just doesn’t run right or doesn’t run at all. It took us several days to correct all the synchronization problems and get the ship fully operational again.”

“Did you find out what caused the trouble?”

“Yes, and this is very perceptive of you. There was one cause. We found it hard to believe, but over time we ruled out everything else. Somehow the cause was the probe. Apparently as we were changing course away from the flight path of the probe something happened. Rather, the probe did something. We still don’t know exactly what it was, but whatever it was caused our problems.

“This made us highly interested in intercepting the probe when it reached your system in hopes of understanding better what the probe had done and perhaps why it had done whatever it was.

“So, do you know now?”

“No. We know more than we did, but we still don’t know exactly what happened.”

“Well, what do you know then?”

“We know a few things, but do you mind if I ask you a question first?”

“OK, sure, go ahead. What would you like to know?”

“Well, all of us on the crew have been wondering for a long time about the abandoned Centauri ship that is orbiting your planet?”

“What ship?”

“Surely you have seen it?” Gerard did his best to impart a little bewilderment in his translated question.

“No, I haven’t seen any ship?”

“OK, now I guess that it is I that does not understand. Please tell me if you can see that?” Gerard pointed in the direction of the rising moon.

“Sure. Nothing wrong with my eyes, but if there is an alien ship orbiting earth there is no way I would be able to see that as plainly as the moon.”

Gerard paused for a moment then said, “Very well, the question will keep for a later discussion.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t very good at answering your question. By the way I also realized that I never even told you my name and you have been very good about explaining what you know. I’m Kent, Kent Holland.”

“Very good to meet you, Kent Kent Holland.”

Kent suddenly felt like he was in a vaudeville routine and corrected, “No, my name is just Kent Holland, and you can call me Kent.”

“Oh, thank you. Earth naming customs have been difficult for me. Thank you for the correction, Kent.”

“You’re welcome. Please go ahead if you have more to tell me.”

“Well, there isn’t a lot more. We were certainly anxious to meet with the probe again. Also given the uncertainties of calculating the time dilation effect we actually arrived at your system a little ahead of the probe.”

“How far ahead?”

“Actually we didn’t do too badly under the circumstances, but we did get here first about two thousand years ago. We realized once we arrived that we still had plenty of time so we made several short exploration trips while we were waiting. We then got back the last time just six months before the probe crossed the orbit of your ringed gas giant.... Saturn I believe.”

“So you saw the probe arrive? Is it somehow responsible for whatever is going on around here?”

“We think it is responsible, but we don’t quite know how. You see when the probe arrived in your system its power system was totally drained. Remember we didn’t think it had more than a few thousand years left in it when we encountered it, and here we were again about fifty thousand years later. As it entered the system it was clearly out of control. It had slowed a lot from the time we had seen it, and probably would have ended up orbiting your sun as a derelict except for one thing.”

“What was that?”

“A ship came from here and retrieved it. Well, actually, there were two stages to the retrieval process. Some kind of drone ship snagged it from near the orbit of Mars and towed into earth orbit. Another spacecraft was then used to bring it to earth itself. I believe the craft is often referred to as the Space Shuttle?”

“Yeah I guess that makes sense.”

“We monitored the situation of many months and learned virtually nothing. Then today we noticed that radio and TV transmissions from earth just stopped. Then we noticed that there didn’t seem to be people anywhere on the planet. So we began exploring more closely. That’s when we spotted you.”

“Sounds like you guys got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning too.”

“Pardon me?”

“Sorry, I just mean this whole thing about yesterday being normal and today not being normal is as much as surprise to you as it is to me I guess.”

“It would seem so.” Gerard seemed a little lost, but continued after a pause, “Perhaps you could tell us what you believe is happening?”

This seemed like a pretty reasonable request to Kent and he proceeded to explain how his day had gone. He was hoping when he got to the part about the empty white buildings that Gerard would say that they had something to do with them, but instead he simply listened intently. He did seem to take particular note of the issues relating to the apparent contradictions regarding how long it had actually been since yesterday as well as the newscaster mentioning that there had been a number of unusual occurrences.

Chapter 4

~ Bright Star ~

As Kent reached the end of his tale of how the day had gone both he and Gerard stood there and just stared at each other for a while. Finally Kent broke the awkward silence.

“Is this all as weird for you as it is for me? I mean the whole idea of meeting someone from another planet, all this stuff about people missing, and the space probe thing?” Kent was feeling a little inarticulate at trying to express how strange this all was to him.

“Meeting a new species is always a little difficult. I think weird is probably a good way of putting it.”

“But you seem to have this worked out pretty well. I mean, you know how to speak and understand us... well me, and You make it seem like you know an awful lot about earth, the people and our way of doing things.”

“Well, the translator,” indicating the box, “does help a lot. It corrects some of the obvious errors I make. Of course doing things like greeting you in Spanish was not something the translator could correct. Also, I have had an opportunity to study earth for quite a while and view some of your history first hand. So it does help.

“Still there is no escaping the fact that first time encounters like this do definitely qualify as being weird.

“Kent, perhaps this would be a good time for you to meet the crew? Also, are you hungry? I realize that it is now getting pretty late in the afternoon, and I believe we have gone well past the customary time for eating the midday meal.”

“Both sound fine to me. I’d like to meet your crew, and food sounds good right now.”

Gerard turned and indicated that Kent should follow him on board the spacecraft. Kent was thinking about times he remembered seeing people going on board an alien spacecraft in TV shows and movies. Then he thought about food, and the inevitable happened. He remembered the old Twilight Zone show and pictured someone running up to him and yelling, “Kent. Don’t go! The book, ‘To Serve Man,’ it’s a cook book!” This gave him the shivers momentarily. Did Gerard invite him to eat or to become lunch? He quickly shook off the notion and followed him into the spacecraft.

As they entered the ship it was clear that Gerard had somehow signaled the crew that they were coming aboard. All the crew was lined up as if for a wedding reception. As they went down the line Kent shook hands with each crew member in turn. As he did so Gerard told him the name of the crewmember, his rank, and sometimes a little more information. Each crewmember could do little more than shake hands and do their best to mimic a human smile. They had no translator boxes themselves, and clearly were depending upon Gerard as their translator. The names Gerard gave to each crewman were related to their duties aboard the Bright Star.

The crew consisted of: Dr. Livingston, the medical officer; Einstein, the science officer; Ramsay, the chief engineer; Winchester; the tactical officer; Bell the communication officer; Columbus, the navigator; Ford, the machinist; Edison, the electrician; Rines, the sensor operator; and Dolittle, the ship's pilot.

Lastly they reached the Captain, Cook. He was introduced in the same way as the others, shook hands and smiled, but then the Captain talked more extensively to Gerard. Kent wasn't sure what they talked about, but he guessed that Gerard was filling the Captain in on the discussions that they had just completed.

What Kent didn't know was that the Captain asked Gerard if there was any explanation for the Centauri ship in orbit. Gerard informed him that Kent seemed completely oblivious that there even 'was' a Centauri ship in orbit and seemed to honestly not know anything about it. The Captain expressed a combination of disbelief and bewilderment to which Gerard could do little more than agree. Gerard then reminded the Captain that the ship had likely been in orbit at least 12,000 earth years and these people's life spans were a mere 80 years and they had only had a fairly reliable written history for about the last 2000 years. He told the Captain that the lack of mention of the Centauri ship in any of the earth information he had researched was apparently due to a lack of knowledge. They simply didn't know.

When Gerard and the Captain had obviously finished talking, Kent got Gerard's attention, "You guys have been flying around the galaxy all by yourselves for years?"

“Oh, no. Of course not. I am sorry if I gave you that impression. The Bright Star is only our reconnaissance ship. Our main ship, the Nova is actually parked on the,” there was a pause while Gerard seemed to be stuck for a word, “your moon.”

“Oh. Are there more of your people on the Nova?”

“Yes, 263,314 counting the crew of the Bright Star to be precise.”

“Wow.”

“Well, the Nova is essentially a whole city. Since we travel a lot at near light speed, leaving families behind is simply not an option. I think the closest comparison on your world would be something like a permanently sailing aircraft carrier.”

“Was the Nova also affected by the probe?”

“No, fortunately it was only the Bright Star that approached the probe and examined it. At the time the Nova was quite far away and unaffected by the encounter.

“The galley is right this way.” Gerard motioned Kent into an adjoining area of the ship.

Kent was a little concerned about what kind of food they would be having, but those concerns were soon alleviated. It seems that Gerard had done his homework pretty well and made sure that Kent’s meal was quite normal looking American cuisine. It wasn’t anything unusual. It looked and tasted like meatloaf, mashed potatoes with gravy and

corn off the cob. They also had what appeared to be distilled water to drink.

The food for the crew of the Bright Star looked significantly different, but Kent wasn't inclined to ask what it was. He figured it might be best not to know.

As they ate Gerard managed with one free hand to use the translator box to keep up a reasonably normal conversation about various trivia. Kent was impressed how he was able to do this and eat his lunch at the same time. Only a couple of times did Kent allow himself to marvel at the fact that he was sitting in an alien spacecraft, eating lunch with a bunch of praying mantises, and handling it all like it was normal.

As lunch was drawing to a close the conversation was revolving around Kent's experience at the TV station. Gerard was interested in the possibility that the tapes might give them significantly more information about what had been taking place during that blank ten year period that both Kent and the Bright Star crew had experienced. Finally they settled on a plan to return to the TV station after lunch to access more of the station's video tapes.

As Kent described the video tape system to Gerard, he was asked to wait a minute while Gerard discussed the situation with Bell the ship's communication officer. The two became quite animated during this discussion and Bell clearly was quite excited. Finally Gerard turned his attention back to Kent and explained that Bell believed it would be possible to use certain Bright Star systems to extract information from the video tapes rapidly in a way that would make it easier to search for the specific information they wanted.

This sounded good to Kent and they decided that Kent, Gerard, Bell and Edison along with a cart full of equipment would leave for the TV station right after lunch. The Captain and the rest of the crew would continue searching for any other people that might be wandering around just as Kent had been doing.

Kent was concerned about everything fitting into his car, but Gerard let him know that they would be using a small recon-vehicle that was housed within the Bright Star. The recon-vehicle was relatively compact when stored, but expanded after deployment. When Gerard showed him how this was done it reminded Kent of the way the lunar buggy of the Apollo era unfolded.

After the recon-vehicle was deployed the party of four set about getting the equipment ready that Bell was pretty sure would allow them better access to the video tapes that Kent had described to them. As they were carrying various pieces of equipment to the recon-vehicle Kent and Gerard talked to the degree that they could. For Gerard this was a little difficult because he didn't always have a free hand to operate the translator.

“Gerard, one thing I didn't think to do while I was at the TV station was to see if any of their computer terminals were working.”

Gerard gave Kent his best attempt at a quizzical look.

“Yeah, computer terminals. The Internet. You know. World Wide Web?”

Gerard managed to wiggle one hand free for a moment to say, “You mean the internet might still be operating. We

assumed since the satellite feeds were dead that the whole network was down.”

“Well, I don’t know. I didn’t happen to check before I left the house, and it just didn’t occur to me when I was at the TV station. I just got so focused on the whole video tape thing I guess I wasn’t thinking too clearly.”

Gerard again wiggled a hand free, “Well, if there is part of the network working that could be of great help. We had tapped into the satellite feeds to find out a lot of what we know about your planet. It was quite helpful.” Gerard got his hand back under the load he was carrying just in time to avert a spill.

“Well, I just hope part of it might be working.”

The four continued loading equipment until the last space was full leaving only enough room for the four to squeeze into the recon-vehicle. Fortunately Kent was becoming accustomed to his new found friends and was not terribly bothered by the close quarters. Bell sat in front to pilot the vehicle along with Edison. Gerard and Kent sat in the back.

Bell said something Kent did not understand. Gerard translated, “Everyone ready?” Kent nodded and afterward hoped Gerard understood. The others said something in reply to Bell, and the recon-vehicle levitated slightly and began moving back toward the city.

Kent noted that the vehicle seemed to be operating something like a hover craft, but there didn’t seem to be any inflation skirt or blowing air coming from under the vehicle. He found this interesting but decided to refrain

from asking about it for the time being. Instead he took on the roll of tour guide and pointed out various landmarks and explained a little about the city. Gerard was busy translating for Bell and Edison so that they would know what Kent was saying.

On their way back to the TV station they came across one of the featureless white buildings with the single door. Kent pointed it out and said, “There is one of your buildings.”

Gerard looked at the building, then at Kent and said, “What do you mean?”

“I’m talking about one of your buildings. One of them this morning made a noise just like the Bright Star. It’s yours right?”

“No. You mean this isn’t something your people built, Kent?”

“Not that I have ever seen before.”

“When you say it made a noise like the Bright Star, what do you mean?”

“That rumbling sound like the ship made just before you guys spotted me.”

“Well, that is interesting. I assure you we have not placed any building such as this here.” Gerard told Bell and Edison what Kent had said, and the trio watched the building intently as they passed it.

“Oh, wow. I guess it’s one more mystery we might want to check when we get to the TV station.”

“It would seem so, Kent.”

The rest of the trip was uneventful. Kent continued to describe things as they passed them and realized that he kept talking partly to keep from feeling the loss of his family and all the people he knew. It was hard for him to believe that this whole strange day had only started for him about nine hours ago.

When they finally pulled up outside of the TV station everyone busied themselves with removing equipment from the recon-vehicle and bringing it into the station. Kent showed Bell and Edison where the racks of video tape were to be found, and they began setting up operations. Kent and Gerard kept bringing in equipment while Bell, with Edison’s able assistance, was assembling everything to begin the task of quickly extracting all the pertinent information from the tapes. Kent showed them where he had found the last tape and explained the dates on the cassettes so that they could work their way backward through the archives.

Finally all the equipment was in place and there was nothing to do but wait for Bell and Edison to finish connecting things. As they did so, Kent took a moment to walk back to the front of the station and watch as the sun was nearing the horizon now. Actually there was a building in the way of the real horizon, but Kent let himself imagine the roofline was the horizon for the sake of a little comfort. Then he began to wonder what he would do when they had finished at the TV station. Would they drop him off at his home? Would he go back to the Bright Star with Gerard,

Bell and Edison? Would he be able to sleep tonight? Then the ultimate question hit him out of the blue. What will it be like when I get up in the morning?

Kent's musings were interrupted by Gerard, "Kent, we have begun transferring the information from the tapes. I thought you would want to know. Would you care to see how it is done?"

"Yeah, sure."

The two of them walked back to the tape room where Bell and Edison were already well underway with the transfers. Edison was retrieving half a dozen tapes at a time from the racks and stacking them to the left of Bell. He would then pick up a stack from Bell's left and return them to the racks while retrieving another group of six new tapes. In turn Bell took tapes one at a time and set them on top of a small square plate that had bracket that was adjusted to hold the tapes in precise alignment. Each tape was in place only about fifteen seconds then Bell would remove it and place it to his right. He would complete a set of tapes just about in time for Edison to take the next group of six back to the racks.

As Kent watched the process he turned to Gerard and said, "I don't understand. How are they getting anything out of the tapes without playing them?"

"Playing the tapes with the kind of equipment that is here in the station would be much too time consuming. We would be here for days without getting very far through the recordings. Instead we are making a holographic record of each tape while it sits on that small box. That record is

stored in that equipment over there. For the lack of a better word it is essentially a computer.”

“OK, so we get it into that thing, but isn’t it still going to take a lot of time to see what is on each tape anyway?”

“Not really. I assume you are familiar with ‘search engines’ like those that were used with the internet?”

“Sure.”

“Well, we have basically the same thing that works with the computer where the holographic images are stored. One the tapes are all indexed by the search engine it is merely a matter of requesting specific searches to get the information we want without having to view everything on the tapes.”

“I get it. We’re going to do a little ‘tape surfing’ in a way.”

“I’m sorry. Tape surfing?”

“They used to call looking for things on the internet ‘web surfing’ and that is what we will be doing with the tapes.”

“Ahhhh, yes that is correct.”

“Good grief! That reminds me. We were going to see if some part of the internet might be working.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, we might as well see if we can access something around here while Bell and Edison are doing their thing.”

“Indeed that would be good. Where should we start?”

“I guess back in the office area we passed on the way in.”

“Lead on.”

Kent and Gerard walked back to the office area and for a moment were transfixed by the sight. The question was where to start. There were a lot of terminals available. Finally, Kent realized it really didn't make any difference “where” they started, just that they started, and he headed for the nearest terminal.

There was nothing particularly out of the ordinary about the terminal. A standard screensaver was displayed on the screen and when Kent moved the mouse he was greeted by a pop-up window that requested a password.

“Nuts!”

“What is the problem?” Gerard inquired.

“It wants a password. I have no idea what it could be, and I'm betting every computer terminal in the building is like this. Right now I feel like kicking myself.”

“Can you actually do that?” Gerard was looking at Kent's legs rather strangely.

“Oh, no.” Kent laughed. “It's just a figure of speech. I'm just frustrated with myself for not having turned my computer on at home before I left for work this morning.”

“Oh, I see. You have a computer at your residence that could access the internet?”

“Well, yes. Assuming anything is working of course. Still we might want to try other terminals too just in case some parts of the system are working and others are not.”

“Yes that seems wise.”

“The library might be a good place to try.”

“Why is that?”

“They had public access terminals that wouldn’t require a password. They were for use by anyone.”

“Excellent idea. Is there a library near here?”

“Gee, I don’t know. I haven’t really tried to find a library around this part of town. Looking one up would have been easy except....”

“Except what?”

