

Edelbach's Odyssey

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CHAPTER 1

The Roadblock

Albert Edelbach squinted his burning eyes and considered the grizzled and wrinkled face that stared back at him from the mirror.

Who the hell is that old fart? he thought, fleetingly. Even into his sixties he still hadn't gotten used to his own, older appearance. Sometimes, subconsciously he still expected his formerly tanned, lady-killer face to be smiling back at him, with that white, even-toothed, winner's smile and that near-black, shock of hair, ready to be coiffed into a do that would fit the day's task. But, this usually only happened in the early morning hours when the confusion of sleep still muddled his thinking. The hair in the mirror was light gray to white sticking out in all directions and, right now, defying the wet comb he was trying to pull through it. Even though he was well past the old-fashioned age of retirement, Edelbach was still "pounding the pavement," as he called it; still working a full time traveling sales job.

It wouldn't feel so bad if 'they' hadn't given us this rosy picture of 'retirement' all those years. So here I am, dragging my sorry butt all over the USNA from Fairbanks to Vancouver to Oaxaca selling crap, he thought. *Even this expensive crap doesn't get me or the company enough money to fund retirement in this sub-depression we're in.*

Edelbach's "they" would be the people in authority, the politicians, the teachers, even the brainwashed parents.

"They'll tell you anything they want in order to get what they themselves want," he said aloud, his voice trailing off.

He was now dragging an old twentieth-century-style Gillette double-edged razor through his crop of lathered-up grey whickers.

Good thing they still sell these blades in Mexico. This is what my Dad used, and what he taught me to use. I don't care if those new nano-laser ones do shave better and last longer, as 'they' say.

His manner of shaving was only one of many rituals to which Edelbach held fast, as a sort of handhold that seemed to preserve at least a small amount of stability in his chaotic world.

Later, he made his way down the creaking hotel stairs and out through the lobby. Beyond the curtain of dust motes, floating in the morning light, he could dimly see, the profile of the owner's daughter at the front desk.

"Bye, Albert, we'll see you next time."

"If there is a next time" he intoned. His customary answer.

"You stay off those Interstates and avoid trouble. The country roads are safer."

"Who cares about safer," he lied with bravado, "What I need is faster."

The girl looked impressed as he strode confidently into the parking lot.

Edelbach locked the trunk of his old Mercedes and then tried the trunk release one more time, just to make sure.

I definitely couldn't have someone making off with those samples. The government would hold me responsible for whatever city was destroyed.

Not that his line of civil ordinance was really capable of such destruction—that is, unless the gangsters knew exactly which components to put together in exactly the right order—but, with a little imagination they could make plenty of mischief with just the individual products. At best, he would lose his Federal clearance as one of a half-dozen or so sales reps who could legally deal civil ordinance in-country.

He started the old car's clattering diesel engine, navigated around the abandoned hulks of cars in the hotel parking lot then accelerated out onto the county highway toward St. Louis. Actually, he always took the country roads and highways, mainly because it did avoid the marauding crews of gang members that were known to throw up roadblocks on the interstates.

I didn't have to worry about this crap when we still had our company plane.

He was an IFR rated pilot, multi-engine with ten thousand hours by the time the company had to close flight ops. It wasn't the cost of maintaining the aircraft but the cost of insurance that justified the decision. The gangs had taken to using stinger missiles on their competitors. The company's Beechcraft King Air was deemed to look too much like the preferred trafficker's ride and thereby a much more expensive risk.

Well, this country route takes longer, but even aside from the safety factor the scenery would justify the extra time.

As a person who until recent years lived his entire life in California's dry valleys, his eyes couldn't drink in enough of the sight of green Illinois woods scrolling by on either side of his car. To him a forest had always been something you paid admission to, like Yosemite or whatever. The trees on the edge of these roads were like giant sentinels guarding the mysterious, dark, vine-draped caverns that they and their cohorts created. Edelbach was delighted to find these stands of forest, stretching in almost unbroken array, along the byways of the entire Eastern part of the country: Maryland, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri and on and on. He had to catch himself from peering too long into the green depths and running off the road.

To Edelbach, those great guardians were like a message from Nature. They were here before this country existed and they would probably be here long after it was gone. Through the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, two World Wars and the current civil chaos, they would not lose their dignity. Some of them might be chopped down to make room for more city or more highways, but Nature was saying that she would prevail and there would always be the woods and forests of North America.

As the Mercedes hummed forward, a glint in his peripheral vision attracted his attention back into the woods. Glimmering through the trees was an oval shape of pale blue-white light, that appeared stationary behind the hurtling tree trunks.

Oh, it's the moon, he thought, forcing himself to check the road ahead. *The moon always looks like it's going along with you.* He remembered returning from the mountains with his parents with the moon behind the car, when he was a kid. "Hey look, the moon's chasing us," they would always tease.

But, when Edelbach returned his gaze to the road ahead, there was the moon, high ahead in the western sky. The light in the forest was still pacing him. He felt a fleeting wave of fear.

"Gotta be a scientific explanation, probably ball-lightening or swamp gas," he murmured aloud, jerking himself back to reality.

The blue-white light faded and disappeared, and the greenery threaded on as he skirted Peoria, veering slightly off course for a while in order to find an unblocked underpass that would get him across the interstate without being noticed. Near the cities, the underpasses were crammed with the shanties of "dispossessors," people who lost homes or were evicted from rentals in the economic unravel of the mid-2000s.

Edelbach winced at the irony. The good citizens, the taxpaying, law-respecting citizens were huddled under freeway bridges while the drug gangs had moved into these poor people's abandoned homes. Of course, the gang members weren't paying taxes so, generally speaking, the cash poor cities didn't have the police resources to remove them. Year by year, the gangs were able to recruit increasingly more members from these bases in suburbia. Many new recruits came from the dispossessors' own ranks, usually older teenagers who longed to be under a proper roof, especially in wintertime. The gang enclaves grew and kept growing. That's where Edelbach came in.

Ever since the Federal Government's period of accelerated commitment to ever-growing entitlements, the many military interventions, the consolidation with Canada and Mexico, and the never-ending battle against the terrorism movement, the states and cities had been left to their own devices to battle their own domestic terrorist organizations—which were virtually what the gangs had become.

Edelbach's trunk full of "fireworks," as he called them, known formally as civil ordinance, was what some of the larger cities like St. Louis were interested in. With the right kind of community support, a city could move against the enclaves, and Edelbach's products were the tools with which they could eradicate the criminal squatters while doing minimal damage to the structures. But even as dire as the national situation was, many communities would not support such tactics even if the courts were pragmatically looking the other way. The majority in those cities still viewed the gang members as somehow redeemable young people instead of the totalitarian, barbaric occupying-power that they had become.

I guess there always will be people who are filled with wishful thinking about the basic 'goodness' of humanity, Edelbach mused. Such thinking usually blinds these individuals to the danger that comes from permissive handling of criminality.

Edelbach viewed the gang "nation" as having gone so far in accumulating raw, primitive power that nothing short of domestic war could bring back a fully civilized country. The enclaves, from which the gang-bangers streamed on their daily thieving, drug dealing, murdering and extorting sorties, provided law-enforcement with the rationale for viewing the gangs as enemy soldiers instead of citizens who deserved the normal legal process. Hence the name of Edelbach's best selling laser carbine: "The Miranda," meaning a shot from it was going to be the only warning the gang member got. This name was Edelbach's suggestion and the factory in Arizona readily adopted it as a name with which local authorities could relate. Edelbach chuckled at his own cleverness but then his smirk faded into a twinge of remorse.

I don't know how I ever became so callous. I guess the dark humor of the police locker room has been rubbing off on me.

For the cops it was a defensive behavior. Maybe for Edelbach it was the same: Laugh so you won't cry. He thought of the gang nation as being like a family dog that had contracted rabies.

It's headed toward your children as they play in the yard. You are holding your hunting rifle. You do what's necessary, dropping the dog. Your joy at saving your children is mixed with a terrible dread and sadness. The dog was like a family member as well. This is North America's situation right now; and England's, and Australia's and the EU and most of the rest of the world.

But Edelbach had the consolation of one positive outcome from his profession. His client cities had the lowest incidence of vigilantism on the continent. This was because the citizens could see that the government was addressing the problem. Ironically, those cities controlled by the "peace-at-any-costers" were the least peaceful in the NA. The gangs in those cities were bolder and the desperation of the citizens led to some ugly, random vigilante incidents, sometimes to innocent people—as often happens with vigilantism.

This chaos had all started with permissive laws then it flourished and grew with a lack of economic investment in law enforcement. The lack of economic commitment was not only caused by the decline in property taxes, stemming from the foreclosures, but also because of the wishful thinkers' refusal to support the necessary draconian measures to stop the growth-momentum of the gang nation. Edelbach couldn't imagine where this was all going. How could the police do anything to slow down this explosion of criminals when the authorities were already so vastly outnumbered? *It's a good thing the gangs don't know how vastly outnumbered, he thought, they would be even more blatant. Why couldn't I just stay in my little glass office and write code for our control systems.*

As head of the engineering team that developed the Miranda, and a specialist in the embedded software that controlled its function, Edelbach had been recruited by management as the corporation's most technically knowledgeable person and the one most capable of representing the company on these monthly sales rounds.

He suddenly focused on the highway ahead, tapping the brake to ease off speed. It appeared that there was an empty overpass up there on the right. Sure enough, the overpass was free of shanties, so he made a sharp, drifting turn and shot through to the other side of the Interstate.

It won't be long now, he thought, relaxing his grip on the wheel. Another 30 miles and I'll be close enough to St. Louis to be able to get back onto I-70 so I can get across the Mississippi. Then he could relax a bit, maybe go over to the Hill for some Italian. It would be good being back in a little piece of civilization again. But as civilized as St. Louis was—relatively speaking—the city was only a faint image of what it used to be. He remembered his first visit in the very early 2000s. He drove into town on 55 past the old red brick Anheuser-Busch brewery with its friendly sign: "Come Visit Us." He had rounded another couple of curves and there it was. The Arch, with its sparkling, beautifully tapered steel curves vaulting impossibly high, seeming to float without any visible support.

He had followed the directional signs, parked and walked right up to the base of it, placing his palm on the cool, brushed stainless steel and gazing up at the intersection of the North and South sections, fully 65 stories directly above his head. He knew it was supposed to be very big, but still, it literally took his breath away.

*Someday if archaeologists ever come upon this, he thought, they'll say 'Something really important happened here.' And they would be right, because for us it **was** important: 'The Westward Expansion that opened up of the rest of the continent to our culture and our civilization. That was the dream, anyhow.*

He shook his head and frowned, thinking of the Arch as it now appeared: covered with gang graffiti. The graffiti went nearly to the top. Even the police had no idea how the gangs got in so quickly and were able to gain traction that high on both sections. The city might have posted stakeouts to catch them in the act, but the vandalism would only come back again and neither the local government nor the National Parks Service had the money to keep up with "cosmetic" issues: there were life and death matters to address.

So, in Edelbach's eyes, this beautiful and iconic mega-sculpture, that celebrated the expansion of civilization, had come to symbolize the expansion of anarchy.

He suddenly awoke from his reverie with a shock and a sick feeling in his stomach. Directly ahead was a roadblock.

CHAPTER 2

An Abduction

God, so close to St. Louis and on a county road to boot. Too damn late to do a U-turn, he thought, nearly standing on the brakes so he wouldn't plow right through the line of gangsters that stretched clear across the road.

The gangsters had some kind of overly large aluminum semi-trailer lying down across the road in back of them.

Holy crap, they all look about nine or ten years old. I don't see one adult or older teenager anyplace.

When the Mercedes had come to a complete stop he immediately jumped out of the car. If he waited until they surrounded it, he would have no escape route. The gang was all dressed in the same attire, a shiny gray uniform like a tight jumpsuit. The line started moving toward him and he gasped. These were some strange looking kids. Their heads were totally out of proportion to their bodies, similar to a toddler. The neck and cranium together had the outline of an old incandescent-type light bulb. They appeared to be wearing grayish skin makeup and huge almond shaped eye coverings.

Maybe I'm just the butt of some elaborate joke. But if this were a joke, the costumes and make up would have cost a fortune. Maybe that's it, some movie company is out here on location and they need to hold up traffic while they shoot a scene. It's got to be a science fiction piece about aliens attacking earth. There's a demand for that nowadays with so many people believing in that UFO crap.

Then he remembered the light in the woods.

Now they were surrounding him. The tops of their bald heads were at the level of his shoulder. Their skin appeared gray, but their heads did not reflect light the way a bald-headed person's would. He was now convinced that these were not costumes. The adrenaline was beginning to flow and his "fight-or-flight" reaction was kicking in, but his muscles were not responding, they just felt numb. Was it possible that somehow, these gray midgets had control over his nervous system? Otherwise, his knees would have buckled right there on the spot. Now he realized that the thing he thought was a semi-trailer must be some sort of sleek vehicle, the glowing oval in the woods.

One of the creatures offered him its right hand. Even though the idea repulsed him, he found his arm rising to join hands with the thing. Maybe that was a result of mind-control; maybe it was his curiosity. He thought of all the ridicule he had heaped on friends who had claimed to have seen UFOs: "What were you smoking that day,"

The appendage he grasped had three long fingers, no nails. He then noticed a shorter finger growing directly out of the middle of the palm. He figured it must serve the same purpose as our thumb, and later this was confirmed as he watched one of the things pick up a large acorn from the shoulder of the road and intensely study it

Edelbach's new partner seemed to say "Don't worry we are not going to harm you." Those words were more in the center of Edelbach's head than in his ears, sort of like when one is listening to music through headphones, though he did hear a quiet, buzzing murmur coming from its slit of a mouth. But there was no jaw motion as it formed these "words" and the mouth slit stayed open as if the creatures' spoken language didn't include consonants formed by the lips. Above the mouth, about where one would expect, were two nostrils, also slits. Around on each side of the

head, also where one might expect to find ears, was a hole with a lumpy protuberance that might have been a lid of some type to guard the opening.

“We must step away from your conveyance,” the voice in his head said.

With that he, his partner and all the other gray things moved over to the opposite shoulder. His partner pointed his left hand at the “semi” which was already hovering about ten feet off the ground. He could now see that it was probably three times as large than an actual semi-trailer. In little more than five seconds, it rose silently to about 30 feet altitude then gracefully spanned the hundred yards or so to where the Mercedes was parked. Hovering, as solid as a rock, the craft produced an aperture in its bottom about 20 feet in diameter. Now the Mercedes started to rise, every bit as gracefully as the craft had done. In seconds, Edelbach was watching his faithful old “conveyance” disappear into the dark interior, as the aperture “healed” itself shut.