Kent pointed at the terminal still displaying the password request, “Well, that would have been my first choice for a way to locate a library. Looking it up on the internet.” Kent shrugged.

Gerard made the translator box laugh. It was the first time he had done so since having met Kent.

“Now THAT’S funny,” Kent pointed at the translator box and laughed too.

Gerard waited for Kent’s laughter to subside a little and said, “I hope it is a good simulation of laughter. I was kind of hesitant to use it, but it just seemed so appropriate.”

“Got that right.” Kent wiped the tears from his eyes as he got his laughter under control. “I think I needed that.”

“Me too. It makes me feel better that we are able to communicate with humor. I know this has been a difficult day. Kent.....” Gerard hesitated.

“What? Is something wrong?”

“No, I just wanted to say that I believe this all must be very difficult for you. With everyone disappearing so unexpectedly this must be very hard. I believe you are probably missing people who meant a lot to you. I just wanted to say that I am sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks. I’ve been trying not to think about it too much, but you’re right. It’s hard.” Kent turned away for a moment.

“I hope I have not said something inappropriate?”

Kent turned back. “No, it’s OK, Gerard.” This is just so strange.”

“I understand.”

After a short but awkward silence the two began systematically checking each terminal in the newsroom just in case one of them was not password protected. After checking them all without success they went back to see how Bell and Edison were progressing.

Chapter 5

~ The Centauri ~

As Kent and Gerard entered the tape archive they could see that Bell and Edison were wrapping things up. Gerard spoke with his crewmates while Kent sat patiently and wondered what they were saying. Kent felt that it was clear that he would never understand the language of his new friends. Then he realized that thinking of them as friends seemed so strange, but on a day like today that seemed appropriate. Finally, Gerard turned back to Kent and began to explain what they had been discussing.

“Bell and Edison have finished logging the tapes into the computer system.”

“So can we tell anything yet?” Kent asked.

“No. Actually we will need to transport everything back to the Bright Star and transfer the information to the ship’s main processor to filter through the recordings for information that pertains specifically to the probe and any events that have lead up to today.”

“Oh.”

“You are disappointed.”

“Well, yeah. I am getting anxious to know what is going on. I guess it was just wishful thinking.”

“Well, the truth is that I am also disappointed. I had thought we might know something right away as well. That is what we have been discussing. They actually did try a couple of quick scans of the data, but realized that the extraction could be handled much easier if we just got back to the Bright Star as soon as possible rather than trying to continue here.”

“Thanks. Now I don’t feel so dumb,” Kent said with a smile.

“You are welcome.” Gerard said, though he obviously missed the implied joke in what Kent had said.

“Are we ready to start packing up then?”

“Yes. Bell and Edison have already taken some equipment to the recon-vehicle.”

The four of them finished loading the recon-vehicle and Bell communicated with the Bright Star to establish a rendezvous point. A landing sight was agreed upon that was much nearer than the original landing location. Gerard explained this to Kent. Then they began discussing Kent’s car that was still at the original landing site, and also what to do about checking the internet connection at Kent’s home. Finally they concluded that it would be best to recover Kent’s car the next day at which time they could also check out the internet connection at Kent’s house.

For tonight they agreed that the best course of action was to get the recordings back to the Bright Star and get the information uploaded to the ship’s processor and setting up the extraction filters that could start running through the data. While this was going on they could all have dinner

and get a good nights sleep. Kent would stay with the crew on the Bright Star, and they would all end a very long and tiring day.

Kent wasn't sure exactly how "good" a night's sleep he would be getting. The thought of sleeping on an alien space ship full of praying mantis people was just a little unnerving. Still, the whole idea made a lot of sense. After all, even if it seemed like everything just happened in the last day, the truth apparently was that this situation had unfolded over a period of almost 10 years. One more day wasn't going to change things much.

When they reached the rendezvous location the Bright Star had already landed. Several of the crew met them as they arrived and helped them to unload the recon-vehicle and stow it back in the Bright Star. Bell and Edison immediately went to work connecting equipment into the ship's processors to upload the data banks for further processing and filtering of all the data. After the equipment was all back aboard, Kent and Gerard began making their way to the galley of the Bright Star.

Kent and Gerard were only in the galley a short time before they were joined by all the rest of the crew including Bell and Edison. Kent really admired how efficient these two had been in getting their jobs done. Of course it seemed everyone in the Bright Star wanted to know what had been happening so there was a lot of talking among the crew. This left Kent to just sit and think about the day while the food was being distributed to everyone.

"Kent."

"Yes?"

“The Captain would like me to tell you that he is both pleased and honored that you will be staying with us tonight.”

“Oh, well thanks. Tell him I am glad to be invited, and thankful for the opportunity.”

“I will.” Gerard turned and talked with the Captain briefly then returned to Kent. “He wants you to know that you are quite welcome, and if there is anything you need please feel free to ask. We all realize this is difficult and want to do anything we can to help.”

“Thanks, Gerard. I appreciate it. I really do. Please tell the Captain you have already helped a lot just by being here.”

“Yes.” Gerard again passed this along to the Captain. The Captain then turned to Kent and gave a simple understanding nod.

The crew was now involved in multiple conversations and Kent felt free to talk to Gerard more as they were eating.

“Gerard, did the Bright Star discover anything while we were at the TV station?”

“Yes. I was discussing that with the Captain when we first returned. During their survey they were able to determine that there actually are quite a few people still on earth, but they are widely scattered. There appear to be a few thousand people on each continent. World wide the Captain is estimating about a million people. If we understand correctly, that would mean that 99.99% of the world’s population is missing.”

“But there are people? Even here in this city?”

“Yes, actually apparently there are about 300 people right here in this city. The strange thing is that when we spotted you we had not detected anyone else. The captain said that after they left us, they were able to determine that there were about 50 people in the city.”

“But I thought you said there were 300 people?”

“I did. Please let me finish. After that survey of the city they tried several others. It seemed in each city there were a few people. They were cautious about revealing themselves, so no one else but you knows we are here for the time being.”

“What about the 300 people?”

“I am getting to that. When we called them to pick us up they returned to the city and performed another sweep. That time they detected about 300 people. They are certain that the original sweep was reasonably accurate, so about 250 people appeared between the first and second sweep.”

“Appeared, what do you mean appeared?”

“We’re not sure either. The Captain and crew are quite sure they were not here during the first sweep and they were here during the second sweep. They also had noticed the number of people in each city they had surveyed seemed higher than in the preceding city.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, the Captain and crew are of the opinion that people are actually appearing. It is not clear where they are coming from, but they are definitely coming from somewhere.”

“If people are appearing, aren’t they going to see the Bright Star parked here?”

“The Captain has taken precautions. The clearing we are parked in has been fenced off to look like a construction zone, and some camouflage material has been applied to the Bright Star to make it less obvious what it is. We’re not expecting any problem.”

“But if there are more people in the city now, then tomorrow there will likely be some people on the streets and looking around just like I was.”

“Yes, that is likely to be correct.”

“So what are we going to do about getting back to my house?”

“We’re already taking care of that. While we have been eating, Winchester and Ramsay took the recon-vehicle to recover your transportation...”

“My car.”

“Thank you. Yes your car. Tomorrow we will use it to get back to your house to avoid revealing too much about ourselves. Doctor Livingston has fashioned us some suits that will allow us to pass for humans at a distance so that any of us who ride with you won’t attract attention.”

“You guys think of everything.”

“Well, maybe not everything, but we try to avoid the more obvious problems.”

“Speaking of obvious. What was that stuff earlier about a Century ship orbiting earth?”

“No, not Century. Centauri.”

“OK, Centauri. So what’s the deal?”

“Sorry, I don’t understand what you mean by deal.”

“I mean what about the Centauri ship? Where is it? Why is it here? How do you know about it?”

“Oh.” Gerard hesitated. “Would you mind if I talk to the Captain for a moment first?”

“Sure, go ahead.” Kent was now wondering why mention of the Centauri ship seemed to startle Gerard. After all, they at least knew about it, whereas it was all new information to Kent. So far this day had been so strange that he was about ready to accept just about anything without batting an eye. Then Gerard returned.

“Kent, the Captain was not really sure how much information we should disclose, but given the bizarre situation we have concluded that best thing to do is tell you everything we know and trust that we are not upsetting the course of your world. After all, your world is obviously already pretty well upset at the moment.”

“That’s for sure. So what have you got to tell me?”

“Well, remember when I pointed at your moon and asked you if you could see it?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I did that because I was kind of astounded that you didn’t know about the Centauri ship.”

“Yeah, I kind of got that, but I still don’t understand.”

“Your moon IS the Centauri ship.”

“What? Is this another joke?”

“No, I assure you this is no joke.”

“You are telling me the moon is a space ship? A Centauri space ship?”

“Well, yes. If you like I believe I can explain. At least I can explain as much as we know.”

“Please do.”

Gerard went on to explain how they had surveyed the Centauri system about 20,000 earth years ago. “We had found a number of planets in the Centauri system but the one that we had expected might be habitable was obviously the scene of ancient devastation. Yet as we surveyed it we found signs of artifacts from an extremely ancient civilization. There obviously was not much left, but we did manage to recover some of the history of the people who had once occupied the planet.”

Gerard went on to explain “For the lack of a better name I am referring to this species as Centaurians because they were in the stellar system that earth referred to by that name. At this point the system is made up of the three stars Alpha, Beta and Proxima Centauri.

“Apparently at the time of the Centaurian civilization the system really was only a binary star system comprised of Alpha and Beta Centauri. Beta orbited at such a large distance that it had little noticeable effect upon the Centaurian world that orbited Alpha. However, many millions of years ago Proxima entered the Centauri system. It was the Centaurian’s belief that Proxima had been ejected from another system many millennia ago. As Proxima was slowly drawing closer and closer to the Centauri system it became clear that the Centauri home world was at risk.

“Proxima would actually cross through the Centauri system very near the orbit of the Centauri home world, and might even rip their home world from its present orbit. As devastating as this was, stellar encounters happen on a very long time scale and the Centauri literally had tens of thousands of years to prepare. They were quite sure that there was nothing they could do to deflect Proxima from its course, so the next best answer was to get out of its way. However, moving the two billion inhabitants of the Centauri home world was no small undertaking.

“There apparently was a lot of discussion and disagreement at first regarding the best course of action, but within a hundred years or so they arrived at a long term plan that seemed likely to be successful. The plan made use of ten of the largest planetoids that were present in the Centauri system. Over a period of thousands of years each of these

planetoids was transformed into a ship capable of carrying from 100 million to 300 million Centaurians on a one way trip out of the Centauri system.

“The transformation of the planetoids was extensive. Each was selected for both size and the fact that its core was no longer molten. The Centaurians then set about boring into each planetoid and excavating a lot of the refractory elements from the interior of the planetoid and redistributing them to the outer surface. This accomplished two things. It made a safe place for the Centaurians to live during their interstellar trip and provided a great deal of protection to the ships by virtue of having a highly protective refractory layer on the outside surface.

“As the process neared completion several very important elements were also installed in the converted planetoids. Realizing the likelihood of collisions during their journeys the Centaurians installed liquification factories throughout the interior of the planetoids. Each factory had multiple connection channels to the exterior surface with large protective valves in each channel. These provide a repair mechanism that could automatically seal any major damage to the exterior of the ships during their voyage. If a large impact caused extensive damage to the surface the liquification factories in the affected area would automatically pump liquefied refractory materials to the surface and flood the damaged region to make a repair.

“Lastly the engines were constructed. These were the largest reaction engines imaginable yet literally tens of thousands of them were required on each planetoid. The fuel for each was also derived from the liquification factories. The planetoids were literally the fuel for the

engines as well as the home for the Centaurians during the voyage.

“For the engines to operate properly they had to be placed very near the surface of the planetoids and this caused the Centaurians a lot of problems. The solution was to actually build up the surface of each planetoid on the side where the engines were placed in order to provide sufficient protection to the engines while having them properly positioned for greatest effectivity in their operation. So each planetoid has a bulge on one side.

“While the ships were being constructed, unmanned survey vessels were sent to several neighboring star systems to determine which ones had the greatest potential for providing a home to the Centaurians. Apparently the Sol system was deemed a likely candidate and it became the target for one of the ships.

Kent interrupted, “You are telling me that our moon is a hollow Centauri ship?”

“Yes. In fact, your scientist had actually noted several of the specific features of the ship but never reached a conclusion about the reasons for what they had observed. They noted the bulge on the far side of the moon. They also noted the unusual arrangement of interior refractory elements that were oddly on the surface, and they noted the highly uncharacteristic circular orbit that would not be representative of a normal gravitational capture. They even noted how the mare were regions that had been flooded with liquefied rock yet never questioned how a moon without a molten active core could produce such floods. They even noted that when objects impacted the surface

that the moon literally rings like a bell due to its hollow interior.”

“So our moon is really a Centauri space ship that has been in orbit for millions of years?”

“Well, not exactly. Yes, it is one of the Centauri ships, but no it hasn’t been in orbit millions of years. The Centaurians did leave their star system over a million years ago, but this ship has only been in orbit about 20,000 years the best we can tell from the current state of the engines.”

“What? Now that doesn’t make sense. The moon has been there way longer than that. Hasn’t it?”

“Well, no. Actually even several earth cultures make reference to the ‘time before the moon’ as a way of dating things that happened in the extreme past.”

“What do you mean?”

“They are talking about the time before the moon, or rather the Centauri ship, appeared in the skies of earth.”

“So Centaurians have been here 20,000 years?”

“It would seem so.”

“Well, where are they?”

“We don’t know. In fact since the information we recovered is only text, we are not even sure what a Centauri might look like. When we spotted one of their ships in orbit we were hoping to learn more, but so far we have not been terribly successful. We have managed to gain partial

access to a few of the engines, but that is all. We have been completely unable to determine how to access the interior of the ship.

“We don’t think the Centaurians are inside any longer, but we are not sure if they are dead or if they have left. It’s possible the ship went into orbit automatically, but we just don’t know. Their voyage lasted a very long time, so it’s possible they became extinct before they ever got here. It is interesting though that the ship’s systems are not totally shut down.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, some of the reaction control system appears to be operating at a very low level. In fact several of the reaction control engines have sometimes been seen from earth.”

“Huh?”

“The reaction control engines are smaller engines that are like the main propulsion units but are scattered completely around the planetoid. Several of these are seen in operation from time to time, but no one on earth has determined what they were. One of the more prominent engines operates from time to time within the Aristarchus crater. The light from its operation has been seen on earth for well over a hundred years.”

“Wow. You know I’ve heard of hiding something in plain sight, but this is mind boggling. I mean, I’ve been interested in UFO’s and stuff like that for a long time. Always kind of hoped to see a real alien space ship, you know? I even used to go to all the science fiction movies and read a lot of books. I just never dreamed that every

time I saw the moon I was looking at the biggest proof of alien life in the world and it was parked right out there in plain sight.”

“I guess now you understand why I was a little surprised that you didn’t know what it was.”

“Yeah. Dumb, huh?”

“Well, it is not so dumb when I now understand that you had every reason to believe that the moon had always been here. For all practical purposes it has been here for almost all the collective memory of your species. So, why would anyone question that it was perfectly normal.”

“OK, so it’s a really big space ship. Are you guys still working on trying to get inside?”

“Yes. Our archeological team was extremely interested in that ship. We had found the records about them in the Centauri system, but the chance to actually explore one was something we had never imagined.”

“Do you think there is any connection between the Centauri ship and the probe?”

“It doesn’t seem likely. The probe’s flight path does not indicate that it was ever anywhere near the Centauri system.”

“Amazing. It wasn’t long ago that I was wondering about aliens and wishing I could meet an alien someday. Today it’s you guys, Centaurians, and whoever built that probe. I guess they were right?”

“Right?”

“Be careful what you wish for.”

Chapter 6

~ Documentary ~

Kent was quite certain he wasn't going to be able to sleep that night. After all, he had just had the most bizarre day of his life, was staying on an alien ship filled with aliens, and his whole world had virtually ceased to exist. His head did spin a while thinking of all the different things that had been happening and all the questions that were still unanswered. He didn't know when he finally fell asleep, but now he was awake and sure it was morning.

After the start of the morning yesterday he figured he was prepared for just about anything. So he got up and gathered his wits about him along with getting dressed and left his sleeping quarters to see what was going on this morning. He hadn't gotten far before running into one of the crew. He still had trouble telling them apart, but finally realized this one was Bell. Kent waved and smiled and felt really helpless without Gerard around. Bell mimicked Kent to the degree that he could and then motioned Kent to follow him.

Kent wasn't sure, but he got the impression that Bell was excited about something. As they entered what appeared to be a small laboratory area of the ship Kent began to understand Bell's excitement. Several members of the crew were already in the room and it was a bit crowded, but Gerard was not among them. Bell said something unrecognizable and everyone made room for Kent to get a better look.

On a small screen some video from the TV station was playing. Kent could also see some symbols scrolling across the bottom. It looked something like closed captioning, but not quite the same. Finally he realized this was a translation for the crew. Finally Kent began to realize what he was seeing.

The video was a documentary regarding the probe. It was showing the probe in some kind of laboratory with a lot of people examining it. The narrator was talking about some of the materials that made up the probe. About that time Gerard entered the room and said something to Bell. Bell typed something into the keypad and the image froze.

“Kent, I have asked Bell to re-route the display to the monitors on the flight deck. We can all go there and watch. There will be enough room for the whole crew to see, and Bell will start the playback from the beginning.”

“That sounds good. Thanks.”