Oh God, I'll bet I'm next.

The large craft now settled down to about ten feet from the ground and a rectangular opening formed, disgorging a metallic staircase. The strange gang of creatures started methodically filing up the stairs.

“I knew it,” Edelbach shouted out loud. “I’m next. Oh God, I’m next.”

With that he decided to drop the creature’s hand and launch into a full run, but his legs would not cooperate.

What the hell are these things? I can do what they want me to, but I can't do what I want to.

“Don’t worry,” the voice said. “We need your help, we will return you to this place when we have received your help.”

The creature led him over to the staircase and gently guided him up the stairs. The county road was now empty. The staircase folded itself up, and before the opening was sealed, Edelbach could already see the ribbon of pavement getting narrower and narrower, until it disappeared into the green Illinois countryside.

When the staircase was aboard and stowed and the opening had sealed itself, Edelbach studied his surroundings very carefully.

There may come a time when I get a chance for escape, maybe some time when we're not flying at three or four thousand feet.

He looked around the interior of the craft, which was more or less a large open room. From the place where the stairs were stowed, a ramp led up into the center of the room. At one end of the room was a platform where three of the road-blockers were seated in front of what appeared to be, a floor-to-ceiling video display showing the sky ahead. Edelbach assumed that these three were the flight crew, although their work area contained nothing in the way of identifiable instrumentation.

Each of the flight deck crew was wearing a thin headband made from a black material. They seemed to be the only creatures on board wearing this. He noticed that the headbands were positioned several inches above their ear holes, so were apparently not a hearing device.

The entire ceiling of in this large operations room was a skylight, maybe a seamless video display, through which patchy clouds could be seen zipping by. Facing the center of the cabin, along the two sidewalls, various crew members were seated at metallic desks. They seemed to be busy fiddling with a variety of colored controls. If the three creatures forward were the flight crew then perhaps these were engaged in communications or documentation—or playing some kind of weird computer games, for all he knew.

Having noted a few possible escape routes, Edelbach now focused on his captors. Not only were they a short race, they were extraordinarily uniform in facial appearance. Their form-fitted jumpsuits appeared to have been knit from very fine metallic thread. The effect was like silken chain mail. The suit fit so snugly, it wouldn’t tax credibility to claim that they were dipped in it while it was still molten.

What he had earlier believed to be tinted glasses, now on closer examination, seemed to be the actual cornea of their eyes. As short as the creatures were, the eyes were actually as large as the lenses of the classic aviator’s sunglasses, except almond

shaped, with the pointed part facing diagonally outwards and upwards. The eyes glistened even though there were no lids, leading Edelbach to speculate that the corneas were some sort of semi-permeable material that was lubricated from within. Rather than a pupil or other aperture perhaps the cornea protected an array of millions or billions of biological pixels, each with its own nano-focusing apparatus, sort of like putting a giant retina, right up front. Edelbach fancied himself good at reverse-engineering things.

“We are going to a more comfortable vessel,” the voice in his head explained, pointing into the skylight. The Semi was overtaking a large black oval object that was silhouetted against what was now a navy-blue sky.

Edelbach glanced at the pilot’s forward display and noted that the horizon was clearly curved. They had apparently risen to the brink of space in only a few short minutes. But he had noticed no detectable g-forces, acceleration or deceleration during the trip. It was as if the craft and every being in it were immune from normal physics.

The oval object now remained fixed overhead but grew larger and larger as they seemed to rise straight up toward it. Edelbach thought of the famous “tractor-beams” of science fiction, but from the kind of maneuvering required to align with the larger vessel, he was sure that the motive power and control were all coming from the Semi.

Through all of this jockeying, the flight crew sat with their hands relaxed upon the desktop in front of them and they were obviously not pushing pedals with their feet.

Either someone else on the ship is piloting, or these guys are controlling this thing through those headbands.

Presently, the dark oval filled the entire skylight and Edelbach could see the surface texture on the oval’s charcoal gray exterior, along with a tiny bluish-white light, in the center of the great mass. Now he and his partner watched that light grow larger and larger as the crew busied themselves gathering up possessions.

Edelbach thought of how utterly alien these creatures were and yet how like human beings, gathering up their stuff before heading home from work. He felt a tiny twinge of compassion for them for the first time since his abduction.

Soon, the tiny light resolved to a rectangle and a few moments later it was now this rectangle that filled the entire skylight. There was a bluish-white flash in Edelbach’s peripheral vision and he turned to see that the source was the forward video display. When his eyes adjusted he could see that they seemed to be on a large lift, vertically passing by story after story of hallways filled with busy creatures like his shipmates. These hallways ended at the great bay through which the Semi now rose. Either the bay aperture had already sealed itself or these creatures were immune to the vacuum of space. Or maybe they were just enjoying some sort of immunity to normal physics, just as he and the crew of the Semi had done on the way up.

Edelbach estimated that they had passed by 20 or 30 stories before their craft came to a halt. There was a muffled clinking sound that could have been some sort of docking mechanism.

“Please wait a moment while the hangar is cycled with Earth atmosphere,” said the voice. Throughout the entire journey the creature had not let go of his hand.

Since he has utter control over my muscles, I wonder why he (or she) would need to physically hang on to me.

“Our observations indicated that this was a method of consolation with your kind—and I have no gender.” the voice said.

“Damn!” Edelbach blurted out loud, “Am I going to have no privacy at all while you hold me prisoner?”

The creature dropped its hand and looked clearly agitated, looking left and right, then at Edelbach then at its own three-fingered hands.

“Please accept my apologies,” the creature transmitted, while giving Edelbach direct eye contact. “It is possible for us to collect your thoughts at will, but from

now on, we will only do so when you are physically speaking to us with your vocal organ.”

“Well let’s hope so,” Edelbach replied, “At least you won’t be charged with invasion of privacy, along with the abduction, kidnapping and false imprisonment charges that you are already liable for.”

“I hope that you will grow to understand the necessity of this action and eventually agree that it was the right thing to do under the circumstances,” said the voice.

The voice sounded neither male nor female. The nearest thing to describing it would be a whisper, or the sound of rushing air with consonants and vowels.

“Okay, you’ve got the engineer in me curious,” Edelbach said. “I’ll hang around long enough to have my curiosity sated, answer whatever questions you have, then we can part friends—or at least I hope that’s the way things are going to come down. By the way, my name is Albert.” Edelbach offered his right hand to the thing.

“Do you need consolation?” the voice asked.

Edelbach smiled for the first time since the ordeal began. “Surely you guys must have observed that we grasp hands and shake them up and down once or twice as a ritual of introduction?”

The creature was bobbing his head rapidly. “No,” He transmitted, “we missed that, but I appreciate your sarcasm. You have me laughing vigorously.” He extended his right appendage.

Edelbach took it and gently pumped it a couple of times. “You are supposed to tell me your name now,” He said.

“It would sound like ‘Korton-greppy3294,’” the creature transmitted, “but you can call me what you wish, Albert.”

“Well, the greppy part reminds me of a computer tool I used to use, called “grep.” I’ll call you “Grep.”

“Agreed,” Grep answered. “The hangar and hangar-level corridors have now been cycled. I can now take you to your assigned quarters.”