When they got to the flight deck everyone found a place where they could easily see on of the monitors. Kent noted that everyone was present and the Captain said something to Bell and he responded by touching several symbols on a keypad. The video playback sprung to life.

The documentary began by explaining how the probe had first been located while entering the solar system. Apparently in the process of tracking various comets and asteroids the object was noticed and at first was assumed to be an asteroid in an extremely elliptical orbit. However, as orbital projections were made it becomes obvious that the object was not actually orbiting the sun at all but was on a hyperbolic trajectory through the solar system.

Since this was now considered to be a highly unusual object a lot of scientific observations were brought to bear. In the process, deep space radar observations reveal the object had a much higher radar cross section than it should have corresponding with the projected size based upon visual observations.

The Hubble Space telescope was brought to bear on the object and a limited amount of detail was revealed, but nothing conclusive could be determined. However, as luck would have it, a comet rendezvous probe was on a trajectory that could be modified to bring it very close to the object.

As the probe neared the rendezvous point the automated mechanisms began snapping pictures for return to earth. The pictures were then sent on their journey to earth.

Kent could see that as the pictures began to display everyone in the video was stunned. This was obviously no stray asteroid. This was an artificial probe of some kind. It was tumbling at a rate that indicated it was not under control. It was also clear that the radar returns were so large because of the angular metallic structure that was a much better reflector of radar signals than any rock would be. This was obviously a monumental event, but one that was full of problems.

The narrator noted that at this point in the discovery there were already a lot of people who knew much of what was happening, but it was not completely public knowledge. Still issues had to be resolved about how to tell the general public about this. Also, despite typical Hollywood movies there could be no manned mission to the probe. None of

the nations had any interplanetary manned launch vehicles or spacecraft. However, the United States, Ariane and the Russian Space Agency jointly determined that it would be possible to put together a robotic vehicle to attempt to snag-and-return the alien probe. It required a Proton launch vehicle along with lashed together U.S. robotic equipment along with A.I. elements to be able to handle the snag in real time so many hours away from earth that lag time would make ground based control impossible. The equipment was placed atop an Ariane booster to provide the necessary acceleration to intercept the probe.

The Narrator also talked about the sociological implications relating to finding the alien probe, and how there were many who didn't want the recovery mission to succeed.

The mission took place and despite a lot of difficulties the alien probe was snagged.

After several months the probe was towed into earth orbit and was within range of retrieval by a U.S. the Shuttle.

During the several months it took to get the probe back to earth orbit pictures of the probe are analyzed in great detail to determine if it would be possible to retrieve the probe in the cargo bay of a Shuttle. Also, after it was determined that retrieval should be possible; ways were devised to lash down the probe for earth return and landing of the Shuttle. The narrator noted that the two Shuttle crewmen responsible for the recovery space walks realized they were going to have to be making things up as they went along because there was not going to be any way to practice fully every step that would be required.

Finally the Shuttle was launched and performed a

rendezvous with the robot/probe duo. As the Shuttle station-kept with the duo everyone realized that however they did this there would be some damage to the probe because it obviously was never intended to be strapped down in the cargo hold of a Shuttle. Still everyone was optimistic that they could succeed.

The day arrived for the recovery operation that was expected to take at least 10 hours of hard work. One of the astronauts would be working from the Shuttle robotic arm while the other used a maneuvering pack to manipulate the probe into position.

Over the period of the next 8 hours the team continued to work the probe into position until it was finally resting on a cradle that had been prepared for it in the Shuttle cargo bay. Fortunately the estimates of how to best place the probe had worked out and minimal damage was done to one item that appears to be an antenna element.

Once all the latches were in place and the probe was declared properly anchored for Shuttle return. The re-entry and landing were reasonably un-eventful with the landing taking place at the Kennedy Space Flight Center in Florida as originally planned. Once the normal landing servicing was done to the Shuttle the vehicle was returned to the Vertical Assembly Building in order to remove the probe from the cargo bay.

The Narrator pointed out that before removal an extensive photographic record was made of the probe while it was still in place just in case there was some damage or problem that occurred during the removal process. During this process much of what appeared to be labels and directions on the probe were photographed in great detail. Also it was

clear that the probe was intended as a deep space mission because it obviously used a nuclear reactor type of power source which was now depleted.

The narrator explained that it was much less clear exactly how long the probe had been in space. Apparently it was ancient, but whether it has been in space thousands or millions of years was the subject of much speculation. Estimates based upon the rate of arrival in the solar system and tracing the trajectory back from the nearest possible stellar systems had indicated travel times of almost 10 million years. Yet there was no way to be sure if the launch point might have been even further away or from an as yet unknown nearby companion to the Solar system.

Further examination of the probe had revealed a plaque somewhat like the one the United States had placed on the Voyager spacecraft in the 20th century. However, this plaque seemed somewhat more cryptic than the one on Voyager that had been believed to be so easy to understand. The Narrator pointed out that this plaque probably was envisioned as being easily understood as well.

The plaque was eventually removed from the probe and turned over to a crypto analysis group from Langley for an attempt at decoding. Of course this was going to take some doing since there was no common point of understanding from which to begin the analysis. But the analysts jump on this as the find of a lifetime.

Continued analysis of the probe gave a few interesting surprises. First people were beginning to believe that the builders of the probe were of a similar stature to human beings. This was concluded based upon the continued ability to work on the probe without having to bend in

funny ways and not requiring extreme contortions to funny shaped appendages to reach things during the disassembly process. Clearly fasteners did not match any standards and the machinists were busy constructing tools, but the tools that were required look remarkably ordinary.

Eventually there was a little bit of progress deciphering the plaque. It was noted that there were some basic number sequences and something that seems to be the equivalent of an alphabet as well as what appeared to be a calendar. The most fascinating thing is that if the calendar really was a calendar it indicated that the probe's equivalent of a year was 360 days which was astonishing. There were also indications that the plaque contained information about building something that could be used to extract further information from the probe.

Gerard turned to Kent and said, "These were things we could not do when we encountered the probe because we did not want to disturb its flight."

Kent nodded his understanding.

The narrator continued to explain that in the mean time progress was still being made in the process of disassembly and analyzing the rest of the probe. Everyone was still rather amazed how easy the disassembly process and cataloging of parts was going. It was also rather amazing to everyone how relatively easily they were able to identify various functional elements of something that was totally alien. Transmitting and receiving equipment was very recognizable as was a laser communication system. Analysis of the power system was also promising, and it appeared that very soon some of the probe's systems might be able to be "powered-up" for the first time in uncounted

ages. Of course the possibility that circuits within the probe were still functional after ages in deep space was the subject of considerable debate.

Some additional progress has also been made on reconstructing some of the “weathered” markings on the external surfaces of the probe. The scientists were speculating at the time that this would become more important as the language deciphering program got a little farther along with the plaque.

On the astronomical front the narrator noted that there had been further attempts at locating the particular system that the probe was believed to have come from, but the uncertainties in the calculations were pretty large and the possibilities were pretty wide open. To narrow the possibilities the velocity of the probe was combined with estimates of age based upon space weathering of the probes external surfaces. While this resulted in a pretty gross estimate the calculations were suggesting that the probe had been in space for somewhere between 20 and 40 million years. Interestingly enough the estimates of the nuclear power system operational life were also suggesting a capability of 35 to 45 million years. All of this along with ion thrusters on the probe indicated the probe just might have been operational until just shortly before it entered the neighborhood of the Solar system give or take a couple of million years. The narrator mentioned that this had everyone wondering what would have happened if the probe had arrived under its own power.

The time was approaching to attempt applying power to portions of the probe to determine if the estimates regarding the power system were correct. Fortunately the scientists, engineers and technicians had been able to isolate a section

of circuitry that didn't appear to be terribly important in order to test the theories without too much risk of damage. The circuitry was powered up slowly while monitoring every parameter that was believed to be important. As the power was slowly brought up to operational levels the circuit clearly began to function. While not doing anything particularly obvious, several lights begin flashing, and test equipment attached to the module revealed signs of electrical life within the module. Of course no one could begin to speculate on what those signs of life actually meant. However, this was a critical step because they could then begin powering up other modules without risking serious damage and decipher their functions one by one.

Everyone was still rather amazed that something from an alien culture bears such similarity to items that are recognizable. Circuit boards were rather obvious, although components themselves looked rather unusual. Components were not attached to circuitry with solder, but appeared to be welded to the interconnecting circuitry. This was probably why circuits were still functional after so many millennia in a hostile environment. The engineers continued to be amazed that as circuit after circuit was powered there appeared to be no obvious component failures. Whoever had built this thing built it to last a really long time and did their job well.

The narrator shifted to the crypto analysis at Langley where they had been achieving some success in decoding the plaque. It had been confirmed that the plaque contained information relating to extracting additional information from the system. Fortunately, it appeared that the probe designers had thought well ahead, and provided all the extraction equipment within the probe itself. In this respect they did better than had been done in providing recorded

data on Voyager without including a playback mechanism. The narrator almost seemed apologetic that we simply didn't know how to make a playback mechanism that was likely to withstand millions of years of space travel and remain functional. There were some portions of the instructions on the plaque that still had the analysts baffled so extracting the information remained beyond their reach at this point, but it seems that it is just a matter of time now. So far the biggest news was discovering details of the stellar system where the probe may have originated.

In deciphering some of the information on the plaque it appeared that the system of origin contained 13 primary planets, and that the home world was the 4th planet from its sun. There were also a 5th and 6th planet of similar composition and beyond that there were 4 gas giants but none with rings like Saturn. Beyond the four gas giants were three more rocky planets, one in an elliptical orbit and one in an extreme elliptical orbit that crossed the orbit of the 6th planet but also extended well into the equivalent of the Oort cloud region, and another that crossed the path of the 4th planet.

From the information regarding orbits of the various planets of the alien system extrapolations were under way to determine what likely might have happened to the system while the probe was in transit. Clearly the system was likely unstable with multiple crossing orbits, but it was still too early to tell what the overall effects would be in such a system. Still it appeared highly likely that planetary collisions or near misses could be anticipated. One could only imagine what might have happened to the builders of the probe during this time.

Suddenly several alarms went off within the Bright Star. The Captain apparently made several commands to the crew. Bell stopped the playback of the documentary, and all the monitors switched to their normal displays. A number of the crew quickly left the flight deck and those remaining hurriedly went to their duty stations.

Gerard explained to Kent as he motioned them off of the flight deck, “The ship’s proximity alarm is warning that there is activity near the Bright Star. The Captain is having the crew prepare to launch and get us away to avoid possible discovery.”

“Where are we going to go?”

“I don’t know for sure.”

Kent suddenly felt the sensation of riding in an elevator and caught a glimpse of one of the monitors just as they were leaving the flight deck. The ground was receding at an astonishing rate.

Gerard motioned them into the Galley, and both of them sat at one of the tables. Gerard was the first to speak. “I’m sorry about having to leave the flight deck so abruptly.”

“That’s OK. I understand. I certainly didn’t want to be in their way while they were so busy.”

“Thank you for understanding. Yes, it is wise to not distract the crew when they are performing flight operations such as this.”

“No problem, but we still don’t know where we are headed?”

“Sorry. Let me turn on the monitor here at the table and perhaps our destination will be on the display.”

Gerard turned on the display monitor, touched a few items on the screen, and then studied the situation for a moment.

“Well, so what’s up?”

“At the moment we are.”

“Come on Gerard, now is not a real good time for jokes.”

“Sorry, we appear to be leaving earth orbit at the moment.”

“What?”

“Yes, it says here,” pointing at the monitor, “we are on a trajectory back to the Centauri..... uh, your moon.”

“The moon! Are we headed to the Nova?”

“It’s possible, I can’t be sure just yet. I am not sure what other reason we would have for going to the moon at the moment, although I would kind of like to have a little more room to move around. The Bright Star is a fine ship, but it is a little cramped.”

“I’m going to get to see the Nova?”

“I assume so. I don’t really know any reason why not. In fact I would be happy to be your tour guide. Of course we will also likely be spending time reviewing more of the data we obtained from the tape archives.”

“It’s kind of too bad though.”

“Too bad about what?”

“We were going to check out the internet connection today at my home.”

“Yes, that is unfortunate. However, since there seem to be more people back on earth, perhaps we will eventually be able to tap into our old connections via some of your communication satellites.”

“Yeah, that would probably be worth another try. Is there any more news about people appearing on earth?”

“Well, our ability to scan while we were on the ground was pretty limited, but Rines told me the indications of people were steadily increasing throughout the night.”

“Rines? The sensor operator?”

“Yes, good memory.”

“I was kind of guessing.”

“Well done anyway. Yes Rines was keeping track and he said if his estimates were correct then as much as 1% of the population might have reappeared.”

“Reappeared from where?”

“That is still a mystery.”

“1% would mean as many as 30,000 people in town?”

“Yes that would be about right.”

“You realize this kind of sucks?”

“Sorry?”

“Well, here I am.... I mean there I was on earth and I was all by my self. Now there are more people here... uh, I mean there, but I am here with you guys. No offense. But I am still the only human.”

“Yes, I see. That is a pretty strange turn of events.”

“Well, it’s like.... you know. I want to know if people I know are back. I want to know if my family is back. I want to know if everyone is eventually coming back. I want to know where they have been. Good grief! I want to know where I have been for the last 10 years!”

“I understand, Kent. Maybe I don’t understand in quite the way you do, but I can certainly relate to what you are experiencing. We apparently experienced something similar; it’s just that we somehow experienced it together as a group so we all lost the time between yesterday and today. So, we don’t have to wonder about friends and family because we know where they are, but we also don’t know what happened.”

“Yeah, and that is what makes it different. Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate what you guys have been doing, and your help. This is just a lot to handle.”

“Yes it is.”

At that point Edison entered the galley, and said something to Gerard and then left.

“Edison tells me that now that we are headed for the Nova we can return to the flight deck and see what else they have found in the tape archives.”

“Excellent, I’m getting real anxious for some answers.”

Gerard and Kent made their way quickly back to the flight deck and took their places so that they could see the playback. As they did so the Captain motioned to Bell who restarted the documentary.

As the program continued the narrator again went back to the testing of modules within the probe. He explained how power was eventually applied to module after module while a battery of scientific instruments made measurements of every possible effect that was taking place. Eventually they had a remarkably good understanding of many of the functions of the modules, but were no closer to the purpose of the probe or its builders. Even though they apparently were able to extract data from the probe’s memory banks, they were at a complete loss to translate the data into anything useful. They eventually concluded the crypto analysis at Langely would have to make headway before they found out much from the data banks of the probe.

In the mean time the scientists turned their attention to the propulsion and attitude control system of the probe. This had the scientists pretty well baffled. They were quite sure which parts of the probe must be responsible for propulsion and attitude control, but they were having no luck identifying and kind of engine or thrusters. The controlling modules simply terminated in another module with no

obvious output. As a result they had refrained from applying power to this final module because they were not sure how to observe its function. The narrator pointed out that further test were being planned and that they would likely involve taking all or part of the probe back into earth orbit before applying power to what was believed to be the propulsion module. At this point they believed this would be the safest option.

The documentary then switched to the crypto analysis at Langely. Here the narrator talked about the latest breakthroughs that were at the point of allowing the playback device to be constructed that would enable them to get data from the plaque. It was also hoped that this would lead to still further breakthroughs.

The narrator then wrapped up the documentary by summarizing what they knew about the probe and the plans that the research teams had for the coming months.

“Well, obviously they learned a lot.” Kent said to Gerard.

“Yes. Excuse me a moment.” Gerard started talking to Bell. When he turned back he told Kent, “They have some other information they have found, but we won’t be playing it right away. Bell told me some of what it involves.”

“Why not play it now?”

“We’re going to be making preparations for our landing soon.”

“Oh.”

“Bell, told me the other things they found were mostly brief pieces of newscasts. They make a few references to advancements in deciphering the language used within the probe, the completion of the playback device, some information being obtained during the playback, and preparations for the orbital test of the probe’s propulsion system.”

“Anything about the tests themselves or anything more specific about what data they got from the playback?”

“Not on the newscasts. But the main thing they picked up was the scheduling of the propulsion system test.”

“Which is important because?”

“It was scheduled just a couple of months before that last newscast you found at the TV station.”

“You’re thinking the propulsion test may have caused the problems the newscasters were talking about?”

“Evidence is pointing in that direction.”

“Yes, it does seem so.”

Columbus, the navigator, made an announcement to the Captain and the Captain issued an order. “We need to leave the flight deck, Kent.”

“Sure. You mean we are already getting ready to land?”

“Yes.”

“Wow, I remember that it took our Apollo ships days to reach the moon.”

“Still, it is an impressive achievement at your specie’s level of development.”

“Thanks..... I think.” Kent smiled as he followed Gerard off of the flight deck.

Chapter 7

~ Nova ~

The arrival at the Nova was routine. However, since Kent was back in the galley with Gerard he was unable to see too much. Fortunately Gerard once again activated the monitor screen and some views of the approach did appear on the screen. Kent was trying to get an idea of how big the Nova might be, but without any common frame of reference it was simply impossible. He even considered that for all he could tell the Nova might be anywhere from a few hundred feet across to a few miles. However, he suspected it was not just a few hundred feet.

As the Bright Star approached closer Kent noticed that an opening had appeared on the side of the Nova. Kent assumed that was where they would enter the ship after they landed. As he watched the opening appeared larger as they continued their approach. It wasn't until the last few seconds that Kent realized they were not exactly going to land. They were flying right into the Nova. As he realized this the scale of the Nova became more apparent. It was huge. Kent sat there in stunned silence as the Bright Star was swallowed in the vastness.

“You didn't tell me how big the Nova was.”

“I think the appropriate response would be, ‘You never asked me.’”

“Very funny.”

“Actually, I rather enjoyed watching your reaction as we approached. I didn’t really know quite how to explain its size so I thought seeing it for yourself would take care of that for me.”

“Got that right.”

Gerard mimicked a smile. “We’ve touched down; we can head for the exit now.”

“OK.” Kent followed Gerard but was more nervous that he had been for quite some time. After all, he was about to be the ultimate minority in just a few seconds. One of him and how many of them? Ten thousand? A hundred thousand? More? Guessing was just not possible. “Gerard?” Kent paused in the doorway.

“Yes.”

“How many of your people did you say are on the Nova?”

“Well, at last count 263,314.”

Gerard tilted his head slightly and looked at Kent. “Shall we go?”

“I guess so.”

Kent followed Gerard to the exit of the Bright Star. Edison pressed a few buttons on a keypad and the inner door slid open. He followed this with a few more presses and the outer door slid open as well. Kent was a little disappointed. He had expected to see the inside of a cavernous ship, but instead here was something that looked about like one of those exit ramps for a commercial passenger jet. He

realized this probably made sense, but it was terribly anticlimactic. The crew then began to file out of the Bright Star with Gerard and Kent bringing up the rear.

As they neared the end of the ramp Kent could see that it did indeed open into a rather large area though not quite a cavernous as he had imagined. As Kent and Gerard exited the end of the ramp Kent could see the Captain was already talking to someone who appeared very official. He thought it was funny how the behaviors of official bureaucracy transcend species. Finally the Captain appeared to sign something and motioned for Gerard and Kent to follow him while the rest of the crew went in the other direction.

As they reached the far end of the landing bay they proceeded through a door into a small room. The Captain said something and motioned for them all to be seated.

“The Captain says that the President has been notified of our arrival and will be joining us here shortly.”

“The President?”

“Well, that is the best translation I can come up with. He is the elected executive officer of the Nova. He is the highest ranking person we have.”

“And why are we meeting with him?”

“Well, this is a rather important occasion. Meeting with a new sentient species is not taken lightly.”

“Oh. I don’t exactly feel that important to be meeting with a President.”

“Sometimes we just don’t perceive our real importance.”

“Yeah, right. It’s not like I am some kind of Head of State or ambassador or something.”

“Well, by default you are an ambassador now. You are our liaison with your species by providence.”

“Gerard.”

“Yes.”

“Sometimes I think you know our language too well.”

“I worked at it.” Gerard punctuated the statement with his mimicked laugh just for good measure.

“OK, so when is he going to be here?” Kent was interrupted by the opening of the door, and the Captain and Gerard stood and looked as if they were at attention. Kent felt it wise to do likewise.

The President entered and motioned everyone to sit. He then said a few words to the Captain who pointed at Gerard. The President talked with Gerard briefly and then paused.

“The President wants you to know that I will be translating for him, and he wants to welcome you and wants to know if you have any immediate needs that we should address before we talk.”

“Please tell him thank you for me, and no I have no special needs at the moment.” Kent was glad he had made use of the lavatory in the Bright Star earlier. He certainly didn’t

want his first act as ambassador for earth to be asking the President where the bathroom was located.

Gerard finished the reply and the president was speaking again and Gerard began translating. “Mr. Holland we are extremely please that you have been able to come here and meet with us. We are equally concerned about what has transpired on your planet. The Captain has kept us informed of the events of the last day and we have also passed this information along to those on our home world. I just want you to know that we are all working diligently to determine what has been happening.”

“Thank you. It has been kind of upsetting, but the Bright Star crew has been really helpful.”

“Yes, they have done an excellent job and are to be commended.” The President nodded toward both the Captain and Gerard. “The information they have obtained from the tape archives have been transferred to the Nova for further processing and we should have a pretty good picture of what has been happening over the last few months. You do realize that we, like you, experienced a major loss of time?”

“Yes, Gerard filled me in.”

“Excellent. I understand you have also discussed the Centauri ship?”

“You mean about the moon being one of their ships?”

“Yes. Of course this is a very important find to us, but at the moment there are obviously more pressing matters to address.”

“You mean what happened to us?”

“Precisely. The time displacement is most disturbing. Also we are monitoring the steady reappearance of the population of your world. Our latest estimate is that almost 2% of the population is now present.”

“Is there any idea where they are back from?”

“Not at present. They seem to be spontaneously reappearing. We are also beginning to see an increase of communication activity on a wide range of frequencies. The communications we have intercepted indicates that everyone is as much at a loss as we are. Some seem to be taking advantage of the situation.”

“What do you mean ‘taking advantage’?”

“There have been indications of looting in many places.”

“Oh.” Kent remembered his own looting experience of just two days ago.

“I am sure this is to be expected under the circumstances, and hopefully the situation will stabilize soon.”

“Yes. I hope so too.”

“That brings us to something I wish to suggest to ask you.”

“Of course, please go ahead.”

“Well, assuming that the population continues to increase, we would like you to be our liaison to your world.”

“Like an ambassador?”

“Yes, in a manner of speaking. Originally we had not intended to reveal ourselves to your species. We were primarily interested in the probe, but we planned to only be in your system a relatively short time after which we would continue our exploration.”

“I guess none of our lives are going quite according to plan.”

“This is true. Now it would seem that it would be a good idea to work together to determine what has happened. Many on the Nova are quite upset about the time loss we experienced.”

“So, how are we going to do this? I mean, this is not something I know anything about doing.”

“No, I am sure you don’t, but that is not a problem if you are willing to be of assistance in this way.”

“I guess so.”

“I will take that as a tentative yes?”

“Yeah.... I mean yes.”

“Very good. Very good.”

“But where do we start?”

“Well, first we would suggest giving the situation time to stabilize. We don’t want your people thinking we are the

cause of whatever happened. We will be observing the situation for a while and when the time appears appropriate we would like you to introduce us.”

“How?”

“We can break in on a variety of communication channels and allow you to make an announcement.”

“OK.”

“This probably seems a little overwhelming doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“No problem. We will work together on an announcement. I believe there is time. For now we would be honored if you would be our guest aboard the Nova and assist us with the research regarding the time loss and the matter of the probe.”

“Sure. Sounds like a good idea.”

“Excellent. Good to have you aboard. For now I will leave you in the hands of the Captain.” The President rose making it obvious that the meeting was drawing to a close.

“Thank you Mr. President.” Kent hoped that was the right thing to say.

“Thank you Mr. Holland.” The President nodded to each in turn and said a few words to the Captain and then left the room.

The Captain then turned and spoke briefly to Gerard. Gerard translated, “The Captain would like to know if you would be interested in a tour of the Nova?”

“Absolutely.”

“Good.” Gerard talked with the Captain a little further and then indicated that they should follow him as he led the way.

Gerard kept up a running commentary as they traveled through the Nova. The Captain was pointing out many of the prominent features of the Nova and Gerard busily translated as fast as he could go. As they toured the Nova Kent saw the Bridge, the living quarters, the Kitchens, some of the cafeterias, the power generators and Engineering. They also had some time to walk through one of the ships gardens where much of the food for everyone was grown. The Captain explained that they could have reported wholly to synthetic food products, but the people tired of them so easily that fresh real foodstuffs were provided as much as possible.

Kent was pretty well worn out as the tour was drawing to a close. He felt like they had been walking for miles and he was right. The Nova really was huge. But as mind boggling as the scale of the ship was, he couldn't help remembering that the huge Nova was less than a fly speck on the Centauri ship where they were parked. Finally Kent just had to ask.

“Captain, has there been any progress on entering the Centauri ship?”

“We have made very limited progress.” Gerard translated. “We have gained access to one of the navigational thrusters, and partial access to one of the main engines. However, we are still unable to locate a way into the living areas of the interior.”

“It’s so amazing to me to think of the moon as a ship.”

“The size is overwhelming isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s just so hard to believe.”

“Yes, I agree. Even with all the places we have seen, we have run across nothing to compare with a Centauri ship. It was a miracle to find this one here. We had never expected to see one.”

“But there is still no idea where the Centauri’s themselves are, or what happened to them?”

“No. So far we have not found any clues to what happened to them.”

“I guess it is just another mystery to add to our own. Speaking of that is there more news on the reappearance of people on Earth?”

“Yes. Some. That is still pretty baffling as well. The best we can tell with our observations is that the population is still increasing. The percentages are still fairly low, but steadily increasing. There is also increasing communication activity across the electromagnetic spectrum.”

“Some particular communication?”

“No. A little bit of everything. Some of the broadcast stations are returning to operation, and there are some new news reports of interest.”

“In what way?”

“Well, there are accounts of witnesses to reappearances of people. But it’s not just people.”

“Not just people?”

“That’s right. It seems the disappearances involve inorganic items as well as organic items.... Uh, both things and people. It also seems that there are disappearances happening as well. Often an inorganic item will disappear for a short time then seemingly reappears, but looking different.”

“What about the small white buildings we saw.”

“There have been some accounts of those as well. No one seems to know what they are, but they do mostly seem to be occupying areas where other structures once stood. Why those structures are gone and have been replaced by the white buildings is a matter of much conjecture, but no one knows anything with certainty.”

“Has the research of the TV archives turned up anything?”

“Yes, both that and tapping into the internet has proven useful. More and more it is looking like what has happened and is continuing to happen are somehow related to the probe propulsion tests that took place just a few months ago.”

“But how does a test a few months ago cause me to lose 10 years of my life?”

“We don’t know. We didn’t lose 10 years, but we did lose considerably more than a few months. Also, whatever we experienced seems to have been simultaneous for all of us. The experience was not spread out over time as seems to be happening on Earth.”

“This is just all so nuts. Nothing makes sense.” Kent wasn’t really talking to anyone in particular.

Gerard chimed in, “Perhaps now is a good time to get something to eat, and get a little rest. It’s already been a long day.”

“Sounds good to me.” Kent agreed.

Gerard apparently made the same suggestion to the Captain who obviously also was in full agreement and motioned for them to follow him to one of the eating areas of the Nova.

Kent was still a little stunned by the size of the ship and from time to time as they were making their way to the dining area he just couldn’t believe he was in a ship. It just seemed like a city until he looked up and didn’t see the sky. Instead he saw the lighting built into the roof of the ship.

It wasn’t too long until they reached the Cafeteria where the Captain motioned Kent and Gerard to a table in the corner. He then spoke to one of the attendants and then returned to them at the table as well.

Gerard explained to Kent, “Normally we would simply get our own food in one of those lines over there,” Gerard pointed, “but I agree with the Captain that might not be a great idea for you to have to do that.”

“It is a little intimidating.”

“Yes, we thought it might be. Also, the Captain has explained to them your dietary needs so that you won’t have to try to figure out what things you can eat and which things might not be best for you. We were concerned about something else as well.”

“What?”

“Well, if you look around you might notice you are kind of the center of attention here.”

Kent glanced around a little then looked back at Gerard and nodded, “Yeah, I kind of thought people were looking at me.”

“They are trying to be polite and not upset you, but they are naturally curious about you. Going through the lines might be pushing the matter a little too far. Someone might attempt to meet you and that might get a little awkward.”

“Yeah. I mean, I wouldn’t mind meeting people, but this is a little scary.”

“Yes. Perhaps tomorrow we could arrange for the broadcast of an interview with you to explain what is going on to everyone in the Nova?”

“Sure. I guess. I mean that seems like a good idea.”

“Good. I can speak to the Captain about it later. Here he comes.”

The Captain and Gerard talked briefly.

“Kent, the Captain thinks that a broadcast might be a good idea. It will help some with the curiosity and will help to introduce you to the personnel on the Nova.”

“OK, just let me know when we are going to do this.”

“Of course.”

Two of the attendants in the cafeteria arrived and began placing food on the table amidst chatter between the Captain, Gerard and the attendants themselves. Soon everything was in place and the attendants departed.

Kent decided to refrain from much conversation while eating. This gave Gerard a much needed break in translating and also allowed him to dig into his food which he was obviously enjoying. Clearly they were all very hungry. Kent wasn't sure what he was eating, but it tasted pretty good. The closest he could think of describing it was as something like Chinese food, but not anything he remembered eating.

The Captain and Gerard spoke intermittently during the meal, but Kent didn't feel left out. He was quite busy filling the empty hole in his own stomach and enjoying the food almost as much as Gerard.

Finally when all were finished Gerard used the translating box to speak to Kent. “The Captain and I were discussing what we should do.”

“About what?”

“Well, this has been another pretty busy day for all of us and I am sure it has been a little stressful for you as well.”

Kent nodded.

“Would you like to go to your quarters?”

“Quarters?”

“Yes we have made arrangements for a place where you can stay on the Nova. There is an entertainment unit and a bed. It’s not very large, but it should be reasonably comfortable. It will also give you a little time to yourself.”

“You know that sounds great. You guys have been terrific, but I really would like a little time to myself. That’s kind of funny though isn’t it?”

“Funny, Kent?”

“Well, yesterday I woke up in a world where I was all by myself and today I am looking for a little time by myself.”

“Yes, indeed. How quickly we adapt.” Gerard agreed.

Gerard explained to the Captain that they were all in agreement and everyone arose and the Captain lead the way to Kent’s quarters which fortunately were not far from the

cafeteria. Kent even believed he could find his way back to the cafeteria by himself if he needed to.

When they arrived Gerard showed Kent how to operate the entertainment unit, the lavatory facilities and how to operate the door. Gerard explained to Kent that he programmed the entertainment unit for a mixture of local and earth entertainment. When they were all satisfied The Captain and Gerard departed after agreeing on a time to meet in the morning. Kent felt odd being all alone in the alien ship, but also a little relieved at being able to just let down finally. He punched up some regular music on the entertainment unit and lay down on the bed and gave himself time to just absorb the last two days.

As he laid there listening to the music he couldn't help but wonder if any of his family and friends were among those who had reappeared on earth. He wondered what they might be going through and how confused everyone must be right now. He also wondered what could possibly be happening and how it could all be connected with the propulsion test of the probe. Then he thought more about these people here on the Nova and wondered how he would manage to be an ambassador between them and whoever was left on earth when things settled. His mind buzzed around in circle after circle until sleep finally relieved him of his burdens.

Chapter 8

~Waking up at the Wheel ~

Kent realized he was being chased, but he didn't know why. He was running down the middle of the road in his bare feet in the middle of the city. Lights were flashing behind him and he knew it was the police, but he could not figure out what he had done. The street was narrow and unfamiliar. He was in the middle of the city, but when he looked up he couldn't see the sky. Still he could see the lights of his pursuers flashing off of the buildings as he was running past them. Then not only was there a siren but they were honking their horn. This was crazy. Did they want him to pull over? In his bare feet? Then his eyes popped open.

As he rolled over he fell out of bed and banged a knee and elbow on the hard floor of his quarters. Then he realized the flashing lights and honking horn were not just a dream. The lights in his room were flashing and a honking sound was coming from the entertainment unit. He pulled himself up and limped to the entertainment unit to see if he could do something about the noise. As he touched it the noise stopped and the display unit immediately activated. He saw what appeared to be some kind of broadcast intended for the mantis people. He also made a mental note to figure out a better name for them. The mantis person appeared to be making an announcement about something important, but Kent was totally at a loss about what it could be until a scene from the moon's surface flashed on the screen.

What Kent saw, based upon Gerard's descriptions, appeared to be a whole array of gigantic rocket engines firing from the surface of the moon, or rather the Centauri ship as he corrected himself. The scene returned to the announcer who still appeared to be giving some type of directions about what the people should be doing in response to what was happening. Kent was wishing he had even the slightest idea what was being said and he was also just wishing one morning would start off dull and boring. Then he heard a beeping sound from the door to his quarters.

Opening the door he was greeted by an obviously breathless Gerard who had clearly gotten to Kent as fast as he could. As Kent let him in he asked, "What is happening?"

Gerard grabbed the translator box and replied, "No one is completely sure yet. A whole section of Centauri attitude thrusters started firing and have been operating continuously for several minutes now. We don't know why."

"What are we doing?"

"All operations people are reporting to their stations. We are preparing for launch if necessary, but the order to launch has not been given. At this point we are just trying to be ready to react if necessary."

"I am guessing this caught you guys by surprise?"

"Yes. The reports are that there was a team at one of the thruster sites when the firings started. The team hasn't been heard from, and we are not sure if they triggered

something or just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Wait a minute. You said thrusters? Those are only thrusters? They are not the main engines?”

“Oh, no. The main engines are much larger. Those are just attitude control engines.”

“Holy cow!”

“I am sorry I don’t understand. What does a religious animal have to do with this?”

“Sorry, Gerard. I am just expressing surprise. I thought from the size of what I saw on the screen that those must be the main engines. They just seem so large.”

“Well, yes they are large. Actually each thruster engine is much bigger than the whole Nova. But of course when adjusting the attitude of a Centauri ship that is to be expected.”

At this point Gerard and Kent were interrupted by a beeping sound coming from a device at Gerard’s waist. Gerard touched the device and waited as they listened to what he was being told by someone elsewhere within the Nova. Gerard acknowledged what was said and turned to Kent.

“Apparently the thrusters are beginning to shut down in sequence. They think it had nothing to do with any of our people at one of the sites, but they still have not heard from them. Our navigation people are trying to figure out what the effect will be on the Centauri ship, but at the moment

we don't appear to be in any danger. We are still holding short of a launch command. Everyone has to remain at their operation stations until further notice."

"And our operation station would be?"

"For the moment, right here. It is best if we stay out of everyone's way."