CHAPTER 3

Alien Technology Class

Edelbach suddenly felt very light. He then realized that the muscular and nervous constraints had been taken off. He was physically unrestrained— for the moment at least

Grep led the way down the metal stairs and out onto the hangar deck. The hangar deck was cavernous. It reminded him of the one he had seen during an open house on the USS Ronald Regan in San Diego, years ago. Only this one was easily a kilometer long and the *Semi* was the only craft moored there. Edelbach had a feeling that this was only one of many such decks aboard the Oval and that the toys were kept on some of the other ones. If every one of the 20 or 30 stories below them had the same dimensions, the Oval’s carrying capacity would dwarf any ten of the largest vessels on Earth combined. Why the hell would aliens need such a mammoth weight lifter, he wondered.

He followed Grep across the hangar bay and toward an intersecting hallway almost identical to the ones he had seen on the levels below. But in this hallway, there were no space creatures. Like the hangar deck, the hallway was empty. Edelbach figured they had cleared this level for the alien. (The Earth alien, that is.)

Well, if their normal is weird to me, then my normal must be as weird to them. They probably don't want their crewmembers being freaked-out by something akin to a Bigfoot slogging down the passageway.

Judging by the degree of technology he was observing, on a superficial level, Edelbach suspected that the creatures viewed Earth as a pretty primitive place.

Edelbach attempted to telepath: "*Grep, what did you mean, 'we need your help'? I don't see how I could add anything to the type of resources you already obviously have,*"

No response. Good. He repeated it aloud.

"You have direct experiences with the Earth race, Albert, something our nanodrone surveillance machines cannot duplicate. We also noted that your thoughts regarding your people were impartial, though conflicted, a very rare trait among Earth people."

"Impartial? I wouldn't characterize myself that way at all; and what exactly is a nanodrone and how does this mind-reading and mind-controlling stuff work; and the anti-gravity propulsion, and how are we out in space right now and not floating around, and how did you find the Earth in the first place, since there are so many millions of stars just in this Galaxy?"

"I'm sure you have even more questions than that," transmitted Grep. "Let us get comfortable and I will give you some insight into these things and even more."

Grep led the way, still farther down the corridor, explaining that nanodrones were gnat-sized flying machines equipped with the highest definition 3-D video and sound recording equipment. Each had something akin to a GPS system and the fleet, which consisted of tens of millions of units, had the mission to seek out and record every cubic inch of human habitation on earth on an on-going basis. The data captured like this was all catalogued and retrievable by query whenever needed by scientists. Interpreting the data was another matter, to an outsider.

"How many nanodrones do you lose to the fly-swatter?" asked Edelbach.

"A considerable number," answered Grep, head-bobbing. "But the technology is easily reproduced."

As Edelbach followed Grep, he noticed that his gait was a little bit reminiscent of a duck waddle with a slight jerk as each leg was thrust forward.

Even though the hallway had no visible lighting fixtures, it seemed to be filled with the same bluish-white light as the hangar bay. It was as if the walls and ceiling themselves were glowing ever so slightly and the combined effect provided a near daylight level of illumination.

"Here is your accommodation," transmitted Grep.

With that, a door-like aperture formed, revealing some living room furniture beyond. The door was just the right height for a creature but looked to Edelbach like it was going to be fairly awkward for him to get through. Grep noticed his hesitation and went over to the wall, sliding back a small covering and adjusting something. The door aperture immediately grew to over six feet.

"The hatch will remember this setting," sent Grep. He stood back and motioned Edelbach through the door first.

Edelbach walked in and audibly gasped. He was looking through an empty wall directly at the millions of stars and dust lanes of the Milky Way Galaxy.

Grep noticed his reaction. "We can adjust the transparency of the outer bulkhead if you find it disconcerting," he sent.

"No, no. I was just surprised...shocked really...but in a good way. I'm sort of what we call 'floored,'" Edelbach replied.

"If you are able to walk close to the wall and look downward, you will see your planet."

Edelbach tenuously made his way over to the "edge" of the room, groping for something to hold onto, but then remembering that what appeared to be an open wall was probably as solid as the floor he was standing on—except perfectly transparent. He looked down and there was the cloud-banded blue Earth and over to the left a bit, the Earth's moon. His knees were feeling weak again for the second time in 24 hours.

“You know, Grep, a wise human once said words to the effect that to the uninitiated, any sufficiently advanced technology appears to be divinity. This is all truly, magic.”

“You speak in metaphor, do you not?” answered Grep. “Your referring to these things as technology is correct. There is no occult power involved. If you are not too fatigued, please be seated and I will explain things.”

Edelbach sat down on the couch, facing the panorama of stars. The couch was very spongy. No telling what material it was made from. He bounced his rear on it a couple of times.

“Do you find the furnishings to your liking?” sent Grep “We copied the design and function from our surveillance records.”

“It’s fine,” answered Edelbach. “And, no, I’m not too tired. But there’s one thing I have to know first.”

“Ask and I will try to answer,” sent Grep.

“This thing about putting words directly into my head, like, directly from your brain to my brain. To me that actually seems occult or maybe a spiritual thing. Are you gods or demi-gods or powered by some kind of spiritual essence?”

Grep was bobbing his head again. “No, very material, just as you are. Let me begin by saying we have had several million years to develop these technologies. From our observations, we know that your race has had only the last few thousand.

“Long ago our knowledge of physics was limited to the first stratum, just as yours is today. We see that your people are just beginning to suspect that there are layers below the ones which are detectable by normal physics. You call some of these layers dark matter and dark energy. We have learned to manipulate those and other layers as well. Even this ship’s drive-systems capitalize on this knowledge.

“Your people might consider the way I am communicating with you right now to be psychic power. Our parent-race thought the same at one time. A few individuals received inklings of thought from others but as we grew to understand the mechanism of thought transference, over the millennia we developed skill in manipulating it.”

“But how do you know English so well? Have you been watching and listening to our broadcasts?” asked Edelbach.

“No, that is not the way transference is done. I am addressing you in my own language, but my mind is sending you universal concepts, directly into the lowest level of your brain’s language-processing area. Recognizing those concepts, your brain assigns English words to each of them and then you experience it as speech. For me, it works the same way in reverse.”

“You mean I have the ability to transmit my thoughts as well?” asked Edelbach.

“Of course. Even primitive life in the Universe has this ability. Most entities lose it as they become more sophisticated, just as the Earth people have largely done.”

“You say ‘most,’ do you mean there have been lots of primitive animals in the Universe that have become civilized?”

“Let’s say they have become technologically astute. That does not automatically imply ‘civilized.’” Grep sent.

“I know what you mean,” said Edelbach, thinking of Earth’s present chaos, “civilization can be an elusive and even temporary thing.”

“We are aware of the Earth’s present troubles,” sent Grep “the road toward civilization can be sinuous. Some planets never achieve that goal. This is one reason we are here at this time.”

Edelbach arose from the sofa and strolled over to the view wall. The wall was more than five meters tall and was transparent from floor to ceiling. The ceiling was an open beam affair. The beams being metallic, were apparently supporting-struts for that part of the vessel. The floor was also constructed of that dull metallic substance used in the glowing walls and ceilings. Instead of glowing, though, Edelbach could feel the floor radiating a comfortable warm temperature.

“Would I be able to get a drink of water?” he asked.

“Of course,” sent Grep, as he motioned Edelbach toward what appeared to be a kitchen area.

They stopped in front of a long countertop of a transparent, sparkling green plastic or stone. There were veins and irregularities running through this material, so he assumed it must be natural. Grep drew his hand across the countertop and a door opened from which he drew two cylinders made of the dull metallic substance. As soon as Grep set the cylinders, on the counter, Edelbach noticed that water appeared in both of them, rising in seconds from a quarter to three quarters and then completely full.

“More magic tricks, eh?” Edelbach chided.

“No, simply manipulating sub-strata wave physics to produce normal matter on demand. The emerald countertop was produced using the same technology.”

“Emerald?” blurted Edelbach, “Do you know how much money a hunk of emerald like that would fetch on Earth?”

“No, but based on its rarity on most planets, probably a fortune.”

“That’s right, but I guess since you guys can crank it out on demand and in that kind of quantity then it’s not worth much at all.”

“And now you are right,” sent Grep, “please join me in a drink of water.” He lifted his tumbler and took a brief sip through his mouth slit.

“You guys drink water too? I always thought people from another planet would be more, alien”

“This relates to our purpose for detaining you, Albert. We do have a purpose for our visits to Earth. But first I must reveal something to you without further delay. I, and the team members you have observed are androids created by the Parent Husbandry to do the work that might require an actual material presence at the point of contact. We are intended to be an analogy but not a copy of human-like races and thereby not terrifying or revolting to them but also not hominoid, therefore not threatening.” Grep, paused, waiting for Edelbach’s reaction.

Somehow, Edelbach had half-expected this. “I found you pretty revolting when we first met,” sent Edelbach.

The android’s head was bobbing furiously, now.

Smiling, Edelbach calculated that, absent the diaphragm to be tickled by the emotions and then go into spasms, this was the polite way for an android to communicate that a fellow creature’s humor had amused them. Sort of like the dog’s tail. Frequency of wag + velocity of wag = degree of amusement.

“Albert, your wit is a joy,” sent Grep. “Especially under circumstances that must be, at a minimum, disconcerting for you. In regard to my appearance: long ago, the Parent-race discovered that an android had to have a “non-hominid” and endearing appearance in order to effectively interact with living beings, or I should say, entirely living beings. Our brains are actually quasi-living tissue, derived from the structure of the Parent-beings’ brains, and made to live-on bioponically in our large crania.

“So they had larger brains than we humans?” asked Edelbach.

“No, not so much larger. Some of the cranial dimensions are to accommodate the bioponic support-equipment our brains require, but some of the extra size is to give us an endearing infantile appearance.”

“A bio-electronic brain...so, that’s why you drink water!” asserted Edelbach.

“Partially. Water is also needed by the nano fuel-cells within our systems to provide power and communications among our members and subsystems.”

“Nano fuel-cells! God, I love this stuff! Tell me about the voltages, amperages, resistance, insulating medium, servo mechanisms—or are they hydraulic?”

Grep was again head-bobbing.

In Edelbach’s peripheral vision, something completely darkened the human-sized door aperture. Edelbach pivoted to see a very tall human being duck his head and enter the apartment.

Chapter 4

A History Lesson

Edelbach stood, mouth-agape. The man was tall, blond and clean-shaven. His faced looked mature but not geriatric, more like late 40s early 50s. He had kind blue eyes and was wearing something that appeared to be a formal kind of pajama, cream colored with a very subtle gold brocade on the edges of the tunic. His shoes were the same cream color and appeared to be suede or something similar.

“I hope you won’t be alarmed,” the man sent. “I sensed Master Korton-greppy’s laughter and I surmised that things were going well. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Director Steppingstone, of the Stratum One Civilization Review Board and a member of the Parent race.”

Edelbach tenuously extended his hand.

“You grasp and pump two or three times” sent Grep.

Edelbach chuckled as he and Steppingstone performed the ancient Earth ritual.

“Excellent, 3294, I see you are already collecting cultural information,” Steppingstone sent.

“What did you mean Master Korton-greppy?” asserted Edelbach, “He’s an android.”

“Irrelevant. 3294 is my dear friend, otherwise I would always call him ‘Master.’ To us this is an honorarium like your ‘Doctor.’ He is a pioneer android created in your year 25,052 BCE for a philanthropic mission to a failing planet beyond your constellation Monoceros. Master Korton-greppy is a wise and accomplished exoanthropologist. He has also been a loving and concerned mentor to this planet. Since his manufacture, he has continued to study, to serve his client-planets and to win membership on the Stratum One Civilization Review Board.”

“Wow,” said Edelbach. “I have to confess, I thought of the android crew as little servants or mechanical slaves. I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t trouble yourself, Albert,” sent Grep. “You were acting from the context of your own experience and I would have mentioned it if it were important.”

“Important? Your mind and your name are probably iconic in your civilization. Again, I am truly sorry.”

“And again, Albert, please forget it.”

Edelbach cracked a sly smile, “Can I still call you ‘Grep?’”

As Steppingstone laughed and Grep began bobbing his head, Edelbach himself enjoyed a therapeutic belly laugh, for the first time in many months.

Later as the three were seated on the couch, admiring the view of Earth’s neighborhood, Edelbach mused, “Grep, was saying that you guys have some higher purpose for visiting Earth. Too bad the kind of chaos I deal with doesn’t contribute to some higher purpose...”

“That chaos is very relevant, Albert,” sent Steppingstone, “we have been concerned with the direction human society has been going for the past half century, since the proliferation of fission and fusion weapons.”

“I have to ask why a society like your own, that has infinite material wealth at the touch of a button, would be concerned with a jerkwater planet like ours—and our puny weapons.”

“Those weapons are not considered puny if a civilization is still in chaos but is close to developing faster-than-light space travel. In that case they are a potential threat to nearby planets. Aside from that, we have a moral stake in affairs on Earth.”

“What’s a moral stake? A stake usually involves money.”

“This involves the purpose previously mentioned by Master Korton-greppy, the purpose for our visit to Earth,” sent Steppingstone, as he rose from the couch, approached the window-wall and made a quick, sweeping gesture with two fingers of his right hand. The wall immediately assumed the configuration of a gigantic window onto the surface of a planet very much like Earth. “Several million years ago the Earth, after having been cultivated for hundreds of millions of years by layering on one ecology after another, was deemed ready for human life.”

“Wait a minute,” interjected Edelbach, “was deemed ready by whom?”

“By the Husbandry, the family of androids and Parent Beings of which we are members.”

The android added, “When the ecology was adequate for human beings then a colony was dropped in from another part of the Galaxy.”

“Dropped in?” said Edelbach incredulously, “You make it sound like a walk in the park on a spring day.”

Steppingstone laughed.

“I’m sorry,” answered Grep, “What you translated as ‘dropped’ is a navigational term we use for landing a craft such as this. In fact, this very craft was one of the fleet that made the transfer.”

“You guys are saying that this vessel existed a few million years ago and my ancestors—the ancestors of every person on Earth—might have walked these decks?”

“They did walk some of the decks,” sent Grep, “Most of the lower decks were outfitted with a natural environment resembling the one from which they came.” In the holographic panorama on the bulkhead, looking like a scene from Noah’s Ark, primitive humans were being led out of the *Utopia* by Parent Beings dressed exactly like the primitives.