"That makes sense to me. Besides I'm shaking too much right now to be much use to anyone." Kent looked at his trembling hands.

Both turned and watch the display screen where they could now see that the output from the thrusters was diminishing and a few of the thrusters had stopped firing totally. One by one they simply stopped until everything looked just as it always had.

"It appears to be over," Gerard offered.

"Yeah, but the question is, what was it all about. I'm betting this was plenty visible from earth and I know nothing like this has ever been mentioned that I know of."

"Yes, from our earlier testing the thrusters have only fired on an individual basis and relatively rarely. They have been observed from earth according to our research, but have never been identified for what they really are."

Gerard's communication device beeped once again. Gerard acknowledged it, and they listened. When they stopped talking Gerard began explaining to Kent.

"They stopped it."

“What do you mean, ‘stopped it’?” Kent was at a loss.

“They stopped the wobble.”

“What wobble?”

“Oh. Sorry. The Centauri ship was pretty much tide locked to the earth. I mean, it always presents one face toward the earth which is the side opposite from where the main engines are located. But there is a wobble. The Centauri ship actually rocks back and forth relative to a perfect alignment with the earth so that sometimes it faces a little to the east and other times it faces a little to the west. Not a lot, but it does. Well, the firing that just happened stopped the wobble.”

“But why?”

“We don’t really know. The Captain contacted me when this first began. He thinks that part of the attitude control system may have been off-line for a while. This may have allowed the wobble to begin. Now, possibly, that part of the attitude control system has come back on line. Normally only a few engines should fire every once in a while and only very briefly.”

“But in this case a lot of them fired to compensate for having been off-line for so long?” Kent queried.

“Exactly.”

“The driver woke up and swerved the car back onto the road,” Kent nodded with understanding.

“What?”

“Sorry, just an analogy. If the driver of a car falls asleep, while driving, his car will start to veer off of the road. If he wakes up before it’s too late he will turn the steering wheel abruptly to get back on the road where he is supposed to be.”

“Yes, that would seem to be the case,” Gerard said as he mimicked a shrug.

“The question is, who woke up?”

“Indeed. We don’t know. It might be just an automated system, and this seems most likely considering how long the Centauri ship has been here without any signs of life.”

Kent and Gerard sat in silence for a few moments, then Kent interrupted the awkwardness. “Gerard?”

“Yes?”

“I realized I don’t know what to call you. I mean, I know your name. I don’t mean that. I mean, what do I call your people?”

Gerard paused for a while before answering. He moved his hand to the translator, but then withdrew it. Finally he responded.

“I don’t really know. In a sense we just refer to ourselves as ‘people’ just as you do. Our word is different and unpronounceable for you, but it essentially means the same thing. I guess it would be good to refer to us by a name attached to our star system. Like you would essentially be

Solarians from the star Sol. That doesn't work real well for naming us though."

"Why?"

"Well, your people have never given our star a name that would mean much."

"I don't understand."

"Well, we have done a lot of research since arriving in your system, and it took some time, but we finally were able to determine that your people actually do have a," Gerard paused while searching for the right word, "designation for our star."

"And it is?"

"Well, it is HD70642." Gerard stopped and offered no more.

"Oh, I see your point. Not exactly catchy is it?"

"Catchy?"

"Not exactly usable in normal conversation. I mean I couldn't say, 'Welcome to Earth all HD70642ians!'"

Gerard mimicked a laugh with the translator box. "No that is definitely not catchy."

Kent thought about it a few seconds. "I think maybe I have got it."

"Got what?"

“A name that would work.”

“Yes?”

“Well, one of the things I noticed about you is the kind of triangular shape of your heads. It reminded me of something, but I would rather not say. Anyway, with this HD thing I have an idea. What about Headians? I mean I know it might sound kind of corny, but what do you think?”

“It seems acceptable to me. Headians it is.” Gerard paused for a moment and realized the irony of something he was about to tell Kent. Quickly he thought of a way to phrase what he was about to say to make an attempt at humor in this strange language.

“Speaking of Headians,” Gerard said, “we have just heard from the Head office.”

“What?” Seeing Gerard tilt his head slightly Kent realized what was up. “Head office!” Kent laughed. “That’s great!”

Gerard mimicked a chuckle with the translator box.

“Do you mean you have heard from your home world?”

“Yes.”

But how is that possible? I mean, aren’t we light years apart?”

“About 90 light years actually. But that isn’t really a problem. We sent them the information we collected the

other day, and they have had their systems processing it for several hours now. They have sent back a lot of information already.”

Kent interrupted, “Now wait a minute. You sent messages that stuff to your home world yesterday and already have answers back from them when they are 90 light years away? I know you guys are good at this, but what about the speed of light limits?”

“Oh, I see why you don’t understand. We don’t use the traditional electromagnetic forms of communication as you do. Those are indeed limited to the speed of light. Instead we use quantum entanglement relay stations?”

“Huh?” Kent stood there with a blank stare.

“I’m sorry. I realize this probably doesn’t make much sense. I will try to explain.” Gerard paused for a few moments. “It’s like this. As we travel around, from time to time we drop off relay stations. These relay stations produce something called quantum entangled photon pairs. Each relay station essentially broadcasts photon pairs in the direction of our ship and also in the direction of the home world.”

“OK, I am kind of seeing this so far, but I still don’t understand how some kind of relay station lets you beat the speed of light, Gerard”

“Well it is a property of quantum entangled photon pairs that whatever happens to one happens to the other instantaneously regardless of the distance between them. It’s almost like they were the identical photon in two different locations in space. So to communicate with the

home world we interact with the arriving photons at our end which instantaneously affects the photons arriving at the home world end.”

“It kind of makes sense, but there has to be a catch.”

“Well, this is the simple description, but there are some issues that have to be considered.”

“Like what?”

“Well, the relay stations always have to be placed in pairs.”

“Why?”

“Well, in general a perfect relay would be exactly half way between to the two parties that are.....” Gerard thought for a moment, “talking.” If everything is perfectly aligned the every instant the photon on one end is affected the affected photon at the other end of the channel arrives at the receiver. However, perfect alignment is never possible so there is a compromise and a delay. This is why the relays are always placed in pairs.”

“I am still not getting it.”

“One of the relays is slightly nearer to us, and the other relay is slightly nearer to the home world. When we talk to them we use the one nearer to us, and when they talk to us they use the one nearer to them. So the delay at each end is the time required for the affected photon to travel the distance between where it reacts to its twin and interception by the receiver at the other end of the link.”

“So for most of the 90 light year distance the link is instantaneous, but there is a delay for the last few hours or days that the photon has to travel before it is detected.”

“Yes. In this case we have been very fortunate that one of the relay pairs is almost centered on the half way point between here and the home world so the delay time is just a matter of days. It could have just as easily have been a delay of months.”

“So you are never out of touch with your home by more than a month or so even though you are 90 light years away?”

“That’s right.”

“Fascinating.”

“And quite helpful too I might add.”

“I guess I see why.”

“Remember I told you that we spend a lot of out time traveling at very near light speed?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, when you do this the time dilatation effect makes time for us pass slowly relative to what is happening on the home world. This might mean for a few days of travel for us several hundred years might pass back on our Head home world.”

“Oh, yeah. But I don’t see exactly how that is a great advantage to you.”

“Every time we drop speed to do a planetary exploration we take the opportunity to contact our home via the best placed relay station that we have dropped off during our travels. When we do this they send us the latest scientific advancements that have happened during the few hundred years of our short trip. We get scientific advancement at an accelerated pace for us. This has provided us with major upgrades to all systems of the Nova.”

“I get it. For them science is advancing at a regular pace but you get major leaps in technology every few days or weeks. Wow, that would be an advantage.”

“Of course we also get to communicate with our descendants back home, but after being away for thousands of years by their clocks, that doesn’t mean much any more. Of course it is also why all of our close families came along on the Nova in the first place.”

“That makes sense. I can see that I might not care to spend a lot of time talking to one of my ancestors from a couple of thousand years ago.”

“Exactly. We are something of a curiosity, and a great source of information to them about the galaxy, but personal communication is rather low priority these days.”

“OK, but you were saying Headia had sent you a bunch of information about the recordings we provided to them.”

“Oh yes, of course. Their ability to process data is much greater than ours, and they have already provided us with some conclusions about what has been happening.”

“OK, don’t make me drag this out of you.”

“Oh, no, of course not.” Gerard mimicked a smile. “According to them, it is as we suspected. The propulsion tests of the probe did cause what we have seen and experienced. Their analysis indicates that the main propulsion system of the probe is a reactionless drive that depends upon phase shifting space in front and behind it to produce propulsion. By doing this they did not require any reaction mass that would not have lasted for such a long trip unless they spent most of the time coasting.”

“What do you mean reactionless drive?”

“Their propulsion was not like a rocket that forces something out of one end in order to go in the opposite direction. Instead they phase shifted space in front of them in a manner that had the effect of compressing time, then behind them they phase shifted space in the opposite direction which had the effect of expanding time. The net effect caused them to move forward. The faster they produced the phase shifts the faster they moved and all without expelling any reaction mass.”

“The propulsion system affects time?”

“Exactly, and they think this is how we all got into this..... uh, mess.”

“Yeah, that would be a good description alright, but how did I get into this? The propulsion tests happened almost ten years after I disappeared from my time and arrived here.”

“Well, our home world scientists are speculating that the probe’s reactionless drive was never intended to be used near a planet or even anywhere with a star system. Since the drive depends upon distorting time they would have know that this could be a problem within a system. However, when your scientists over rode the command system of the probe to do the propulsion test near the earth, Centauri ship and us, we were all subjected to the effects.”

“Yeah, but what about the ten years?”

“Well, they estimate that the effects are kind of like ripples in a pond of water where distance from the center of a disturbance is like a combination of distance and time from the propulsion system. Even though you were pretty far in the past relative to the probe you just happened to be close enough to be caught up in the disturbance. This is why as the propulsion test got closer the newscaster said that events had gotten worse. They just didn’t realize the cause of the events was the future propulsion test.”

“But why did different things time shift by different amounts, and why did dome things not seem to shift at all?”

“Our scientist don’t fully understand this either. They speculate the effects were a function of the distance from the probe, the probe’s orientation at the time of the test, and the relative size of the object. It seems that things that occupied greater areas of space tended to time shift less, but we just don’t know why.”

“So what happened to the probe?”

“We are not sure just yet. We believe the test was set up to be short duration and the probe is probably in orbit somewhere around the earth and simply doing nothing.”

“Well, that’s good..... I think.”

“I think so too. We have started searching for it, but we don’t think that is our biggest priority right now.”

“So what is our biggest priority?”

“Well, after what happened this morning, we’re thinking the recent actions of the Centauri ship are something we need to pay careful attention to at the moment. We just don’t know what to expect next. In the mean, time the population of earth is steadily increasing as people are apparently materializing after their time shift.” Gerard hesitated.

“What’s the matter?”

“Well, we have been keeping track of broadcasts from earth since people have started reappearing. The news has not been all good.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, with the time displacements there have been a lot of mishaps as people and objects have reappeared. The majority of the time things seem to have been alright, but there are accidents. Automobiles have been seen reappearing as the driver loses control and crashes. Airliners have crashed as they reappear just before landing. People and things have materialized inside of other objects producing explosions. It is pretty chaotic.”

“I guess I was one of the lucky ones.”

“Fortunately there are many like you, but the situation has them pretty busy dealing with the problems right now.”

At this point Gerard’s communication device interrupted them and whoever was calling apparently wanted something pretty important because Gerard didn’t even take a break to explain to Kent what was happening. Finally he finished and turned to Kent.

“It seems that with the present chaos on earth the President and his advisors have determined that it might be best to establish contact before things progress any further. They figure it will be difficult enough with the present population and all the problems they are experiencing, and expect things may get a lot worse before they get better.”

“Yeah, I can see that, but why did he call?”

“Well, remember you are the one who is going to be our liaison to earth.”

“Oh.”

“You seem a little concerned.”

“Well, yeah. I mean I have never done anything like this before.”

“That’s OK. Those people on earth haven’t either.”

“You’re not making me feel any better here, Gerard.”

“Sorry.”

Gerard went on to explain that they would be meeting with the President and his staff in about 45 minutes. The two decided that this would allow them just enough time to eat in the cafeteria and still not be late for the meeting. They hurriedly got on their way and talked very little during the trip or the meal.

During the meal Kent was preoccupied about what it was that he would be doing and how in the world he was ever going to learn how to do it. Here he was about to be the middle man in contact between earth and an alien species and he knew he didn't have the foggiest idea how to do it. Then with all the other things going on he certainly felt overwhelmed.

His most serious concern was that the people on earth might conclude that the aliens had something to do with what was happening rather than having been caught in the aftermath of the probe propulsion test. He was wondering how to explain all this and not seem like a mad man to them. Yet after all that had happened the last few days just about anything anyone said would sound a little mad.

Kent was lost in thought when Gerard broke the spell. “Kent we need to get going.”

“Uh, right. Right with you.” Kent hurriedly followed as Gerard led the way out of the cafeteria and to the President's offices.

Chapter 9

~ Ambassador ~

“Mr. Holland, it’s good to see you. Please be seated.” The President motioned to a chair at the conference table. He also indicated the place next to that is where Gerard should be seated.

“Thank you sir,” Kent responded as he made his way to the seat while hoping his shaking wasn’t noticeable. Gerard slid into the seat beside him.

“Mr. Holland, it is the consensus of our leadership council,” indicating the others seated at the table, “that we should wait no longer in regard to establishing contact with the people of earth. We had hoped that the situation would stabilize more, but it is apparent that the chaos is going to be a prolonged condition.” The President paused a rather long time as if searching for the precise words he wished to say. “For the lack of a better term, we would like to appoint you as our ambassador to earth.” Then the President simply stopped and looked at Kent.

Kent wasn’t sure what to say or how to say it. What he really wanted to do was run away and hide, but he knew that wouldn’t work. The only human on the Nova was going to stand out no matter how he tried to be inconspicuous. “Uh, yes. Of course. I guess.” Kent was hoping Gerard translated his gibberish into something more eloquent.

“Excellent! Those in favor please signify.” Everyone around the table slammed their fists on the table. Kent took this to mean “Aye.”

“Then it is done. Mr. Holland, my assistant,” at this point Gerard stopped translating for a moment.

“Kent, I am going to refer to the Presidents assistant as John. I simply don’t know what else to call him.”

Kent nodded.

Gerard continued the translation, “John will assist you in preparing an opening communication and establishing preliminary meetings with representatives of earth.”

“Sure. OK. That would be good,” Kent stammered while again hoping Gerard was doing better at keeping him from looking like a fool.

“Good. John, please take Kent and Gerard and get things underway.”

“Yes, sir,” John answered as he rose from his seat and began making his way toward the door while indicating that Kent and Gerard should follow.

Kent was thoroughly relieved to be going and let out a quiet sigh as the door shut behind him. “What have I gotten myself into?” he thought to himself. At this point he was sure hoping John knew what to do because he knew he didn’t.

Kent and Gerard followed John into another office near where they had just met with the President. After they

entered, John indicated that they should be seated while he walked around behind a small console and took a seat himself.

Gerard translated for John, “Kent, I am hoping you have some idea how to proceed.”

“Me? I thought you guys had done this sort of stuff before.”

“Well, theoretically yes under fairly normal circumstances, but I think we could all agree that this is anything but normal.”

Kent nodded in agreement.

“Frankly, I am pretty much at a loss about where to begin. What I can help with is putting you in touch with people on earth. How we are going to establish who might be in authority in the middle of the chaos down there and how we are going to explain what we know and who we are without negative reactions is beyond me.”

Kent felt what little hope he had dwindle quickly. “Well, I don’t want to panic anyone, but I am definitely not an ambassador and haven’t the slightest idea where to start. Until a few days ago..... I mean ten years ago... I mean.... Well, you know. Until this started I was just an engineer in a small electronics company. I don’t have any great ideas where we go from here either.”

John sat a long time without saying anything. He seemed to be sitting there totally oblivious to the whole situation then suddenly he looked up. “Kent, would people on earth be more likely to believe a polished speaker who is a

professional ambassador, or an average person who is just about as confused as they are?”

“Well, personally I’d rather hear from a common person than a professional liar.... I mean ambassador.”

“Perfect,” was John’s response which he punctuated by pounding the console. “In one hour you go live talking to the people of earth!”

“What? No way! I have no idea what to say, what not to say, or even what to ask.”

“Precisely,” responded John. “You just be you, and be honest with them. Tell them everything you know. Tell them everything you know about us. Tell them everything you have seen and everything we have learned.”

“It sounds too easy and too scary at the same time.”

“Well, lets make some notes about some of the things that have happened and some of the things we have learned so that you don’t miss any major points, but other than that it’s probably best if you just tell them whatever you wish.”

“I guess we don’t have any other good alternatives.”

With that Kent, John and Gerard began putting together the basic ground work of what Kent would be saying in his broadcast to earth. John took one brief break during this time to speak with one of his staff about making arrangements for the broadcast itself.

In a little under an hour they had the basics laid out for Kent. Mostly John and Gerard just asked questions to

spark Kent's memory of the events of the last few days. John then took notes that Gerard translated back into English for Kent.

A chime signaled that it was time for them to go to the communication center of the Nova where the broadcast would originate. Kent found himself shaking even though Gerard and John kept telling him that he would do fine. Those assurances just didn't help.