Grep continued, “Being at the level of development of Early Stone Age, we could not have contact with them or the mission would be jeopardized.”

“Mission? What exactly was this mission?”

“To spread humanity and other races of intelligent beings to as many inhabitable planets as we could locate. To watch each planted race, develop, and to learn lessons from the manner in which it overcame adversity in order to arrive at civilization. To learn from its music, its art its social skills and of course its failures. And finally, when socially evolved to the proper point, to introduce it to its brother worlds across the Universe.”

“So, you are gods, after all,” said Edelbach, “I mean, what you are doing, we call ‘playing God,’ at any rate.”

“As we have come to understand it, what you conceive as God, is the initiator of the Universe,” answered Steppingstone, the intelligence that created all levels of matter and energy and was the author of the template from which all life is drawn. This God is the absolute source of all we know, and by theory, is the master of this and every other universe.

“We are not God we are merely the Husbandry. Those millions of years ago, we developed the technology to create physical wealth, ‘at the touch of a button’ as you put it. From that point on, we wanted for nothing. We had no unfulfilled needs. But instead of being happy with infinite wealth, we began to feel, as a race, an empty hollowness. We began to be convicted of a need to use our wealth for the good of other beings, not just for our own consumption. Cherishing and nurturing that with which you’ve been blessed merely honors God, it does not usurp God’s prerogative.”

“Because we had developed the ability to manipulate the matter-frequency of our ships, the speed of light was no longer relevant. This allowed us to transfer from one side of the Galaxy to the other instantaneously, using a combination of tuning quantum-gravity and quantum-entanglement and tapping into dark energy. As a result of this navigational ability, within a few thousand years we had discovered intelligent races on the planets of many stars.

“We soon learned that there is a propensity, within matter, for life to develop and a propensity for intelligent races to follow the basic hominid form that you and I exhibit.”

“And God said, let us make man in our image,” whispered Edelbach.

“What is that, a quotation from your literature?” asked Grep.

“It’s from one of our ‘Holy’ books,” answered Edelbach. “The one used by the Jews and Christians of the Earth. I never gave it much credence, even though my family was Jewish.”

“Curious,” offered Steppingstone, “that theological concept evolved on many worlds, and could very well be the reason that God built this propensity into matter. We don’t know. God’s ways are beyond us, but don’t rule out the possibility that truth can come to someone directly out of the ether, much like the short-range telepathy that we employ. There is an intangible stratum that we know only from occasionally detecting certain effects. We call it the Truth Wave. You might call it spirit. Maybe it was this ‘spirit’ that inspired the writer of your holy book to record the statement about God’s image.”

“Well, maybe some of it is inspired,” said Edelbach. “But most of it was inspired by some human being’s desire to control other people. The God described in there gets angry, orders kings to go exterminate nearby nations down to the last child and domestic animal. He’s all too human. I think that book is more a matter of humans making God in their own image.”

“Long ago, the Parent-race too, had individuals who purported to speak for God by creating holy books,” sent Grep. “But now we do not need books to support our belief. The more we delve into the multitudinous strata of physics, the more the concept of God, or a supreme intelligence, becomes inescapable.”

Steppingstone tele-pathed something that Edelbach’s mind interpreted as “Amen.”

“If your planet doesn’t have holy books how do people know what God wants them to do,” asked Edelbach.

“The more we realize the magnitude of God the less we dare presuming to speak for God. We believe it is up to each being to live its life with the assumption that there is an ultimate accounting for all life-choices. Experience has shown that those who endeavor to follow the Truth Wave, or spirit, usually make good choices. This was the case when the Husbandry decided to use its wealth and power to help other beings.” Steppingstone paused. “But Albert, even though we are millennia ahead of Earth in technology, we are just as ignorant about what happens after death. Such is the humility of Truth.”

“I imagine it helps to live several thousand years. That defrays facing up to the consequences of living on the dark side of the Force.”

“Oh, you refer to the Star Wars Saga,” sent Steppingstone, “I’m familiar with it’ but, the Truth Wave has no ‘dark side.’ One either synchronizes with it and enjoys its elevating effect or one does not and continues to labor under his own power.

“So, what do you Husbandry Beings reap out of all this sowing?” asked Edelbach.

“As I said before, knowledge of art, music, culture, social methods. Further, Utopian lessons, Dystopian lessons and, most of all, filling the empty part of us that I mentioned.”

“I’m not sure I follow the logic,” commented Edelbach. “On Earth, our science of Anthropology walks a fine line between observation and meddling. The observer’s very presence, among the subjects being studied, can taint study results. In more than one case, the subjects made up fanciful stories because it seemed to please the scientist. How do you beings know that your contact with your subject-races hasn’t planted the seeds for some ultimate harm?”

“You judge rightly,” said Steppingstone. “We must be exacting in our care to remain in the background when we gather up a starter colony for transport to a new

world. We use the nervous constraints that you experienced along with closely similar hominids to lead them aboard.

“As I mentioned before, when aboard-ship they are restricted to decks that are configured like a small corner of their home world, including the same food sources and an artificial day and night holographically projected upon a skydome that reaches 200 meters in height, nearly half the maximum thickness of this vessel.”

“What kind of stupid race would be fooled by such a ‘holideck’ arrangement for their living accommodations?” queried Edelbach.

“No race at the stage of advancement your planet has achieved would ever be the subject for colonizing. One can only do this with very primitive races that still have the flexibility to be adapted to a new physical environment. When an ideal race is found, starter groups may be gathered and taken to as many as scores of planets in this fashion.”

“You mean that human beings could be living on a bunch of other planets right now?”

“You have cousins on hundreds of other worlds. They were migrated there in one great wave around 1.3 million years ago, at the same time Earth was seeded,” continued Steppingstone, “Each of the subject planets has been seeded with the exact same mix of flora and fauna and then left to the vagaries of natural selection and pure chance, to develop into...whatever. The Husbandry is very careful to place each experiment so distant from the others that communications, physically and electronically is impossible.”

“That is, unless your lab rats develop the same quantum gravitational-entanglement travel technology,” challenged Edelbach.

Steppingstone frowned. “We do have methods of observation that are non-intrusive such as the nanodrones that Master Korton-greppy mentioned to you. We won’t allow a socially backward planet to develop it.”

“How the hell do you stop a world from developing whatever the hell they want to?” squeaked Edelbach. His voice always failed like that when he was severely agitated and wanted to sound powerful and masculine.

“Pardon me, I’m feeling a need for water,” sent Grep. “May I get you another cylinder, Albert. or you Yaushr?”

Very diplomatic, thought Edelbach, *Grep could see things were getting a bit heated, this little android is pretty amazing.*

“Yaushr,” thought Edelbach. “Sounds like Yow Shir with a downward or command intonation on the first syllable and none on the second.” His salesman’s Mandarin picked up from good customers in California would translate that as “key” as in door key, a key that is a stepping-stone. “Nah, couldn’t be,” he thought.

“Yes, please Master Korton-greppy, let’s all three refresh ourselves then go to the mess hall. When was the last time you ate, Albert?”

“I don’t know. Sometime yesterday. I left the hotel in a hurry to get an early start and didn’t have breakfast. I was dreaming about The Hill in St. Louis just before you guys picked me up.”

“What is the Hill?” sent Grep.