When they arrived at the communication center Gerard showed Kent where he would be seated while making the broadcast. Kent realized he didn't know where the camera was, but he noticed that he saw himself on one of the communication screens. The butterflies were taking a real toll on Kent's stomach but he was too busy trying to stop the shakes to worry about that at the moment. His underarms were wringing wet too, but he just kept trying to tell himself that it wouldn't show.

Just moments before the broadcast was to begin Bell, the Bright Star communication officer, came in and waved to Kent. Strangely enough having another crewman from the Bright Star helped calm his nerves just a little.

"Four, three, two, one...." Gerard pointed at Kent.

"Hello everyone. I'm Kent Holland. I am not someone you would know, but I do have information for everyone so please listen. I have been assisted in being able to make this broadcast, but I will tell you more about that later. First I want to let you know that I have experienced the same loss of time that many or all of you have. I woke up a few days ago and discovered that I had lost about ten years of my life. So I know what many of you are going

through. So, first I want to tell you about what I have seen and learned in the last few days.”

With that, Kent told of that first morning where he found himself as the only person on earth. He then went on to talk about the strange buildings he saw, and his eventual discovery by the Bright Star crew. He talked about the crew in detail mentioning each of them by name. The broadcast inserted pictures of the crew where appropriate.

It all seemed so unreal to him as he talked to the air and wondered if anyone was listening or watching. Of course he kept telling himself that people “were” watching, but without seeing it there was still a small part of him that was having trouble believing. Here he was, Kent Holland, making one of the most amazing broadcasts of all time to a world wide audience yet he certainly didn’t feel very important right now. After all, they didn’t really know much about what had happened and whether there would be other effects that were yet to be observed. They also didn’t know what was going on with the Centauri ship and why its engines had fired.

Kent brought his broadcast to a close, “So in conclusion, we are presently here on the moon, and we will be listening and watching for your responses. We will get back in touch with any of you who contact us on a more individual basis and will make arrangements for a joint meeting between all of us who have been concerned and affected by these recent events. With that I will say thank you and goodbye from the Nova.”

Kent saw the a motion from Bell that indicated that they had stopped the broadcast. He was relieved, but at the

same time wondered how people on earth would be reacting.

“Well done, Kent.” Gerard was the first to congratulate him. “I mean well, done Mr. Ambassador.”

“Man, that has to be about the weirdest thing I have ever done. I’m soaking wet, and feel like I just need to go to bed and sleep for a month.”

“Nerves,” Gerard observed.

“In spades,” Kent agreed.

“What?”

“Oh, that means I agree with you completely.”

“Oh. Sorry. I’m not sure I am ever going to get the hang of all these sayings that don’t seem to say what they say.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I thought I just did.”

“Sorry, Gerard. I mean I understand. Can we get out of here and just go relax somewhere? I really do need to unwind after this.”

“Sure. How about having some entertainment and something to snack on?”

“Sounds perfect. Let’s blow this joint. I’m sorry. Let’s go.”

“Kent, being your translator has been an ‘interesting’ experience. Indeed, let’s blow this joint.”

Of course “blowing the joint” didn’t turn out to be as easily done as said. Kent had to endure a number of translated congratulations from the people in the communication center. The one he liked best though was from Bell. He gave Kent a nice simple “thumbs up” sign that needed no translation. Kent wondered where Bell had picked that up, but much appreciated the human gesture.

As Kent and Gerard made there way to one of the entertainment centers on the Nova, Kent became more aware of Headians watching him as he passed. He had seen them looking at him before, but this was somehow different. It didn’t seem to be just curiosity or the fact that he was different. It was something different.

“Gerard?”

“Yes.”

“Why are your people looking at me funny?”

“Funny? I don’t think they look funny.”

“No, I mean they are looking at me differently than they did. I am not sure what it is, but it’s different.”

“Well, many of them saw your broadcast, and likely those that haven’t yet seen it have heard about it. So you are something of a celebrity on the Nova. I hope this isn’t too disturbing to you?”

“No, it’s fine. I just don’t feel like a celebrity. Mostly I just feel kind of alone in a crowd.”

“Yeah, I think I can understand that. We’re all here, but we’re not like you. You are the only one of your kind around. Is that it?”

“Yeah, and I guess it gets me a little nervous sometimes. No offense, but I’ve been trusting you guys an awful lot considering I can’t read anything around here anywhere, and you are the only one I can actually talk with.”

“No offense taken. It is an understandable feeling. I know I would be cautious if our roles were reversed.” Gerard paused for a moment. “You know, Kent, we might be able to do something about only being able to talk to me.”

“How? I mean there isn’t a chance I am ever going to get the hang of your language.”

“Well we do have something of an automatic translator device, but it’s far from perfect. Still, it can be used to make yourself understood and can allow you to get the general idea of what a Headian is saying.”

“Wow, that sounds like quite a gizmo.”

“Well, it might be a gizmo, whatever that is, but it does work if you would like to try one.”

“Can I?”

“Of course. If you don’t mind a little delay we can swing by Edison’s place. He has one he has been working with

since we have been back and I am sure he would love to show it to you.”

“Lead on, Gerard.”

True to his word Edison’s place was only a few hundred feet from where they had been talking and they were soon standing at his doorway where Gerard signaled that they were there and would like to meet with him.

Edison opened the door quickly and ushered them inside while Gerard explained the reason for their visit. Edison became immediately excited about the possibility of trying the automatic translator and rushed to an adjoining room to retrieve the device. As he returned he placed the device on a table and turned it on. Then he spoke to Kent.

“Thing say.”

“What?” Kent responded.

“Thing say. Device translates thing say it to. You talk and it say.”

“Oh, I get it. You want me to say something so the device can try to translate it.”

Edison nodded, a trait he picked up from Kent while they were on the Bright Star together. “Yes. It perfect not, but does it good to understand idea basics.”

“Yeah, not bad. I understand. It’s not perfect but it manages to translate the basic idea. How well is it doing with what I say?”

“OK. Pretty strange order words, but understand I a meaning for words your.”

“Wow!” Kent exclaimed.

“Yes. Wow!” Edison mimicked clearly beaming with excitement over this achievement.

“Gerard translator good, but good also to alternative have.”

“I agree, no offense Gerard, but I would love to be able to talk with some of your people at times when you don’t happen to be around. Even if you are around it would make me feel better to at least get the gist of what people are saying before you can give me the translations.”

“That seems like a good idea to me,” Gerard responded.

“Kent this one take. Other I get today later. Several there are,” Edison offered.

“Really? That would be great. Wow, thanks, Edison.”

“Welcome.”

Edison took the time to show Kent some of the basics of operation of the device and also how to use an ear/microphone so that only he would hear the incoming translations from the Headians. Also what he said would be easily picked up by the microphone and translated directly from the device so that the Headians would hear him. There was also a mute feature to prevent translating whenever he wanted to do so.

Armed with his new found miracle Kent was anxious to give it a try. “Come one Gerard. I’ve got so see how this works out. Let’s go.” He waved to Edison on the way out and Edison responded with the “thumbs up” sign just as Bell had done earlier. Kent really liked the way Bell and Edison had taken it upon themselves to make such a human gesture. For the first time Gerard found himself trailing behind Kent as they moved through the Nova.

As Kent walked among the Headians who were about their daily routines he was picking up bits and pieces of conversations. Most were more gibberish than anything just like any random snippet of conversation you might overhear from a passerby. Still, Kent was elated and wanted to take his little experiment a step further.

“Gerard?”

“Yes.”

“Would it be OK for me to approach a few people individually and ask them if it would be alright for me to try to talk to them?”

“I suppose so. We should not interfere with workers who are involved with ship operations, but talking to people that are off duty or not busy should be alright.”

“OK. Well, how about that person?” Kent pointed at what he believed to be a female Headian. As he did so he realized that he had never interacted with any female Headians since he had first met them.

“I think that would be OK.”

“Well, here goes nothing.”

“Where would ‘nothing’ go?”

“Sorry, Gerard. Never mind,” Kent apologized as he walked over to the Hedian he had selected for his grand experiment.

“Hello. I am Kent. I am from earth. Would it be OK if I talk to you for a few minutes?”

The female responded, “Talk funny thing. Understand you me?”

“Yes I understand.”

“Didn’t know possible talk us and you. My name is,” the device said, “Please speak desired name to use with subject.”

“Call her Diane.”

“Name set,” the device continued. “I heard you earth from. Saw us you broadcast today.”

“Yes that was me. What do you think about all that is happening?”

“Confusing happens do know not thinking.”

“Yes, I don’t know what to think either. How do you feel your people and the people of earth getting to know each other?”

“Excited I. Occurrence rare never and I have happen seeing. Hopeful together we friends might be.”

“Yes I hope for the same. I have become friends with Gerard here and several of the crew of the Bright Star who found me on earth a few days ago.”

“Know I crewman,” the device requested a name to use for its translation. Kent looked at Gerard for help.

“She knows Bell.”

“Thanks Gerard. Call name Bell.”

“Name set,” the device droned and then completed the translation, “Bell.”

“Yes I know Bell. He and Edison helped get the information from the TV station on earth. Edison is the one who gave me this to use,” indicating the translator.

Then it occurred to Kent to ask, “Diane, what do you do here on the Nova?”

“Work I at center communications.”

“In a communication center?”

“Yes. Waiting we all are about answers with message sent you today.”

“Answers to my message?”

“Yes. Responses some not sense make. Responses some silly. Responses some angry. Responses some sincere.”

Organizing chief operators are categories. Responses being President given soon.”

“How soon?”

Diane spoke with Gerard and Gerard responded, “She says they expect to turn over responses to the President’s staff in about two hours. They think that will give them enough time to categorize and sort them so that they can determine which ones are legitimate responses.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. I bet we got some real crackpot answers from some people.”

Gerard momentarily hesitated while weighing the possible bearing that broken ceramic pottery might have on the matter, and then chose to ignore the reference. “Kent, Diane is on a break from work and said she needs to return quickly.”

“Oh, of course. Diane, thank you for talking with me, and can I get in touch with you again?”

“Welcome you are, and yes can you. Gerard contact knows how.”

“Thanks. Diane.” As Diane turned and began making her way back to work Kent noted the office area that she entered. He figured it wouldn’t hurt to try to remember where something as important as the communication center was located. Then he turned his attention to Gerard. “Gerard, I am afraid that a lot of the answers we will be getting are going to be pretty useless.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, think about it. The world is in chaos. There is what, maybe ten percent of the population down there, and the governments have to be completely non-functional. I am sure there is a lot of bad stuff happening down there and now they have this monkey wrench thrown into the works.”

“Pardon, monkey wrench?”

“We, uh, I make this grand announcement that sounds about as crazy as anything they could possibly imagine. Now we sit here and wait for coherent answers. Ya gotta remember, Gerard, there was no unified government of earth before all this happened, and now they have to be operating in almost total anarchy.”

“Well, they might be up to fifteen percent returned. Do you think that will help?”

“Gerard, I don’t think it would help much at this point if they were one hundred percent returned. We’d just get more responses not a more coherent response. This is really a mess.”

“I must accept your assessment of your people, but what can we do? Is there anything that can help?”

“I don’t know, Gerard. This just isn’t something I really know anything about. I mean I used to ‘Monday morning quarter-back’ how our governments worked as much as anyone, but now I am really trying to put myself in these people’s shoes. I hate to say it, but I think we are probably going to have to do something that I really don’t like.”

“What would that be?”

“I think we might have to make the decisions for them and run things in their best interest until this all settles down.”

“Kent, we have never done such a thing. I don’t even think we would consider it. Worse yet, wouldn’t that just confirm the worst suspicions of some of your people, that we are responsible and that this is some kind of invasion?”

“Yeah, and that’s why it’s such a big mess. I am just as certain you’re right. It’s just that they aren’t likely to be able to get their act together anytime in the foreseeable future and we might not have much choice.”

“There is another possibility.”

“And what would that be?” Kent wondered.

“We may all be facing the need to come to an agreement regarding what to do about the Centauri.”

“Is something else happening?”

“Well, while you and Diane were talking I received a call. The activity here on their ship is steadily increasing, and we don’t know what it means. The Captain told me that there are discussions among the senior staff about launching the Nova. In fact they are already making preliminary preparations.”

“Launching? But where would we be going?”

Gerard mimicked a shrug. “In the mean time we also have some good news.”

“What?”

One of our teams exploring the Centauri ship has made a breakthrough. They actually were able to enter one of the large engine rooms and from there found a passage to the interior of the ship. They did not encounter any Centauri, but they found a lot.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know for sure, but the Captain said we should come to his quarters and he will be able to play the recordings the team made during the exploration.”

“Well what are we standing around here for? Let’s go.”

“Right this way, Kent.” Gerard led the way past several structures that Kent interpreted as office complexes. It was a rather lengthy walk and Kent had to look up several times and see the ceiling overhead to remind himself that he was inside of a ship. Then the idea that this ship was parked on the Centauri ship sent shivers up his back.

Kent suddenly felt overwhelmed. To him, just a few days ago his biggest worry was about keeping his job in the middle of all the layoffs around him. Now he was concerning himself with the fate of the whole earth and the role of two alien species and an alien probe that threw people through time. Still he wondered about his family back on earth. He wanted to know if they had returned yet, and if they were alright, but he knew trying to find out right now wouldn’t be possible. So, he just followed Gerard to the Captains quarters. He wasn’t feeling much like an ambassador just now.

Chapter 10

~ Centauri ~

Gerard touched the announcement plate adjacent to the Captain's doorway. The door immediately slid open and the Captain urgently motioned them inside. He was clearly quite excited and had been anxious for them to arrive.

As the Captain was speaking excitedly to Gerard Kent was tempted to turn on the translator to see if he could understand what was being said. However, he felt that it would be unwise to eavesdrop on the Captain without permission and instead chose to wait for Gerard's translation.

Finally Gerard turned to Kent. "Kent, please have a seat over here." Gerard motioned to a seat near the monitor. "The Captain is about to show us the recording from the exploration team. He also was telling me some details about what they now know about the Centauri. I will try to explain some of it while the recording is being played."

"Great." Kent could see that the Captain was trying to patiently wait for them. "Please have the Captain go ahead. I am as anxious to see this as I can be."

"Certainly." Gerard signaled the Captain to start the playback which he did without a moment's hesitation.

On the screen of the monitor they could see a wide shot of what was apparently one of the main engine rooms. This was without a doubt one of the most massive structures

Kent had ever seen. He began to get a grasp of how big it was when he realized that the small figures in the shot were Headians. It reminded him of being on a tour of Hoover Dam where he was at the bottom looking up at the face of that massive wall of concrete. Yet this was even bigger. The engine room appeared to be even larger than the whole Nova.

Gerard explained, “This was taken shortly after they entered the engine room. I don’t know how they found a way in. As they were exploring they found various signs and equipment around the engine room itself.” In the playback you could see signs on the wall and equipment around the room, but even the equipment was massive and dwarfed the Headians.

“Apparently as they were exploring the engine room they found another passage that lead further into the interior of the ship.”

The playback showed the Headians making their way out of the engine room and into a long but very large corridor. As they walked they began seeing some artifacts along the walls. Some were again just signs, but some looked like paintings or artwork of some kind. Then as they continued the playback focused on a large object up ahead. Because of the motion of the playback and the distance it was hard to determine what was been displayed. Then as they came nearer it was obvious.

There on the screen was their first view of a Centauri. A statue to be exact, but a statue of a Centauri. The playback showed the statue from head to toe and then the Headians entered the picture to pose with it. They looked like little children around it since they only came up to its waist.

“This statue isn’t life size is it?” Kent asked.

“Actually, based upon the equipment they saw in the engine room, they are pretty sure this is a true size representation of a Centauri. Actually probably someone important to them.”

Kent tried to take it all in. Here was a Centauri standing there with mouth half open, head tilted up, one arm raised and with a finger pointing to the sky. Kent had to agree that this was more than just some statue. This must be someone important to the Centauri. Then Kent began to make out some of the other parts of a display that surrounded the Centauri statue. Clearly it was a representation of a star system. Also there were a dozen or more spheres shown with one a bright golden color while the others were silver.

“Gerard.”

“Yes, Kent.”

“I have a hunch this guy had a lot to do with Centauri ships leaving their home world. I think that is what this display is all about.”

“I believe you are right, and that seems to be the consensus of the exploring team as well according to the Captain.”

At this point the captain interrupted them and began talking to Gerard. The captain seemed to be explaining something to Gerard that was evidently coming as quite a surprise to the translator. As the two talked Kent just stared at the last images from the exploration team that were still frozen on

the monitor. He kept wondering who these people were, why they had come here with their massive ship and most of all where they were now or where they are now.

“Kent.” Gerard interrupted Kent's daydreaming.

“Yes.”

“The captain was telling me that when he first saw the images of the exploration team the statue reminded him of something he had been talking about with a friend of his. His friend is a xenoarchaeologist and I will call the friend Dr. Rohl after another earth archaeologist.”

“Xenoarchaeologist?” Kent inquired.

“Yes. He is an archaeologist of alien civilizations.”

“Oh yeah, like xenobiology would be the study of alien life.”

“Exactly. Anyway, what they were discussing was the similarity between the statue and something Dr. Rohl had been researching in earth archeology. I won't try to explain it all because Dr. Rohl is on his way over right now and I am sure he can do a much better job of explaining. However, their discussion led to both of them wondering about something that might be confirmed with the statue because its mouth was open. So, the captain sent a message to the expedition team leader who I will call Louis. The captain hasn't gotten an answer just yet but he is hoping to hear something back shortly.”

“I’m sorry Gerard, this all seems really confusing. I just don’t understand what a xenoarchaeologist and the mouth of a Centauri statue have to do with anything.”

“I know. I am a little bewildered myself, but I am hoping the doctor can explain.”

The captain was just letting in Dr. Rohl as Gerard finished and Gerard began translating various greetings between all the parties. Dr. Rohl pointed out that he had seen Kent’s announcement to earth and he too was hopeful that things would go well in trying to establish a relationship between their two species.

Finally, with all the preliminaries settled, the captain asked the doctor to please explain how the statue might tie into his work regarding the studies of earth.

Gerard translated for Dr. Rohl, “Of course I would be happy to do so. As Captain Cook pointed out there is something that may connect the statue you see there on the screen with my study of earth archaeology. To explain this perhaps I should point out that there are things about earth’s past that are not widely understood nor are they apparently common knowledge to many on earth possibly including yourself, Kent.

“It seems there are certain.....” Gerard was momentarily at a loss for the right word, “anomalies in the archaeological record of earth. Some of these anomalies I find quite fascinating and I would like to discuss them more with you later. However, for now the items of interest are giants that apparently existed in the past on earth.”

“What do you mean giants?” Kent asked.

“I mean basically people who look similar to yourself but are from two to three times your height.”

“People twelve to eighteen feet tall?”

“Precisely.”

“That's crazy. There are no people around like that.”

“Perhaps not now, but there is documented evidence that there have been. In fact their bones have been found on about every continent of earth on a number of occasions. In some cases complete skeletons have been found, in other cases just a few bones. In all cases the sizes have been projected as I have said.”

“I've never heard of such a thing.”

“I am afraid that is not all that uncommon. I have studied a number of alien civilizations and have noted the same behavior. Often a sentient species develops a self image of the way they evolved and how things have transpired in the past on their planet and systematically ignore, bury or hide any evidence that doesn't fit their ideas. It seems that this took place here as well. There is simply no doubt that the giants existed. The only doubt seems to be who they were and whether they are related to the present day people such as you.”

“OK, but I am having trouble believing this.”

“You are from the North American continent are you not?” queried Dr. Rohl.

“Yes.”

“OK, then considering the demographics of the region may I assume that you have some religious beliefs?”

“Well, yeah. I mean I go to church and stuff. It's... it was a Baptist church.”

“Excellent. In that case you have some beliefs regarding things written in the Christian Bible.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“OK, then would it surprise you to consider that Goliath may have been one of these historical giants?”

“You're kidding.”

“No, I assure you I am not. It is not certain, but it is entirely possible that he was in fact one of these very real giants that have turned up in the archaeology of your world. We simply don't know for sure.”

“OK, so if we say there were giants what does that mean that is so important?”

“See that?” Dr. Rohl gestured toward the image of the statue on the monitor.

“You don't mean?” Gerard stood there with his mouth hanging open for a few seconds before realizing what he must look like and closed it.

“Because the captain and I wondered if there might be a connection we needed some way that we might verify or

disprove our speculation. After talking about it for a while the one consistent theme regarding the giants, beside their size, was that they had a double row of teeth. Clearly the one thing we really wanted to know about that statue was the one thing we couldn't see in the recording. So, the captain sent a message to the exploration team to see if they could tell us the status of the teeth in the statue.

"Of course this might be pointless, unless whoever made the statue adhered to detail at that level."

Kent sat for a moment just thinking. "But if that statue has a double row of teeth, and the giants on earth had a double row of teeth, then...."

"Then it is possible that the Centauri have been a part of earth history for a very long time."

"Wow!" Kent exclaimed. Just when he thought things couldn't get any stranger, they did.

A tone sounded from the monitor screen and the captain went over and sat in front of it for a minute. He was apparently dealing with some kind of message. While they were waiting to see if it was a response to his question to the exploration team Kent asked, "Dr. Rohl, you said something about other anomalies in earth archaeology that you found interesting. What did you mean?"

"Well, there are things throughout the geological record that just make no sense according to the normally accepted history of your planet."

"Such as?"

“Well, according to the records we have researched, your species believes themselves to be essentially as you are now for the last one hundred thousand years or so. You consider your present status as modern man. You also seem to believe your species developed as a branch apart from the other hominids on this planet roughly three or four million years ago.”

“Yeah, that seems about right.”

“The problem with that,” Dr. Rohl continued, “is that bones of anatomically modern earth people have been found in rock strata that are tens and hundred of millions of years old according to methods of dating by your archaeologists. It is also disturbing that artifacts created by technologically advanced people have been found in these same ancient rock strata.”

“What kind of artifacts?”

“Nails, shoe prints, bowls, dolls, gold chains, coins, and even something that looks like a spark plug.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No. Again I assure you I am not. In some cases there are even pictures and eyewitness testimonies regarding the circumstances of the recovery of the artifacts. Time and time again these things turn up in geologically ancient rock strata that are sometimes over a hundred million years older than the accepted four million year lineage of modern man on your planet.”

At this point the captain interrupted and spoke with Gerard.

“Gentlemen,” Gerard translated, “the statue does have a double row of teeth.”

“So, do we think this means that the giants on earth in the past were somehow Centauri?” Kent wondered out loud.

“We can’t know for certain at this point, but I am inclined to think this might be possible,” Dr. Rohl responded.

“But how?” Kent asked.

“Perhaps the probe.” Dr. Rohl offered.

“You mean the probe might have done to the Centauri the same thing it did to us but maybe even worse?”

The Captain spoke up and Gerard translated, “I was talking to Einstein about the way the Centauri might be reappearing. He also is suspecting that somehow the Centauri were affected millennia ago when they first arrived at earth. Maybe they were affected so that some Centauri were scattered throughout earth history but also some of them were thrown into their future which is our present. Perhaps we should get in touch with him about this and discuss it further.”

Before this even had a chance to sink in an alarm began sounding from the Captain’s monitor. He reacted quickly to silence it, but then was watching the screen and listening to find out the cause of the alert. Kent was listening and wishing Gerard would translate then cursed himself quietly for forgetting the translator device he still had.

Kent deftly turned on the translator to hear, “Personnel all staffing locations, practice not. Activity increase on... Call name.”

“How should I know?” Kent reacted instinctively.

“Call name,” the device repeated patiently.

“Nuts.” Kent said as he flipped the translator off.

“Kent.” Gerard prompted.

“Yeah.”

“It is the Centauri. Apparently activity is increasing dramatically and there are reports that some kind of ship is going into orbit from the interior of the Centauri ship. All operational staff of the Nova are being told to report for duty and we are launching in a matter of minutes.”

“Launching? But where are we going?”

“I am sorry, Kent. I have no idea. We are just all being told to either report for duty or to go back to our quarters and prepare for launch.”

After a brief discussion between the Captain, Dr. Rohl and Gerard everyone began heading for the door.

“Kent, you come with me. We will go back to your quarters. The Captain and the Dr. have to report for duty.

“Of course. Thanks.” Kent said as they proceeded out of the Captain’s quarters.

Kent couldn't help but wonder what the Centauri must think of all of this. It's likely they hadn't even figured out yet that they had experienced a time lapse, and they just might have already noticed the Nova parked on their ship and be thinking the worst. Kent was trying to put himself in their position even though he didn't know them yet. Then it occurred to him that he just might do alright at this ambassador stuff if the Centauri didn't kill them all first.

Chapter 11

~ Family Man ~

As Kent and Gerard made their way back to Kent's quarters, Kent couldn't help but notice the clear difference among the Headians. Everyone was moving with a purpose. No one was just standing around and there was no idle chatter. They were all business and seemed to know exactly what they needed to be doing. Kent envied them. He realized the thing he was least certain about at the moment was just exactly what he should be doing. He felt so insignificant. Here they were dealing with a space ship the size of a small planet while he was on board another ship that was far bigger than anything he had ever imagined. He was surrounded by these praying mantis Headians, and all of them were trying to figure out how to deal with Centauri that were gigantic and of completely unknown disposition. Somehow his attempts at bridging the gap between the Headians and earth didn't seem too important just now.

As they walked together in silence, Kent continued to think of all that had happened in just the last few days. He was still wondering where any of his family might be and if they were safe. He just wished that he knew for sure rather than dealing with all this uncertainty. The only thing that he felt was keeping him together at this point was having all these distractions to deal with. Distractions, a funny thing to call some of the most monumental revelations in the history of mankind, he thought. How long have we wondered if there was some other intelligent life in the universe? How long have we searched the skies? How long have we speculated

about such things, written about them, made movies about them, and now here he was in the middle of it all and thinking of it as a distraction.

With the way things were unfolding, Kent realized that people, including himself, were decidedly more adaptable than he had ever given them credit for. Who was he to be acting as some sort of ambassador between a race of aliens and the whole earth? He had no idea what he was doing, but here he was nevertheless. You just never know for sure which way a day is going to take you when you get up in the morning these days.

As he was thinking through all the events that had taken place he suddenly found himself automatically touching the entrance plate for his quarters and realizing he didn't even remember how they got there. He had been walking on auto-pilot in a daze of his own making. He remembered how this would happen to him from time to time on his drive home from work. He would suddenly find himself near his house and not remember having driven the last five miles. Yet, here he was on a space ship on the moon and doing exactly the same thing. Yes, people are adaptable, he thought.

“Come on in, Gerard.”

“Thank you.” Gerard responded almost automatically.

“I was pretty quiet wasn't I?” Kent inquired.

“Yes. I assumed you had something on your mind.”

“Well, yeah. I was thinking about my family.”

“We all do in times of stress.” Gerard offered as he looked down.

“Oh, man. Wow, I’m sorry, Gerard. I’m being so thoughtless. You probably would like to be with your family.”

“Well... yes.”

“Gerard, go on. I’ll be fine.”

“But...”

“You heard me. Get out of here. It’s OK. Really.”

“I was wondering.....” Gerard hesitated. “Perhaps we could both go to my place?”

“Really? I mean, that’s OK with me if it’s OK with you and your family.”

“Let me just contact my wife so that we don’t surprise her, but I am sure it will be fine.” Gerard said as he began to contact her. She answered, and the two spoke for a few minutes. When they finished talking Gerard turned to Kent.

“She said she would be honored to have you join us. She also told me to warn you that our children will probably have a million questions for you.”

Kent laughed. “Kids are the same everywhere I guess. Well, let’s go.”

As Kent was walking out of his quarters for a moment he forgot Gerard wasn't human, looked like a praying mantis, and came from another world. Instead Kent was just going with his friend, Gerard, to meet his family. It felt good in the middle of all the strangeness.

The trip to Gerard's home was uneventful. There were not too many Headians still out in the public places. It seemed likely that most of them were at their assigned locations in preparation for the imminent launch. Those that were still out were obviously heading for specific destinations with a purpose. Now one paid much, if any, attention to Gerard and Kent. It would seem that Kent's celebrity status was the last thing on anyone's mind right now.

Gerard's home was quite a way across the Nova, but they arrived there relatively quickly since there was nothing much to impede their progress. Gerard touched the door plate and the two entered much to the surprise of Gerard's two children who were in the process of chasing each other across the room. Kent couldn't help but laugh as the two of them froze in their tracks, running into each other, and had their eyes open wider than any Hedian he had ever seen. Yes, kids were indeed the same everywhere.

Not only was Kent laughing, but clearly both Gerard and his wife were laughing too although it was a strange clicking-squeaking sound that they made. Still it was obvious they found the children's' reaction just as amusing as he did. As the laughter subsided, and with the kids still frozen in their tracks, Gerard proceeded to introduce Kent to his wife.

“Kent, this is my wife June.”

“Please do meet you, June.”

“And these are my children, Wally and Beaver.”

“Hi kids. Uh, Gerard?”

“Yes, Kent.”

“Leave it to Beaver, huh?”

“Well, it seemed like something that would work. I forgot until we were almost here that I needed a human name for them. I hope it is OK.”

“Yeah, it’s just kind of funny, but no more than when you said, ‘Hola, Como estas?’ a few days ago.”

“You’re not going to let me forget that are you?”

“Of course not, but I’m not going to tell anyone else. It’s our secret.” Kent just couldn’t help himself from poking a little fun at his friend. Yes, Gerard was his friend, and Kent realized more fully now than ever before that friends are not about appearance, or even language, but something much more important.

Finally the kids began to thaw from their frozen state and realized that they could move and began to inch closer to Kent. Then they began asking their father one question after another. Gerard was so busy answering them that Kent had a couple of minutes to just look around and get a sense of what it is like in a Hadian family.

“Kent, these kids are a bottomless pit of questions. They want to know everything about you.”

“Well, if it is OK with you,” Kent began to offer, “I could turn on the translator and try to answer some of them myself.”

“Would you? That would be great. They would really love to talk to you I know.”

“Of course.” Kent flipped on the translator.

Thirty minutes later, when the announcement that the launch was about to take place was being made, Kent was wondering if turning on the translator box had been a mistake. These kids really were a bottomless pit of questions. They had wanted to know where he was born and even produced an earth globe for him to point out the location. They wanted to know what he did for a job, how old he was, what his home was like, if he had ever been in space before, how big his family was, did he know all the world leaders personally, would he be learning the Headian language, what did he eat, were all earth people the same size as him, and on and on and on. Then Gerard rescued him and had June take the kids off to play in their room, and Kent was amazed at how normal this all seemed.

Finally the time had come; shortly after the announcement was made the Nova began lifting from its resting place on the Centauri ship. Kent surprised himself that he was now thinking of it first as a ship and only afterward as earth’s moon. For a moment he simply noted this as being adaptable to some pretty amazing revelations. In some small way he could tell they were moving, but it would have been easy not to notice. There were no thundering engines roaring away in his ears, and he felt no significant vibration.

“Gerard?” Kent finally broke the silence of the moment.

“Yes, Kent?”

“I forgot to ask if they announced where we are going.”

“Well, they said we are going to make about a half orbit of the Centauri ship. Apparently they are doing this to keep the main ship between us and the smaller Centauri ship that launched earlier. They said at that point we will change course for earth.”

“Are we going to land there?”

“They did not say, but I believe it is unlikely. We have never before landed the Nova on a planet that size. I am not even sure if we are able to do so.”

“Then we are just going to orbit earth?”

“That is likely. I am thinking that will also give us some time to communicate with whoever we can on earth prior to making any kind of smaller scale landing. Of course that is all subject to what the Centauri might choose to do next.”

“Yeah, that is kind of a wild card right now, isn’t it?”

“Wild card? Oh, you mean what they do can change the game.”

“Well, they certainly have some serious technology at their disposal. They could simply aim one of their main engines at us and fire it up and what could we do?”

“Not much I’m afraid.” Gerard concurred.

June returned and spoke briefly with Gerard. At first he seemed to hesitate and then he turned to Kent. “Kent, my wife would like to know more about your family, or would you prefer not to talk about them?”

“Actually I would like to tell you about them. I mean, they have been on my mind, and well, you know, it’s hard not knowing what may have happened to them.” Kent felt like he was on the verge of losing control, but managed to hold himself together. Partly this was to keep from embarrassing himself, and partly so as to avoid embarrassing Gerard and June.

“I understand. Whatever you would like to tell us would be fine.”

Kent took a deep breath then slowly exhaled before starting. “There were four of us in our family: my father, James, my mother Jacki, and my sister Kathleen. Kathleen and I were born in Phoenix. That’s the city where you found me. I’ve lived there most of my life except that I went away to school in California for a while.

“About 5 years ago my mom and dad split up. My dad lives in Los Angeles now and my mother lives in Albuquerque. I don’t guess I ever really understood exactly what went wrong, but maybe they do. I had been on my own about 3 years before they split up, so I’m sure things happened that I don’t know anything about.

“About a year before they split up my sister got married and moved to Dallas. She has 2 kids now, Peter and David. Her husband is Harry. They seem like they have really got

it together, you know. I envy them a little. I've just never found the right person to settle down with.

“Sometimes when I am alone I think about all of them and wonder if they are down there on earth any more. It's hard not knowing. Now it's not just wondering if they are alive or dead, but even if they are in the present, the past or the future. I keep wondering if any of them are together anywhere, especially Kathleen's family. I know it would tear Kathleen apart if she were separated from the boys. They mean everything to her. It's funny, your kids reminded me of them.” Kent stopped and just stared at the floor for a few seconds.

“You know what the hardest thing is, Gerard?”

“What my friend?”

“I have a hard time seeing their faces in my mind. I just don't want to lose their faces.”

“Do you have pictures of them?”

“I think so, but they are back at my house. At least I hope they are back at my house. I just feel so uncertain about everything now. It's not knowing what exists anymore and what doesn't or what may exist later but doesn't exist now. It just feels like this whole probe thing stole everything that's important.” Kent fell silent just staring at the floor.

As Kent was speaking Gerard had quietly translated for his wife who just sat and stared at Kent. In the silence June got up from where she was seated and went over and sat beside Kent and put an arm around him. There was nothing that could be said, and at the same time there was nothing that

needed to be said. It helped. Kent didn't know why, but it helped.

“Kent, we will try to locate your family as soon as we can. Perhaps when we get into earth orbit we will have an opportunity. In the mean time it's getting late. We have a room where you can get some sleep if you like.”

“Yeah, thanks, Gerard. That would be good. I appreciate it.”

“You are probably going to be needed when we get into earth orbit, so try to get as much sleep as you can.” With that Gerard rose and showed Kent to their guest room.

When he returned Gerard sat with June and they talked about Kent and what he was going through. Gerard was grateful to his wife for what she had done, but was concerned about the risk she had taken both for her and for Kent. He cautioned her to be a little more careful in the future because one always had to be concerned about inter-species empathy. June agreed, and they headed into their room to get some sleep too.