“The Italian-American neighborhood in St. Louis, Missouri. It’s kind of a tourist trap like Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco, California. Some mediocre overpriced restaurants, but a few of them...excellent. My favorite is La Calabria. They know me there and always have my favorite, *Ossobuco*, available when I come.”

“Let’s tell the computer chef and see what it can come up with.” smiled Steppingstone, ducking under the aperture and leading the way into the hallway. As if on cue, the hallway began filling with hundreds of individuals, both Parent and Android, all apparently headed to dinner.

What Edelbach had heard had his head spinning. He should have been ecstatic to have been given the privilege of learning about these mysteries, and yet he couldn’t help but feel a measure of grief. What had died was the myth of the people of Earth as reigning supreme in the Universe, as conquerors warping forth into the final

frontier, expanding the edges of the Federation. Instead was the growing image of man as a race of kept goldfish.

CHAPTER 5

A Dinner Under the Dome

The sound of chatter and clinking dishes coming from a great archway up ahead hinted “dining room.” The trio turned into the archway and moved out under a tremendous stained-glass dome. It wasn’t nearly as high as the St. Louis Arch, but it must have taken up nearly the entire vertical dimension of the vessel. The stained glass and crystal elements were framed in gold coming, and the themes woven amongst the sections were anthropomorphic, or roughly so. Depicted were domestic scenes, agricultural scenes and what might have been industrial scenes. There were definitely cows and horses, dogs and cats, along with more exotic, unfamiliar animals.

One entire side of the great room was the same transparent bulkhead material used in Edelbach’s accommodations, but with an even more impressive view of the local galaxy and the Earth-Luna juxtaposition—except, this “window” was 30 or 40 stories high. From the foyer and the chef’s line there was a climbing trail leading up a tree-covered mountain that had the dining room floor spread out before it. Several babbling brooks cut the hill vertically and there were charming wooden and stone bridges, where the winding trail crossed them. At each crossing, there was a pad containing a picnic table and lounge chairs. The view back down the mountain was of the entire dining room, with the firmament beyond it.

Across the great floor of the dining room were hundreds of tables occupied with a dizzying variety of human-like creatures, with varying sizes and skin coloring—including subtle shades of pastel blue and green. It was difficult for Edelbach to distinguish males from females; they all wore the same pajama-like uniforms and sported roughly the same hair length. None of these people were grotesque or sprouting horns or bizarre facial-folds—as a lifetime Trekkie (like Edelbach) would expect.

It’s almost like the “racial” variety we have on Earth, thought Edelbach, but multiplied by evolutionary threads on hundreds of planets.

When they arrived at the chef’s line, Steppingstone explained to the computer exactly what Edelbach had earlier wished for. There was a slight pause and a hatch opened in the counter, from which a tray arose. On the tray was the La Calabria *Ossò Buco* dinner complete with the customary Fettuccini Alfredo on the side, both presented on La Calabria’s red and green trimmed china.

Edelbach gasped for the second time that day. “Now come on, tell me that wasn’t magic. That is just spooky.”

“Just science, Albert,” said the android. “We’ll tell you the trick when we get to our table.”

Even Grep was given a tray of food by the computer chef. Grep’s food was definitely not identifiable and cut up pretty small to accommodate his slit of a mouth; but, Edelbach assumed that the living brain tissue inside Grep’s head would need nutrients, just like a normal human brain would. Steppingstone had what looked like a halibut or swordfish steak with an asparagus-looking vegetable topped with what might pass as hollandaise.

Once they had their trays, Steppingstone led the trio up the winding path, over three bridges then over to a beautifully finished rosewood table positioned under the spreading branches of a mango tree. Edelbach knew his rosewood because he had been lusting for a guitar made from it. He would have had it long ago, but pure

rosewood guitars were expensive. He assumed that the Husbandry had just waived the wand of science and created the material on demand.

Seated at the table, facing outer space, Edelbach had a feeling of *Deja vu*. “It’s like I’ve been here before,” He thought. Then he remembered being in Clifton’s Cafeteria in L.A. years and years ago. To a four-year-old, that cafeteria was nearly as beautiful and seemed equally large as the vessel’s dining room, with its various mezzanines, balconies surrounded by tropical plants. The crystal stained glass ceiling of the vessel was eerily familiar as well; and then he remembered The San Francisco Sheraton Palace Hotel’s gorgeous dining room that he had seen when he was a college student.

“Was this whole scene especially built for me?” posited Edelbach.

“Oh no, only the food tray,” Answered Steppingstone, smirking. “The other things you see are indeed partially gathered from Earth culture—because we find them appealing. This is part of the package of positive rewards we enjoy as a result of the Husbandry’s work. But there are also cultural influences from many other planets as well in this dining room.”

“As I noticed; but how does all this work?” queried Edelbach, indicating the food, “Especially the *Ossobuco*.”

“I explained to the computer your description of the Hill in the city of St. Louis and the name of both the restaurant and the dish. The computer merely examined the archive of nanodrone recordings for that restaurant and watched La Calabria’s chef prepare the dish. The computer said to apologize because it had to synthesize the *Ossobuco* from some generic pieces of veal it had in the freezer.”

“You could’ve fooled me,” laughed Edelbach. “It tastes just like the real thing...So, are you telling me that you have video of everyplace on Earth captured by these nanodrones and stored in the ship’s computer?”

“Actually, everyplace on many worlds,” answered Steppingstone. “At a depth of greater than one million years—enough to capture the entire history of one of our transport epochs.”

“Then, I have to ask again,” Edelbach interjected, testily, “why the hell do you need me? You’ve got more data than contained in the sixth expansion of the World Wide Web.”

Steppingstone was unsmiling, “What the hell good is raw data without relative knowledge, Albert. You were an engineer; you should remember that fact. And why the hell did you call our charges ‘lab-rats’, you rude geek?”

The android was head-bobbing because of Edelbach’s shocked expression, “Albert, Director Steppingstone is our Prime Scholar of Earth Languages. I don’t know if you are more shocked by the epithet or by Yaushr’s command of colloquial American English.”

“Both,” answered Edelbach. “And once again I have to apologize. I denigrated your entire life’s work with the stupid metaphor about lab-rats; so please accept my apology,” After a pause, “Oh, by the way, people who are geeks are usually proud of it, so you need to use a more offensive epithet, like ‘bastard.’”

Steppingstone’s stern face bloomed into a big Nordic-looking smile. “Apology accepted.”

“The rude part was good, though,” Added Edelbach.

The rosewood table temporarily erupted into good-natured guffaws and bobs, then all that was heard for the rest of the meal was the quiet roar of thousands of human and alien conversations and dishes tinkling under the dome—mixed with the sound of the babbling brooks, and with their own munching.

“*So it is Mandarin*,” thought Edelbach.

CHAPTER 6

An Overnight Flight

After their meal, the trio strolled along a cantilevered walkway hanging out from a quarter-mile-long stretch of transparent bulkhead. The sight of the Milky Way, the Earth and Moon and even some of the larger nebulae continued to awe and inspire Edelbach. He wondered if this could ever become mundane to him.

“After this nice walk, maybe you will be able to get some sleep,” speculated Steppingstone.

“Sleep? Now wait a second, Grep promised me that you would take me and my car back to where you picked me up. I can’t be spending the night. I have calls to make, tomorrow.”

“And we will indeed return your vehicle and you, just as we promised,” said Grep. “But we are not finished with your education and your mission.”