Chapter 12

~ Message ~

The night just seemed way too short. Gerard was knocking at the door to get his attention, but all Kent wanted to do was just sleep a little longer. It wasn't a matter of being lazy, but rather just exhaustion. He knew he had been running on adrenalin for days now and it had taken its toll. As much as he wanted to spring out of bed his arms and legs just refused to cooperate.

“Just a minute, Gerard! I'm coming,” he lied. He was still fighting to convince his body to budge.

Knock, knock, knock.

“OK! All right already. I'll be right there....” He punctuated this with a yawn and finally swung his legs out of bed and started moving. He hit the touch plate for the door and strained to keep his eyes open as the door slid aside.

“Kent, good you are up. The President has requested a meeting. We need to be there very soon. Here drink this,” he said as he forced a cup into Kent's not-so-cooperative hands.

“What.....?”

“Drink it. It will help you wake up and give you enough to get you by for a while.”

“Umm, O...K...,” Kent responded between sips of whatever was in the cup. Even before he finished he began to feel the fog lifting.

“Good. I don’t like to resort to that, but in this case an exception seemed warranted,” Gerard noted as he observed Kent coming to his senses.

“OK. I’m here and I’m awake. Now what is happening?”

“We’re to meet with the President and we have to get started to his office soon. You have a little time to clean up and I will fill you in on the way.”

“OK. I’ll be right with you,” Kent answered as Gerard left to give him a few minutes to get ready.

Just one morning. Just one morning. That’s all Kent could say to himself as he cleaned up and got ready to go. He longed for just one normal morning. Nice simple clock radio morning. Nice shower, shave, breakfast, newspaper morning. Kent couldn’t help but wonder if he was ever going to see one of those mornings ever again. Yet soon he was ready and on his way with Gerard still wondering what this could be about. Of course it could be anything. It could be something about the responses from earth. It could also be something about the Centauri that they had seemingly successfully evaded.

Gerard and Kent were both quiet as they walked, and this gave Kent a little more time than usual to consider how the Centauri might figure into all of this. He realized that the Centauri had apparently also been affected by the probe test even though the effect must have hit them shortly after putting their ship in orbit. While it seemed that some part

of the Centauri population had been thrown forward into the present, it also seemed that there were Centauri scattered across earth's history as well. That would certainly explain some of the accounts of giants with double rows of teeth in ancient accounts. But that would also mean that at least some Centauri managed to get from their ship to earth in the ancient past. Could these have been some of the ancient astronauts that people believed might have been a factor in earth history? Could they have also been the Nephelim? Could one of them have actually been Goliath?

The questions seemed endless. If the Centauri had really been involved in earth's history, Kent wondered, how much had Centauri knowledge and culture affected the development of earth? At this point he just hoped that the lack of any direct action against them by the Centauri was a good sign. He also hoped there would be some way of establishing contact with them to avoid hostilities in case they thought that either earth or the Headians were somehow responsible to them being transported through time to the present.

As they entered the building where the President's office was located they were met by one of his assistants who appeared agitated. It wasn't anything Kent could quite put his finger on, but the normal exchange of pleasantries between the assistant and Gerard just didn't seem to be taking place as he had come to expect. Instead they were hurriedly ushered directly to the President.

Upon entering the President's office Kent could see that the assistant had only been mirroring the demeanor of the President himself. Clearly this was not the cool leader of the Headians that he had met earlier. There was a rather

rushed exchange between the President and Gerard. What was happening was intense and Gerard didn't have time to translate fully.

“Kent, I need to go check on something for the President immediately. I am sorry I have to leave you here for the moment. Do you have the automatic translator with you?”

“Uh, yeah. Why?”

“Well, the President would like to talk with you, but I have to go. So, go ahead and turn it on and I will explain to the President what we are going to do. OK?”

“Yeah, got it.” Kent flipped on the translator and placed the ear/mic in his ear and adjusted to volume as he heard Gerard explaining the automatic translator to the President.

“OK, Kent, we are all set. I have to go, but I will be back as soon as I can.”

“OK.” Kent waved to Gerard as he dashed out of the room. He looked at the President feeling uncertain what he should do. Should he start the conversation, or wait for him? Should he try pleasantries or just ask directly what was happening?

“Kent, understand you me?” asked the President.

“Yes sir. This isn't perfect, but it seems to be able to help me understand the main idea of what you are saying.” Kent felt a feeling of relief that he would probably be able to just respond rather than starting this conversation.

“Good. Gerard assignment for translate messages. Hope I he can understand they say us.”

“You need him to translate messages from earth?”

“No. Messages from...” The translation was interrupted with one of those annoying requests for a name of something the box did not understand.

“I’m sorry Mr. President. The translator does not understand who it is you are talking about. Can you try to explain who it is that Gerard is translating for?”

“Yes.” The President paused while thinking of a more explanatory name that the automatic translator might understand. “Moon people.”

“I understand. Just a moment sir.” Kent pressed a button to allow him to tell the translator box that “moon people” and the word the President had said all meant “Centauri.”

“Mr. President. You have received some kind of message from the Centauri?”

“Yes. Centauri ship behind us hours few. Broadcasting they us to. Not understand us. Answering not can. Don’t we know what saying. Gerard best one translator. Hope we Gerard can understand.”

“So the Centauri are following us and they have been broadcasting a message. You don’t know what they want so you don’t know how to answer them. You are hoping Gerard can figure out what they are saying so that you can know what to do?”

“Yes. Earth orbit soon. Centauri sooner. Not know defense or attack.”

“You expect the Centauri to reach us before we reach earth orbit and you don’t know if they might attack?”

“Yes. Centauri think might us responsible happen strangeness their ship.”

“Yes, I had thought about that. They might indeed think either your people or earth have done something to them. I guess in a way earth did do something to them even though it was the same probe accident that has affected all of us.”

“Yes. Centauri understand not probably.”

“I agree. They probably don’t understand what has happened and being able to communicate with them would be very important.”

“Agreed. We you want talk to earth. Messages response your broadcast. Important but Centauri emergency.”

“So, there have been responses to my broadcast?”

“Yes. Expected you them talk after earth orbit. Centauri priority change.”

“Yes, I agree. The Centauri situation would be our first priority alright.”

The communication panel on the Presidents desk beeped and the President activated it. The President listened over his private earpiece and responded briefly but quietly

enough that the automatic translator did not pick it up. Then he deactivated the panel.

“Kent, Gerard translate success some. Recognize he language. Working Gerard response on.”

“Wow!” Kent briefly wondered what the Headian equivalent of “wow” might be. “He really is a good translator. How did he know the language?”

“Said Gerard language is earth old.”

“What?” Kent felt embarrassed by his response and added, “The Centauri language is like an old earth language?”

“Think I Gerard that means.”

“So he’s trying to put together a response based on an old earth language?”

“Yes.”

“Would it be possible to go where he is? Maybe I can help. I know a little of a couple of earth languages besides the one I am speaking.”

“Yes. Please help possible if.” The President signaled to his assistant who had returned and indicated to him that Kent should be taken to Gerard.

“Thank you Mr. President. I hope I can help.”

“Kent. Thank you.” The President waved as Kent and the assistant left the room.

Kent and the assistant walked down several hallways and through a number of doors before reaching Gerard. Kent, try as he might, was unable to memorize the route and was sincerely hoping he wouldn't have to find his way out of this maze single handedly. In fact he was getting rather anxious about the whole situation until they finally reached Gerard.

“Gerard!”

“Kent. Good to have you here.” Gerard seemed to be honestly pleased.

“What have you found?” Kent pointed at the scribbling Gerard had done that looked more like some kind of doodle than any sort of writing.

“Here is what I'm dealing with.” Gerard pushed a couple of buttons and the sound of someone talking filled the room.

“That's the message from the Centauri?”

“Yes. It surprised me because I believe I recognize parts of words in it. The strange part is that the words are very similar to words in various languages common on earth. Yet, the Centauri language is not any of the languages I am familiar with.”

“But I thought you guys had translated Centauri stuff?”

“We have, but not spoken language. What we managed to translate was their written language. We had no idea how any of the words would or should be pronounced. See here is some of their written language.” Gerard placed a sheet of

Centauri text in front of Kent. It was an intricate pattern of vertical and horizontal wedge shaped lines flowing across the page in the most beautiful pattern.

“Wait a minute. I’ve seen that stuff!” Kent exclaimed.

“What? Where?”

“It was in a museum. I thought it was really fascinating. The display was all about India.”

“Yes, but what about this writing?”

“Oh, yeah. The writing looks like Sanskrit.”

“I am aware of Sanskrit, but I did not study it because it is not one of the more commonly used languages on earth. I understand it is even rarely spoken in India today.”

“Yeah, the display I saw said something about that. Hey, can you play that message again?”

“Sure.” Gerard hit the button to repeat the message.

“Yes. That’s it. I heard some of it spoken once and some singing. They called it Vedic Sanskrit. It sounded a lot like the message.”

“Excellent. That gives me a place to start. Give me a few minutes.” Gerard turned to the console and began speaking to it.

Kent sat quietly and watched Gerard at work. He could tell that it seemed he was making progress and was working his

way through the message methodically. Finally after several minutes he turned to Kent.

“We make a good team.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well with your help we now have a complete translation. You gave me the place to start looking. Admittedly the translation is a little rough and might be a bit off, but we have the main point of it.”

“You mean it really was Sanskrit?”

“Yes and no. It is indeed very closely related to Vedic Sanskrit. I can’t be sure if Sanskrit came from this language or this language somehow came from Sanskrit but they are very similar. Too similar.”

“What do you mean about them being too similar?”

“Well, why would a race that lived four light years from here speak the earth language of Sanskrit?”

“You got me.”

“What do you mean, Kent?”

“Sorry. It’s an old saying. I mean I have no idea why they would speak Sanskrit.”

“Nor do I.”

“OK, so they speak a language we don’t understand why, but what the heck were they saying.”

“Yes, of course.” Gerard looked back at his translation. “The message says that it is from their supreme commander or something like that. Then it says that they do not wish to be aggressors towards us, but that they are prepared to defend themselves and their ship. They are demanding that we acknowledge them and explain what we were doing on their ship. They have given us a time period. I think it is some kind of time limit where they want an answer, but I don’t know what the time limit is. They say they are prepared to detain us before we can reach earth.”

“I’m not sure what they mean by ‘detain’ but I think it would be a real good idea to get some kind of answer back to them rather quickly.” Kent observed.

“Yes, but what?”

“I suppose that should be up to your President?”

“Yes, of course.” Gerard turned and tapped the communication panel. When the President appeared they began talking. Kent tried listening by means of the automatic translator but with both Headians talking rather fast and at a low volume the translator was just providing Kent with gibberish.

“Kent, the President agrees with your assessment. He is going to take up the matter with the Council immediately, but in the mean time he has instructed me to send a reply that acknowledges the Centauri message and lets them know that we have only peaceful intentions.”

“Yes, that seems good. You might want to at least add something about the problem with the probe so that they

will understand that there has been a problem, that we know about it, and that we aren't the cause."

"Yes, I am sure that would be wise. Thank you, Kent."

"No problem. I'll just sit here while you put together a message to send if that's OK."

"Certainly." Gerard then turned to the console and began talking. He was also viewing a graphical presentation of the message that was being generated. Clearly he was also going back over it and correcting certain parts that he thought were not quite what he wanted. Kent was fascinated while watching Gerard at work. He had become used to Gerard's ability to deal with him in English and it never had really occurred to him how accomplished his friend really was at his job of translating.

"There." Gerard sat looking at the graphical presentation. I'm not one hundred percent sure this is saying exactly what I think it's saying, but it has to be awful close. I just don't think I want to spend much more time on it and end up finding out exactly what the Centauri mean by detained."

"Good point."

"Well, here goes." Gerard pushed a button on the console. "Message sent." Gerard paused for a moment. "I hope they don't take off points for bad grammar."

"I'm sure you'll get an A, Gerard."

"I'm hoping we all do." Gerard just sat there and stared at the console.

“Gerard, I don’t think you are going to get an answer immediately.”

“I know. It’s just going to be hard waiting and not knowing. I just want...” Beep. Gerard turned back to the console. “You were saying?”

“You mean they have already answered?”

“Yes, just a minute.” Gerard’s hands flew over the console for a few minutes. Then he looked toward Kent in a way that Kent had not seen before and he wasn’t sure what it meant. “They are ordering us to stop and prepare for a boarding party.” Gerard was visibly shaking. “This is not something that has ever happened to us.”

“It’ll be OK.” Kent was not as sure of this as he was trying to sound. “Tell the President what has happened. Also, I suggest we do as they say unless you are prepared to fight them off.”

“Me? Fight them?”

“I mean you as in all of you, all the Headians on this ship.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Stress. It’s hard translating under stress. Yes, I’ll tell the President.” Again Gerard passed on the information in the latest message. He was still shaking when he turned to Kent.

“The President asked me to send them a message that tells them we are going to do just as you suggest. He has also asked if you will please take charge of negotiations with the Centauri.”

“What do you mean, me take charge of the negotiations?”

“Well, that is what he asked.”

“No. You don’t understand. I don’t know anything about this stuff. A few days ago I didn’t even know any of you guys existed. I’m just an engineer at an electronics company with the bad misfortune of getting zapped 10 years by that stinking probe. I’m not a negotiator. I don’t have the foggiest idea where to even begin. I don’t know the Centauri at all and I barely have gotten to know you guys.

“Tell him no. Tell him hell no.” Kent finally ran out of steam.

“Kent, I understand this seems really strange to you....”

“Not strange. Plain simple crazy.”

“OK, crazy then. But it is you that doesn’t understand. We’ve been around for a long time, and have encountered a number of sentient species, but never like this. We know just enough about the Centauri to realize how little we understand them. They are a species we have marveled about for a long time. We have simply never encountered a species that literally moved their whole planet full of civilization. We are astounded at their ships. They do what to us would have been unthinkable.

“Then there is you and your people. When you pointed out your lifespan I was amazed. I simply had never considered that you lived such short lives. Then I had a chance to evaluate how far your civilization has progressed in the last thousand years. In fact how far it has come in just the last

one hundred years. It's clear to me that in a short time you could rival the exploits of the Centauri. It's like you were made from the same material.

"I agree with the President. If there is anyone who can negotiate with the Centauri it would be someone from earth, and I can't think of anyone that we know would be better than you."

"Gerard, they are light years ahead of us. How can you even think such a thing?"

"You are thinking technology, Kent. I am talking about your mind and your way of thinking. If there is anyone equal to the task of negotiating with the Centauri it isn't us, it's you. We can supply the technology, but we need your mind."

Kent took a deep breath and sat in thought for a few moments. "You really believe this?"

"Absolutely, and I know the President does as well. He told me so."

"Well, Gerard... This may be the craziest thing I've ever done, but ... OK." Kent knew he had really done it this time. He had committed himself to something he had no idea how to do but was equally determined to accomplish for himself and the Headians.

"Where do we start Mr. Ambassador?"

Without feeling the need to protest that he was not an ambassador Kent said, "Gerard, the best defense is a good offense. I want you to send a message to the Centauri. You

are going to tell them that we require their presence here in one hour or sooner. They will be meeting with the President and I, and we will not tolerate them being late because we have important matters to attend to.”

“Kent, are you sure?”

“Well, I guess we’ll see. Also, please get a hold of the Captain and the rest of the crew. We need to find the probe, if it hasn’t already been found.”

“It hasn’t as far as I’ve heard.”

“OK then. We need to locate it fast and we need to know everything we can find out about how it runs and all the side effects.”

“Consider it done, but why?”

“Let’s just say that I think we need an Ace in the hole.”

“What?”

“Sorry. I guess you’re just going to have to trust me on this one.”

Chapter 13

~ Meeting ~

The hour passed quickly and all Kent could think of was how he hoped he was not making a huge mistake. After all, once the Centauri saw the Nova at close range they might assume that the best answer was to shoot first and ask questions later. If there was anything he had learned from history classes in school it was that the ones with the power never willingly gave those without the power any opportunity to unseat them.

Gerard had just finished talking to the President's aid. "They are arriving shortly. We have made arrangements for them to dock at our freight port. It's the only place big enough to receive them. The President is on his way and will meet us there."

"OK, good," Kent said motioning for them to head for the meeting place. "We can talk on the way."

As the two made their way to the freight docking port Kent continued, "Do we have anything on the probe yet?"

"Yes, the aid said that they had tracked it to a location near Saturn. The Bright Star has already left to retrieve it."

"Excellent. Anything on the analysis of its operation?"

"We were fortunate. The scientists on our home world have been working on just that. Also, for the last few days they have been maneuvering the communication relay into

a near perfect central location between us and them so our communications are only taking about an hour each way.”

“So what have they found?”

“From the data we were able to provide to them they have a pretty good three dimensional time-space map of the probe’s operation. From that they can pretty well tell the amount of time displacement that would be experienced at any given coordinate relative to the probe.”

“I was hoping for something like that, but thought that it might not be as clear as you are making it seem.”

“Well, from what they have told us the strange mixture of effects that were experienced on Earth was largely due to the changing orientation and distance of the probe during the test. This put the whole earth through a real mixed up mess of time distortions.”

“Mixed up mess. Is that the technical term for it?”

“Sorry, I’m at a loss for a better translation. Don’t give me a hard time or I’ll start making up words or lapse into Spanish.”

“Stress getting to you, Gerard?”

“This whole situation is very difficult.”

“Yeah, I know. Hang in there buddy.”

Gerard looked up as if wondering what it was he should hang from.

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