“I wasn’t aware I had a mission. Now, listen: I have a job that I’m lucky to have in this economy. If I spend the night on this behemoth I’m likely to lose it.”

“Albert, you are an engineer, a persuasive sales person, one who has knowledge of Earth’s mores and culture,” the android sent.

“Plus, you have a wisdom commensurate with your chronological age,” offered Steppingstone. “In short, that’s a pretty good résumé-to put it in the current Earth vernacular. We would like to hire you as a consultant.”

“What?” Edelbach squeaked. “That’s ludicrous, I can’t imagine that I have any true value to you guys. You know everything, and if you don’t, all you have to do is check the nanodrone-archives.”

“As I mentioned before, raw data is useless without perspective and experience. On top of that, you do have wisdom, Albert, and you do have an ability to judge impartially.”

“I suppose you know that because you spied on me via nanodrone, Yaushr.”

“Partially.”

“You bastard! Don’t you realize that we Earth people treasure our privacy and that a violation of that is a violation to our person, just as surely as a physical assault would be?”

“I guess we need to learn that,” quietly answered Steppingstone, staring into space.

“Well, consider that lesson my first deliverable under our contract, how much am I going to get paid?”

Steppingstone’s meek expression immediately morphed into that big Nordic smile.

“I would suggest something portable and easily convertible to any Earth currency,” he said excitedly “How about 24 Karat gold bars?”

Edelbach gulped, “Uh, that wouldn’t be very portable would it?—Because of the weight? But hey, a Swiss Bank named Credit Suisse puts out small ingots of a few ounces or so. Would that be counterfeiting if you copied those?”

“Not if we make ours out of truly 24 Karat gold and a perfect weight to match the Credit Suisse counterpart. These bars are not a national currency, are they? Isn’t the purpose just a certification of purity and weight?” asked Steppingstone.

“I guess. Can you verify that, when you look into the nanodrone archives to see how they’re cast?”

“Surely. Would ten ounces per day be a sufficient compensation for an interstellar consultant?” asked Steppingstone.

Another gulp. “Uh, that would be more than sufficient,” he whispered—mentally calculating, *Let’s see, \$2,000 per ounce times 10 ounces times maybe two weeks on this tub... That’s \$280,000! I’ll stick that right into my retirement account.*

“I would like to welcome you as a crew member,” sent Grep.

“Thank you. By the way, on what vessel do I have the privilege of serving?”

“The intergalactic-class carrier *Utopia*, Grep sent.

“May I too, welcome you Counselor?” added Steppingstone. “By the way, the honorarium, ‘Counselor’ is officially the one that goes with your job-description, as one of three *de jure* envoys representing Planet Earth’s interests in the Husbandry High Council.”

“Who are the other two?” asked Edelbach.

“We, of course,” answered Steppingstone, gesturing toward the Master.

“Councilor, I suggest you get some sleep,” sent Grep. “I know you have had a highly stressful day. We are very sorry to have had to put you through this, but in the end, we feel that you will agree that it was the proper decision.”

Grep and Steppingstone walked Edelbach to his cabin. The bedroom was fitted with a greater than king-sized bed and the typical floor to ceiling video display facing out on to space. Grep showed Edelbach how to dial the bulkhead to opaque and back to transparent. He also showed him how to access nanodrone archives and even planet-side satellite broadcasts. It didn’t take much fiddling to dial the wall to CNN. Edelbach fell asleep watching the morning broadcast from down in Atlanta.

When he awoke, someone had placed a breakfast tray on his nightstand containing a tumbler of orange juice and some strange-looking but delicious little pastries. He wanted to watch some more news as he enjoyed breakfast, but all he was getting on the wall was static. Well, then he would enjoy the outside view, so he slid the control from opaque to transparent.

“What the hell...” he gasped, looking at an entirely different scene from the day before. Instead of the familiar spiral dust lanes of the Milky Way, he was looking at great fluffy columns of thick dust clouds embedded with blue stars. Nearby, was a yellow sun-like star and over to the extreme left was a near twin to the Earth’s blue-marble configuration, except with three smaller moons in what looked like, widely varying orbital diameters.

Looking downward, he saw, zipping out of bay doors along the length of the *Utopia*, scout vehicles of many different designs. Some looked like the *Semi*, others were saucer shaped; some were cylindrical, like a water heater. Edelbach guessed that they were headed for the blue planet and that each design was built for a specific exploration job, probably perfected over thousands of years.

“Good morning, Albert,” piped Steppingstone, sticking his head around the corner into Edelbach’s bedroom. “I hope you had a nice trip.”

“I didn’t even know I was on a trip, where the hell are we?”

“Near the edge of what you call M-31, the Andromeda Galaxy.”

“No way! That must be three hundred thousand light years from Earth. No way. Overnight? No way, Yaushr.”

“Yes way,” Steppingstone laughed, again showing off his command of the vernacular, “And it’s actually 2.5 million light years. I think Master Korton-greppy explained to you that our drive technology uses quantum gravity and quantum entanglement tapping dark energy as motive power. DE is not subject to general relativity; it’s instantaneous: it also penetrates into other strata, but we can talk about that later. So being immune to the effects of relativity—here we are,” he added, blithely.

“Holy crap!” exclaimed Edelbach. “So, it really is true. Well then, what’s the purpose of this little house-call?”

“A field trip, you might say.”

“Where are the students?”

“You’re it, Albert.”

“Me?” He was squeaking again. “You brought a ship bigger than all the aircraft carriers on Earth combined, more than two million light years across intergalactic space to teach some cranky old washed-up engineer some kind of lesson?”

“Yep, it’s a lesson that’s important to your mission, and your mission is supremely important to your fellow human beings on Earth.”

“Well, if this is important to all 7.5 billion people on earth then how can I resist the inevitable,” he said, incredulously. At the same time, he was thinking, *If you’re willing to pay me \$20,000 per day, how can I resist the inevitable?*

Grep's ever-so-subtle head-bobbing indicated that he picked up the sarcasm. Edelbach decided to ignore Grep's eavesdropping and not raise an issue. Grep was seeming more human all the time.

"Good, then it's settled," exclaimed Steppingstone. "I'll have the JX-02 scout, Hermes readied for a quick tour of Arangelle, but first, Master, we should clear out of here, so the Councilor can get a quick sonic."

A "sonic", as Steppingstone had demonstrated the night before, was a sonic shower. Instead of water, the user was showered with threads of warm air all vibrating at different ultra-sonic frequencies. What was mollifying to human skin, leaving the user completely refreshed, was absolutely deadly to germs and other living micro-organisms. In addition to providing a soothing effect, the threads also changed the static charge of contaminants and a large static generator vent in the ceiling of the shower, acting as a magnet, literally sucked away that which would get washed down the drain in a normal shower.

Stepping out of the sonic, Edelbach liked the idea that he could immediately get dressed without having to dry-off. He was tying the last of his shoes when he stopped cold.

"My Gillette double-edges," he gasped. His shaving kit was in his bag, in the Mercedes, in the Semi, in the hangar bay, probably somewhere a half mile away.

I must have a good five-o'clock shadow going by now, he thought, reaching up to stroke his beard. Instead of stubble his face felt utterly smooth.

I'll be damned, he thought. *The sonic is programmed to take off excess masculine facial hair. It's a good thing I'm not Orthodox or Hassidic, I'd be very pissed-off.*

Continued soon...